

Vancouver's Auratic Geographies

by

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THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in the
Department of Geography
Faculty of Environment

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Spring 2011

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Abstract

In the 1930s, when Walter Benjamin undertook his analysis of the “Work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility,” reproduction technology was in its infancy. In contemporary Vancouver, BC, the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) is the preeminent visual arts institution and is thoroughly implicated in the city’s cultural landscape. By drawing on Benjamin’s conception of the aura of artworks and the concomitant cultural politics of art, this thesis argues that the VAG is engaged in seemingly contradictory practices. I examine an exhibition and the photographic practices at the VAG that reveal both the embrace of autonomous, auratic art and the “politicization of art”—practices purported by Benjamin to be ideologically opposed. By positing that the VAG’s socio-political power originates in the aura of art, I seek to uncover how the Gallery engages in both progressive and conservative politics of art in Vancouver.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; aura; art; museum; cultural politics; cultural geography

For Paul: *May your dedication and passion never wither in any age.*

For Tina and August: *We three carry on, together.*

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to all of the staff of the Vancouver Art Gallery—especially Trevor Mills, Kimberly Phillips, Monica Smith, Dana Sullivant, and Rachel Topham—who took the time to share their insights and experiences with me. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Eugene McCann for his valuable advice and assistance in the formulation of some of the key strategies and theories in this work. However, I am most indebted to my advisor, Paul Kingsbury, for his profound support, encouragement, and guidance from the inception of this project through to its conclusion. I strive to be a geographer of his calibre one day.

The undertaking of this degree and research project required an immense commitment not only from me but also my wife, Tina Gessler. Without her ceaseless love and support in our move from the Midwestern US to Western Canada, from a sunny second floor to a basement, from working salaries to graduate student poverty, this project would have taken much longer and withered in quality. The level of commitment was intensified by the arrival of our son, August Francis, in March of 2010. Especially in these first four months of 2011 as I have written this thesis, Tina has taken on the vast yet mundane tasks of caring for August—at times for seven days a week. The realization of this project has relied heavily on her unsung labors. I might never thank her enough.

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Chapter 1:

Introduction to the Project

Art, Geography, Museum

This thesis explores the practices (e.g. exhibition and photography) of a preeminent public art institution, the Vancouver Art Gallery (hereafter VAG), and the political implications of those practices. I argue that while the VAG overtly promotes a reflexive, progressive, and critical politics of art, it simultaneously insinuates politically conservative understandings of art to further its institutional goals. Although geographers have examined museum institutions as sites (Harraway, 1989; Lepawsky, 2008), new insights can be gained by focusing on the practices and representations of art at a museum (Sherman & Rogoff, 2003). My central analytic is Walter Benjamin's famous concept of the "aura" of art, most explicitly outlined in his seminal essay, "The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility," (2006 [1936]). In this essay, Benjamin uses the aura to address the political power invested in traditional works of art made by

traditional means such as painting and sculpture. He discusses how new technologies in the creation of art, specifically photography and cinema, have the potential to liberate art from its traditional, conservative, fetishized status and open up the possibility for new cultural politics. Because of its distinctive engagement with the political potentials of art, I argue that Benjamin's theory of the aura holds tremendous potential for the analysis of spatial politics at an art museum.

My life experiences inform much of this thesis. In my first career, I was intimately involved with photographic practices at an art museum. At the age of 19, I started an internship as a photography assistant at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri. The museum was a welcome alternative to my previous experiences in commercial photography studios. At the time, I felt that my work at the museum was an important contribution to a wider understanding of art, and imaging of artworks was more in line with my own critical views of capitalism. As I absorbed the technically demanding skills of photographing artworks in a museum setting, I worked my way up the ranks to become the museum's lead photographer. In 2002, a new department manager ushered in our adoption of digital photographic technology. This implementation of new technology and techniques reinvigorated my interest and enthusiasm for my work because it opened up new possibilities for photographic reproduction of art. Digital photography and the software program Photoshop allowed me to capture images of works of art that, with film photography, had been too cumbersome or difficult to achieve (Miller, 2003). All was well in my museum

photography career, until I encountered the Homeless Museum of Art¹ (HoMu) in an exhibition that borrowed my own home as a temporary gallery space (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: Installation view of Noterdaeme's *The \$0 Collection*, Kansas City, 2006.



Photograph by the author.

On a warm, humid June afternoon in Kansas City, I waited with a group of would-be gallery visitors in anticipation of the arrival of our tour guide, artist Filip Noterdaeme. Echoing the work of artists Marcel Broodthaers (Walker Art Center, 1989) and Andrea Fraser (2005), Noterdaeme is the director of HoMu and his

¹ The Homeless Museum of Art is the cornerstone of an ongoing critical art project by Filip Noterdaeme. For further information see the museum's website: www.homelessmuseum.org.

work is a critique of preeminent art museums, the power structures that they embody, and how they surreptitiously reproduce these power relations in their representations of art. In 2006, Noterdaeme presented *HoMu Cribs*, a museum-for-a-day displayed in private homes, or "cribs", in Kansas City's Westside neighborhood. Noterdaeme installed several originals and replicas from the collection of the Homeless Museum of Art in volunteers' homes, including my own, and led a group of visitors through the various cribs for a walking tour. In my home, Noterdaeme installed a version of *The \$0 Collection* (Figure 1.1), an assemblage of postcards from the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, industrial milk crates, and found objects. The piece comments on (in)accessibility along class lines of artworks in the museum. I approached Noterdaeme after the show to proudly tell him that I had taken the photographs that appeared in the postcards he had installed in my home. Noterdaeme alluded to one of the works he had installed in another home (Figure 1.2), and told me that at HoMu, they ask that not just directors, but all museum employees should "wash their hands." I laughed uncomfortably, and felt a blush erupt on my face. I was immediately propelled down a path of personal reflection that would lead me to acknowledge, weeks later, that I was implicated in the exclusive, elitist trappings of the museum upon which Noterdaeme commented. Unable to shake his trenchant critique, ultimately I resigned from my position as Photographer at the Nelson-Atkins and fled to Chicago to complete my BA degree in critical human geography. However, redemption from my museum-profession transgressions would not be attempted until I entered the MA program at Simon Fraser University. This thesis

represents my own critique of museum practices inspired by HoMu and its director.

Figure 1.2: Installation view of Noterdaeme's *HoMu Bathroom/Curatorial Department*, Brooklyn, 2006.



Photograph retrieved from http://bloggy.com/2007/02/museum_director_1.html, March 1, 2011.

My own interests in art museums and geography seem timely given geographers Deborah Dixon's (2009) and Paul Kingsbury's (2010) recent calls for academic geographers to lend credence to art and aesthetics in geographic inquiry. For Dixon, "political struggle is necessarily aesthetic insofar as it is an attempt to reconfigure the place not only of particular groups, but also the social order within which they are embedded" (2009, p. 411). For Kingsbury,

“aesthetics...is one of the most undervalued categories in human geography” (2010, p. 56). Further, very few geographers have previously undertaken in-depth analysis of art and museums. James Ketchum’s doctoral dissertation (2005) examined three artist’s work and how contemporary geographical imaginations are impacted by the work of visual artists. Josh Lepawsky (2008) explored the politics of the displays at the Telekomuzium in Kuala Lumpur. Gillian Rose (2001) explained how museum spaces could be interpreted in her book on visual methods for geographers. Apropos to my thesis is Emilie Cameron’s (2007) Bourdieusian analysis of the practices at the gift shop at my own empirical site, the VAG. Though geographers have sparingly engaged in critical analysis of art and museums, a flourishing subfield of art history, critical museology, is largely responsible for the growing literature on the topic.

Peter Vergo’s (1989) edited volume is generally credited with spurring critical attention to art museums. Since his inspirational call, Tony Bennet (1995), Douglas Crimp (1993), Carol Duncan (1995), Didier Maleuvre (1999), Andrew Wallach (1998), Donald Preziosi (2003), and Andrew McClellan (2003; 2008), among others, have all contributed to an important and insightful literature regarding art museums and the politics in which they engage. Crucially, as Daniel Sherman and Irit Rogoff (1994) point out, most of these studies have “remained within the boundaries of particular disciplinary concerns: they have looked at museums as *sites*, whether of architecture, of exhibitions, national or cultural narratives” (p. ix, emphasis added). Also, while previous analyses have drawn on the theoretical orientations of Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and

even Walter Benjamin, remarkably none have mobilized Benjamin's conception of the aura as a primary analytic. This thesis seeks to address these gaps in the existing literature by focusing on the exhibitionary and photographic practices at the VAG and examining them through the politically sensitive lens of the aura.

The VAG is currently engaging in a heavily politicized relocation campaign. When the VAG's current director, Kathleen Bartels, was appointed in 2001, she almost immediately began to hint at the inadequacy of gallery's renovated courthouse building (Lee, 2010). By 2004, the gallery had hired an architectural/ consulting firm to formally assess their needs and create a new master plan. After exploring several options, the gallery decided that the best option was to relocate to a newly constructed, purpose built facility at another location. In March of 2010, the gallery announced that it would vie for the last undeveloped lot in downtown Vancouver, the former Larwill Park site that currently functions as a parking lot. Largely basing their campaign for the highly desirable lot upon the practical needs of the gallery (e.g. the present building's scarcity of exhibition and storage space and programming facilities), the campaign notably lacks justification regarding the importance of art or the art museum to warrant the estimated \$250-400 million construction, move, and operating endowment. Crucially, this thesis also explores how and why the VAG need not explicitly address the relevance its core operations in the cultural landscape of Vancouver. I argue that the VAG's exhibitionary and photographic practices surreptitiously establish a conservative and fetishistic importance of art in the minds of Vancouverites.

Study Overview

This thesis deploys an empirical case study, relying upon participant observation, interviews, and visual methodologies (Rose, 2001). Data collection began in June 2010 and concluded February 2011. During this time I visited ten VAG exhibitions, attended public information events related to the relocation campaign, shadowed an educational tour for grade school children, interviewed 17 members of the VAG staff, and conducted 12 interviews with individuals and small groups of visitors as they exited the VAG's exhibition space. In careful consideration of the collected data, I was struck by the internal tensions encompassed by the VAG's representations of art. My initial examinations seemed to reveal that the VAG promoted a progressive, critical engagement with art and museological practices while simultaneously fostering a conservative, dictatorial understanding of art in its audience. To further explore this tension, I decided to focus my analysis on two components. First, I chose an exhibition that took place in June, 2010 that featured the practices of the VAG's conservation staff: the public conservation treatment of a painting from the VAG's collection. Second, I chose to focus on the work of the VAG's photographers, specifically the images generated for two exhibition catalogues: one for Reece Terris' installation titled *Ought Apartment* (VAG, 2009) and the other for Michael Lin's installation titled *A Modest Veil* (VAG, 2010d). These empirical components form my analyses in Chapters 2 and 3.

My central analytic is Benjamin's theory of the aura, a conception of the political potentials of art and its unique and powerful socio-spatial presence.

While geographers have mobilized the aura to examine commodity fetishism (Goss, 1999), urban experience (Savage, 2000), and the consumption of geospatial technology (Kingsbury & Jones, 2009), I remain faithful to its empirical origins by examining its relationship to artworks in the museum. Benjamin posits that traditional works of art, that is, handmade artworks from the earliest cave paintings through modern oil paintings and sculpture, have historically elicited a magical and powerful experience that resists critical reflection by the viewer and promotes secluded and exclusive experience of art. A unique, traditional work of art “perpetuates an isolated, individualist mode of reception which prevents a sense of (political) solidarity across class boundaries” (Duttlinger, 2008, p. 82). However, Benjamin sees redemptive hope for the democratic potential in the new art-making technology of photography. By allowing a work of art to be received and experienced outside of the constraints of time and place, photography “emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience” (Benjamin, 2006 [1936], p. 106) to auratic practices such as pilgrimages to exhibitions and ritualized encounters with art at a museum (Duncan, 1995). For Benjamin, through new artistic technologies an artwork has the potential to be experienced en masse across class boundaries and thus a politicization of art can begin.

In my consideration of the aura’s complexity and its potential to expose political motivations and ideologies, I will examine the exhibitonary and photographic practices at the VAG through the pursuit to resolve these guiding research questions:

- How do embodied gallery practices shape people's experiences and understandings of art?
- How do photographic practices at the VAG diminish and/or support an auratic experience of art?
- How is the aura of art mobilized by the VAG's administrators and supporters to facilitate the proposed relocation of the Vancouver Art Gallery?

Thesis Outline

This introduction has presented the main topics this thesis examines. Starting with some background of my personal interest in art and museums, I then introduced some of the scholarly work that has broached the topic and the gaps in that literature that I seek to fill. Next I introduced the pertinence of my empirical site by providing an overview of the VAG's current plans to move to a purpose-built facility in downtown Vancouver and provided an overview of my research methods and theoretical framework. With these orientations in place, I will briefly outline the remaining chapters in the thesis.

Chapters 2 and 3 are written as independent papers with the intent to submit them to scholarly journals for publication. In both chapters, I mobilize Walter Benjamin's conception of the aura of artworks as an analytic to examine practices at the VAG. In Chapter 2, I explore Benjamin's notoriously complex and elusive idea of the aura through three constitutive characteristics as described in his artwork essay. I then use this definition as an analytic to examine a two-week exhibition held at the VAG in the summer of 2010. The exhibition, a display of museum practice that is usually carried out away from public view, exemplifies the VAG's contradictory practices around the aura of art.

In Chapter 3, I expand the definition of the aura established in Chapter 2 in order to unpack the complexity of art's relation to photography. In cultural, geographic, and literary studies Benjamin's notion of the aura has become synonymous with authentic, traditional works of art and photography is understood to be art's auratic emancipator. However, I argue that recent scholarship (Duttlinger, 2008) and even Benjamin himself acknowledge that photography has the ability to elicit an auratic experience itself. To do so, I draw from two lesser known (at least in geography) essays in Benjamin's oeuvre, "Little history of photography" (2005 [1931]) and "On some motifs in Baudelaire" (2006 [1940]). After identifying the auratic potential of photography, I then turn to examine how current photographic practices at the VAG work to transmit the aura of art rather than diminish it.

Chapter 4 concludes the thesis wherein I discuss the key contributions of the two analyses. Here I briefly summarize the two preceding chapters and I reflect on how in geography, the aura is an under-utilized concept for the empirical analysis of art and museums. Next I discuss the research in terms of three specific contributions to geographic and critical museology literatures. I then discuss the prospective next steps for this research and its potential for future studies. Finally, I conclude by discussing how Benjamin's conception of the aura may be used to address the paucity of geographic inquiry of art, museums, and their politics in the future.

Chapter 2:

Auratic Geographies within the Vancouver Art Gallery

Introduction

When Walter Benjamin undertook his analysis of “The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility” (2006 [1936]), the technology of visual reproduction was in its infancy². His assessment of a “withering” aura—a waning socio-spatial presence—experienced around artworks was part lament, part redemptive hope.

With the advent of new technologies for the production of artworks, Benjamin saw the potential for a radical shift in peoples’ perception and experience with art. This in turn could open up the possibility for a new cultural politics. Prior to the time of Benjamin’s writing, art had been experienced as a holy, totalitarian,

² This sentence is an intentional rephrasing of Benjamin’s opening line to his seminal essay, *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility*, “When Marx undertook his analysis of the capitalist mode of production, that mode was in its infancy” (Benjamin 2006 [1936]: 101). In the original line, Benjamin is referencing Karl Marx’s analysis of the capitalist mode of production in *Das Kapital* (1867), and immediately establishes the Marxist orientation of his critique. Similarly, I allude to this line as homage to both him and to Marx, and to establish the Marxist underpinnings of my analysis of an art museum.

top-down expression of deific creativity, capable of eliciting such divine terror, or “theios phobos,” as to warrant expulsion from Plato’s ideal city (Agamben 1994; Preziosi 2009). For Benjamin, advanced capitalism with its industrial technology held the power to de-throne this powerful position of art and release its political potential.

Above all, it [technological reproduction] enables the original to meet the recipient halfway, whether in the form of a photograph or in that of a gramophone record. The cathedral leaves its site to be received in the studio of an art lover; the choral work performed in the auditorium or in the open air is enjoyed in the private room. (Benjamin, 2006 [1936], p. 103)

What happens for Benjamin in this shift from the singular, unobtainable, and fetishized artwork of old to the reproducible, commodified, and secular artwork in the new age is a weakening of the powerful and dictatorial socio-spatial presence of art. This shift in perception sets the stage for the possibility for art to be critically encountered by its audience across class distinctions. Thus a politicization of art and aesthetics can take place, and the potential for a radical politics in art is emancipated.

The pivotal critique of Benjamin’s conception of the liberating, revolutionary potential of a withered aura in the experience of art comes from his friend and fellow Frankfurt School social theorist Theodore Adorno. After reading an earlier draft of Benjamin’s artwork essay, Adorno wrote a letter to Benjamin criticizing his unqualified and indiscriminating acceptance of technologically reproduced art and Benjamin’s corresponding rejection of all autonomous art as being inherently counterrevolutionary (Adorno, 2007 [1936]). Adorno, prompted

by this exchange with Benjamin, formulated a more concrete and detailed articulation of his position in his seminal essay, “On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression in Listening” (Adorno, 1991 [1938]). In this essay, Adorno introduces his concept of the culture industry. Using the example of music rather than visual art, Adorno points to the efforts of the “culture industry” to restore a counterfeit aura to technologically reproduced art, in this case popular music distributed through records. He accuses this medium of pandering to the masses as entertainment or cultural diversion (Wolin, 1982). For Adorno, Benjamin overestimates the influence of technology to wither the aura of art, and underestimates the ability of capitalism to compensate. Adorno is sceptical of the potential for technologically reproduced art to instil revolutionary tendencies in the masses, while accusing Benjamin of underestimating the effects of the commodification of art through these technologies.

Contemporary experiences of art, however, seem to support Benjamin’s prophetic notion of a withered aura. In Benjamin’s time, photography complicated our perception of art by bringing unprecedentedly detailed reproductions of original works of art within the grasp of the masses. Today, our perceptions of art are further complicated by means of digital imaging and the Internet. In recent decades, museums have increased access to their collections beyond their walls by making high-resolution, color digital reproductions available through their websites (see for instance Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2011; Museum of Anthropology at UBC, 2011). Additionally, in February 2011 Google opened up a handful of the world’s highest profile art museums via its wildly popular “street

view” interface with the Google Art Project (Google, 2011). Art heists, crimes that once captured popular imagination in films such as *The Thomas Crown Affair* and supported an auratic presence of art, have themselves withered. In Madrid, thieves attempted to sell a stolen cast iron sculpture worth 800,000 Euros to a scrapyard for a mere 30 Euros—a move that exposed them to authorities (“Spanish stolen art”, 2010). Even the cool embrace of finance capitalism has incorporated autonomous, auratic art: in January 2011 A&F Services, a French company, launched Art Exchange, “the first ever centralised market place dedicated to artworks” (A&F Services, 2011, p. 2).

Perhaps in response to these social changes, art and aesthetics have recently gained increased attention in scholarship. Geographers, for example, have called for theoretical and empirical research on the relations between art, aesthetics, and the political. James Duncan and Nancy Duncan (2001) explore the aestheticization of politics in a wealthy New York exurb. James Ketchum’s doctoral dissertation (2005) examined three artist’s work and how contemporary geographical imaginations of war are impacted by the work of visual artists. Deborah Dixon’s (2008) analysis of an exhibition of critical BioArt examines how aesthetics are experienced in space and can evoke viscerally profound responses and political implications. Likewise, her (2009) engagement with aesthetics and politics demands that art can be a site of political struggle. Similarly, for Paul Kingsbury, “aesthetics...is one of the most undervalued categories in human geography” (2010, p. 56).

Concurrently, the idea that culture can be deployed as a catalyst for urban economic growth has become part of a new urban policy orthodoxy by which cities seek to enhance their competitive position. Since David Harvey's examination of the major shift in urban governance "From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism..." (1989), interurban competition has been the focus of much geographic scholarship (e.g. Jonas and Wilson, 1999; McCann, 2004; Peck, 1995). Increasingly, the dominant factor in this late-capitalist competition is cultural capital surrounded by a discourse of 'creativity,' especially from creative city champions such as Charles Landry (2000) and Richard Florida (2002). Landry (2000) and Florida (2002) claim that cities in the post-industrial west must invite a clustering of human capital termed the "creative class," a loosely defined group of highly educated young professionals that seek culturally and amenity rich lifestyles in urban cores. Landry and Florida's work, however, has been criticized for its coarse and underdeveloped mechanics (Markusen, 2006; Nathan, 2005). Geographers, notably Peck (2005) and McCann (2007), have contested the assumed benefits from 'creativity' and culture-led urban regeneration and competition. In Peck's (2005) words,

creativity strategies subtly canalize and constrain urban-political agency, even as their material payoffs remain extraordinarily elusive. The cult of urban creativity is therefore revealed in its true colors, as a form of soft law/lore for a hypercompetitive age. (p. 768)

Whether or not arts infrastructure and cultural development are economically, politically, or socially sustainable as core urban policies is yet to be seen (Johnson, 2009). Nonetheless, within the last two decades, this kind of urban

redevelopment has come to occupy a pivotal position in the urban entrepreneurial strategies of increasingly global cities. These perspectives, suspicious of the increasing ubiquity of culture and the arts as part of capitalistic and socially unjust urban policy, seem to take an Adornian position critiquing the progressive potential of art. Defining art as a neoliberal tool in progressive clothing, scholars are sceptical of this surge in culture-led policy and the role of public art galleries in urban politics. The calls of geographers (Dixon, 2008, 2009; Kingsbury, 2010) to more closely examine the role of aesthetics and art in spatial and cultural politics seem an appropriate avenue to further explore these tensions.

The Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) is representative of these culture-led urban practices as it vies for relocation and a new, purpose-built gallery in downtown Vancouver. As the preeminent institution for civic engagement with visual art, the public art gallery is necessarily implicated in contemporary experiences of the aura. No longer merely charged with the collection, preservation, and display of art, public art galleries are increasingly self-conscious of their role as a mediator between scholarly appreciation of high art and the masses (Vergo, 1989; Marstine, 2006).

In order to analyse the relationship of the public art gallery, the aura, and their socio-political possibilities, this paper examines some of the museological practices (e.g. exhibition and photography) at the VAG. I argue that Benjamin's conception of the aura around artworks can be usefully mobilized as an analytic through which a better understanding of how the VAG harnesses the socio-

spatial power of art. I begin with a close examination of characteristics of the aura of artworks to more fully develop a definition of it that is grounded in the political power in the experience of viewing visual art. This will necessarily include the critique of Benjamin's ideas as put forth by Adorno. Next, I turn to an empirical background of the VAG with a brief history of the institution. I then focus my analysis on an exhibition mounted by the VAG in the summer of 2010, the public conservation of a painting from the gallery's collection. By mobilizing the aura as an analytic, the micro geographies of art as encountered at the VAG can be exposed as both redemptive practices opening up critical engagement with art and museological practices, as well as a reifying, top-down discourse ensuring that the power of art remains firmly harnessed by this preeminent arts institution.

Walter Benjamin and the Aura of Art

The aura of art is arguably the best known and most controversial concept in Benjamin's corpus and is a conception of the unique and powerful socio-spatial presence of art. Grappling with art's political potentials, the aura is situated in the complex realms between mysticism and politics. Crucially, the aura does not refer to an ontological thing, but rather describes particular forms of human experience and the perception of art. At stake in Benjamin's examination of the aura is how new technologies in the production of art can produce revolutionary shifts in humanity's modes of perception and in turn such shifts can lead to socio-political change. While his conception of the aura is dotted throughout his oeuvre,

for this analysis I draw upon his ideas about the aura as it relates to works of art in his seminal essay, “The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility” (2006 [1936])—heretofore referred to as the artwork essay³.

As noted above, art and aesthetics have recently gained increasing attention in geographic scholarship. While Benjamin’s writings have been mobilized in geographic analysis (e.g. Goss, 1999; Gregory, 1994; Savage, 2000), the specific use of the aura as a central analytic in geography is surprisingly absent (though see Kingsbury and Jones, 2009). Therefore, In order to develop a definition of the aura that can be used to interpret some of the practices at the VAG, I draw from Benjamin’s artwork essay and some of the work on the aura in the fields of literature, museology, and media studies. Through an analysis of these texts, I focus on theoretical definitions of the aura as it is experienced around artworks in a museum. In the following section, I present a definition based on three constitutive characteristics of the aura: authenticity, distance, and ritual. These characteristics envelope the experience of the aura as it is constructed in a public art museum, and they underline how art museums promote a powerful socio-spatial presence of art, a power that is harnessed by the museum to fuel its own political agenda. What arises from my

³ There are multiple translations of this essay available. The most widely distributed and cited is the first English translation from a French publication made available in English in *Illuminations* (Benjamin, 1968). Most Benjaminian scholars currently rely on a more recent English version made available in *Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935-1938* (Benjamin, 2006) which is based on the German original as recorded by Adorno and Gershom Scholem in *Gesammelte Schriften* (1972). The fact that the versions differ slightly is emblematic of Benjamin’s own thoughts on translation, “Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point...a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course and according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux” (Benjamin, 2004 [1924], p. 261). Therefore I hope to do justice to Benjamin’s thought by keeping that translational flux in mind.

development of the aura as an analytic is the notion that an experience of the aura can be understood as a thoroughly spatial phenomenon. The auratic experience is one that is rooted in an exchange between the viewer and the artwork. Yet as I argue, the aura extends beyond the surface and the frame around the work of art.

Auratic Authenticity

In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence—and nothing else—that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject. (Benjamin, 2006 [1936], p. 103)

We perceive auras around artworks that are original and authentic. For Benjamin, the art object in the museum is seemingly stripped of its aura that was derived from a religious or cult value. It is readily replaced by another aura that is established in its exhibition value. This exhibition value is based upon the artwork's uniqueness and authenticity, the way the artwork offers proof of artistic genius and represents a much more secular religiosity of *l'art pour l'art* or "art for art's sake." Concomitantly, the extent of the proliferation of reproductions of artworks in the 21st century is far beyond that of any previous time. Far from the diminishing the aura, this proliferation has actually served to enhance the originals' power and attractiveness (Wallach, 2003). With the focus of the exhibition value of an artwork at the museum, reproductions serve as advertisements for what may be seen there. Today, much of a visit to the

museum is centered on experiencing an encounter with the *original* of a reproduction.

John Berger, drawing on Benjamin's theory of art, illustrates the encounter that a visitor might experience when viewing Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin on the Rocks* at the National Gallery in London:

I am in front of it. I can see it. This painting by Leonardo is unlike any other in the world. The National Gallery has the real one. If I look at this painting hard enough, I should somehow be able to feel its authenticity. The *Virgin on the Rocks* by Leonardo da Vinci: it is authentic and therefore it is beautiful. (1972, p. 14)

Art historian Andrew Wallach calls this fetishization of the authentic artwork “the new cult of the original” (Wallach, 2003). The aura only exists when an object is specifically constituted in time and space—that is, when the object is unique, permanent, and thus cannot be *completely* reproduced. So even if the artwork is liberated from its parasitic tie to traditionally religious customs, the art world has cleverly generated a new, secular religiosity based upon the artist as genius and cultic, ritualistic reverence of the original, authentic artwork.

Auratic Distance

What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of distance, however near it may be. (Benjamin, 2006 [1936], pp. 104-105)

In his signature poetic eloquence, Benjamin calls forth distance—both spatial and temporal—as a crucial constituent of the aura. Hence, a characteristic of the aura in artworks is the artwork's inapproachability; our inability to bring it closer or to possess it fully. This notion of spatial distance is one that Benjamin feels

technological reproducibility targets directly, and the withering of this distance as achieved by the proliferation of reproductions has a social basis:

Namely: the desire of the present-day masses to 'get closer' to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in an image, or, better, in a facsimile, a reproduction. (Benjamin, 2006 [1936], p.105, emphasis in original)

This collapse of an auratic distance is achieved, as noted in the first quote of this paper, through the dissemination of reproductions that can be encountered by the viewer (or listener) outside of the institutional context of a cathedral, an orchestra hall, or indeed, an art gallery.

Artworks, especially in a museum setting, rely upon a temporal distance in evoking an auratic experience. In the gallery, the work of art seems to become even more historical: it is removed from its original context and placed into an art historical narrative that constructs a “mythical veneer of pastness... indeed history becomes aura” (Maleuvre, 1999, p. 269). In his critique of art history as practiced in museums, Donald Preziosi (2003), recognizes how in museums, artworks are considered emblematic of the time in which they were created, and understood to fall in a chronological, evolutionary order, relegated to their historical places rather than fully considered in our present.

Spatial distance that contributes to an auratic encounter with art is also manifested in the museum. It is hard to imagine a preeminent gallery space without stanchion barriers, glass, security guards, cameras, or motion detectors that are all in place to maintain a distance between the viewer and the art. While

ostensibly these measures are installed to protect these works of art, they effectively communicate that the art is worth protecting, nurturing their auratic value. But for Benjamin, “the unique apparition of distance, however near it may be” (2006 [1936], p. 105) is also intimately related to the idea that artworks on display at the museum will never be ours, that we will never possess them. The painting in the gallery, then, will always remain there, and require our patronage to its temple-like confines.

Ritual, Fetish, Aura

As we know, the earliest artworks originated in the service of rituals—first magical, then religious. And it is highly significant that the artwork’s auratic mode of existence is never entirely severed from its ritual function. In other words: *the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art always has its basis in ritual.* (Benjamin, 2006 [1936], p. 105, emphasis in original)

As briefly noted above, the aura is, for Benjamin, firmly rooted in the fabric of ritual and tradition. Benjamin notes that before the 19th century the artwork was inseparable from a ritual function—the “location of its original use value” (1968 [1936]: 224)—that is an important contribution to the artwork’s aura. While ritual and tradition are understood by Benjamin to be dynamic categories (e.g. Greek mythology, Roman Catholicism, and even secular systems of belief), they provide the formalized structure for reverence that provides an experience of the aura.

In her seminal analysis on the museum as a ritual space, Carol Duncan (1995) identifies the art museum as a modern day secular temple of the republic.

Duncan explores the museum as a complex performance of specific ritual scenarios. She points to the achievement of a demarked, liminal zone of time and space in which visitors forget their day-to-day lives and open up to a new kind of experience. She also examines the parallels between the Western concept of aesthetic experience—generally understood as the art gallery’s primary function—and the rationales for more traditional rituals such as enlightenment, revelation, and redemption.

Each of these constituent characteristics are an aid to my mobilization of the aura as an analytic of art museum practices. However, they fall short of the aura’s most profound component, namely, experience. For through my extrapolation and description of authenticity, distance, and ritual I am not describing the aura as an ontological thing in itself. These are three characteristics that set the stage for one to experience the aura of an artwork. They are not mutually exclusive; rather they overlap and are interconnected components that together set up an experience of an artwork’s aura. In Vancouver, the preeminent site to experience the aura of art is the VAG. I now move to introduce the VAG through a brief account of its formative and deeply political history.

The Vancouver Art Gallery: Putting Art in its Place

Creating a public art gallery in Vancouver was the brainchild of a determined Vancouver philanthropist. Henry A. Stone, president of dry goods merchant Gault

Brothers, was born in London and moved to Canada in 1882. When his only son died in the First World War, Stone decided to build a memorial that “would benefit the whole city” (Griffin, 2006). In 1925, Mr Stone and a delegation of eleven members of Vancouver’s business elite approached the City Council to propose that an art gallery be built in conjunction with the City’s already planned civic center (Andersson, 1983). While then mayor L.D. Taylor and council were initially supportive of the idea, they ultimately turned down the request for building funds. However, Stone’s action before the city council spurred a debate in the local media about what an art gallery might mean for Vancouver. From the *Vancouver Sun* newspaper:

Art and education are the machinery of happiness. They are the flowering of prosperity... If Vancouver cannot broaden her cultural life, all the millions she might hoard will be worth nothing. If her money cannot buy her spiritual happiness, she might as well have remained a wilderness. (1925, quoted in Andersson, 1983, p. 1)

And from the *Vancouver Sunday Province*:

when a city is sufficiently settled and assuredly upon the road to great commercial success, the time arrives when it must turn its attention to higher matters... It is in our reaction to art that we declare ourselves either progressive and civilized or reactionary and callous. (1926, quoted in Andersson, 1983, p.1)

From even before its inception, then, the VAG was an example of what art historian Donald Preziosi identifies in art museums as a “social technology” (1996, p. 97) of cultural politics. For Vancouver and its citizens, an art gallery would bring the city the means to cultivate proper aesthetic taste in its citizens and legitimize Vancouver as a culturally mature world-class city. By 1930, Mr

Stone and his fellow philanthropists had raised \$130,000 for the construction of a building and the purchase of a nucleus of a collection of artworks, and they would only ask the City for a site on which to erect it. Stone and his associates successfully secured municipal support early in 1931, with the provision of a site at 1145 West Georgia Street just west of the then center of downtown Vancouver. Stone and the other business elites on the VAG board thus set out to make manifest an auratic building to house an auratic collection of art.

Designed by local architects Sharp and Thompson, the first VAG building revealed the founders' attempt to associate itself in relation to an art historical lineage by carving the names of canonical artists like Durer, Rembrandt, and Velazques on its frieze and flanking the entranceway with marble busts of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. The founding collection similarly adhered to Stone's conservative interests and tastes. In the summer of 1931, Stone travelled to England with the director of Vancouver's School of Decorative and Applied Arts, Charles Scott, to embark on a shopping spree for a founding collection. The two men secured a collection that reflected the VAG board's economic and cultural ties to England as it predominantly outlined a conservative history of British art. For the opening on October 5th, 1931, the premier exhibition displayed the purposively acquired collection "which would be in good quality and comprehensive in appeal" (Andersson, 1983, p. 2).

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, modern Canadian artists would become more influential and amend this conservative history. During this period, influential BC artists Emily Carr and Lawren Harris held exhibitions that would stir

controversy in Vancouver as to what constituted legitimate art (Robertson, 1983). By 1951, these artists would be fully validated when the VAG was expanded to three times its original size—a move almost entirely justified in order to accommodate the donation of 157 works by Carr (VAG, 2010c). Removing the art deco façade, architect Ross A. Lort remodelled the VAG in accordance with the International Style popular in Vancouver at the time. Fundraising for the expansion was led by Harris, who was instrumental in raising \$300,000 toward the project, a sum matched by the City of Vancouver. This shift from the Gallery's association with conservative, Euro-centric artworks to modern and Canadian art is evidence of the dynamic nature of the VAG's collection and exhibitions.

The 1950s and '60s would prove to be difficult years for the VAG. The aesthetic debate between conservative traditionalists and modern artists continued while fiscal and operational problems grew. By 1959, the first VAG director William Dale publicly announced that there were only a few quality works in the permanent collection and that it was time to “weed out the junk” (Robertson, 1983, p. 18). This led to the largest membership meeting to date—some 250 people—in 1960, with an attempt to get more artists on the board of trustees that had been dominated by Vancouver's business elites. At one point, the president of the board, Aubrey Peck, told the city council that there had been “too much emphasis on art and not enough on the business end of things” (Robertson, 1983, p. 20) and the board asked the City of Vancouver to take over operations of the gallery. The City declined, but by the mid 1960s, the

photographer, artist, and curator Richard Simmins took the helm of the VAG as director, and is credited with turning the institution around (Robertson, 1983).

I borrow the subtitle to this section of the paper from a 1983 article published by the VAG's then institutional publication, *Vanguard Magazine*, on the occasion of the completion of renovations to Vancouver's original courthouse building (Buchan, 1983). The renovations were designed by Canadian architect Arthur Erickson, and caused quite a stir as his modernist aesthetics tangled with the neoclassical building. As the BC courts had vacated the building for a new, larger facility adjacent to the west, the City sought a new tenant for the monumental structure. The VAG was the clear choice, establishing Robson Square as the city's cultural hub. The former courthouse has served as the gallery's home, relatively untouched since Erickson's renovations, until now.

The 2010 winter Olympics in Vancouver brought unprecedented numbers of consumers to downtown Vancouver, and all of the city's facilities were confronted with long lines. The Vancouver Art Gallery is located in the center of all the action, with the adjacent Robson Square serving as one of the Vancouver Olympic Committee's entertainment sites. During the weeks of the Olympic and Paralympic games the gallery waived its standard admission fees. The Gallery swelled with pride and self-importance in announcing its record breaking attendance (Griffin, 2010). Within this afterglow of the Olympic moment, on March 4th, 2010, the *Vancouver Sun's* front page was divided between the pronouncement of the beginning of the Paralympic Torch relay across Canada

and the VAG's announcement that its Board of Directors had selected a site in the city upon which to build a new museum (Griffin, 2010).

Figure 2.1: Screen capture from VAG campaign website, showing map of proposed relocation.



Image retrieved from <http://www.newvanartgallery.com/>

This announcement can be considered the beginning of the VAG's campaign to take the entire site of the former Larwell Park, bordered by Beatty, Cambie, Dunsmuir, and Georgia streets in downtown Vancouver (Figure 2.1). This is a contentious move on the part of the VAG, one aimed at reinvigorating the VAG, an art museum facing the predicament of maintaining its relevance in an era of image-laden mechanical and digital reproduction. This move is also contentious in the spatial politics of urban development in Vancouver. The Larwell Park site is the last remaining undeveloped block in the city and it currently functions as a parking lot. In 2006 the city attached the \$40 million bill

for renovations to the adjacent Queen Elizabeth theatre to the site with the intention of passing the expense along to future developers of the site. These are some of the reasons why the VAG is not the sole potential occupier of this valuable city-owned lot. Therefore the City's perception of the VAG's importance to Vancouver's cultural and financial health is critical.

As noted above, the VAG has been housed in Vancouver's original courthouse heritage building for nearly 30 years. The gallery and its board have been evaluating an expansion since 2004 when it conducted a master planning study that exposed the current building's inadequacies. The VAG, not unlike many "public" art museums, has been critiqued since this announcement was made for making this decision behind closed doors without consulting Vancouver's public. Therefore the gallery has mobilized an aggressive marketing campaign to garner popular support for their bid for the Larwell Park site. Through widespread advertisements in local media, numerous town-hall style public information sessions, intimate "coffee chats" with museum members, and frequent direct mailings to its 50,000 members, the VAG claims that is "engaging" the public. However, this campaign is not an effort to open up a dialogue with the public about the options for the institution moving forward. This is a campaign to engender support for decisions the gallery has already made.

As this brief history of the gallery illustrates, the VAG has moved about the city of Vancouver and is now in the process of moving again. The VAG struggles with ephemerality and fixity in its position in Vancouver. I will now turn to an example of the VAG's current programming in order to understand how aura of

art is implicated in the VAG's spaces and practices. I draw upon my research methods of participant observation and interviews with key stakeholders in order to elucidate the VAG's interaction with and mobilization of the aura. I focus on an event that seeks to make some of these hidden practices visible in my examination of the public conservation of a painting in the summer of 2010.

Art, Aura, and Spatial Practice at the Vancouver Art Gallery

Conservation on Display

On June 10, 2010 the VAG sent out an invitation to all 50,000 plus of its members to witness “something *completely new*. As a museum member, you will have the opportunity to see an important aspect of our mission at work, *for the very first time*” (VAG 2010a, emphasis in original). For two weeks, between June 14 and June 25, 2010, the Gallery would put on display some of the day-to-day work of its museum services staff that is usually hidden behind secured doors. The VAG's conservators would be working on the conservation treatment of a large painting in the Gallery's central rotunda. The justification for the staging of this event was primarily based upon the sheer size of the painting, 274cm x 366cm, and the inadequacy of the VAG's conservation lab to accommodate an artwork of these dimensions. This event, then, not only provided visitors with a unique opportunity to see some of the work of the Gallery that goes on behind the scenes, it also provided the VAG with the opportunity to showcase its need to relocate to a larger facility.

The conservation of artworks in a museum collection is an integral function of the institution. In the past, to sustain a myth of timelessness and an auratic presence of a collection of art, museums made conservators and their work more or less invisible to visitors. In the late 20st century turn towards more reflexive museological practices, however, museums and conservators are increasingly interested in conveying the complexities of caring for a collection of art. Today, most museums accept that artworks do inevitably age and that this condition need not be veiled or disguised. Conservators have responded to this shifting notion by embracing sets of practices that are based on “doing no harm” and “reversibility of materials and procedures” rather than preserving an artwork’s pristine appearance as when the artwork was last touched by the authoring artist (Barker & Smithen, 2006). While the display of these practices may be new to the VAG, museums across the globe have staged exhibitions about conservation to illustrate the authenticity of their collections as well as further educate visitors about these practices.

It is important to acknowledge that this exhibition is a product of VAG’s organizational structure that has been shaped by critical scholarship and new museological practice. My interviews with the VAG’s administrative staff exposed that the Gallery is organized into two distinct arms: curatorial, charged with organization and scholarship of exhibitions, and education, charged with visitors’ interaction and interpretation of those exhibitions. Traditionally, these two arms are isolated and frequently in conflict with each other. However, at the VAG and specifically under the direction of VAG Director Kathleen Bartels, there is an

attempt to bring these two directives into greater collaboration. The recently appointed Director and Curator of the education division, Heidi Raetmaer and the newly instigated position of Head of Interpretation, currently held by Kimberly Phillips, embody these inter-organizational politics. The inclusion of “curator” in Raetmaer’s title is a deliberate attempt to bridge the previously distinct roles of the two departments. Similarly, Phillips’ academic background—she holds a PhD in art history—is also meant to develop some harmony between the two. Phillips was key in the development of this exhibition of conservation, and explained how the event was a deliberate attempt to, “make it very transparent, the nature of what’s going on, what’s involved in the everyday conservation of our collection” (personal communication, February 17, 2011).

I now move into an analysis of the exhibition, utilizing Benjamin’s concept of the aura in the terms I have outlined above. First, I examine the event in terms of how the VAG’s practices evoke the auratic authenticity of the painting undergoing conservation and how the entire VAG collection is implicated in the process. Next I uncover how an analysis of auratic distance is simultaneously diminished and maintained in the staging of the event. Finally, I consider the event in terms of how a ritualistic experience is conveyed through more subtle implications of the architecture of the VAG’s spaces.

Auratic Authenticity

For most visitors to this exhibition, the first interaction with this exhibition is through the announcement letter mentioned above, in which the authenticity of the focal artwork is supported almost immediately:

Between June 14 and June 25, visit the Gallery Rotunda from 1pm to 4pm, Monday to Friday and watch as our Museum Services staff works on the conservation of a large painting from the permanent collection, *Quantificateur Bleu* by Guido Molinari. One of the group of artists who were working in Montreal in the 1950s and 1960s calling themselves 'Les Plasticiens,' Molinari is an important figure in the Gallery's exhibition history, and has been included in 13 exhibitions here, including three solo exhibitions (in 1964, 1977 and 1989-90). *Quantificateur Bleu* is an outstanding example of his later work and was just acquired last year. (VAG, 2010a, p. 1)

These few sentences do an impressive amount of work in verifying the object of this exhibition as auratically authentic in at least two ways. First, the artist's cachet is established through his classification and placement in an art historical narrative. This is an explicit example of what Benjamin evokes as authenticity of an artwork, "...the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the *historical testimony relating to it*" (2006 [1936], p. 103, emphasis added). Through reading the passage above from the VAG's announcement, the Gallery subjects formulate their conception of the artwork undergoing conservation in the carefully constructed terms of this artist, Molinari, who was the member of a Franco-Canadian art movement working in far off time of the mid-20th century. The text further elaborates that Molinari also has an exhibitionary pedigree with the VAG, having his own exhibitions that spanned three decades. Second, the final sentence on the didactic poster alerts

the reader to the fact that this particular example of Molinari's oeuvre is an "outstanding example of his later work," and is a recent acquisition. Thus, this artwork is to be understood as a significant piece in the VAG's "collection of over 10,000 works of art [that] represents the most comprehensive resource for visual culture in British Columbia" (VAG, 2010a, p. 1).

Figure 2.2: View of the exhibition, including the didactic poster.



Photograph by the author.

This auratic authenticity was reinforced at the exhibition itself. Upon entering the Gallery's rotunda, the visitor is met by a didactic poster that Phillips authored (Figure 2.2). This text also places *Quantificateur Bleu* within an art historical narrative. The didactic elaborates on the artist's process and materials and the challenges they present to the VAG conservators:

Guido Molinari (1933-2004) was a Montreal-based Canadian artist known for his abstract modernist colour field paintings. He often worked in acrylic, a medium that became popular with modern

artists because of the intensity of its hues and the ability to achieve flat monochrome expanses of colour. Acrylic presents certain challenges for restoration. Because the paint is inherently porous and can hold dirt and other materials introduced to the surface, improper cleaning techniques can easily stain or cause changes to the colour or the gloss. The conservators will use an aqueous solution to lift marks from the surface of the canvas, working slowly and meticulously to avoid compromising the integrity of the image. (VAG, 2010b)

These insights into the artist's materials and the processes at work invoke that this is a delicate, precarious, and original work of art that is in the Gallery's care. In addition, this is the only mention of the problems in the condition of the painting that require the attention of the conservators. What the didactic refers to as "other materials introduced to the surface," is actually a somewhat shockingly mundane coffee spill on the bottom-left corner of the canvas (Smith, personal communication, June 23, 2010; Phillips, personal communication, February 17, 2011). That the banal nature of the transgressing mark on the canvas is skirted over exemplifies how carefully the auratic authenticity of the artwork is guarded by the VAG. It is not published that the conservators are attending to what must have been a dramatic mishap while the artwork was in the VAG's care. The focus is on the diligent care now undertaken, and the expertise that the VAG has in doing so. Therefore, the authenticity of the artwork, in the Benjaminian sense, is supported by these two practices: first, situating the artwork in an art historical narrative. Second, pointing out the precariousness of the original work of art and the care it requires. Thus, an experience of "the authority of the object, the weight it derives from tradition" (Benjamin, 2006 [1936], p. 103) is firmly established for the Gallery visitor.

Auratic Distance

This display of conservation exposes a more complicated interaction with auratic distance. While there was no additional or special fee for viewing the conservation exhibition, the exhibition was behind the Gallery's entrance to the fee-restricted space. Thus, the first imposition of distance between the public and this artwork is a financial one (see table 1). This subtle spatial practice of requiring visitors to pay a fee to gain access to the VAG's exhibitions supports the exclusivity of the Gallery's exhibition spaces and frames the institution as the facilitator of the visitor's potential engagement with the artworks in its collection. While the VAG does offer an alternative, "by donation" fee structure on Tuesday evenings, this exclusionary practice nonetheless reinforces a distance between the art and the public.

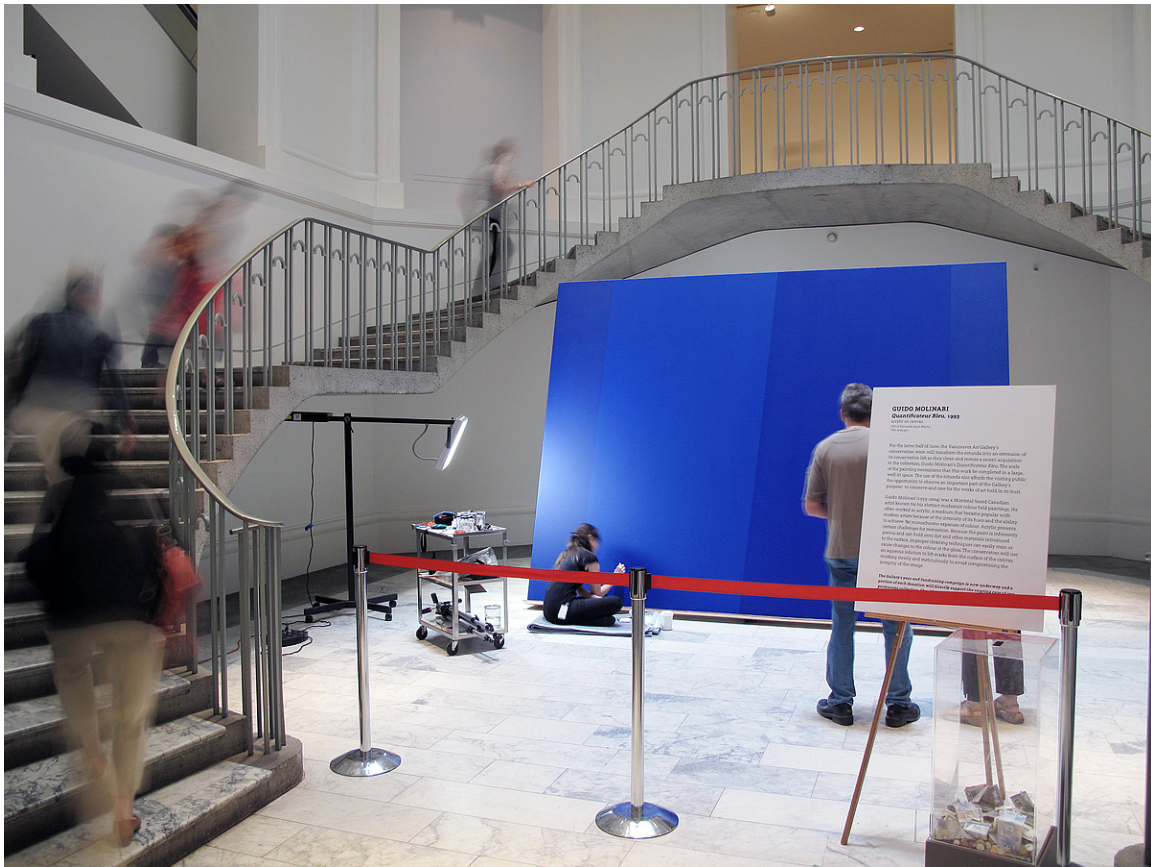
Table 1: Vancouver Art Gallery Fall/Winter 2010-2011 Admission Rates (VAG, 2011a).

<i>Category</i>	<i>Admission Fee</i>
Adult	\$19.50
Senior (65+)	\$14.00
Student (with valid ID)	\$13.00
Children (5-12)	\$7.00
Family (maximum 2 adults and 2 children)	\$50.00
Members	Free

Upon paying an admission fee and passing through the tinted glass double doors that mark the exhibition space entrance, the visitor enters a liminal

entry annex. At the time of the conservation exhibition in June 2010, the VAG was in the process of installing another exhibit on this first floor. Therefore, the only possible route was to continue forward through the annex into the Gallery's rotunda. There the visitor meets Molinari's *Quantificatuer Bleu*, an enormous expanse of rich blue paint in at least three subtly different hues. The visitor's progress towards the painting is interrupted, however, by the most common of museum security protocols: a stanchion barrier. This bright red barrier demarcates an obvious split between inside and outside, a distance from the artwork that must be attended by the visitor. This distance-barrier encircles the painting, maintained by the symmetrical staircase that hugs the walls of the rotunda space. From outside of these barriers, the visitor can witness a positively post-auratic act as the VAG conservators conduct their treatment of the painting.

Figure 2.3: Exhibition view showing some of the equipment used by the VAG conservators.



Photograph by the author.

Inside the barriers, the conservators are accompanied by a myriad of tools (Figure 2.3). A bright, boom-mounted light on wheels allows the conservators to reveal minute details, dust, and dirt on the surface of the painting. A rolling cart functions as a temporary toolbox, holding an assortment of laboratory bottles filled with solutions and solvents, swabs, and magnification visors. A six-foot ladder adds to the sense that there is real work taking place here. Most impressive in regards to the visitor's sense of auratic distance is the fact that the painting is not mounted on a wall, rather it rests on a custom built easel, pitched back at a 20 degree angle. This subtle shift in placement of the artwork functions

to de-throne the artwork from its more traditional exhibition value or the focus on aesthetics. The painting can now be understood as a vulnerable object requiring the attention of skilled professionals and not the artist. This experience is most potent when the visitor witnesses the conservators actually touching the surface of the painting, the ultimate transgressive act in a museum. The exhibition stirred a significant amount of interest and inspired a different kind of interaction between visitors, the Gallery staff, and the artwork. Head Conservator Monica Smith commented on how “well received” the exhibition was, stirring many questions from visitors, especially those who were art collectors in their own right (personal communication, June 23, 2010). These questions related to how the work being performed at the VAG might relate to their own collections, e.g. how to clean and care for their own artworks or who to contact for professional services (Smith, personal communication, June 23, 2010). Smith, as a fully vetted VAG staff member, had the luxury of passing through the barrier that marked off the exhibition space. Thus she functioned as a liaison between the Gallery and the public, and she moved in and out of the space when interacting with visitors.

Yet, even though the artwork is brought closer to the viewer by witnessing this post-auratic condition (e.g. the painting brought down off the wall, conservators touching the surface) of this artwork, it still must be observed from outside of the barrier-delineated space. Thus visitors understood that this is not an act that anyone could perform. Only the trained, acknowledged VAG professional staff are permitted to interact with the art in this way—except in one

instance. Smith's role and personal interest in making her work and the work of the VAG accessible was most fully demonstrated in the late afternoon when two women were intently asking about the conservators' work. To make her points more clear, Smith opened the stanchion barrier and invited the visitors *inside* (Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.4: View of the conservation exhibition with visitors invited inside the barriers.



Photograph by the author.

By inviting these visitors inside the exhibition barriers, Smith furthers the VAG's goals to disclose its previously hidden practices and knowledge. She also collapses the auratic distance around this painting for these visitors. However,

with the barrier left agape, another visitor soon entered the space—uninvited—to share in the closer look. This disrupted the congenial interactions between Smith and her invited guests, and she quickly sought to re-establish control of the space. She indirectly pronounced, “I need everyone to move behind the stanchions!” (Personal communication, June 23, 2010). The temporarily collapsed distance was reconstructed.

Auratic Ritual

Positioned in the Gallery’s rotunda, the exhibition was staged in a formal space that was only modestly renovated by Arthur Erickson for the Gallery in 1983 (Buchan, 1983). The neo-classical details that cover the façade of the former courthouse building are revealed in this space. While the remainder of the Gallery was converted to embody the gallery-standard “White Cube” (O’Doherty, 1986), the rotunda is embraced by a symmetrical staircase, topped with an open ceiling that soars three stories to the building’s central dome, and decorated thick decorative moulding (see figure 2.5). These formal, neo-classical aesthetics are rare inside the VAG, and work to firmly ritualize this space.

Figure 2.5: View of the exhibition, including the entire rotunda space.



Photograph by the author.

The ritualised encounter with this exhibition harkens back to Duncan's (1995) analysis of the art museum as a modern day secular temple of the republic. The VAG imposes a delineated, liminal zone of time and space in which visitors forget their day-to-day lives and open up to a new kind of experience. Duncan also examines the parallels between the Western concept of aesthetic experience—generally understood as the art gallery's primary function—and the rationales for more traditional rituals such as enlightenment, revelation, and redemption.

Conclusion: Contradictory Practices in a (Post-) Auratic Vancouver Art Gallery

The application of Benjaminian thought in the analysis of art museums is firmly established in the exploding field of critical museology (e.g. Crimp, 1993; Sherman, 1994; Wallach, 1998). However, the tendency in this literature is to call on his ideas surrounding collecting and the construction of a historical narrative. In this paper, I have focused on only one aspect of Benjamin's thought—the concept of aura. In so doing, I hope to alert geographers to the spatial aspects of the aura in an attempt to develop its analytic potential in studies of art and politics.

In my analysis of the VAG's exhibition of the conservation treatment of Guido Molinari's *Quantificateur Bleu*, the aura as analytic has helped me to expose two sets of contradictory practices. On the one hand, the VAG is engaged in a progressive, de-mystifying approach to its educational programming. As noted above, this exhibition was seen as an opportunity for the museum to show some of the work it usually conducts behind the scenes. In doing so, the vulnerability of an object in its collection to aging, deterioration, and coffee spills is brought to the fore. Through this exhibition, the artwork takes a step down from its auratic transcendence as object beyond ourselves and can be perceived in a new way by the public—just as a painting, very much like one a visitor might have in their own home. This kind of engagement with artworks at the VAG speaks to the shift in perception and political potential in art in the age of their technological reproducibility:

Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception... And if changes in the medium of present-day perception can be understood as a decay of the aura, it is possible to demonstrate the social determinants of that decay... The stripping of the veil from the object [artwork], the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose 'sense of sameness in the world' has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique... The alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality is a process of immeasurable importance for both thinking and perception. (Benjamin, 2006 [1936], p. 104-105)

To further the understanding of how this perception shift manifests in a museum, this paper examines practices other than the proliferation of reproductions (for an excellent examination of the VAG gift shop, see Cameron, 2007). By moving an explicitly spatial definition of the aura to the fore, the same shifts in perception of an aura around art are uncovered. The VAG, through structurally empowering its educational programming division, is supporting Benjamin's ideas around the revolutionary capacity of post-auratic art. In so doing, it promotes a politically progressive perception of art on the part of its audiences. On the other hand, however, the VAG is simultaneously engaged in practices that nurture an auratic and politically conservative experience of the exhibition. By reinforcing the authenticity of the painting, imposing distance from the artwork, and formalizing the visitor's encounter with ritualistic overtones, the VAG ensures that an aura emanates from the exhibition.

While an increase in the critique of museum practices and the resultant shifts to increasing reflexivity are apparent, the VAG continues to rely upon and actively seeks to foster an auratic perception on the part of the public. As a public

institution falling victim to waning public funding in an entrepreneurial, neoliberal, and competitive market for private, philanthropic dollars, the aura encapsulates the VAG's primary source of leverage and power. The VAG's position and contradictory practices around the aura of its collection, its spaces, and the building itself are symptomatic of the political economy of 21st century Vancouver. Even the most revolutionarily oriented art, when exhibited at the VAG, will be inoculated by the on-going myriad of practices that support auratic experiences.

Chapter 3: Auratic Photography at the Vancouver Art Gallery

Introduction

*We should at last be justified in not admitting [the artist] into a city that is going to be under good laws, because he awakens this part of the soul and nourishes it, and, by making it strong, destroys the calculating part. We can admit no poetry into our city save only hymns to the gods and the praises of good men.
(Plato's Republic, trans. Bloom, 1968, 289-290)*

*Plato, and Greek classical antiquity in general, had a very different experience of art, an experience having little to do with disinterest and aesthetic enjoyment. The power of art over the soul seemed to him so great that he thought it could by itself destroy the very foundations of his (ideal) city; but nonetheless, while he was forced to banish it, he did so reluctantly, 'since we ourselves (in Plato's own words) are conscious of her spell.'
(Agamben, 1994, p. 4)*

That art could harbor such a potent, “divine terror”—Plato’s term for the effects of inspired imagination—to warrant banishment as it did for Plato is an idea that is alien to most people living in the 21st century metropolis. Giorgio Agamben finds

explanation of this conundrum in Edgar Wind's (1963) influential text, *Art and Anarchy*, where our relationship with art has shifted from an earnest, heartfelt *interested* in Plato's time to a far more detached, aesthetically scrutinizing *interesting* in contemporary contexts (Agamben, 1994). Arguably, this waning emotional attachment with works of art is prefigured in Walter Benjamin's celebrated essay, "The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility," (2006 [1936], hereafter referred to as the artwork essay). For Benjamin, the powerful socio-spatial presence of art has always been based in ritual, and the shift that Wind identifies is captured in the move from a religious or magical reverence of art to the more commonly secular encounters in modern-day art museums as part of the "cult of beauty" (Benjamin, (2006 [1936], p. 105).

Today, this shift is exemplified in popular conceptions of art portrayed in the media. Preeminent art galleries, understood as secular temples for the appreciation of art, routinely engage in playful antics with their prized collections. In a *Wall Street Journal* report prior to the 2010 Super Bowl, "two museum directors from the Super Bowl contender city art museums—the New Orleans Museum of Art and the Indianapolis Museum of Art—are getting in on the Big Game by wagering major art loans on the outcome of the Saints-Colts matchup" (Jackson, 2010, para. 2). The New Orleans Saints won the big match, and in keeping with the bet, the Indianapolis Museum of Art conceded a three-month loan of one of their cherished paintings, *The Fifth Plague of Egypt* by Joseph Turner. This arguably insolent and profane incident nonetheless attracted positive support, as evinced in the following online comments about the article:

“This is fabulous. Should make it a yearly event...” (Jackson, 2010, comment 5), and “Oooo, Ouch New Orleans. Indy has a better museum and a better team! Go Colts!” (Jackson, 2010, comment 4). Art appears in this context to be an interesting form of entertainment rather than a sacred medium warranting Plato’s divine terror.

The shifting socio-political contexts of art and aesthetics have recently gained increasing attention in geography scholarship. James Ketchum’s doctoral dissertation (2005) examined three artist’s work to uncover how contemporary geographical imaginations of war are impacted by the work of visual artists. Deborah Dixon’s (2008) analysis of an exhibition of critical BioArt examines how aesthetics are experienced in space and can evoke viscerally profound responses and political implications. Likewise, her (2009) engagement with aesthetics and politics demands that art can be a site of political struggle. Furthermore, Kingsbury (2010) affirms, “aesthetics...is one of the most undervalued categories in human geography” (p. 56).

Furthermore, urban theorists Charles Landry (2000) and Richard Florida (2002) look to the economic potentials of arts and culture. In this approach, arts infrastructure can be deployed as a catalyst for urban economic growth and has become an integral part of a new urban policy orthodoxy through which cities seek to enhance their competitive position. Whether or not creativity and cultural development are socially, economically, or politically sustainable as core urban policies is yet to be seen (Johnson, 2009). Nonetheless, within the last two decades, arts and culture driven urban redevelopment has come to occupy a

pivotal position in the urban entrepreneurialism of increasingly global cities. Geographers have contested the assumed benefits from this 'creatively' and culture-led urban regeneration and competition. McCann (2007) draws attention to how "creative" policy enhances geographical imaginations of cities so that they may gain an edge in interurban competition. Peck's (2005) account demonstrates how "creativity strategies subtly canalize and constrain urban political agency, even as their material payoffs remain extraordinarily elusive" (p. 768). Miles and Paddison (2005) have asked in their introduction to a special issue on urban cultural policy in *Urban Studies*, "to what extent is culture led regeneration more about rhetoric than reality?" (p. 834). These perspectives echo Plato's suspicions of the arts, though as part of capitalistic and socially unjust urban policy.

As preeminent arts infrastructure, public art museums are not a new development and have long been a part of the urban milieu, serving as a vital social technology in the post-enlightenment era (Preziosi, 2003). The first public art gallery, the Louvre in Paris, opened in post-revolutionary France in 1793 to celebrate the first anniversary of the fall of the monarchy. It was with the Louvre that art museums increasingly became symbols of politically virtuous states that could demonstrate the highest civic virtues through the "universal and powerful" language of art (Duncan, 1995, p. 32). While critical scholarship of public art galleries has flourished in the fields of art history and museology (e.g. Crimp, 1993; McClellan, 2003, 2008; Wallach, 1998), there is a paucity of analysis of the political implications of museums in geography (though see Lepawsky, 2008).

This paper addresses the gap in the geography literature surrounding art museums in the 21st century as profound sites of struggle around conservative and progressive representations of art and its political potentials. Following Sherman and Rogoff (1994), in this paper I will focus on the *practices*—specifically the representation of art in the text and photography of gallery-published catalogues—at a preeminent art museum, the Vancouver Art Gallery (hereafter VAG). By concentrating on how two exhibitions are represented in the VAG’s publications, this paper will show the VAG conveys what I call an “auratic” and politically conservative encounter with art, despite the critical nature of the artworks themselves.

First, through a close reading of some of Benjamin’s essays, I will establish the characteristics of autonomous art that elicit an auratic experience. Further, I discuss how photography—broadly understood by Benjaminian scholars to be at odds with the aura—can convey the auratic appreciation of artworks. Second, I introduce the relocation campaign currently underway at the VAG as a prescient frame calling for scrutiny of the institution’s practices. I also present how the introduction of the new, revolutionary technology of digital photography at the gallery is opening new potentials for the representation of art. Third, I move to an empirical analysis of two exhibition catalogues: Reece Terris’ *Ought Apartment* (VAG, 2009), and Michael Lin’s *A Modest Veil* (VAG, 2010d). Supported by interviews with VAG staff, I mobilize Benjamin’s ideas of the aura and power of photography to explore how these VAG practices nurture and support an auratic experience of art. The paper concludes with a discussion of

how photography can bolster the aura as much as it can liberate the artwork of it, and how the politics of an auratic experience of art benefit the VAG's relocation campaign. Benjamin's promise of a withering aura is by no means inevitable, nor is photography inevitably a means by which the aura is depleted.

Benjamin, Photography, and the Aura

Arguably the best-known and most controversial concept in Benjamin's entire corpus, the aura grapples with the unique and powerful socio-spatial presence of art and its political potential. Crucially, the aura does not refer to an ontological thing, but rather describes particular socio-historical formations of human experience and perception. At stake in Benjamin's examination of the aura is how new technologies can produce revolutionary shifts in humanity's modes of perception, and how this in turn can lead to socio-political change. While Benjamin uses examples of the aura that can be experienced in nature, in cities, and around commodities, below I focus on his writings in terms of art history. In this section, I first define the characteristics that for Benjamin constitute an auratic experience of art. Drawing primarily from Benjamin's artwork essay (2006 [1936]), I distil three aspects that Benjamin describes as formative of the aura. Second, I move to disrupt the widely assumed opposition between photography and the aura. In keeping with Carolin Duttlinger's essay on the aura of photography (2008), I draw from other works in Benjamin's corpus to illustrate how photography need not be understood solely as the aura's destroyer, but as the very vehicle for its conveyance.

Auratic Authenticity, Distance, and Ritual

Through a careful consideration of Benjamin's artwork essay, I will bring three components of the aura to the fore. These are its basis in authenticity, its demand of distance, and its reliance upon ritual. These mutually constitutive elements cannot be considered in isolation from one another. Nonetheless, the identification of each is useful to analyse the VAG, so that the gallery's practices can be examined for how they construct an auratic experience of art.

In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence—and nothing else—that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject. (Benjamin 2006 [1936], p. 103)

For Benjamin, an aura is perceived around artworks that are original and authentic. Traditional artistic mediums of painting and sculpture exemplify this status. Each fresco, each oil painting, each stone or wood carving is unique, unlike any other object in the world. This uniqueness, this authenticity, harbors a gravity that we experience as the aura. Even as Benjamin acknowledges, "in principle, the work of art has always been reproducible" (2006 [1936], p. 102), what is generated when an artwork has been copied by hand is a second, other object with its own unique authenticity. The fundamental difference in the medium of photography is that each photographic print from a single negative is as authentic and original as the first. In the digital age, each copy of an image file

is identical⁴. This identical reproducibility is the aspect of technological reproduction that Benjamin charges with the destruction of the aura.

What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of distance, however near it may be. (Benjamin, 2006 [1936], p. 104-105)

In his signature poetic eloquence, Benjamin calls forth distance—both spatial and temporal—as a crucial constituent of the aura. Hence, a vital characteristic of the aura of artworks is the artworks' inapproachability; our inability to bring them closer or to possess them fully. Benjamin notes that technological reproduction has the ability to collapse the distance that is inherent to viewing an “authentic” work of art in a temple, cathedral, or an art gallery. A photograph of an artwork “enables the original to meet the recipient halfway... the [artwork] leaves its site to be received in the studio of the art lover” (2006 [1936], p. 103). However, as I discuss later in the paper, Benjamin overlooks how an auratic distance can also be maintained by photography.

As we know, the earliest artworks originated in the service of rituals—first magical, then religious. And it is highly significant that the artwork's auratic mode of existence is never entirely severed from its ritual function. In other words: *the unique value of the “authentic” work of art always has its basis in ritual.* (Benjamin, 2006 [1936], p. 105, emphasis in original)

For Benjamin, the aura is firmly rooted in the fabric of ritual and tradition. Benjamin notes that before the 19th century the artwork was inseparable from a ritual function—the “location of its original use value” (1968 [1936], p. 224)—that

⁴ The subtle exception to this are image artifacts generated by opening and re-saving through the compression algorithms of certain file formats such as jpegs.

is an important contribution to the artwork's aura. While ritual and tradition are understood by Benjamin to be dynamic categories (e.g. Greek mythology, Roman Catholicism, and even secular systems of belief), they provide the "strange tissue of space and time" (2006 [1936], p. 104) for the aura to exist. The art object in the museum is seemingly stripped of its aura that was derived from a religious or cult value and replaced by another aura based upon its exhibition value (Wallach, 2003). This exhibition value is derived from two qualities: the artworks' uniqueness and authenticity, as well as the way the artwork offers proof of artistic genius and represents a much more secular religiosity of "*l'art pour l'art*" or "art for art's sake" (Benjamin, 2006 [1936], p. 106). The proliferation of reproductions of works of art in the 21st century far exceeds that of any previous historical period. Far from diminishing the aura, this proliferation has actually served to enhance the originals' power and appeal. A visit to the museum is today centered on experiencing an encounter with the *original* of a reproduction. Art historian Andrew Wallach calls this fetishization of the authentic artwork "the new cult of the original" (Wallach, 2003). The aura only exists when an object is specifically constituted in time and space—that is, when the object is unique, permanent, and thus cannot be *completely* reproduced. So even if the artwork is liberated from its "parasitic subserviance" (Benjamin, 2006 [1936], p. 106) to traditionally religious ritual, the art world has cleverly generated a new, secular religiosity based upon the artist as genius and cultic, ritualistic reverence of the original, authentic artwork.

Benjamin's Photographic Aura: the Gaze Exchanged

While Benjamin's notion of the aura is most commonly associated with the artwork essay, it is an idea that permeates his entire corpus. Further, while the aura is posited to be in opposition with photography within the artwork essay, this antagonism is dissolved in other parts of his writings. In her 2008 paper, Duttlinger successfully argues that in Benjamin's writings, the "aura and photography are not simply cast as mutually exclusive opposites but are in fact engaged in a complex process of interaction" (p. 80). Following Duttlinger, this paper argues that Benjamin's conceptions of the aura and photography permit the aura of authentic works of art to be communicated and reaffirmed through photographs. This has profound implications for utilization of the aura as an analytic in geography, especially analysis of the spatial politics of an art gallery. To make this argument, I first turn to Benjamin's initial contemplations on photography in his essay, "A little history of photography" (2005 [1931], hereafter referred to as the photography essay).

With photography, we encounter something new and strange... the most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us. No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible compulsion to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject. (Benjamin, (2005 [1931], p. 510)

Benjamin concentrates on early photographic portraiture in his photography essay. Strikingly, in photography Benjamin discovers a "magical" quality that usurps that of the hand-painted picture. Far from accusing

photography of destroying a magical experience—as in the artwork essay—here photography evinces a new kind of magical encounter. The quote above is in reference to a photograph of a recently engaged couple, and he concentrates on the gaze of the female sitter: “here she can be seen with him. He seems to be holding her but her gaze passes him by, absorbed in an ominous distance” (p. 510). In another photograph, a portrait of a woman alone, he notices “her eyes cast down, in such indolent, seductive modesty, there remains something that goes beyond testimony to the photographer’s art” (p. 510). Benjamin utilizes these notions of distance and the gaze to formulate how a photograph can evoke an auratic experience. The “magical value” he alludes to in the above quote stems not from the authenticity, distance, or ritual surrounding the photograph at hand, but rather from the photographic process itself, “which preserves a sense of immediacy even across temporal distance” (Duttlinger, 2008, p. 85). Therefore, these descriptions of the aura as it relates to photography do not disrupt the post-auratic potential of photographs as Benjamin describes in his artwork essay. Rather, they speak to how the precise recording *process* of photography enables an auratic encounter with a photograph’s subject.

Maintaining his focus on early portrait photography, Benjamin calls forth a pivotal example in the photography essay: a childhood portrait of Franz Kafka executed by a commercial photography studio. Benjamin makes the argument that commercial studios represented the invasion of industrial mass production into photography and the dissolution of the aura in the medium. In the portrait of Kafka, Benjamin detects an “infinite sadness” (2005 [1931], p. 515) as it is an

attempt to simulate the aura of pre-commercial portraiture. He argues that the commercial portrait photographers, with their phoney props and costumes, their better optics and light-sensitive films, “made it their business to simulate the aura that had been banished from picture” (2005 [1931], p. 517) by the technological advances of commercial photography. For Benjamin, the aura that early portrait photography was able to evoke was not based purely on qualities inherent to the photographic process, but specifically the limitations of early photographic technology. The murky slowness of early technology captured a mysteriousness that could establish a reciprocal gaze between a photograph’s subject and the photograph’s viewer. Benjamin claims that commercial photographers “saw it as their task to simulate this aura using all the arts of retouching” (2005 [1931], p. 517). As I argue later in this chapter, digital photography offers new tools to VAG photographers as a means to these same ends.

Benjamin reconsiders the aura in 1940 in the essay, “Some Motifs on Baudelaire” (2006 [1940]), shifting his focus away from art or photographic technology to the world at large. Considering the aura in this broader context reveals how, for Benjamin, experience of the aura is centered on the gaze exchanged between observers and objects:

Inherent in the gaze is the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed. Where this expectation is met, there is an experience of the aura in all its fullness. ... Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate or natural objects. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us. (Benjamin, 2006 [1940], p. 338)

As Duttlinger (2008) points out, this parallels Benjamin's use of the gaze in his photography and artwork essays. Further, the consideration of aura beyond traditional works of art illuminates it as a form of human experience and perception rather than a fixed historical category (Duttlinger, 2008). Rather than simply positing that photography and the aura are in clear-cut opposition, closer examination of Benjamin's writings reveal the possibility of auratic photography (Duttlinger, 2008).

Consideration of the aura as an experience—of a gaze exchanged by a viewer and an object—opens up the potential for auratic encounter with an object mediated by photography. Later in this paper I argue that this idea can be utilized to analyse photographic processes at the VAG. In the next section I provide some background to the VAG's endeavour to relocate to a purpose-built facility. I also introduce the photographic practices that will ultimately be shown to contribute to the relocation campaign.

The Vancouver Art Gallery's Relocation Campaign and its "Little History" of Digital Photography

On March 4, 2010, in the afterglow of the Winter Olympics in Vancouver, the VAG officially announced its intention to build a new home in the last undeveloped lot in downtown Vancouver (Griffin, 2010). The lot, bordered by Beatty, Cambie, Dunsmuir, and Georgia streets, was originally the site of the city's historic Larwill Park. In 1954, the City of Vancouver purchased the lot and it functioned, "temporarily," as a bus depot while the City discussed possible uses

for the site (Lee, 2010). Since then it has functioned as a parking lot, and in 2006 the City secretly borrowed \$40 million against the lot to fund renovations of the adjacent Queen Elizabeth Theatre (Lee, 2010). The City intended to reclaim the encumbrance from future development of the valuable site. However, the VAG contends that by relocating to this site, the “area has the potential to become a vibrant cultural district” in Vancouver, and is asking the City to waive the substantial charge. Additionally, early estimates for the cost of constructing a purpose-built art gallery building range from \$250-400 million (Lee, 2010). While the provincial government has already promised \$50 million, and various members of the board have together pledged support of another \$50 million, the gallery faces an imposing fund raising task and will need to secure substantial public support to acquire access to the site.

Following the announcement, the VAG launched an aggressive marketing campaign to justify the move. The gallery hired a marketing and public relations company specifically for this campaign. Kathleen Bartels, the gallery’s director, along with her “high-powered knights,” patrons Michael Audain, CEO of Polygon Homes and an avid philanthropist and supporter of visual arts, and David Aisenstat, CEO of Keg Restaurants, Ltd. and VAG board chairman have engaged local and national media to stake their claim (Bula, 2010, p. 38). The campaign includes a custom website (<http://www.newvanartgallery.com/>), professionally produced videos displayed at the gallery and made available on the web (VAG, 2010g), multiple full page advertisements, “coffee chats” hosted to engage museum members, a series of public information sessions, and

various leaflets and brochures that are distributed at the gallery and mailed to gallery members.

The VAG's relocation campaign hinges on two arguments. First, the campaign focuses on the practical considerations of the relocation, particularly the inadequacy of its current facility. Repeated in pamphlets distributed at the gallery (VAG, 2010e), the public information sessions, and at "member coffee chats" (VAG, 2010f), the VAG stresses how it has "outgrown" the former courthouse that it currently occupies:

- "...a severe lack of educational programming spaces."
- "Only 3% of our permanent collection can be displayed at any given time. Our building isn't nearly large enough..."
- "Our art storage vault...is beyond capacity."
- "Aging building systems are difficult and expensive to maintain museum standards."
- "We have no theatre, lecture hall, or large gathering space..."
- "Line-ups, long wait times, and overcrowding are common..."

These practical points are eminently quantifiable and defensible, and the VAG can show quite readily how these constraints negatively impact its operations. However, by focusing on the operational deficiencies of the current building, the VAG bypasses any direct engagement with or justification of the fundamental role of art at the gallery or in Vancouver. What art is and how the VAG interacts with art is left unacknowledged, and its presumably vital importance to the city is merely implicit.

Second, the VAG mobilizes the rhetoric of global inter-city competition. The campaign frames Vancouver as “one of *the* contemporary art centres in North America, along with New York and Los Angeles” (Director Kathleen Bartels in VAG, 2010g, emphasis in original). Further, “every great city needs a great art gallery” (Board member Michael Audain in VAG, 2010g). Here, Bartels and Audain are considering art and the VAG’s roles in positioning Vancouver in the world city hierarchy (Friedman, 1986; Sassen, 1991), and furthering Vancouver’s entrepreneurial (Harvey, 1989) and growth machine (Molotch, 1976) agendas. Without presenting any justification, the campaign positions the VAG as pivotal in Vancouver’s ability to be competitive with other major urban centres, and seeks to align itself with the likes of NYC and LA. In a poignant catch phrase that speaks to the global networks of inter-institutional exhibition lending, Bartels claims that the VAG’s expansion is based on the goal to bring the “best of the world to Vancouver, and the best of Vancouver to the world” (VAG, 2010g).

Absent from the campaign is an engagement with the significance of art, its benefit to the citizens of Vancouver, or whether the VAG *should* expand its operations. Certainly the point is made that there is a demand for more educational programming and events, but what is the root of that demand? A key word permeates the campaign, it is a word that performs a tremendous amount of ideological work: “deserves.” In the aforementioned video, the narrator claims that “Vancouver *deserves* its own signature art gallery” (VAG, 2010g, emphasis added), and Bartels remarked at one of the public information sessions, “the Vancouver Art Gallery *deserves* a purpose-built facility” (personal

communication, July 24, 2010, emphasis added). When the gallery's relocation and expansion are framed this way, the VAG's operations as they relate to art are implied, and their comprehension by Vancouver's citizens is assumed to be common sense.

A strategic tool in shaping the VAG's presence in Vancouver and in global art networks is Bartels' prioritization of gallery publications. Since her arrival at the VAG in 2001, the gallery's photography department has been driven by producing images to illustrate exhibition catalogues (Mills, personal communication, January 19, 2011). This reliance upon the technology of photography harkens back to art historian Donald Preziosi's observation "art history is in a real sense the child of photography" (2003, p. 37). It is through the dissemination of images of artworks that comparative analysis of art became feasible, and is therefore a foundational component of art history. Further, the promulgation of VAG catalogues works to convey the VAG's exhibition activity to the world, simultaneously building material evidence of the institution's exhibitionary oeuvre and advertising the gallery's commitment to exhibiting art. Illustrating these catalogues with top-quality photography is imperative to communicating an effective and professional VAG.

Photography and cinematography, the technologies with which Benjamin focused his analysis, have steadily evolved and reshaped our perceptions and consumption of art to the point that "today we see art as nobody saw it before. We actually perceive it in a different way" (Berger, 1972, p. 9). This shift in our perception of art has been exacerbated by the second truly revolutionary means

of technological reproduction: digital imaging. This technology adds important possibilities to image generation that were previously highly difficult to attain or easy for the viewer to detect. The critical visual theory of Susan Sontag (1977) has gone mainstream in an age when Photoshop has become a neologistic verb (Wyly, 2010). No one views photographs as unproblematic representations of reality, and yet the photographic image can still operate to quietly communicate ideological notions, e.g. the photoshopped supermodel/ideologies of the body, the photoshopped architectural interior/ideologies of the home, the photoshopped cityscape/ideologies of urban branding, and, as I examine in this paper, the photoshopped art installation/ideologies of the aura.

The VAG did not have a proper photography department of its own until the 1970s. Currently, Trevor Mills and Rachel Topham, are only the fifth and sixth full-time photographers, respectively, to be employed by the gallery. Mills explained that the VAG's switch to digital photography from traditional film photography was a response to the technology's apparent usurpation of the traditional "project triangle" (personal communication, January 19, 2011). The project triangle is a project management model that claims between the desirable attributes of cost, speed, and quality, any project can only succeed in achieving two. However, for Mills, digital photography allowed him to achieve all three. Before shifting to a fully digital workflow, Mills' annual budget consisted of \$15,000 for film, \$15,000 for laboratory processing, and \$15,000 for studio equipment and supplies (personal communication, January 19, 2011). While the initial costs of digital professional imaging equipment and software is relatively

high, it is quickly offset by the negation of film and processing costs. With regards to speed, he offered this example:

Before, if we were shooting an installation, like a Jeff Wall show comes to mind, it was a process of spending weeks doing just color correcting tests on transparencies with color correcting filters. Now, basically, we would just shoot it, and color correction would be the click of a button, a white-point balance. So what would have been a major project with scaffolding and assistants and lights, we can now go up there and just shoot it in a fraction of the time. (Personal communication, January 19, 2011)

And with regards to quality:

...even simple things, like a painting I did this morning, had sort of a metallic glossy surface, you know, which you sort of want some *life* on, you know, lighting wise, but when you do that it glares out other parts of the painting. So now, you just do lighting for the gold metallic parts, get them pretty, then shoot it, and move the lights to do the rest of the picture, and then, with perfect registration, put them together. It's pretty straightforward; it just wouldn't have been possible [with film]. So what digital has allowed is for us to isolate all of the individual components, and if you isolate them, you can control them. (Mills, personal communication, January 19, 2011, emphasis in original)

This last point, brought up by both Mills and Topham in my interviews, brings to the fore an important quality of digital photography: control. Echoing the points of critical visual theory made above, the control available to photographers with digital imaging also recalls Benjamin's assertion that modern photographers see it as their "task to simulate [the] aura using all the arts of retouching" (2005 [1931], p. 517). Remarking on this new, profound level of control in retouching photographic images:

I think there's a parallel in digital music, remember when CDs first came out and people like Bob Kerr [Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Radio broadcaster and musician] hated digital sound?

Because it lost, in his words, the texture. And it wasn't a problem with the technology as much as a problem with the technicians. Because once you can clean up something, you tend to over clean it up. So a lot of digital photography just reeks of Photoshop. And that's sort of what happened with digital music. Until the technicians became more comfortable with it and recognized the value of that so called texture, and respected what was actually there and didn't clean it up. (Mills, personal communication, January 19, 2011)

Therefore, the photographers at the VAG are readily aware of the control they have over the images they create, but are tempered by the need to introduce the "texture" of more traditional photographic technology. This tempering of the control offered by digital technology is an aim to make images that are passively consumed by the viewer. The images that Mills and Topham create of the artworks at the VAG are intended to be effective mediators between the viewers of their photographs and the artworks as they appear at the VAG:

I think the bottom line is we just try to reproduce the experience you would have when you're looking at it with your eyeballs, if you were seeing the artwork in person, without a lens, I try to reproduce the artwork to reflect that experience. I mean that's what I sort of always go back to: this is how it feels when you look at it in the gallery. (Mills, personal communication, January 19, 2011)

In the next section, I conduct a careful analysis of two exhibitions and their VAG-published catalogues as case studies in experiences that Mills' and Topham's digital photography evokes. Through my examination of the impossible images that are reproduced in the catalogues, an understanding of how overtly politically progressive and critical art can be subtly and effectively framed as conservative, auratic constituents of the VAG's exhibition oeuvre will be established. I now turn to the empirical analysis of these works.

Photographic Practice at the Vancouver Art Gallery: Two Exhibition Catalogues

Here I discuss how the work of VAG photographers Trevor Mills and Rachel Topham both deconstructs and reconstructs the aura of the gallery. This is achieved through careful image construction made feasible by digital imaging. I also discuss how the gallery's success, including the proposed relocation, hinges upon a perception of the aura of the gallery by Vancouver's residents and politicians. I engage the above through an analysis of photographs of two exhibits at the VAG, a re-presentation of art's auratic presence, which is transposed to the gallery itself through the use of these images in branding and advertising the gallery.

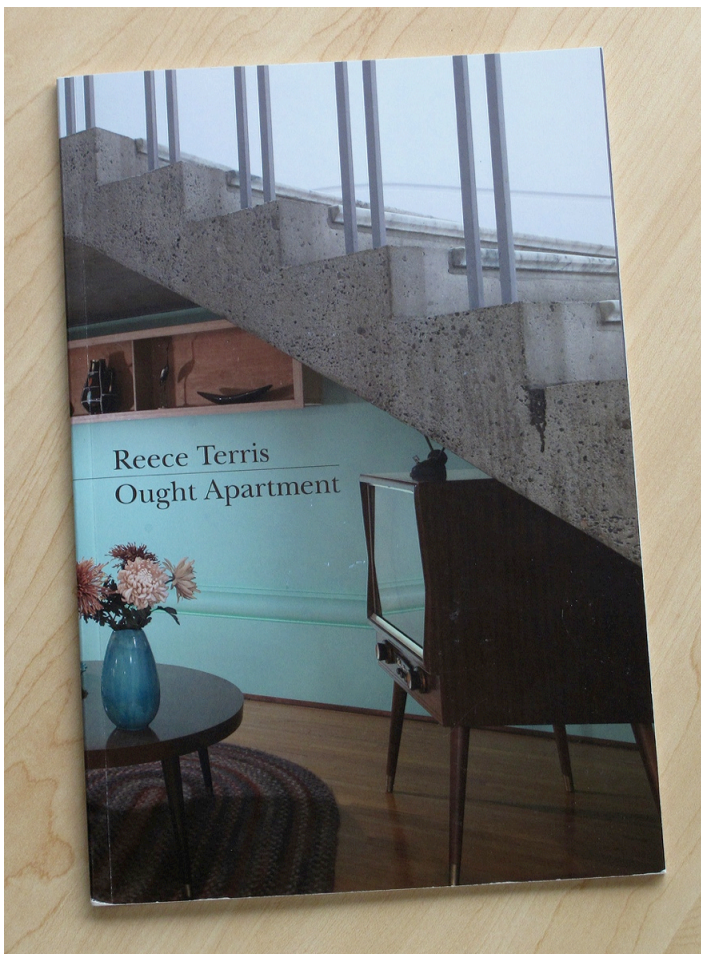
Photography at the VAG has historically been aimed at sharing the collection beyond the walls of the institution, indeed following along with Benjamin's ideas about the democratic potential of mechanical reproduction. Today, the photographers at the VAG frequently image works of art for this same purpose though the technical capabilities, since the adoption of digital technology, have changed dramatically. Since Kathleen Bartels took the directorship of the VAG in 2001, the primary catalyst for the workload of gallery's photographers is generating images for the gallery's ambitious publication schedule (Mills and Topham, personal communication, December 8, 2010). On paper, as an institutional objective, the primary purpose of these images is purportedly to "document" the artwork—a seemingly neutral, passive function. However, VAG photographers are well informed of critical visual theory. They

understand the power of photography to assert epistemological power through carefully considered framing, perspective “correction,” and digital retouching. During the course of my interviews with Mills and Topham, they struggled to define just what their photographs were, stating that they “try to represent or illustrate the art” (Mills, personal communication, January 19, 2011). Mills and Topham were uncomfortable with the notion that their photographs were an interpretation of artworks, for them this suggests too much ownership. “In a way, you try and create images that *lack* ownership, right? Because you want them to be interpretable” (Topham, personal communication, January 19, 2011, emphasis in original). No matter how the photographers approach their work, the images they produce have a profound impact on how the art is received by the VAG’s audiences and ultimately how the VAG itself is perceived and understood. In this section I describe how Mills and Topham approach photography of two recent temporary installation exhibitions, *Ought Apartment* by Reece Terris and *A Modest Veil* by Michael Lin. The photographers’ techniques are greatly impacted by the possibilities of digital image manipulation that takes place *after* the initial images are captured. My analysis of this process shows how the digital construction of a final photographic image of a work of art is an impossible simulacrum of the artwork, and how the process can evoke an auratic experience.

Case Study 1: Reece Terris, *Ought Apartment*

Installation art is intentionally ephemeral. By challenging the fetishization of the collectable work of art, this medium's art materializes only temporarily. Therefore, as Susan Sontag (1977) imagined, it lives on only in its photographically recorded form accompanied by text carefully constructed by the artist and curators. In this section, I analyse how the VAG's exhibition catalogue for the exhibition *Ought Apartment* by Reece Terris simultaneously deconstructs and reinforces an auratic resonance of the artwork.

Figure 3.1: The exhibition catalogue for *Ought Apartment*.



Photograph by the author.

On May 6th, 2009 the Vancouver Art Gallery opened the ninth project in its NEXT series, “a series of projects from the Pacific rim” (VAG, 2011b). This work of art by Vancouver artist Reece Terris was an incredibly complex installation in the VAG’s central rotunda. Titled *Ought Apartment*, the installation was comprised of a stack of six units rising up through the rotunda to a grand height of 18 meters. Each unit is a fragmentary segment of an apartment representing a decade of interior consumer and design elements from the 1950s to the then present day “oughts” (Arnold, 2009). Spatially, each of the units is partial, including only portions of kitchens, bathrooms, and some component of living space. The stack is configured in the gallery so that the visitor can walk through the 1950s and 1980s levels, but only see the other four from various vantage points afforded by the gallery’s escalators and terraces, and cutaways in the walls of the “apartments.”

Terris’s installation is a critical examination of consumption, the “garbage of disposable income” (Snider, 2009, p. 13), housing, and labor. Terris, both an artist and a building contractor, collected the fixtures, furniture, and consumer objects used to populate the units himself over the course of several years from his renovation business in the Vancouver metro area. The interiors are a re-assembly and re-presentation of Terris’s collection. By bringing the banal decoration of everyday domestic life in Vancouver to the fore, *Ought Apartment* is an exercise in what Bertold Brecht termed the *verfremdungseffekt*, or, making the familiar strange (Snider, 2009).

The installation was in place until September 20th, just four and a half months, and ultimately deconstructed and removed from the gallery to make way for the VAG's fall 2009 exhibition programming. Therefore all that remains of this artwork is the photography of it, some of which is presented in the exhibition catalogue along with a foreword from the VAG director Bartels, an introduction by VAG curator Grant Arnold, an essay by Vancouver artist Greg Snider, and Terris's CV. This catalogue is the means by which the artwork will live on, and it will be the primary means for VAG patrons to interact with this piece of the VAG's exhibitionary oeuvre. I now turn to mobilise Benjamin's concept of the aura as an analytic, utilizing the four constituent characteristics of the artwork's authenticity, the viewer/visitor's implied distance from the artwork, the ritualistic/cultic characteristics, and the gaze exchanged as they are simultaneously mitigated and reinforced by nuanced framing in the exhibition catalogue. This analysis explains how the VAG nurtures an auratic experience of art through its photographic practices.

Authenticity

The catalogue opens with a foreword by gallery director Kathleen Bartels. Though brief, the text outlines the profound resources and labor deployed by the gallery in order to bring Terris's vision to fruition. The catalogue carefully frames artist Reece Terris's authenticity for the reader/audience. He is at once an everyman—a native son growing up in Vancouver's suburbs, a blue-collar worker—and an artist-genius—a formally trained, accomplished exhibitor. The

reader is told how Terris grew up in the mundane suburbs of PoCo (Port Coquitlam) and North Burnaby in a working-class family. His childhood is approachably described through his interests in “working on bikes, go-karts, and tree forts... as a child he dragged materials off local building sites into the forest at the end of the street” (Snider, 2009, p. 16). The reader can readily identify with the hero of the story; Terris could have been swinging on the playground next to you, shopping at your grocery store. The catalogue goes on to explain Terris’s education as an apprentice carpenter at the British Columbia Institute of Technology, “a pragmatic education, a combination of formal training and self-taught technics” (Snider, 2009, p. 16). By the age of 21, Terris had started his own construction company that he now runs with a partner. These descriptions render Terris as a de-mystified everyman, a decidedly non-auratic character, a legitimate citizen, a working-class one-of-us.

Yet the biography soon takes a different tack, and the reader begins to understand these larval stages of Terris’s life as precursor to his emergence as the butterfly cum artist-genius he is as an exhibitor at the VAG. In 2000, Terris enters Simon Fraser University’s School for the Contemporary Arts, and through this enlightening experience he is able to spread his wings, embodying his true potential. Through his formal arts training, Terris’s genius is emancipated. He increasingly demonstrates “ambitious solutions,” “sophisticated understanding,” an “impulse to uncover the tensions and contradictions” that are evident in Vancouver’s urban landscape, and a higher sensitivity than “most consumers to the presence of things in the world” (Snider, 2009, pp. 20-28). This text, extolling

the virtues of the artist-Terris, is interlaced with several beautiful photographs of *Ought Apartment*, and the author successfully evokes an auratic awe of this accomplished artist. If there is any doubt in the reader's mind, Terris's provenance is reiterated at the end of the catalogue, listing his education and previous exhibitions across Canada, the US, and London. Terris is now framed as a legitimate artist, a legitimate genius worthy of the prime exhibition space and substantial funding afforded by the VAG.

The images convey an authenticity as their formal presentation in a gallery-published exhibition catalogue insinuates them as accurate appraisals of the artist's vision and the viewer's experience of the artwork in person. Though VAG photographer Topham is the creator of the images, each one that appears in the catalogue was carefully chosen by Terris and the exhibition curator Grant Arnold, and then forwarded to the catalogue designer. Thus the artist and curator sanctioned the images that appear in the catalogue to accurately convey the experience and meaning of the installation. The VAG photographers consider exhibition curator Arnold to be one of the more "hands-off" in his request for photography. Therefore, Topham approached her task of imaging *Ought Apartment* with the self-imposed goal of reproducing "how it feels when you look at it in the gallery" (Mills, personal communication, January 19, 2011). Topham attempted to achieve this authentic experience through taking multiple photographs from a single vantage point, and then stitching those photographs together seamlessly to construct one final image. Because this technique is invisible and intentionally hidden from viewer of the catalogue, an authentic

experience of the installation—in the opinion of the photographers—is conveyed. One example of this technique is the cover image for the catalogue (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2: Cover image for the *Ought Apartment* catalogue.



Photograph by Rachel Topham, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2009. Used with permission.

Reflecting on the use of this technique in the photography of the exhibition:

Mills says: It simply would not have been possible on film. It goes back to the way you would experience it. Because when you went up into those cramped spaces, your eye pans and zooms, your eyeballs go in and out and around, and your brain connects it all seamlessly. And now with digital you can at least go towards that.

Topham: Yeah, people's reactions to photographs like that, that are stitched or multiple exposures, somebody who works up in

curatorial, she was like ‘really? You use multiple exposures for those?’

Mills: Like that cover shot with the coffee table underneath the staircase, you could not do that with film, you just couldn’t because the room was too tight. But it’s what your eyeball does without thinking about it. (Personal communication, January 19, 2011)

Distance

Even in an installation that invites the public to wander through it, to seemingly penetrate the aura of the artwork, a distance was maintained for the gallery visitors and this distance is legible in the exhibition catalogue. As explained above, the exhibition was a challenge to photograph in a traditionally “objective” sense, at a comfortable distance that is expected in photography of art. Terris’s installation took up nearly the entire volume of space that is the gallery’s rotunda. Through careful digital reconstruction, the photographs hold the appearance of being rather neutral windows into the spaces of *Ought Apartment*. However, that each image is carefully and complexly manipulated assemblage of up to 35 individual captures proves that these are meticulous representations that intentionally convey something other than the actual experience of the artwork. While in the previous example (Figure 3.2) the intention is to convey an authentic and intimate experience of *Ought Apartment*, the following two examples show how the same technique can be deployed to convey a sense of distance that was not experienced at the exhibition.

The first example (Figure 3.3 and 3.4) is a view of the installation taken from one of the escalators at the VAG. As these escalators are always in motion when the gallery is open, a visitor to the exhibition would not be able to take the

time to consider this view from a stationary standpoint. Figure 3.3 exemplifies the stitching technique in process, and actually conveys more accurately the constrictions of the space around the installation.

Figure 3.3: *Ought Apartment, 50s-60s-70s, looking west, first stitching.*



Photograph by Rachel Topham, VAG, 2009. Used with permission.

Figure 3.4: Ought Apartment, 50s-60s-70s, looking west, final image.



Photograph by Rachel Topham, VAG, 2009. Used with permission.

While this image has already undergone a great deal of manipulation, its appearance suggests how close a viewer was to the artwork as they stood on the VAG's staircase pictured at the bottom of the image. The final edits to the image are intended to rectify the optical and digital distortions that bend the straight lines of Terris's installation. Figure 3.4 is how the final image appears in the catalogue. In this final image, the artwork takes on a much more powerful presence in the frame, and the viewer is effectively pushed back from the artwork. No longer diminished by the warping and bending of the distortions from the initial stitch, the artwork exudes an assertive perpendicularity. While this image is a highly manipulated construction, in Mills' and Topham's opinion it works to convey the (auratic) experience of this massive installation.

In a second example (Figures 3.5 and 3.6), Topham adopts an even more obscure point of view from the top of a mechanical lift, some 20 meters above the rotunda's floor. This image represents a view that was absolutely impossible for a gallery visitor to obtain. The top "apartment" in Terris's installation could only be seen with the viewer's eyes at the level of the floor. While at first glance this perspective opens up an encounter by inviting the viewer to see something otherwise impossible, it reifies the artwork as something to be examined from all, even proper, angles. Figure 3.5 shows again just how tight the spaces around *Ought Apartment* were, and the digital manipulation necessary to capture the entire view from top to bottom and left to right. Yet again, when the final manipulations are applied for the image that appears in the catalogue (Figure 3.6), the viewer is pushed back from the artwork and more space appears

around the installation. This jockeying with the viewer's perception of space exemplifies Benjamin's notion that the aura is a "strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of distance, however near it may be" (2006 [1936], pp. 104-105).

Figure 3.5: Ought Apartment, 2000s, looking east, first stitching.



Photograph by Rachel Topham, VAG, 2009. Used with permission.

Figure 3.6: *Ought Apartment*, 2000s, looking east, final image.



Photograph by Rachel Topham, VAG, 2009. Used with permission.

Ritual

The catalogue is subtler in its assertion of ritual/cultic characteristics of the aura. The exhibition is framed as a ritualistic encounter in two ways: through consistent reference to the imposing neoclassical spaces of the VAG's architecture and through an austere aesthetic that permeates the images. First, in the catalogue's

foreward director Bartels explains, “*Ought Apartment* successfully utilizes the imposing space of the rotunda to engage the Gallery’s audience” (VAG, 2009, p. 5). Indeed, one of Terris’s goals was to comment on the architecture of the former courthouse through imposing his massive structure into its central, ceremonial space. Additionally, the views made possible by the architecture from the various balconies, stairways, and escalators were understood by the artist to provide many points of view to encounter the artwork. This is effectively communicated by the catalogue photography, as is the nascent reminder that this artwork existed in only one place, the VAG. Thus the VAG is ever present in the photographic encounter with the artwork, along with the all of the ritualistic encounters of an art museum (Duncan, 1995). If the VAG is a temple of art, then this catalogue serves as its hymnal.

Second, a ritualized encounter is also evident in the striking austerity of the photography. Any depiction of a human is absent from the catalogue. This too is likely a conscious choice on the part of the artist and curator, because it is in line with a key component of the artwork to elicit personal memories from the viewer of the objects displayed. However, in the photography this alludes to the quiet spaces of reflection found in ritualized spaces. Topham’s multiple exposure technique affects the lighting in the photographs as well. Through combining several exposures of the same view, she was able to even out the lighting—diminishing highlights, opening up shadows—that lend to impossibly even (and beautiful) lighting that subtly evokes a magical presence of the photographs.

The Gaze Exchanged

In each of the examples provided above, the photography of Mills and Topham succeeds in achieving what was for Benjamin an auratic encounter with a photograph. Through the manipulations made possible by digital technology, e.g. extraordinarily even lighting, impossibly wide views, distortions corrected, these photographs take on a subtly unreal presence. This presence invests the photography and its subject with the ability to look back at us and evoke an auratic experience with Terris's artwork. Therefore, even when visitors can purchase an illustrated exhibition catalogue so that *Ought Apartment* "leaves its site to be received in the studio of the art lover" (Benjamin, 2006 [1936], p. 103), the illustrations are loaded with subtle conveyance of the aura.

Case Study 2: Michael Lin, *A Modest Veil*

In anticipation of the 2010 Winter Olympic Games, the VAG carefully considered the exhibitions that would decorate the gallery for its spring 2010 exhibition schedule. Inside, the gallery hosted a spectacular collection of highly auratic anatomical drawings by Leonardo da Vinci. Outside the gallery, Taiwanese artist Michael Lin developed an immense mural to cover the Northeast façade of the building. Relying on the draw of da Vinci (and a temporary suspension of admission fees) to attract record numbers of visitors to the gallery, Lin's installation would provide an example of the gallery's engagement with less popular yet significant contemporary art.

Lin is most well known for his monumental painted installations that intervene with public space. His signature aesthetic comes from the use of patterns based on traditional Taiwanese textiles and his work has been installed in museum cafés, galleries, city halls, and libraries around the world. For the VAG exhibition, Lin created an enormous hand-painted mural that covered the Gallery's northeast façade. While his other installations have followed the contours of the architecture in the spaces where he installs them, at the VAG no attempt was made to mimic or integrate the building's form. Instead, *A Modest Veil*, was intended to be just that: a veil to symbolically mask the colonial, ideological, and social violence that a museum propagates and represents.

In addition to veiling the institution, Lin also executed a book-wrapping project for the Gallery Store, which covered VAG publications in a wrapping paper of his own design (Figure 3.7). Lin's comment on the commodification of art is seemingly in direct dialogue with Benjamin and his ideas of mechanical reproducibility and further, the VAG's appropriation of that process. In the most explicitly critical component of the installation, Lin designed t-shirts to be worn by the frontline VAG staff (Figure 3.8). These depicted a frame from the comic *Asterix*, with a curtain slightly parted to reveal signs of crashing and banging taking place behind it. The text on the frame reads, in French, "Let us cast *A Modest Veil* over this deplorable and most unusual scene of violence" (VAG, 2010, p. 48).

Figure 3.7: Installation views of *A Modest Veil* in the exhibition catalogue.



Photograph by the author.

Figure 3.8: T-shirts for VAG staff to be worn during the exhibition of *A Modest Veil*.



Photograph by Rachel Topham, VAG, 2010. Used with permission.

The catalogue that the VAG produced for sale at Lin's exhibition is actually a career survey that includes just a few images from *A Modest Veil* at the end as his most recent work. For this section of my analysis, I focus on a singular image that has become one of the most frequently used in VAG branding and marketing (Figure 3.9). Functioning as the VAG's Facebook handle, representing how the VAG appeared when on the world stage of the 2010 Winter Olympics, and also manifested as limited edition print, this is a powerful image of the VAG. Again

utilizing Benjamin's aura as an analytic, I establish how Topham and Mills, through carefully deployed digital photographic manipulation, convey an auratic experience of this Lin's decidedly critical installation.

Figure 3.9: Final publication image of *A Modest Veil*.



Photograph by Trevor Mills and Rachel Topham, VAG, 2010. Used with permission.

Auratic Authenticity, Distance, and Ritual

In order to draw out how Mills' and Topham's photograph of *A Modest Veil* engenders an auratic perception of the installation, I again draw attention to the auratic constituents of authenticity, distance, and ritual. Similar to the catalogue of *Ought Apartment*, the VAG catalogue of Lin's work frames the artist as an authentic and legitimate genius. Comprised of five essays by scholars from prestigious arts institutions around the globe (Tate Britain, San Francisco Art

Institute, Braunschweig University of Art in Germany, Parsons Paris School of Art and Design, and the VAG), the text explores Lin's numerous exhibitions since 1993. Born in Tokyo, Lin is described as living in Hawaii, California, Taiwan, Paris, Shanghai, and Brussels. Thus, the reader understands that he is a formally trained artist (he has both a BFA and a MFA degree) who is worldly and highly educated. The catalogue presents over 100 illustrations of his various artworks, offering a striking visual representation of his artistic corpus.

With regards to *A Modest Veil*, the essay and photographs describe the large scale effort required in launching the installation. Bartels describes the installation in the foreword as "massive," "monumental," "ambitious," and on a "grand scale" (VAG, 2010, p.7). Her claims are supported by photographs of entire groups of painters working on the veil before it was mounted on the VAG's façade. The authentic gravity of the installation and the VAG's key role in its production is further established by Bartels remarks, "It is with great pride that the Vancouver Art Gallery has organized Lin's first exhibition in Canada and the first catalogue to survey his career" (VAG, 2010, p. 7). The political pertinence of the exhibition in relation to the city of Vancouver is also recognized:

Lin's massive hand-painted mural based on Taiwanese textile designs veils the Gallery's façade during the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Vancouver, a period when the eyes of the world are on our city. Situated on Canada's west coast, Vancouver is a portal between North America and the Asia-Pacific region, and Lin's work aptly embodies the layered and coexisting histories and cultures of the Pacific Rim. (VAG, 2010, p. 7)

Thus Lin's oeuvre and *A Modest Veil* specifically are imbued with a gravity of authenticity that is framed as important to Vancouver and its citizens. That Lin's work is a critique of VAG practices is quietly brushed over.

In the definitive photograph of the installation (Figure 3.9), Mills and Topham effectively establish an auratic distance both spatially and temporally. The point of view that Mills and Topham chose has precedence in VAG imaging generally and in Lin's proposal specifically. The northeast façade is the ceremonial front of the institution, though Erickson's renovations to the courthouse building included relocating the main entrance to the opposite side. Mills remarked how he has photographed this side of the building several times for various publications (Personal communication, December 8, 2010). Lin was actually provided with one of these previous photographs to aid in his design of the project. Mills explained that the photograph is taken from atop a scissor lift some ten meters above the ground. This high vantage point is necessary to be able to see over the fountain in front of the building (Figure 3.10). While not the overt intention of the photographers, this vantage point communicates a view of the VAG that is impossible for a visitor to attain. Not readily apparent at first glance of the final image, this on-high perspective establishes a perceived distance for the viewer of the photograph that would not be experienced when encountering the installation in person.

Similarly, a temporal distance is subtly communicated in the final image. This photograph is also the product of multiple exposures that were assembled to form the final image. The goal was to capture several images over the course of

several hours and amalgamate them all to create an image that balances the light on the artwork, the building, the foreground, and the sky. As Mills and Topham explained:

Topham: We attached the tripod to the pole the lights were on, and started shooting at 3:40, and we were up there about three hours. So then we just shot a bunch, bracketed, a bunch of exposures. Brought it back here to take a look at it. We shot a bunch of nighttime shots that we didn't end up using. And then, I processed this one, and I looked at it, and chose it as the base exposure.

Mills: Part of the problem with this shoot is that in the winter time that side of the building is back lit all day, the sun never hits the front of this building. So it [the sky] looks blasted out, and that's partly why the lighting looks a little strange and unnatural, because it *is* strange and unnatural.

Topham: Mm hmm, it's super unnatural.

Mills: Because there's no natural light hitting that side of the VAG. (Mills and Topham, personal communication, January 19, 2011)

Thus what is ultimately presented to the viewer as a snapshot, an instant in time captured by the camera, is actually a construction of light recorded over the course of three hours. This is also an impossible element to the photograph that reinforces the temporal distance established in the picture of a temporary installation that no longer exists.

Figure 3.10: Establishing shot and base exposure for the final image of *A Modest Veil*.



Photograph by Trevor Mills and Rachel Topham, VAG, 2010. Used with permission.

A ritualistic encounter with *A Modest Veil* is also effectively communicated through the final photograph. Even though Lin's installation is intended to veil the VAG's façade, the photograph actually maintains the ritual overtones of the 1930s neoclassical architecture. As curator Bruce Grenville explains in the text, while Lin's installation veils the ionic columns along the façade, the neoclassical edifice ultimately frames the artwork (VAG, 2010). What makes the image so successful in its use in VAG publicity is that the VAG building is readily identifiable, as are the ritualistic overtones of the neoclassical museum paradigm

(Duncan, 1995). That the building is photographed straight-on, perfectly centered in the frame reinforces the symmetrical power of the design of the building.

The Gaze Exchanged

Mills and Topham succeed with their image of *A Modest Veil* (Figure 3.9) in eliciting Benjamin's notion of a magical encounter with a photograph, as

...the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of the long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. (Benjamin, 2003 [1931], p. 510)

Like the images of *Ought Apartment*, this is a highly manipulated, constructed, and impossible image that evokes the sense of photography's ability to capture a single moment for our pensive perusal. Mills and Topham sought to construct this kind of experience with the final photograph by incorporating images of people around the bottom of the photograph, some of them blurred in motion. For Topham this was intended to evoke

...almost a street photography vernacular, as soon as you have someone standing still and someone moving, that insinuates that the person standing still is standing and looking at it versus that someone is walking away from it. But it just looks more balanced, like to me, it's not about introducing the 'noise' of an analogue photograph, it just looks balanced, [be]cause it's natural, it activates the space. (Personal communication, January 19, 2011)

Thus Mills and Topham are embracing the technological potentials of digital imaging to construct a particular aesthetic experience of their photographs, and consequently the subjects of their photographs. For Topham, the artificial

addition of figures from several other photographs—some of the figures in the final image are even multiples of the same person—introduced a “natural” balance to the image. It is apparent that these manipulations help to evoke an auratic experience of the artworks that Mills and Topham portray, but that this isn’t necessarily a harmful transgression. Benjamin found promising potentials in even the more modest technical capabilities of early 20th century photography, such as magnification:

...photography reveals...image worlds which dwell in the smallest things—meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams, but which, enlarged and capable of formulation, make technology and magic visible as a thoroughly historical variable. (2005 [1931], p. 512)

Mills’ and Topham’s embrace of technology similarly evinces notions of magic with the eerie lighting and ghostly figures. Hence the point of this analysis is to draw attention to *how* an auratic experience of artworks are constructed and conveyed by the skills and technologies put to use by the VAG photographers. Whether these manipulations are to the benefit or detriment the viewer’s perception of the artwork is another question.

Conclusion: The Aura Conveyed

Photography, by virtue of the advancements of manipulation in the age of the digital image, is unprecedentedly capable of capturing and re-presenting subtlety and nuance of artworks. Be it the “rectification” of the optical distortion of architectural perpendicularity, harnessing extreme dynamic range, or introducing hyper-real compositional balance and points of view, these techniques are not

new to photography. What is new is the ease and effectiveness of their implementation. In the words of Mills, “we have infinitely more control” (personal communication, January 19, 2011). The photographers at the VAG are taking full advantage of these capabilities with their technical skill and sensitivity to their photographic subjects. What is also evident in their work is that their images are not the result of personal artistic endeavour. These photographers are institutional employees and the impetuses to their work are institutional goals and needs.

This is not to say that Benjamin was wrong in his assertion of the political potentials of art through the technological opportunities of mass reproduction. Benjamin did not make any predictions as to how the story would end, as Kingsbury and Jones assert in their article on Benjamin and geospatial technologies (2009). For Kingsbury and Jones, Benjamin “opens the door to a new cultural politics, but that door can swing in more than one direction,” towards either tyrannical or democratic ends (2009, p. 502). The door is still swinging at the VAG, for on one hand the “masses” are granted access to richly critical artworks like *Ought Apartment* and *A Modest Veil* through the gallery’s proliferation of reproductions and publications. However, Adorno’s accusation that Benjamin overestimated the revolutionary potential of technology is evident at the VAG. The exhibition catalogues that serve as the primary record of these artworks and live on as our only encounter with these artworks are not merely documentation or neutral evidence. These catalogues are illustrative

interpretations that add meaning, shape perception, and imbue the artworks with aura.

Thus, my mobilization of Benjamin's aura as an analytic by which to encounter some of the practices at the VAG exposes the contradictory nature of the politics at a public art gallery. To borrow Kingsbury and Jones' metaphor, the door swings one way and we can rejoice in the reflexive, critical engagement with art that the VAG fosters. Then the door swings violently back, showing us the impact of the constraints of the neoliberal context in which the gallery operates. It seems that in order to survive and promote a democratic engagement with art, the gallery must be an effective entrepreneur selling its most unique and valuable asset: the aura.

As the VAG continues with its campaign for relocation of the gallery in a new, purpose built building, it is compelled to foster its auratic prominence. In January 2011, the City of Vancouver announced that it would extend the opportunity for the VAG to refine a business plan and prove its ability to raise the necessary funds to construct and operate a new facility. At the time of this writing, the City is reserving two-thirds of the former Larwell Park site for a new art gallery, with the remaining third to be sold for private development. VAG director Bartels is confident, "we've raised \$92 million already and I think that's remarkable" (quoted in Fralic, 2011, no page number).

Unmistakably for Benjamin, what is at stake with consideration of an aura around works of art are the growing threats of totalitarian and fascistic power

during the 1930s. Today, the VAG is actively maintaining the power of the aura in a democratic context yet under a cloak of innocuousness—art for art’s sake, art is beautiful, art is necessary, and so on. Charged with amassing and administering a collection of art for the City of Vancouver, the VAG is implicated in Preziosi’s assertion, “there is no art history, no museology, that was not founded in the attempt to domesticate, discipline, and tame this power [of art] for the modern republic” (2003, p. 42). At the very same time that the VAG embraces politically critical exhibitions, the institution and its staff are conducting the everyday labor of harnessing the power of auratic art for the City of Vancouver.

Chapter 4: Conclusions Drawn from the Project

Summary

In this thesis, I have mobilized Benjamin's conception of the aura and its concomitant politics as an analytic in order to examine some of the practices at the VAG. Because the aura is an experiential manifestation of politics communicated through art, I have argued that it is a particularly effective theory to explore the politics at work in an art museum.

To introduce the above topics in Chapter 1, I drew upon my background as a museum worker and my own encounter with a critique of museum practices through the work of artist Filip Noterdaeme and his Homeless Museum of Art. I then provided a brief overview of previous studies of art and museums in the fields of geography and critical museology, pointing to some of the gaps in these literatures that this thesis has sought to fill. Next, I provided an overview of the study, detailing the research methods I employed, the data that I collected, and

the guiding research questions. I concluded the introduction with an outline of the paper's structure.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide two substantive analyses of praxis that is representative of the cutting-edge museological theory and practice at the VAG. In Chapter 2, I focused on an exhibition that ostensibly sought to demystify some of the work that normally takes place behind closed doors at museums. The VAG invited the public to peak behind normally closed doors and witness the gallery's conservation staff treat a painting from its collection. In open view, the gallery exposed the inherent vulnerability of the objects in its care. However, my analysis revealed in the implementation of this exhibition, the VAG nonetheless maintained the visitors' experience of the painting's authenticity, sustained a crucial distance from the artwork, and constructed a ritualistic encounter at the event. Crucially, these elements contribute to an auratic experience. Thus, the progressive and post-auratic orientation of the exhibition was underpinned by the VAG's need to maintain the power inherent in an auratic encounter with the art in its care.

Chapter 3 turned to the photographic practices at the VAG. I first established how an auratic experience can be communicated through photography. I then analysed how the VAG's photographers evoke an auratic encounter with the artworks they illustrate through the deployment of digital imaging techniques. I explained how the VAG exhibits art that is critical of the fetishized status of art in a museum, and how the creation and distribution of exhibition catalogues rife with photographic reproductions is seemingly in line

with Benjamin's noted emancipation of the artwork from the aura. Yet, upon closer analysis of the photographs and other content, the catalogues can be seen to nurture, reinforce, and convey an auratic experience of the exhibitions they represent. Thus, these two chapters illustrated practices that simultaneously emancipate and conserve the socio-spatial power of art at the VAG.

In this, the concluding chapter, I present the contributions that this research makes in both geography and critical museology. In addition, I illustrate how my re-examination of Benjamin's aura as an analytic is useful for future analyses of our encounters with art. Also, my mobilization of Duttlinger's (2008) photographic aura holds great potential for disrupting the widely assumed opposition of visual technologies and the constraining politics of the aura. I will then address the next research steps for this project, and finally conclude the thesis with reflections on scholarly engagement with art, aesthetics, and politics.

Research Contribution

The research presented in this thesis contributes to geographic and museological scholarship in at least three ways: first, this thesis outlines a mobilization of the aura as a (geographic) analytic. By clarifying the experience of the aura as a socio-spatial presence of art constructed through an artwork's authenticity, perceived distance, and reliance upon ritual, the politics implicated in an encounter with art can be fully understood. This clarification allows for the identification of auratic experience beyond the frame around a painting or the pedestal below a sculpture. We can observe the aura emanating from an entire

exhibition, a museum, a neighbourhood, a city. For example, the VAG's cultivation of the aura of individual artworks coalesces, and is also experienced around entire exhibitions, the building, and in Vancouver as a whole. This conception opens up tremendous possibilities for analysis of the geographies of art, aesthetics, and politics.

Second, the two papers in Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis contribute a unique geographic analysis to recent scholarship on art and aesthetics generally, and the VAG in particular. Cameron's (2006) brilliant ethnography of the VAG's gift shop launches a Bourdieusian analysis of the commodification and social stratigraphy of consumption at the art gallery. And Fast's (2010) account of the liminal work and storage spaces below the VAG's "white cube" exhibition galleries is an excellent, critical examination of museum practices. The papers I present here build on the work of Cameron and Fast, filling out the scholarly accounts of the VAG while contributing a new theoretical analytic and a geographic orientation to analyses conducted in the wider field of critical museology.

Third, following Duttlinger (2008), this research has presented a re-examination of Benjamin's aura and its relationship to imaging technology. Through the development of a more nuanced definition of Benjamin's own ideas about the aura and photography, a spatial understanding of our interactions with images, the gaze-exchanged, opens up new possibilities for the application of the aura as a visual analytic. To slightly amend Duttlinger's words:

...the model of a photographic aura facilitates a mode of [geographic] engagement which, while arising out of theoretical reflection, is founded on a deeply personal, emotive form of photographic interpretation from which neither the viewer nor the image emerge unchanged. (Duttlinger, 2008, p. 99, “geographic” substituted for “literary”)

Thus, this research contributes a powerful and nuanced analytic to the visual methodology literature in geography (Rose, 2000, 2001; Sidaway, 2002; DeVertuil, 2004; Wyly, 2010).

Next Steps

My main priority for the next steps with this research is dissemination. This thesis, formatted within the guidelines of the two-paper approach, provides the basis for submission to academic journals. My initial ideas for possible venues for publication are *Social & Cultural Geography* and *Society & Space*, and I am interested in exploring the possibilities for publication in museum and cultural studies journals as well.

Encouragingly, I have already found interest in my research in the museum and gallery profession, not only from staff at the VAG, but also from an institution outside of Vancouver. Following my presentation of the research in Chapter 3 at the Western Division of the Canadian Association of Geographers Annual Meeting in March, 2011, I was approached by Dr. Zoe Meletis, a professor of geography at the University of Northern British Columbia. Meletis was recently appointed to the board of the preeminent art gallery in Prince George, BC, the Two Rivers Art Gallery. She is interested in sharing this thesis

with the board there to open up a conversation about how the Two Rivers Art Gallery's practices might be implicated in my findings at the VAG. Further, I have begun research into an application for the "Public Outreach Grants: Dissemination" program administered by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada that would fund the distribution of my research findings to arts institutions across North America.

Beyond dissemination, this research opens up the door to further analyses of practices surrounding arts and culture utilizing the aura. Geography scholars can offer tremendous insights to the field of critical museology by bringing geography's rich history of critical analysis to arts institutions. With the development of Benjamin's conception of the aura as a spatial analytic in this thesis, further research should take this analytic to other empirical studies of art, galleries, museums, as well as informal and alternative sites of engagement with visual art. An effort is warranted to heed the call of Michel Foucault:

It seems to me that the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them. (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006 [1971], p. 53)

Focusing Foucault's call upon arts institutions seems increasingly important due to these institutions' complicity in the "rise and rise" of culture-led urban policy (Miles & Paddison, 2005). In the continuing struggle to navigate shifts from secondary to tertiary economies, especially from managerial to entrepreneurial governance, urban policy is increasingly reliant upon arts and culture (Johnson,

2009; Kearns & Philo, 1993). Paramount to this research are the unique qualities of art and its concomitant politics. While scholars have shown that the arts have substantial impact on contemporary urban development (e.g. Grodach, 2008; Johnson, 2009; O'Brien, 2007) further research is needed to understand how the arts have come to be widely considered an innocuous public good. Numerous researchers have critiqued this emergent practice and highlighted the social injustices and un-sustainability that accompany these urban strategies (Deutsch, 1996; Zukin 1995). Yet, these literatures largely overlook the hegemonic social significance of the arts as key to shaping the private and public understandings of these redevelopment schemes. Additionally, as noted previously, there is a paucity of theoretical and empirical research on the spatial relations between aesthetics and politics (Dixon, 2008, 2009; Kingsbury, 2010). Future projects need to address these gaps in the literature by examining how arts institutions shape popular experience and conception of the arts, as well as exploring the spatial nexuses between aesthetics and politics in the context of arts institutions.

Conclusion

Given the immediate context of the VAG's relocation ambitions, this study has provided rich insights into how a preeminent arts institution constructs a common sense, hegemonic understanding of the importance of art that is mobilized to achieve institutional goals. The VAG relies on the political power of authentic, auratic works of art to justify the necessity of an art gallery in Vancouver. The work of validating the VAG's (auratic) presence and importance to the city of

Vancouver is established through its day-to-day practices in exhibiting and publishing works of art as per its strategic plan. Therefore, in its public engagements, the relocation campaign need only focus on the practical deficiencies of its current renovated courthouse facility.

However, to disregard all of the VAG's activities as an exercise of power and politics grossly underestimates the gallery's contribution to critical, progressive, and reflexive engagement with visual arts. Over the course of my examination of the VAG, I encountered an enthusiastic and thoughtful staff whose heartfelt dedication to their work contributes greatly to what the Director and Curator of Education and Programming called "enabling and facilitating" positive encounters with art (personal communication, December 14, 2010). As the Associate Director Paul Larocque expressed, "the VAG is seeking to generate transformative experiences" (personal communication, December 12, 2010), a promising objective that leaves space for a wide range of opinions, points of view, and political orientations. Through the VAG's willingness to explore alternative exhibitions such as putting its conservation practices on display and its enthusiasm for the critical work of artists like Reece Terris and Michael Lin, the VAG is pre-emptively engaging with museological praxis that reflects current scholarship in critical museology.

Yet these positive engagements are tempered by the contingencies arising from being the largest arts institution in the province in a city permeated with neoliberal ideology. Keeping the institution funded has been a struggle in recent years, as the gallery laid off several staff and cut back hours to cope with

dwindling public funding and a shrinking operating endowment (Lee, 2010). In order to attract private philanthropy and justify the public funding it does receive, the VAG falls back on the origin of art museums to harness the auratic power of artworks:

There is no 'art history,' no museology, that was not founded in the attempt to domesticate, discipline, and tame this power for the modern republic. (Preziosi, 2003, p. 42)

The VAG's seemingly contradictory practices surrounding the politics of art are a symptom of progressive aspirations of contemporary museological theory constrained by conservative ideological and economic contingences in contemporary Vancouver.

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Appendix

Caption details for the images provided by the Vancouver Art Gallery:

Reece Terris,

Ought Apartment, 2009

Installation at the Vancouver Art Gallery, May 6 to September 20, 2009

Photo: Rachel Topham, Vancouver Art Gallery

Michael Lin,

A Modest Veil, Georgia Street Plaza, 23.0 –02.05.10, 2010

Paint on metal

Installation at the Vancouver Art Gallery, January 23 to May 2, 2010

Photo: Trevor Mills and Rachel Topham, Vancouver Art Gallery