

Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation

In recent decades, it has become increasingly evident that the art world has shifted its interest away from the artwork and toward art documentation. This shift is particularly symptomatic of a broader transformation that art is undergoing today, and for that reason it deserves a detailed analysis.

The artwork as traditionally understood is something that embodies art in itself, that makes it immediately present and visible. When we go to an exhibition, we usually assume that what we will see there—whether paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs, videos, readymades, or installations—*is* art. Artworks can, of course, refer in one way or another to something other than themselves—say, to objects in reality or to specific political subjects—but they cannot refer to art, because they *are* art. But this traditional assumption about what we find at an exhibition or museum is proving more and more misleading. Increasingly, in art spaces today we are confronted not just with artworks but with art documentation. The latter can also take the form of paintings, drawings, photographs, videos, texts, and installations—that is to say, all the same forms and media in which art is traditionally presented—but in the case of art documentation these media do not present art but merely document it. Art documentation is by definition *not* art; it merely *refers* to art, and in precisely this way it makes it clear that art, in this case, is no longer present and immediately visible but rather absent and hidden.

Art documentation refers to art in at least two different ways. It may refer to performances, temporary installations, or happenings, which are documented in the same ways as theatrical performances. In such cases, one might say that these are art events that were present and visible at a particular time, and that the documentation that is exhibited later is intended merely as a way of recollecting them. Whether such recollecting is really possible is, of course, an open question. Since the advent of deconstruction, if not before, we have been aware that any claim that past events can be recalled in this straightforward way must, at the very least, be considered problematic.

Meanwhile, however, more and more art documentation is being produced and exhibited that does not claim to make present any past art event. Examples include complex and varied artistic interventions in daily life, lengthy and complicated processes of discussion and analysis, the creation of unusual living circumstances, artistic exploration into the reception of art in various cultures and milieus, and politically motivated artistic actions. None of these artistic activities can be presented except by means of art documentation, since from the very beginning these activities do not serve to produce an artwork in which art as such could manifest itself. Consequently, such art does not appear in object form—is not a product or result of a “creative” activity. Rather, the art is itself this activity, is the practice of art as such. Correspondingly, art documentation is neither the making present of a past art event nor the promise of a coming artwork, but rather is the only possible form of reference to an artistic activity that cannot be represented in any other way.

Nevertheless, to categorize art documentation as “simple” artwork would be to misunderstand it by overlooking its originality, its identifying feature, which is precisely that it documents art rather than presenting it. For those who devote themselves to the production of art documentation rather than artworks, art is identical to life, because life is essentially a pure activity that has no end result. The presentation of any such end result—in the form of an artwork, say—would imply an understanding of life as a merely functional process whose own duration is negated and extinguished by the creation of the end product—which is equivalent to death. It is no coincidence that museums are traditionally compared to cemeteries: by presenting art as the end result of life, they obliterate life once and for all. Art documentation, by contrast, marks the attempt to use artistic media within art spaces to refer to life itself, that is, to a pure activity, to pure practice, to an artistic life, as it were, without presenting it directly. Art becomes a life form, whereas the artwork becomes non-art, a mere documentation of this life form. One could also say that art becomes biopolitical, because it begins to use artistic means to produce and document life as a pure activity. Indeed, art documentation as an art form could only develop under the conditions of today’s biopolitical age, in which life itself has become the object of technical and artistic intervention. In this way, one is again confronted with the question of the relationship between art and life—and indeed in a completely new context,

defined by the aspiration of today's art to become life itself, not merely to depict life or to offer it art products.

Traditionally, art was divided into pure, contemplative, "fine" art and applied art—that is, design. The former was concerned not with reality but with images of reality. Applied art built and composed the things of reality themselves. In this respect, art resembles science, which can also be divided into a theoretical and an applied version. The difference between fine art and theoretical science, however, is that science has wanted to make the images of reality that it creates as transparent as possible, in order to judge reality itself on the basis of these images, whereas art, taking another path, has taken as its theme its own materiality and lack of clarity, the obscurity and, therefore, autonomy of images and the resulting inability of these images adequately to reproduce reality. Artistic images—from the "fantastic," the "unrealistic," by way of the Surrealistic and on up to the abstract—are intended to thematize the gap between art and reality. And even media that are usually thought of as reproducing reality faithfully—such as photography and film—are also used in the context of art in a way that seeks to undermine any faith in reproduction's ability to be faithful to reality. "Pure" art thus established itself on the level of the signifier. That to which the signifier refers—reality, meaning, the signified—has, by contrast, traditionally been interpreted as belonging to life and thus as removed from the sphere in which art is valid. Nor can it be said of applied art, however, that it concerns itself with life. Even if our environment is largely shaped by applied arts such as architecture, urban planning, product design, advertising, and fashion, it is still left to life to find the best way to deal with all these designed products. Life itself as pure activity, as pure duration, is thus fundamentally inaccessible to the traditional arts, which remain oriented toward products or results in one form or another.

In our age of biopolitics, however, the situation is changing, for the principal concern of this kind of politics is the lifespan itself. Biopolitics is often confused with scientific and technical strategies of genetic manipulation that, at least potentially, aim at reforming the individual living body. These strategies themselves, however, are still a matter of design—albeit that of a living organism. The real achievement of biopolitical technologies lies more in the shaping of the lifespan itself—in the shaping of life as a pure activity that occurs in time. From begetting and lifelong medical care by way of the

regulation of the relationship between work time and free time up to death as supervised, or even brought about by, medical care, the lifetime of a person today is constantly being shaped and artificially improved. Many authors, from Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben to Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, have written along these lines about biopolitics as the true realm in which political will and technology's power to shape things are manifested today. That is to say, if life is no longer understood as a natural event, as fate, as Fortuna, but rather as time artificially produced and fashioned, then life is automatically politicized, since the technical and artistic decisions with respect to the shaping of the lifespan are always political decisions as well. The art that is made under these new conditions of biopolitics—under the conditions of an artificially fashioned lifespan—cannot help but take this artificiality as its explicit theme. Now, however, time, duration, and thus life as well cannot be presented directly but only documented. The dominant medium of modern biopolitics is thus bureaucratic and technological documentation, which includes planning, decrees, fact-finding reports, statistical inquiries, and project plans. It is no coincidence that art also uses the same medium of documentation when it wants to refer to itself as life.

Indeed, one feature of modern technology is that we are no longer able by visual means alone to make a firm distinction between the natural or organic and the artificial or technologically produced. This is demonstrated by genetically modified food, but also by the numerous discussions—especially intense these days—about the criteria for deciding when life begins and when it ends. To put it another way: How does one distinguish between a technologically facilitated beginning of life, such as artificial insemination, for example, and a “natural” continuation of that life, or distinguish that natural continuation, in turn, from an equally technology-dependent means of extending life beyond a “natural” death? The longer these discussions go on, the less the participants are able to agree on where precisely the line between life and death can be drawn. Almost all recent sci-fi films have as a major theme this inability to distinguish between the natural and the artificial: the surface of a living being can conceal a machine; conversely, the surface of a machine can conceal a living being—an alien, for example.¹ The difference between a genuinely living creature and its artificial substitute is taken to be merely a product of the imagination, a supposition or suspicion that can be neither confirmed nor refuted by observation. But if the living thing can

be reproduced and replaced at will, then it loses its unique, unrepeatable inscription in time—its unique, unrepeatable lifespan, which is ultimately what makes the living thing a living thing. And that is precisely the point at which the documentation becomes indispensable, producing the life of the living thing as such: the documentation inscribes the existence of an object in history, gives a lifespan to this existence, and gives the object life as such—independently of whether this object was “originally” living or artificial.

The difference between the living and the artificial is, then, exclusively a narrative difference. It cannot be observed but only told, only documented: an object can be given a prehistory, a genesis, an origin by means of narrative. The technical documentation is, incidentally, never constructed as history but always as a system of instructions for producing particular objects under given circumstances. The artistic documentation, whether real or fictive, is, by contrast, primarily narrative, and thus it evokes the unrepeatability of living time. The artificial can thus be made living, made natural, by means of art documentation, by narrating the history of its origin, its “making.” Art documentation is thus the art of making living things out of artificial ones, a living activity out of technical practice: it is a bio-art that is simultaneously biopolitics.

This basic function of art documentation was strikingly demonstrated by Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*. In the film, the artificially produced humans, called “replicants,” are given photographic documentation at the time they are produced, which is supposed to certify their “natural origin”—faked photographs of their family, residences, and so on. Although this documentation is fictive, it gives the replicants life—subjectivity—which makes them indistinguishable from the “natural” human beings on the “inside” as well as on the outside. Because the replicants are inscribed in life, in history, by means of this documentation, they can continue this life in an uninterrupted and thoroughly individual way. Consequently, the hero’s search for a “real,” objectively determinable distinction between the natural and the artificial ultimately proves to be futile, because, as we have seen, this distinction can be established only through an artistically documented narrative.

The fact that life is something that can be documented but not immediately experienced is not a new discovery. One could even claim that this is the definition of life: life can be documented but not shown. In his book

Homo Sacer, Giorgio Agamben points out that the “bare life” has yet to achieve any political and cultural representation.² Agamben himself proposes that we view the concentration camp as the cultural representation of the bare life, because its inmates are robbed of all forms of political representation—the only thing that can be said of them is that they are alive. They can therefore only be killed, not sentenced by a court or sacrificed through a religious ritual. Agamben believes that this kind of life outside all laws yet anchored in law is paradigmatic of life itself. Even if there is much to be said for such a definition of life, it must be remembered that life in a concentration camp is generally thought to be beyond our powers of observation or imagination. Life in a concentration camp can be reported—it can be documented—but it cannot be presented for view.³ Art documentation thus describes the realm of biopolitics by showing how the living can be replaced by the artificial, and how the artificial can be made living by means of a narrative. A few examples will illustrate the different strategies of documentation.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Moscow group *Kollektivnye Deystviya* (Collective Action Group) organized a series of performances, conceived mostly by the artist Andrey Monastyrsky, which took place outside Moscow with only the members of the group and a few invited guests present. These performances were made accessible to a wider audience only through documentation, in the form of photographs and texts.⁴ The texts did not so much describe the performances themselves as the experiences, thoughts, and emotions of those who took part in them—and as a result, they had a strongly narrative, literary character. These highly minimalist performances took place on a white, snow-covered field—a white surface that recalled the white background of Kazimir Malevich’s Suprematist paintings, which has become the trademark of the Russian avant-garde. At the same time, however, the significance of this white background, which Malevich had introduced as the symbol of the radical “non-objectivity” of his art, as a symbol of a radical break with all nature and all narrative, was completely transformed. Equating the Suprematist “artificial” white background with the “natural” Russian snow transposed the “non-objective” art of Malevich back into life—specifically, by using a narrative text that attributed another genealogy to (or rather, imposed that genealogy upon) the white of Suprematism. Malevich’s paintings thus lose the character of autonomous artworks and are

in turn reinterpreted as the documentation of a lived experience—in the snows of Russia.

This reinterpretation of the Russian avant-garde is even more direct in the work of another Moscow artist from this period, Francisco Infante, who in his performance *Posvyashchenie* (Dedication) spread one of Malevich's Suprematist compositions on the snow—once again replacing the white background with snow. A fictive “living” genealogy is attributed to Malevich's painting, as a result of which the painting is led out of art history and into life—as with the replicants in *Blade Runner*. This transformation of the artwork into documentation of a life event opens up a space where all sorts of other genealogies could equally be discovered or invented, several of them quite plausible historically: for example, the white background of the Suprematist paintings can also be interpreted as the white piece of paper that serves as the background for every kind of bureaucratic, technological, or artistic documentation. In this sense, it could also be said that the documentation also has snow as its background—and thus the play of narrative inscriptions can be extended further and further.

Such a drama of narrative inscriptions is also staged in Sophie Calle's installations “Les aveugles” (The Blind) and “Blind Color.” “Les aveugles,” of 1986, documents a survey the artist conducted in which people who were born blind were asked to describe their conception of beauty. Several responses referred to figurative artworks, about which these blind people had heard, which were said to depict the real, visible world in an especially impressive manner. In her installation, the artist confronts the descriptions of these artworks given by the blind with reproductions of the paintings described. For “Blind Color” of 1991, Calle asked blind people to describe what they see, then wrote their answers on panels, which she juxtaposed with texts on monochrome painting written by artists such as Kazimir Malevich, Yves Klein, Gerhard Richter, Piero Manzoni, and Ad Reinhardt. In these art documentations, which are presented as the results of sociological research, the artist manages to attribute unfamiliar genealogy to the relatively familiar examples of the traditional, figurative, mimetic art, as well as to the examples of modern paintings that are usually understood as artificial, abstract, and autonomous. For the blind the mimetic, figurative paintings become totally fictional, artificially constructed—one can say even autonomous. By contrast, the modernist

monochromes show themselves as true depictions of the blind's vision. Here it becomes obvious to what extent our understanding of a particular artwork is dependent on its functioning as document of a certain life situation.

Finally, we should mention here Carsten Höller's performance, *The Baudouin/Boudewijn Experiment: A Large-Scale, Non-Fatalistic Experiment in Deviation*, which took place in the Atomium in Brussels in 2001. A group of people was enclosed in the interior of one of the spheres that make up the Atomium, where they spent an entire day cut off from the outside world. Höller frequently engages in transforming the "abstract," minimalist spaces of radically modernist architecture into spaces for living experience—another way of transforming art into life by means of documentation. In this case, he chose for his performance a space that embodies a utopian dream and does not immediately suggest a domestic environment. Primarily, however, the work alludes to commercial television shows such as *Big Brother*, with its portrayal of people forced to spend a long time together in an enclosed space. But here the difference between a commercial television documentation and art documentation becomes particularly clear. Precisely because television time and again shows images of the enclosed people, the viewer begins to suspect manipulation, constantly asking what might be happening in the space hidden behind these images in which "real" life takes place. By contrast, Höller's performance is not shown but merely documented—specifically, by means of the participants' narratives, which describe precisely that which could not be seen. Here, then, life is understood as something narrated and documented but unable to be shown or presented. This lends the documentation a plausibility of representing life that a direct visual presentation cannot possess.

Topology of the Aura

Some of the examples above are particularly relevant to the analysis of art documentation because they show how famous artworks that are well known in the history of art can be used in a new way—not as art but as documentation. At the same time they also reveal the procedures by which art documentation is produced, along with the difference between the artwork and art documentation. But one important question remains unanswered: if life is only documented by narrative and cannot be shown, then how can such a

documentation be shown in an art space without perverting its nature? Art documentation is usually shown in the context of an installation. The installation, however, is an art form in which not only the images, texts, or other elements of which it is composed but also the space itself plays a decisive role. This space is not abstract or neutral but is itself an artwork and at the same time a life space. The placing of documentation in an installation as the act of inscription in a particular space is thus not a neutral act of showing but an act that achieves at the level of space what narrative achieves at the level of time: the inscription in life. The way in which this mechanism functions can best be described by using Walter Benjamin's concept of aura, which he introduced precisely with the intention of distinguishing between the living space of the artwork and its technical substitute, which has no site or context.

Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" became famous primarily for its use of the concept of aura. Since then, the concept of aura has had a long career in philosophy, especially in the celebrated phrase "loss of aura," which characterizes the fate of the original in the modern age. This emphasis on the loss of aura is, on the one hand, legitimate, and clearly conforms to the overall intention of Benjamin's text. On the other hand, it begs the question of how the aura originates before it can or must be lost. Here, of course, we speak of aura not in the general sense, as a religious or theosophical concept, but in the specific sense used by Benjamin. A close reading of Benjamin's text makes clear that the aura originates only by virtue of the modern technology of reproduction—that is to say, it emerges in the same moment as it is lost. And it emerges for the same reason for which it is lost.

In his essay, Benjamin begins with the possibility of perfect reproduction, in which it is no longer possible to distinguish materially, visually, empirically between the original and the copy. Again and again in his text, Benjamin insists on this perfection. He speaks of technical reproduction as a "most perfect reproduction" which is able to keep intact the material qualities of the actual work of art.⁵ Now, it is certainly open to doubt whether the techniques of reproduction that existed at that time, or even today, ever in fact achieved such a degree of perfection that it was impossible to distinguish empirically between the original and the copy. For Benjamin, however, the ideal possibility of such perfect reproducibility, or a perfect cloning, is

more important than the technical possibilities that actually existed in his day. The question he raises is: Does the extinction of the material distinction between original and copy mean the extinction of this distinction itself?

Benjamin answers this question in the negative. The disappearance of any material distinction between the original and the copy—or, at least, its potential disappearance—does not eliminate another, invisible but no less real distinction between them: the original has an aura that the copy does not. Thus the notion of aura becomes necessary as a criterion for distinguishing between original and copy only because the technology of reproduction has rendered all material criteria useless. And this means that the concept of aura, and aura itself, belongs exclusively to modernity. Aura is, for Benjamin, the relationship of the artwork to the site in which it is found—the relationship to its external context. The soul of the artwork is not in its body; rather, the body of the artwork is found in its aura, in its soul.

This other topology of the relationship between the soul and the body traditionally has a place in gnosis, in theosophy, and similar schools of thought, which it would not be appropriate to pursue here. The important realization is that for Benjamin the distinction between original and copy is exclusively a topological one—and as such it is entirely independent of the material nature of the work. The original has a particular site—and through this particular site the original is inscribed into history as this unique object. The copy, by contrast, is virtual, siteless, ahistorical: from the beginning it appears as potential multiplicity. To reproduce something is to remove it from its site, to deterritorialize it—reproduction transposes the artwork into the network of topologically undetermined circulation. Benjamin's formulations are well known: "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its here and now, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."⁶ He continues: "These 'here' and 'now' of the original constitute the concept of its authenticity, and lay basis for the notion of a tradition that has up to the present day passed this object along as something having a self and an identity."⁷ The copy lacks authenticity, therefore, not because it differs from the original but because it has no location and consequently is not inscribed in history.

Thus, for Benjamin, technical reproduction as such is by no means the reason for the loss of aura. The loss of aura is introduced only with a new

aesthetic taste—the taste of the modern consumer who prefers the copy or the reproduction to the original. Today’s consumer of art prefers art to be brought—delivered. Such a consumer does not want to go off, travel to another place, be placed in another context, in order to experience the original as original. Rather, he or she wants the original to come to him or her—as in fact it does, but only as a copy. When the distinction between original and copy is a topological one, then the topologically defined movement of the viewer alone defines this distinction. If we make our way to the artwork, then it is an original. If we force the artwork to come to us, then it is a copy. For that reason, the distinction between original and copy has, in Benjamin’s work, a dimension of violence. In fact, Benjamin speaks not just of the loss of aura but of its destruction.⁸ And the violence of this destruction of aura is not lessened by the fact that the aura is invisible. On the contrary, a material injury to the original is much less violent, in Benjamin’s view, because it still inscribes itself in the history of the original by leaving behind certain traces on its body. The deterritorialization of the original, its removal from its site by means of bringing it closer represents, by contrast, an invisible and thus all the more devastating employment of violence, because it leaves behind no material trace.

Benjamin’s new interpretation of the distinction between original and copy thus opens up the possibility not only of making a copy out of an original but also of making an original out of a copy. Indeed, when the distinction between original and copy is merely a topological, contextual one, then it not only becomes possible to remove an original from its site and deterritorialize it, but also to reterritorialize the copy. Benjamin himself calls attention to this possibility when he writes about the figure of profane illumination and refers to the forms of life that can lead to such a profane illumination: “The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the *flâneur*, are types of illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic.”⁹ One is struck by the fact that these figures of profane illumination are also figures of motion—especially the *flâneur*. The *flâneur* does not demand of things that they come to him; he goes to things. In this sense, the *flâneur* does not destroy the auras of things; he respects them. Or rather, only through him does the aura emerge again. The figure of profane illumination is the reversal of the “loss of aura” that comes from siting the copy in a topology of undetermined circulation though the modern mass media. Now, however, it is clear that the installation

can also be counted among the figures of profane illumination, because it transforms the viewer into a *flâneur*.

Art documentation, which by definition consists of images and texts that are reproducible, acquires through the installation an aura of the original, the living, the historical. In the installation the documentation gains a site—the here and now of a historical event. Because the distinction between original and copy is entirely a topological and situational one, all of the documents placed in the installation become originals. If reproduction makes copies out of originals, installation makes originals out of copies. That means: The fate of modern and contemporary art can by no means be reduced to the “loss of aura.” Rather, (post)modernity enacts a complex play of removing from sites and placing in (new) sites, of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, of removing aura and restoring aura. What distinguishes the modern age from earlier periods in this is simply the fact that the originality of a modern work is not determined by its material nature but by its aura, by its context, by its historical site. Consequently, as Benjamin emphasizes, originality does not represent an eternal value. In the modern age, originality has not simply been lost—it has become variable. Otherwise, the eternal value of originality would simply have been replaced by the eternal (non)value of unoriginality—as indeed happens in some art theories. All the same, eternal copies can no more exist than eternal originals. To be an original and possess an aura means the same thing as to be alive. But life is not something that the living being has “in itself.” Rather, it is the inscription of a certain being into a life context—into a lifespan and into a living space.

This also reveals the deeper reason why art documentation now serves as a field of biopolitics—and reveals the deeper dimension of modern biopolitics in general. On the one hand, the modern age is constantly substituting the artificial, the technically produced, and the simulated for the real, or (what amounts to the same thing) the reproducible for the unique. It is no coincidence that cloning has become today’s emblem of biopolitics, for it is precisely in cloning—no matter whether it ever becomes reality or forever remains a fantasy—that we perceive life as being removed from its site, which is perceived as the real threat of contemporary technology. In reaction to this threat, conservative, defensive strategies are offered which try to prevent this removal of life from its site by means of regulations and bans, even though the futility of such efforts is obvious even to those struggling for them. What

is overlooked in this is that the modern age clearly has, on the other hand, strategies for making something living and original from something artificial and reproduced. The practices of art documentation and of installation in particular reveal another path for biopolitics: rather than fighting off modernity, they develop strategies of resisting and of inscription based on situation and context, which make it possible to transform the artificial into something living and the repetitive into something unique.