RE-COLLECTIONS: AURATIC ENCOUNTERS WITH DATABASE AND ARCHIVAL ARTWORKS

by

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ABSTRACT

This study considers Walter Benjamin's concept of aura in the context of new media. Drawing from Benjamin's writings as well as scholarly interpretations of his work, I argue that aura has not been eradicated despite technological advancements that have vastly increased the accessibility and mobility of images and image making. Following from interpretations of Benjamin that link the phenomenon of aura to an intrinsic human longing for transcendent fullness of (auratic) presence that can never be realized but persists in a partial state, I develop a general aesthetics of aura that centres on manifestations and representations of trace. I then modify my aesthetics of aura to account for dematerialization and other challenges of new media. My research methodology is phenomenological: I utilize autophenomenographic methods, iteratively documenting and reflecting upon my own embodied perceptions of auratic encounters with new media art. I compare my various observations in the context of the aesthetic criteria of aura previously identified, re-evaluating my original theoretical positions. I eventually confront the issue of aura's potential instrumentalization, concluding that my accidental and chance encounters with aura, often the result of a design or programming oversight, ultimately cannot be reproduced and instrumentalized at will. I determine that in new media artworks, aura fundamentally lingers within these accidental ruptures that prevent immersive experience.

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1: AURA: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Introduction and Purpose

Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), a German-Jewish theorist and philosopher on the periphery of the Frankfurt school, applies the term aura to describe the distinctive quality of an original work of art that withers when the artwork is mechanically reproduced.[1] According to Benjamin the phenomenon of aura originates in pre-modern cultic practices and designates the mystical quality and corresponding elevated status of certain objects. Benjamin describes aura as withering in the early 20th century as the status of the original work of art diminished in importance and the ability to make multiple photographic prints and reproduce images of artworks increased, rendering works of art more common and accessible to the general public.

This research reinterprets Walter Benjamin's concept of aura in the context of new media[2] arts and technologies. Its primary aim is to contribute to Benjamin and aura studies within the broader field of Communication by looking at what happens to the aura (of original works of art) in an era of in new media art. If photography allows aura

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[1] See Sections 1.3–1.5 for extended explication of Benjaminian aura.

[2] I use the term "new media" to refer to media involving computer and Internet technologies, interactive interfaces, and digital (often user-generated) content. New media are being differentiated here from the older analog media (such as film) that employ more physical processes and materials. In new media, digital encoding allows these diverse processes to converge on a single platform, doing away with much of the traditional materiality and tactility of old media. Additionally, uses of old media generally follow a centralized broadcast model of communication, while uses of new media tend toward decentralized networks and a much wider distribution of creative agency, content production and ability to disseminate and share information. For a more detailed definition refer to Flew and Smith's (2011) New Media: An Introduction.

to wither, what then happens to image and art making in the online sphere? The online artwork is the ultimate copy, accessible "twenty-four seven" and yet simultaneously an original work of art. New media art dissolves the distinction between copy and original due to its theoretically infinite capacity for reproducibility. Moreover, the ephemeral aspects of the virtual sphere can also be associated with the mystical qualities of aura, despite technology's past association with aura's demise. The image on the screen is both present and not present. It is omnipresent *and* virtual. This thesis shapes a theory of aura that addresses these contradictory characteristics of new media art and continues the task of making Benjamin's work a living text, to be readdressed, reconsidered and reapplied as new artistic, technological, and political situations arise. In this thesis I initially explore the broader characteristics of aura, significantly drawing from—but also looking beyond—the basic definition of aura associated with the original work of art. I examine aura as a perceived presence that is related to particular aesthetic properties not exclusive to the original work of art.

For this study, I am defining "aesthetics" according to Susan Buck-Morss's (1992) terms. Buck-Morss argues that while aesthetics originally referred to the "sensory experience of perception" (p. 6), by Benjamin's time it had gone through a "reversal of meaning" (p. 7) and was applied primarily to art—"to cultural forms rather than sensible experience" (p. 7). I use aesthetics here however in the original sense of the word:

> *Aisthitikos* is the ancient Greek word for that which is "perceptive by feeling." *Aisthisis* is the sensory experience of perception. The original field of aesthetics is not art but reality—corporeal, material nature. As Terry Eagleton writes: "Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body." It is a form of cognition, achieved through taste, touch, hearing, seeing,

smell—the whole corporeal sensorium. The termini of all of these—nose, eyes, ears, mouth, some of the most sensitive areas of skin—are located at the surface of the body, the mediating boundary between inner and outer. This physical-cognitive apparatus with its qualitatively autonomous, nonfungible sensors (the ears cannot smell, the mouth cannot see) is "out front" of the mind, encountering the world prelinguistically (Buck-Morss, 1992, p. 6).

To differentiate between the aesthetics of taste in cultural forms and aesthetics as a form of prelinguistic comprehension in tune with sensory perception (that can be used as a tool of analysis to identify the visual and other sensory "atmospheres" of particular settings in art and life, some of which have ideological implications), I use the term "style" to denote aesthetics associated with artistic taste and stylistic modifications, whereas I use the term "aesthetics" to refer specifically to the form of feeling-based cognition described by Buck-Morss.

Based on criteria which follow from Benjamin's own writings as well as from the scholarly interpretations of his ideas that I outline in the upcoming sections, in this study I define a general aesthetics of aura, describing the aesthetic prelinguistic characteristics that correspond to auratic presence.[3] I then use these insights to investigate how aura is specifically manifest in contemporary new media artworks.[4] Taking an autophenomenographical approach which concentrates on the researcher's own

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[3] Over the course of this chapter I explain in greater detail this idea of auratic presence; I develop and operationalize my proposed auratic aesthetics, elaborating on what elements might contribute to the manifestation of aura and what categorical features constitute such an aesthetic.

[4] Note that in this research I am being fairly liberal with my use of the term "art." This project is not concerned with questions regarding what is and is not art; therefore, for the sake of simplicity I have made a decision to err on the side of inclusivity in my use of the term. I do however focus specifically on artworks that must be viewed on a personal computer or laptop monitor rather than on smaller mobile devices. This is because of the still prominent use of Adobe (previously Macromedia) Flash in creative and graphic-conscious online projects. (Flash has never been supported on the iPhone and is no longer supported on Google's Android. In November of 2011, Abobe officially announced its transition to Apple's preferred HTML5 and discontinued its development of Flash Mobile.)

sensual embodied experiences,[5] I study six new media "research sites," documenting and reflecting on my own interactions with the artworks in order to discover how aura may be perceived in new media art, and what factors contribute to aura's sensed presence or lack of presence in these artworks.

1.2 Benjamin and the "Work of Art" Essay: Background

Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility"[6] comprises Benjamin's most cited and discussed analysis of aura. Despite the initial lukewarm reception of the essay when first published in 1936,[7] by the 1960s it became a key work for scholars in art history, film studies, comparative literature and cultural studies (Gumbrecht and Marrinan, 2003; Patt, 2001). Use of the essay in fine arts followed in the 1980s: the essay and its concept of aura gained relevance for theoreticians and practitioners involved with art-making as critical writing was increasingly introduced into studio courses (Patt, 2001).

Since the onset of the 21st century, in an effort "to rethink our own cultural, technological, and media environments," Benjamin and his notion of aura have been revived as subjects of contemporary inquiry (Patt, 2001, p. xiv). *Benjamin's Blind Spot: Walter Benjamin and the Premature Death of Aura* (Patt, 2001) and *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age* (Gumbrecht and Marrinan, 2003)—both collections of

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[5] See Chapter 3 for explanation of autophenomenographical approach and its applicability to this study.

[6] Translated from the German "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit"; originally translated as "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

[7] This 1936 version is the first type-written version of the work but is referred to as the second version to differentiate it from the original handwritten draft. Benjamin also published a third version of the essay in 1939.

diverse essays on aura and its more recent applications and interpretations—have been

particularly significant for conceptualizing aura in relation to new media in this study:

these anthologies examine from multiple perspectives the relevance of Benjamin and

aura to the 21st century. However, these anthologies are by now a decade old. A

continuously developing media-scape necessitates additional work in this area. This

thesis addresses the need for a contemporary aesthetics of aura specific to the

emerging 21st century media-scape.

1.3   The Concept, Politics, and Aesthetics of Aura

The term "aura" is used by Benjamin to describe the elusive mystical quality and

authority imbued in certain objects, in particular original works of art. Benjamin initially

introduces aura in "Little History of Photography" (1931/1999a). He then revisits and

elaborates on this notion again in his best-known essay, often considered the definitive

essay on aura, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility"

(1936/2002a).

In the latter essay Benjamin discusses aura specifically in relation to the aura of

the original and unique artwork; he describes what happens to this aura when art is

reproduced for the masses using mechanized media such as photography and film. The

increased accessibility to art which results from these new technologies has an

emancipatory aspect because ordinary people can become literate in, produce, and

distribute these media relatively inexpensively. Yet Benjamin also sees the destruction

that an uncritical embrace of technology and modernization can engender. In the "Work

of Art" essay Benjamin argues that a society's absolute embrace of technological innovation—not directed towards socio-economic emancipatory purposes but instead for its own sake, for continuous growth and progress as an end in and of itself—thrusts society towards weapons production, violence and war. There becomes no way for this energy to expend itself other than war: "[w]ar, and only war, makes it possible to set a goal for mass movements on the grandest scale […] only war makes it possible to mobilize all of today's technological resources while maintaining property relations" (vol. 3, p. 121). Benjamin suggests that if exploitative capitalist property relations and power structures are maintained and these new technologies are utilized by existing power structures, then the masses' potential collective power will be directed towards violence, rather than empowering the people with the means of gaining previously exclusive knowledge and the ability to document their own histories, lives and perspectives.

As illustrated above, Benjamin was expressly concerned with the political ramifications of aura, aura's anticipated destruction, and the new technology's relationship to that destruction. This study is however less concerned with the politics of aura and more concerned with identifying and exploring manifestations of auratic aesthetics. This does not mean that I am diminishing or denying the political implications of these aesthetics. I accept Benjamin's general premises regarding the political and ideological implications of aura as a mystifying quality synonymous with distant god-like authority, as well as aura's antithetical manifestation in progress-hungry

futurism and capitalism. I am instead concerned with how these issues are expressed

aesthetically and how their aesthetics might translate in a new media environment.

In the following section I expand on key aspects of the "Work of Art" essay that

inform the discourse on aura and describe its properties and origins, including (a) the

concept or aesthetic of aura as distance and mystification and its relationship to cult;

and (b) the opposing concept or aesthetic of nearness.

1.3.1 Aura as Distance

In the "Work of Art" essay Benjamin (1936/2002a) associates the existence of an

artwork's aura with its "here and now"—its singular location in time and space—a

uniqueness and timelessness that mechanically reproducible media such as photographs

and films do not possess to the extent of traditional painting. He describes this aura as a

"strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it

may be" (vol. 3, p. 105). To help us make sense of this seemingly vague statement, it is

necessary first to understand that Benjamin sees the "uniqueness" of the original work

of art as "[embedded] in the context of tradition" (p. 105). Benjamin writes that

originally this phenomenon "found expression in a cult," that is, "the earliest artworks

originated in the service of rituals—first magical, then religious" (p. 105). Benjamin

understands folk magic and religious ritual to be coming from a shared tradition of

bestowing an aura of authority upon higher figures and objects of awe, unattainable to

the everyday person. Benjamin sees secular painting as emerging from this same

tradition and maintaining this ritual power—this aura surrounding higher culture, the

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artist's signature, and the authentic one-of-a-kind status of an original artwork.

Benjamin relishes from this perspective the advent of photography as a democratizing

game-changer which would smash the aura and prestige of the authentic original:

"[f]rom a photographic plate […] one can make any number of prints; to ask for the

authentic print makes no sense" (p. 106).

Thus, when Benjamin describes aura as a "unique apparition of a distance" (p.

105), he refers to a distance of awe and reverence: the expanse between the human

and the divine, or in its secular manifestation between the viewer and the authentic

work of art. A distance between ordinary and extra-ordinary that, no matter how close

one gets to the original artwork, can never be entirely bridged or defined. This space is

not merely metaphysical, but is also physically manifest: "[c]ult value as such even tends

to keep the artwork out of sight: certain images of the Madonna remain covered nearly

all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are not visible to the viewer at

ground level" (p. 106). Not only is there a perceived presence of unbridgeable space

between the viewer and the auratic object, but this sensed distance also corresponds

with the physical and socio-cultural positioning of that object within society. Objects

with aura tend to be partially hidden from view and accessible to few.

1.3.2   The Surgeon: Film, Photography and Aesthetics of Nearness

Benjamin asserts that while painting is still in the service of ritual and aura,

photography and film represent and contribute to the decline of auratic distance and

the rise of an oppositional aesthetic, an aesthetic of Nearness. "Nearness" refers to

these technologies' relative accessibility compared to traditional hand-painted artworks

as well as their ability to penetrate the viewer in a more invasive and shocking manner:

> How does the camera operator compare to the painter? In answer to this, it will be helpful to consider the concept of the operator as it is familiar to us from surgery. The surgeon represents the polar opposite of the magician. The attitude of the magician, who heals a sick person by the laying-on of hands, differs from that of the surgeon, who makes an intervention in the patient. The magician maintains the natural distance between himself and the person treated; more precisely, he reduces it slightly by laying on his hands, but increases it greatly by his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse: he greatly diminishes the distance from the patent by penetrating the patient's body, and increases it only slightly by the caution with which his hand moves along the organs. In short: unlike the magician (traces of whom are still found in the medical practitioner), the surgeon abstains at the decisive moment from confronting his patient person to person; instead, he penetrates the patient by operating (Benjamin, 1936/2002a, vol. 3 p. 115).

With the reproducibility of art and the rise of photography and film we exit the

world of the magician and enter the world of the surgeon, explains Benjamin. Instead of

maintaining distance as the magician does, the new era being entered is, like a surgical

procedure, near and invasive and yet also mechanical and dissociated. The audio-visual

stimulation and spectacle of film pierces the audience like the surgeon's knife

penetrates the skin; the actor is disassociated from the audience and the story since she

acts for the camera, scenes are shot out of sequence and the performance is not live.

Benjamin argues that this is a distinct shift in values. The cult value of a traditional

artwork which depends on its rarity, mystique and inaccessibility—its auratic distance—

gives way to the exhibition value of film, which reaches a large public and creates a high-

impact display of sound and moving imagery. This could be a positive democratizing

transformation allows Benjamin, describing the progressive reaction to a Chaplin film:

"[t]he progressive attitude is characterized by an immediate, intimate fusion of pleasure—pleasure in seeing and experiencing—with an attitude of expert appraisal. Such a fusion is an important social index" (p. 116). Benjamin sees the potential for critical viewing of film by the general public as they view it with this "attitude of expert appraisal" (p. 113). However Benjamin also notes that more often than not "[f]ilm capital uses the revolutionary opportunities […] for counterrevolutionary purposes" (p. 113), drawing the audience into the spectacle without any critical consciousness.

The goal of building critical consciousness is paramount to Benjamin's emancipatory goals for society, but this positive ideal of how technology could function in society seems increasingly distant as the world around Benjamin launches in the opposite direction, developing and embracing war, technology, and speed to such a point that it welcomes self-annihilation. Self-annihilation is the result of such an increase of technology, rampant modernization and capitalist alienation without a critical consciousness on the part of the people writes Benjamin: "[h]umankind, which once, in Homer, was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has now become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure" (p. 122). This climactic act of violence is the ultimate manifestation of an aesthetic of nearness—the intoxicating pull of unconstrained scientific and technological advancement, of overzealous modernization and growth.

This intoxication with technology and progress is not the only dynamic Benjamin warns against in the "Work of Art" essay. He also cites the cult of personality

surrounding the film star as an example of false aura newly occupying the masses since

the decline of the original work of art and the rise of photography and film. Benjamin

describes the film star's phony aura as a fetishized commodity manufactured by the film

industry. In this study I consider this "aura" aesthetically comparable to futurism, and I

therefore categorize it within the aesthetic of ever-increasing nearness: like the violent

futurist energy that self-consumes in the ecstatic fire of war, the phony aura of the

celebrity also fosters a desire to metaphorically consume the object of adoration. Both

futurism and celebrity worship can be described collectively as consuming energies and

should both be associated with false aura and considered antithetical to the aura of the

original work of art. The original work of art has an aura of authenticity and mystique

and commands a distance of awe and reverence. These ravenous false auras on the

other hand spur a desire to get ever nearer to the falsely auratic object.

1.4   An Earlier Glimpse of Aura: Benjamin's "Little History of Photography"

1.4.1   Beyond the Medium and the Copy: Auratic Content

While the "Work of Art" essay explains aura to some extent, it primarily deals

with form rather than content. It differentiates between the auratic medium of painting

and non-auratic media like photography and film. Benjamin's "Little History of

Photography" on the other hand does comment on the subject of representation,

technique and artistic style used in a work and their bearing on whether or not a work is

auratic. This earlier essay also shows aura to be a more relational and relative concept

than one might have assumed from the "Work of Art" essay: an overly rigid reading of

the "Work of Art" essay would suggest that photography fully eradicates aura. The

"Little History of Photography" essay reveals a more nuanced picture of Benjamin's

thinking on the topic, demonstrating that the total eradication of aura is not necessarily

the case, and that reproducible arts such as photography can be auratic in varying

degrees, depending on technical capabilities and stylistic decisions. It is important to

stress that despite their different emphases these two essays both contribute to the

interpretation of aura that this study follows. The "Work of Art" essay is more

concerned with the political implications of the aura's decline and illustrating the

dialectic between the unique original and the mass producible work. Alternatively, the

"Little History of Photography" discusses the auratic implications of various stylistic

developments, decisions regarding referents, as well as aura-diminishing progressions in

photographic technology.

In "Little History of Photography" Benjamin (1931/1999a) summarizes the

advances and changes in photographic technology in the ninety years that passed since

the invention of the daguerreotype, discussing this technology's influence on the rapidly

evolving practices of photography and art. Benjamin also relates the artistic and

technological changes to the social and political landscape in which these changes were

occurring.

1.4.2   Technological Advances and Increasing Accessibility

Benjamin explains in "Little History of Photography" that over time, as the

camera and prints shrink in size and the amount of time it takes for the photographic

image to register decreases, photography becomes less expensive, and eventually is available to and affordable by the general public. Similarly the subject matter becomes more everyday, involving more immediate surroundings, and the sheer number of photographs increases as a result of this increased use among the general public. Both the way in which the photograph is kept and the way it is perceived also change. Instead of being kept in a cherished box, or being perceived almost as an original work of art, timeless and meant to last, the photograph is used to capture more immediate events and environments and greater numbers of them, making the photographic image more commonplace and less precious and important to preserve. This pattern of moving from authoritative, timeless and permanent to commonplace and immediate is a theme present in both essays, and is integral to understanding the aesthetics of aura.

1.4.3   Auratic Mystification Versus Anti-Auratic Estrangement

In terms of actual examples of aesthetic properties of aura, in "Little History of Photography" Benjamin describes the process of making older one-off daguerreotype prints as more auratic than the later faster reproducible photographic processes. He explains how in the daguerreotype, the time required to pose for the photo allowed the referents to grow into the print, as if more of a person's corporeal presence became in the process embedded in the photograph. Furthermore, the images were blurry, shaky and unclear (even though Benjamin writes that people were still shocked by what were for them vivid likenesses). As technological advances occurred in this field, the mystique, authority and distance of the earlier photos began to diminish.

Around the year 1880, attempts were made to imitate this disclarity—to

recreate the distance that had been embedded in the technology of the camera and

inject aura back into the images. Because the natural effect of imperfect technology was

not hindering clarity any longer, Benjamin (1931/1999a) writes that photographers tried

to reproduce this hazy effect with filters. Benjamin is not fond of these filters, or any

other stylistic alterations for that matter. He sees them as adding to the mystique of the

image, of re-injecting it with aura. Benjamin prefers the images of Atget, a photographer

and contemporary of Benjamin, as Atget's photographs do nothing of the sort in terms

of staging mystique. According to Benjamin they are devoid of aura (vol. 2, p. 515).

Benjamin describes how Atget estranges the environment as opposed to mystifying it:

Atget's images are like crime scenes. Factual. Documentary. Their aim is to defamiliarize

the viewer from previous, taken for granted, perceptions of an environment and

thereby foster critical consciousness, revealing the social politics within the image (vol.

2, p. 515). When we are removed from our environments and they become foreign to

us, only then can we see them critically according to Benjamin. Benjamin sees potential

for demystification in photography, just as he sees how mystification and auraticization

can be purposely re-introduced into this same medium.

1.4.4   Aura: A Mystical Trace, a Partial Presence

The "Little History of Photography" offers a number of critical details that

provide a more complete description of aura than the "Work of Art" essay does. Aura is

first of all depicted as more of a relative concept: some types of images are shown to

have more or less aura than others, which means that photography does not necessarily

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eradicate aura. Furthermore, in terms of determining how to identify auratic subject

matter, this essay shows that the mystical trace—the distant and not entirely clear or

visible—is a source and sign of the traditional aura of unbridgeable distance. This is

most clearly shown in the example of the daguerreotype, because of the time it takes

for the light to capture the image and let the referents soak into the page, giving the

image more substance and materiality[8] in the process. It is also illustrated in the idea

that haze, soft focus filters and the like can contribute to or reproduce the aura of the

earlier blurrier, less technologically sophisticated photographs. This insight is key in

paving the way for operationalizing the concept of aura and developing an aesthetics of

aura for new media, as it illustrates the sensory dimensions of auratic objects, and

guides my identification of attributes to look for in the artworks I explore in this study.

1.4.5 Summary

Overall, these two categories—mystifying distance and authority versus

immediacy, accessibility and scientific objectivity—are prevalent in both essays. They

are clearly integral to the problematic of modernity and of the aura that begins to decay

noticeably for Benjamin at this time. There is however a significant difference between

the two essays in their assessments of these two categories. "Little History of

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[8] I use the terms "material" and "materiality" to differentiate the "traditional" physical corporeal realm of objects that have spatial dimension from the realm of digital images and virtual environments. These differentiations are not absolute however: I argue in Chapter 2 that virtual "dematerialized" environments also have a materiality in terms of the phenomenal embodied experiences of their creators and users as they engage both mentally and physically with the onscreen environment. Following from this development, throughout this study I use "material" and "materiality" in a comparative manner—in terms of degrees of materiality. I refer to artworks as more or less "material" as a way of comparing experiences and aesthetics that are oriented more towards the sensuous, corporeal, physical and tangible, as opposed to the more time-based, fleeting, virtual and ephemeral.

Photography" seems to offer a primarily positive outlook towards modernity and

technological advances: these advances are described as almost exclusively

emancipatory even as the degradation into stylistic alterations and auratic illusions,

which come hand in hand with the commercialization and capitalization of photography,

begins to concern Benjamin. This is distinct from the "Work of Art" essay, where the

futurist drive for glory, high-tech weaponry and violent energy, racing closer and closer

towards inevitable warfare and its own beautiful destruction, overwhelmingly taints the

earlier more favourable image of modernity depicted in "Little History of Photography."

Regardless of Benjamin's outlook on modernity, what is most important for this study,

for developing an aesthetics of aura, is to remember that auratic content in "Little

History of Photography" is associated with mystification, fog, haze, trace, distant

authority, permanence and timelessness of early photographic portraiture, while the

destruction of aura in "Little History of Photography" relates to mass accessibility,

proximity, immediacy, as well as depersonalized documentary and critical estrangement

or demystification.

1.5 Theorizing Aura After Benjamin

1.5.1 Introduction

This section discusses other scholarly commentaries on Benjamin's aura,

examining aura further as the partial, distant or incomplete presence put forth in "Little

History of Photography." I introduce Strathausen's explanation of how aura cannot be

completely destroyed, as our longing for aura in its absence is itself auratic. Additionally

I look to metaphor, drawing from Sharrett's use of music to describe aura, in order to demonstrate the nuances of aura in more concrete and experientially recognizable[9] terms.

1.5.2   Strathausen and Kuppers: Aura as Unconsummated Longing

According to Strathausen's (2001) reading of Benjamin, aura is a gaze or projection that humans need and therefore project onto objects. For Strathausen, aura stems from "a utopian longing that can be suppressed but not destroyed" (p. 6). This projection or feeling according to Strathausen is bound to the self-alienation of capitalism and modernity, especially the pushing of all forms of expression into the homogeneity of monetary value. The flattening of expression "does not allow for the mythical experience of the reciprocal gaze," that is, the older pre-modern ritual or cultic aura; our longing for that reciprocal gaze exists instead as a projection onto the object (p. 8). This means that the existence of modern aura corresponds to the decay of the pre-modern ritual aura. Strathausen argues that aura is therefore linked to its own negation and withdrawal. "Since the aura lingers in a state of self-alienation, it, by definition, can neither become fully present nor fully absent, but always oscillates between these two poles" (p. 9). If the aura does become fully present—if the distance between the subject and the auratic object is bridged and the veil of mystification and distance is pulled away—the aura is eradicated: the beautiful object (the object which

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[9] That is, illustrations of the concept of aura which employ physical examples that are familiar to most readers and can exemplify the theoretical concept more concretely.

has aura) is not the veil nor the object but the object within the veil.[10] To make the

auratic object fully present is to destroy it. While "[t]he destruction (that is

actualization) of the aura would be Benjamin's political and theological dream come

true" explains Strathausen, "[t]he proclaimed fulfilment of this dream […] can be

nothing but a lie" (p. 10). This is the paradox of closing the (auratic) distance to see the

manifestation of aura more clearly when the aura is dependent on that very distance.

Kuppers (2001) similarly argues that reaching a utopian/dystopian reality of

either fully present aura or alternatively the complete destruction of aura[11] cannot and

must not occur for Benjamin. Kuppers stresses that "as Benjamin writes again and again

about closeness, the examples he provides speak of desire rather than consummation,"

i.e., to long for aura's full presence is a necessity, but to attempt to transcend this

longing and make the auratic fully present is a false endeavor (p. 41). Such an attempt

would "[drain] the aura of its critical potential by forcing it to deliver an essence it does

not possess" (Strathausen, 2001, p. 10). Benjamin's Utopia/dystopia—the theoretical

full presence of aura that is described in Benjamin's writings in Messianic terms—must

remain no-place[12] as a dream that is not meant to be forced into existence.

If the theoretical ultimate destruction/realization of aura is equated with a

transcendent Messianism the arrival of which would end our world (or "constitute the

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[10] "'The beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil' […] Through its veil which is nothing other than aura, the beautiful appears" (Benjamin, 1936/2002b, vol. 3, p. 137).

[11] The fulfilment and the destruction of aura are ultimately one and the same, because to fully see the aura is to destroy it, since it is the mystification of the object that makes that object auratic.

[12] Utopia translates from the Greek literally as no place: the prefix "ou-" means no, and "topos" is place. At the same time the prefix "ou-" acts as a pun with another Greek prefix, "eu-," meaning good. The implication being that the ultimate good place is in fact no place.

end of time" in Strathausen's words), then auratic longing in a broader sense—longing

for, but never being able to transcend all mystification—requires us to reject any

concept of transcendent "truth" and accept the limitations of human possibility and

knowledge. "Truth" assumes demystification but is at its essence "pure mystification," a

paradox in itself. The only ultimate truth (which is essentially the realization/destruction

of aura) can be the constant of ambiguity. This longing for and inability to reach certain

truth, remaining forever in a perpetual state of ambiguity, is the core of auratic longing.

1.5.3   Illustrating the Tensions of Aura

This association that I suggest between aura and ambiguity is a view shared by

Sharratt (1998), who states that "[t]he nature of auratic distance is indeterminacy" (p.

32). Sherratt uses the metaphor of music to illustrate the impossibility of aura being

fully revealed and argue for its necessary indeterminacy. She explains that there must

be both sound and silence for either to exist, noting that in the case of music, "[i]t is the

musical notes that make us aware of the silence" (p. 32). She posits that if either silence

or sound is all-encompassing, neither can be perceived. If there is total silence, there is

nothing to differentiate it from and therefore no way to identify and define it. All-

encompassing and total (infinite and not limited to a particular distance and length of

time) sound and silence can only be theoretical, because if one of these existed "fully" it

would be indefinable. At the same time, the partial silence amidst sound is what hints at

what total silence could/would be. Juxtaposition of both sound and silence is required

to suggest the possibility of one of them as a totality. This insight suggests to me that

auratic aesthetics too require juxtaposition. The auratic object must be somewhat near

yet still obscured or elusive for its distance to be felt. There has to be something akin to a veil or fog, limiting but not fully impeding visibility. There must be enough of the object visible to suggest that there is something to long for that exists behind the veil, and enough disclarity to suggest that the object is worth longing for. Mystique and ambiguity are significant in auratic aesthetics of longing.

My question now is whether there is an optimal range of partial visibility for generating a stronger auratic presence and an optimal level for weakening aura. If I extend Sherrat's metaphor, I can illustrate more vividly the dynamic: in music, an even distribution or regular pattern of notes and rests would not have the same impact on a listener as a jarring break or over-extended pause. The more constant or regular the noise, the more impactful the irregular pause or disruption. It makes sense that aura would operate similarly and that the closer one gets to touching the aura and thereby eradicating the distance that *is* aura—the stronger the tension of the distance would then be. Similar to the physical tension that is felt when slowly bringing a metal object towards a magnet, the closer one gets to letting the object come in contact with the magnet, the greater the tension of the remaining distance between the two and the more potent the aura. If the silence is too long or not long enough, the auratic tension may be lessened. Certain proportions of partial presence, specifically those right on the cusp of presence, almost fully visible or barely visible, have more auratic potency. This insight constitutes another key principal of these auratic aesthetics.

1.6 Next

In this chapter, I have outlined the theoretical background for my formulation of the basic aesthetics of aura. Chapter 2 will focus on the defining characteristics of new media, the area in which the auratic aesthetics of limitation and indeterminacy, together with manifestations of trace and longing, are to be investigated.

2: NEW MEDIA AND AURATIC AESTHETICS

2.1   Introduction

In this section I describe certain characteristics of new media that have influenced the course of this study and informed how I will approach the concept of auratic aesthetics in relation to new media art.

2.2   The Languages of Film and New Media

Lev Manovich (2001), a renowned scholar of new media, describes the flavour and identity of new media by placing new media in the context of the history of the printed word and of painting. Manovich argues that each of these traditions has its own "language." He sees the primary quality of new media, the thing that differentiates it from cinema, to be its database quality—its emphasis on sampling without the linearity, which typifies mainstream cinema (excluding surrealist and experimental cinema). Manovich discerns that although film was based on "sampl[ing] time twenty four times a second," it still was ordered one frame at a time (p. 50). Even if cinematic narrative jumps forward and backward in time, we still watch it linearly.

When we digitized film we became able to access any frame at any time: "new media abandon[ed] this 'human-centered' representation," and allowed time to be "managed, analysed, and manipulated" with newfound ease (p. 51). We took the frames out of the filmic narrative and entered them into a database.

Manovich makes a clear distinction between the "language" of the narrative and

the "language" of the database. Narrative-oriented new media works, for example

virtual and augmented realities, strive for a seamlessly composed environment or story,

the holy grail being total-immersive presence. Total-immersive presence (also referred

to as telepresence) involves "'the sense of being physically present in a remote or

synthesized environment'; a sense which is 'preconditioned' by 'sensory immersion'"

(Fisher as cited in Nechvatal, 1999, p. 34). This concept of immersion, defined by

Nechvatal (1999) as "an aesthetic moment's totality of experience when viewer and

view coalesce" (p. 18), is akin to Wagner's theatrical concept of "Gesamtkunstwerk" or

total-artwork. "[T]he formal characteristics of the [G]esamtkunstwerk were theorized as

necessarily being the product of a fusion of the separate arts in pursuit of a 'total

effect'" (Nechvatal, 1999, p. 91). Database art lacks the "total effect" of the

Gesamtkunstwerk. The database is more inclined toward gaps and disparate bits of

information that we then try to classify and creatively organize into our own narratives

explains Manovich. The database language according to Manovich is one where we try

to fill in the gaps with our own stories and sense-making as opposed to becoming

absorbed in an immersive narrative-oriented work.

Many new media artworks involve a combination of both languages. Narrative

and database are by no means mutually exclusive concepts; but Manovich clearly

stresses that whereas film favoured narrative, new media art favours the database.

While new media art is at times pulled towards the narrative side of the spectrum, the

overwhelming language of the human-computer interface according to Manovich *is* the

database. Since Manovich sees the database as embodying the spirit of new media, it is this type of new media art I will be concentrating on in this study—art that involves databases and processes of collection as opposed to works that emphasize narrative.

2.3 Database and Archive

Referencing and working with Manovich's ideas on database language in new media, Manoff (2010) has begun to theorize the cultural and metaphorical meanings of the database. Manoff understands "current configurations of database as a kind of logical unfolding of the archival impulse" (p. 392). She writes that "archive" and "database" are used now by scholars metaphorically to "theorize digital culture and new forms of collective memory" (p. 386), and consequently they "mean something broader and more ambiguous" than traditional usage of professional experts writing within their carefully delineated disciplinary fields (p. 385).

Manoff uses the term "archival effects" to describe "the ways in which digital media bring the past into the present," when discussing the extensive digital availability of media and cultural content from previous eras (p. 386). She argues that the simplicity and ease of capturing digital data stimulates an urge to collect and archive data in greater quantities than ever before. The broader database/archival genre encompasses an array of projects, ranging from the collection of Twitter Tweets which "will provide historians with knowledge of historic and other events from across the globe as they unfolded in real-time and as they were experienced in the moment by users" to the creation of "virtual reconstructions and databases of ancient objects, structures, and

even entire cities" (p. 387) which "serve as partial substitutes for historical sites threatened by war, tourism, urbanization, looting, and decay" (p. 388).

The conflation of these terms "database" and "archive" under unified notions of collective memory reflects a change in our perceptions of time: when time is measured in Tweets and status updates "the present appears to shrink through accelerating cycles of innovation and obsolescence" (p. 388). The present moment becomes elusive, always being passed. At the same time, the boundary between "the moment just passed" and "The Past" is blurred, just as the difference between database and archive grows faint.

Citing Hartzog, Manoff describes the diminishing difference between online and offline worlds as a result of "mobility and ubiquity" (p. 392). The Internet becomes a seamless part of our material lives and our day to day—as we too join the "living archive" of our media-infused and data-saturated universe. Our every waking moment is externalized and collected.

Working with Manoff's conflation of database and archive, specifically the idea that the database itself demonstrates an archival impulse, this research will incorporate online archival projects in addition to strictly digitized and algorithmically searchable online databases. While they differ in terms of levels of abstraction and automation, at their core they both stem from the same impulse of preservation—whether of the immediate past generated exclusively online (as in the case of Twitter) or of much earlier events that have only later been documented online. This way I can choose a range of works that will allow me to compare within the category of new media, varying levels of abstraction, automation, digitization, as well as the transition from distant

memory to immediate memory. I will be able to study and analyze the aesthetics of these processes, in order to better understand their relationships to auratic possibility in new media art.

2.4   Aesthetics of Space, Time and Real-time

Corcoran (1996) writes that with the digital image "[o]ur aesthetic attention is shifting from the museum to the visit; from objects in space to an activity in time" (p. 378). The art-object becomes in effect an art-event. It is dematerialized, lacking a lasting physical presence. While dematerialization is not unique to new media art,[13] it is this characteristic that separates the fleeting virtuality of new media art from the material weight of old media art. When an image of a painting is delivered to one's computer screen it is not so much about the material, physical "distance from Lille to New York, or again from New York to [a] home in Paris, possibly via several different servers along the way," rather it's about time—fleeting, ephemeral, ungraspable.

When Corcoran was writing a decade and a half ago distance was measured in "bits per second," giving time *some* "weight," even if only through the sheer agony of waiting two full minutes for a single image to load (p. 377). Today, however, much larger files load in less than a second, and waiting is reserved for high definition movie downloads. The Google search engine even *anticipates* our search queries before we finish typing them. Real-time is the course of the day; we expect instantaneous results.

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[13] The art-event can be traced back to 1920s Dadaism, as well as the Situationist happenings, performance and installation art of the late 1950s and 1960s (Manovich, 2001; Greene, 2004).

The trend towards real-time operations and the emphasis on the "here and now"

that exists today would likely be as problematic for Benjamin if he were still alive as it is

for French cultural theorist Paul Virilio, who shares Benjamin's appreciation for distance

and apprehension towards immediacy (Manovich, 2001). Virilio (2000) tells us that the

"human environment" has an "optical thickness" that all but disappears when

confronted with real-time (p. 44). Real-time through a Virilian lens refers to the

dissolution of spatial relationships, allowing us to be two places at once: "[it] manifests

when tele-objectivity allows one to witness an event at daybreak in England when it's

pitch black night in one's neighborhood" (Beard and Gunn, 2002, p. 7). This space-time

compression has been in operation for decades already; numerous technologies to

some extent conquer distance and seemingly reduce the size of the world. Beard and

Gunn (2002) demonstrate this phenomenon as follows:

> If it is possible to fly to Europe overnight, our mental map (our
> perception) of space separating Europe and the United States shrinks. If
> we can receive broadcasts of news events live from Europe, our mental
> map of the space separating Europe from the US shrinks again (p. 7).

This example illustrates certain aspects of partial space-time compression to

which we long ago became accustomed. Contemporary real-time technologies further

increase this effect, and space-time compression in its hypothetical absolute form would

cause the space between objects to shrink to nothing and distance would not exist at all

(Manovich, 2001). And if distance does not exist, asserts Virilio (2000),

> […] you must also get rid of borders. Not just the political borders of
> nation-states, in favor of federal or confederative entities; you must also
> abolish the *aesthetic* "borders" of the things that surround us, in favor of
> one ultimate boundary in time, that of the acceleration of the *optical*

communication of the appearances of a world wholly telepresent, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week (p. 50).

This concept of a single boundary in time—the convergence of the globe to a single point—bears much similarity to Benjamin's view of futurist aesthetics. It echoes the relationship I demonstrated previously between aesthetics of nearness and manifestations of power and violence: "telecommunication technology for Virilio eliminates the category of space altogether as it makes every point on earth as accessible as any other—at least in theory," bringing us to the age of "real-time politics, which requires instant reactions to events transmitted at the speed of light" in which a military power has the "capability of striking [...] any point on Earth at any moment" (Manovich, 2001, p. 279). When Virilio writes in 2000 about the dimensions of real-time, he is dealing with the same aesthetic issues as Benjamin was in the 1930s, including the erasure of distance, the decline of aura, and corresponding rise of futurist aesthetics. And just as in Benjamin's time traces of materiality and the corresponding presence of aura must still exist in the world and in new media art regardless of any erasure of distance as it can never be a complete erasure. While aura's nature and the objects and qualities that invite its presence may change or develop, it is here to stay in some form according to Strathausen and Kupper's explication of aura. The issue is where to find it. How do we transfer the concept of aura into the realm of new media? How do we

transfer the material manifestations of aura such as the indexical[14] trace of the referents captured by exposure to light over a period of time in the daguerreotype,[15] and transfer these very material manifestations of aura into a virtual environment? What happens to the traditional visual art-object when time takes over and spatial relationships and environments—tangible aspects of traditional materiality—diminish? To what extent does art on a screen disable aura (like Atget's photographs did for Benjamin[16]) with its computerized crispness and perfection, and its lack of human touch, of material trace? Logically, the aura must still linger or re-emerge if it can never be fully destroyed, but where and how do we locate it?

2.5   A "New Media" Aesthetics of Aura

Based on Benjamin's discussion of aura in "Little History of Photography" I have established that the work of art does not necessarily need to be unique. However the uniqueness of the original work of art can still be considered an "auratic dimension" of the work (Richter, 2001, p. 29): while not an absolute requirement for aura, it is still a contributing factor. An original hand-made work suggests that the direct touch of the artist is present in the artwork. The material trace of the artist's hand lingers on the painting, even in the artist's absence. The idea of an original work of art implicitly

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[14] In semiotics, the index is the term used to denote a type of sign which "is in dynamical (including spatial) connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses of memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other hand" (Peirce, 2006, p. 108). The index does not resemble the object it references, but rather triggers a learned sensory memory of the referent. Footprints, scars and bullet-holes are all examples of indexes. The index is the remaining trace of a now absent object or event.

[15] See Section 1.4.3.

[16] See Section 1.4.3.

contains the material trace, as does the daguerreotype that takes time to absorb the referents into the image. Nonetheless, the material trace is not necessarily the only kind of trace, though it may be the simplest and most powerful. The trace can in fact manifest itself in multiple ways, including those that are less related to actual material indexes and instead rely on the mediation of technology, as illustrated in the following example.

In McCormack's (2010) work on geographic remote sensing, McCormack discusses the contactless reception of objects' sensory data through technologies of geographic remote sensing. These instruments offer knowledge of a particular geographic phenomenon before it comes into view. The phenomenon "might not be visible, but at any given point it might be sensed" (p. 643). In this example of geographic remote sensing, the hint or spectre of presence is mediated through technology, but it is still a trace, even if not in the traditional material sense. The concept of remote presence discussed by McCormack exemplifies how the aesthetic of the material trace, the hint of presence, can function in the virtual dematerialized sphere of new media.

Additionally, the "auratic dimension" of the an artwork's uniqueness is not entirely limited to its indexical (trace) function discussed above, but can also be perceived thusly: according to Baecker (2003), the uniqueness of the work of art depends on "the condition of the possibility of a work's 'here and now,'" rather than on there being no-thing in the world comparable (p. 12). This reading puts emphasis on the work's exclusive spatio-temporal locus of existence and reduces emphasis on the physical uniqueness of the art object. This concept of a unique moment of experience

where the viewer encounters the work of art—whether a more traditional material art object or a time-based, interactive, performative or conceptual work—can act as a bridge in an analysis of aura in new media art, where the physical art object is lacking, and time and concept play more central roles.

Hanson (2004) describes the digital image not as a single image, but as an entire process or experience forged through the body's "own affectively experienced sensation of coming into contact with the digital" which includes the "embodied, subjective experience" (p. 13). The digital image is a unique encounter with the art (non)object. As such, the moment of experience is a "live" one—a unique individual original performance and cannot be reproduced: it is the original authentic work of art. As Richter (2001) describes: "[w]hen the morphology of an artwork is dematerialized, [i.e., it is not physically reproduced, but can be 'conjured' onto any screen at anytime] the moment of reproduction itself becomes the artwork" (p. 30). It becomes unique in its interactive experience from moment to moment with every viewing being slightly different. Instead of the work being seemingly contained inside a frame, separated from its viewer, the moment of experience with interactive work becomes the work itself in a sense. This factor changes the infinitely reproducible online work into an original work of art, the viewing and interaction different in every instance.

In this way dematerialized new media art is still very much material in that its existence is grounded in how one physically experiences the unique moment of encounter with the artwork: the art object becomes an art event.

This focus on the process and experience of the encounter with the artwork guides this exploration and contributes significantly to the possibility of locating a sense of materiality and with it auratic potential in new media art.

2.6 Next

In this chapter I described the defining characteristics of new media art and illustrated how the auratic dimensions of trace and uniqueness translate into a virtual landscape. The next chapter, Chapter 3, will outline my research design, methodology and process for a study of new media art in which I test these assertions and possibilities regarding auratic aesthetics in new media art, and look for actual instances of auratic presence in six different artworks.

3: RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Introduction

This study explores and compares how aura manifests itself over six encounters with different new media artworks. This chapter details how I conduct and document my embodied encounters with the six chosen artworks. Throughout this chapter I explain the development and basis for my research design, moving from the origins of my interest in new media art, to the conceptual formulations of research questions, to my empirical investigations involving an iterative process of interacting, observing and reflecting. This account of my process includes the various steps along the way, such as my strategy and reasoning behind finding and establishing a typology of new media artworks, and use of this typology for the selection of six works for closer study.

As part of my discussion of process and methods, I first outline and account for my research methodology, which follows from Benjamin's own methods of thinking and writing. The different ways of seeing expressed in Benjamin's work from which I draw include the more distant or "disengaged-engaged" perspective of the flâneur as well as the closer, more impressionistic and less delineated perspective presented in Benjamin's "A Child's View of Color." I use the lens of the flâneur for my initial online browsing and collection of the projects and sites that inform my typology. "A Child's View of Color" guides my main research phase, helping me to document my embodied experiences of the six works that I analyse more closely. These methods I adopt are akin to what

Hockey and Collinson (2007) have called autophenomenographical methods of analysis—methods which offer a way to document and analyze embodied experiences.

3.2 Benjamin's Methods: A Philosophy of Writing and Thinking

My research methodology is inspired and guided by the nuanced lens of Benjamin's own philosophical and methodological approach to writing and thought. This is however a more complex task than it appears, as despite being well versed in the Western philosophical canon, Benjamin avoids overtly referencing his philosophical influences and eschews discipline-specific terminology (Friedlander, 2012 p. 2). Furthermore, Benjamin's writing style is closer to that of a literary critic than a philosopher and the range of topics he covers is broad (p. 1). This makes identifying Benjamin's philosophical stream and positioning him firmly within an established school a difficult task.

Various scholars have attempted and continue to attempt to define and explain Benjamin's methodological and philosophical positioning. In an introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*, Adorno (1955/1991) summarizes the difficulty of Benjamin's approach. He observes that "[one] who looks in Benjamin's philosophy for what emerges from it will necessarily be disappointed; it satisfies only the person who broods over it until he finds what is inherent in it: 'Then one evening the work becomes alive'" (vol. 4, p. 249). In other words, to read Benjamin requires reading him extensively and gradually allowing the ideas and observations to ruminate until concept-images and impressions begin to form from the cumulative build-up of exposure to Benjamin's

perceptions of his world. Indeed, Adorno describes how "Benjamin compared his form

to a weaving" and observes that motifs were woven with reference to each other in a

self-contained web (p. 249). This constellation eventually becomes visible and begins to

impress itself upon the reader. As such Adorno writes that there *is* a kind of "unity" to

Benjamin's work, but he qualifies this by explaining that "the essence of this unity

consists in it moving upward, in finding itself by losing itself in multiplicity" (p. 242). The

definitive characteristic of Benjamin's work according to Adorno is its lack of solidity, the

continuous gradual crystallization of meaning.

This view, that despite its fragmentary nature there is a kind of unity to

Benjamin's work, is also relayed in the recent scholarship of Eli Friedlander (2012).

Friedlander however goes further than Adorno, and does not evade the task of clearly

defining Benjamin and his writings: he does attempt to consolidate Benjamin's works

under a defensible unifying philosophy. For Friedlander, Benjamin's *Arcades Project*[17]

and the methodology behind this project are key to comprehending the essence of

Benjamin's work as a unified whole. Friedlander takes Benjamin's *Arcades Project* to be

the most significant or most developed example—the core—of his life's work. The

Arcades Project is Benjamin's most advanced attempt to, in Friedlander's words, "[write]

a philosophical history" (p. 3). Friedlander elaborates: "[f]or Benjamin the stakes of

philosophy are not in a theoretical introduction to the practice of writing history but

rather in the possibility of a concrete presentation of that reality as a philosophical

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[17] The *Arcades Project* (1940/1999b) consists of a collection of fragments of writing documenting the Paris Arcades, a gradually decaying mercantile district of covered passageways built in 19th century Paris that Benjamin saw as being distinct to a dying way of city life. Benjamin himself died before the work could be finished.

constellation of contents" (p. 2). Rather than writing about history through a particular

theoretical lens, Benjamin *presents* a historical reality, a context, through the collection

of information, as a mosaic, a constellation of the material and literary contents of time

and place. The philosophy is articulated through his methodology. Benjamin's particular

method of writing and presenting a historical reality constitutes a philosophical project

in itself.

Although Benjamin's approach may not immediately seem conducive to

academic research norms, as a research method, there is still a clear philosophy and

methodology to be found in Benjamin's work. His research strategy involves the piecing

together of various narratives, details and observations. With this practice, Benjamin

highlights a particular collection of seemingly mundane fragments of a dying

neighbourhood. He rescues and revives the abandoned and decaying dregs and scraps

from falling into the dustbin of history by allowing new collective meaning to gradually

emerge through the process of careful and specific documentation and arrangement.

3.3   Research Design: Emergent Methods and Iterative Processes

Congruent with Benjamin's emergent methodology described above in Section

3.2, my study of new media art and aura follows an iterative process which will similarly

allow meaning and comprehension to gradually emerge from observational layers: I

make multiple visits to my research sites (six online artworks) taking extensive notes,

both descriptive and reflective, paying attention to detail and building up the textured

layers of my own research assemblage. My process and method of note-taking is

informed by Benjamin, but is also similar to Hockey and Collinson's autophenomenographical methods for analysing athletes' sensuous and embodied iterations with their sporting equipment and apparatuses. Hockey and Collinson's prescribed method combines an athlete's evocative prose written in response to the athlete's own embodied interaction with her sport (where the athlete acts both as researcher and research subject), with a more formal comparative analysis of a number of such compiled responses relating to a particular sporting category or type of interaction (p. 16).

In this study I respond to my own phenomenological interactions with six new media artworks producing a similar style of prose, concentrating on my own embodied experience with the artworks, and then reflectively comparing the six compiled autophenomenological accounts. This emphasis on perception of sensual experience complements my approach to and definition of aesthetics, as well as being consistent with the iterative processes of observation and documentation which follow from Benjamin's "A Child's View of Color" (1915/1996a) an essay which explores different ways of seeing and multiple levels of detail and description.

This research will engage with various levels of detail, including some more general reflections in addition to a significant amount of descriptive detail on the level of particulars. As mentioned above, I draw on Benjamin's "A Child's View of Color" (1915/1996a) to guide my varied attention to detail, as I want my methods to follow from Benjamin's own ways of seeing and working. This essay and the research method following from it will be discussed in full later on in this chapter. First however, I review

how my research process has evolved by retracing how I navigated my decision-making

leading up to the selection of my six different research sites, in order to provide a

clearer idea of what I am analysing and why, before I describe my approach to analysis.

3.4 Project Evolution and Research Process

3.4.1 Background

My inquiry process began well before I conceived of this research project, with

Jonathan Harris and Sep Kamvar's *We Feel Fine*, an artwork I have long found

compelling, which I was introduced to during my undergraduate studies in design.[18]

Briefly, the project data mines "feelings" (sentences which include the words "I feel" or

"I'm feeling") in real-time from various blogs and websites across the Web, and displays

these "feelings" as multicoloured dots swarming about the screen, each with a feeling to

share, illustrating the notion of connectivity and shared emotions between individuals. I

first came across this work in 2006. When I more recently became interested in Walter

Benjamin's writings, I noticed a number of themes common in Benjamin's work that

reminded me of certain aspects of *We Feel Fine*, offering me a new lens through which

to view the artwork. I was curious about whether aura could exist on an online platform

and how these themes might relate to the existence of aura in general, and in this

artwork in particular. The themes from Benjamin's work which I identified and used as a

lens for re-contemplating the artwork include collection and archive; closeness; memory

and trace; distance; wandering and flâneurie; and time. My initial creative exploration of

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[18] This artwork is described and analyzed in greater detail in Chapter 4 of this study.

these six original themes that preceded the study is included here as Appendix 1. The

essay is split into six fragments, each devoted to one of the themes. I consider each

theme in relation to *We Feel Fine* as well as in relation to an array of Benjamin's

writings, illustrating each theme's relevance to both this new media artwork and to

Benjamin. The essay is non-traditional and mainly consists of ruminations and

observations. It raises more questions than it answers. The essay has remained in its

original format regardless of the direction in which the study has since developed. It was

my entry point into this study and is included here as a time capsule documenting the

research process. It demonstrates the development of my research as an iterative

process, and is therefore integral to understanding the history of the study and of my

thinking on the subject of aura in new media art.

At the time of this initial speculation, I considered the most significant paradox

or tension shared by Benjamin and *We Feel Fine* to be between the theme of distance

and that of closeness, both in terms of overcoming distance between people, as well as

in relation to the real-time immediacy of the site's constant new feed of updates.[19]

Accordingly, I created a provisional definition of what I temporarily termed "data

mining art" as a basis for finding and selecting a body of works with similarities to *We*

Feel Fine that could be used to explore, compare, and contemplate this particular

flavour of auratic experience. I tentatively defined this art form as:

> art which uses algorithmic code to mine data from external sources and
> databases which are subject to change in real-time (not a database which

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[19] In actuality the applet updates every ten minutes (Harris and Kamvar, 2006, "Methodology" ¶1), but
visually the feed appears constant and immediate.

is internal, closed or controlled by the artist). Content is appropriated automatically by the code from its original context and reframed along a new artistically/creatively articulated concept.

Although data mining art was initially the focus of the project, I remained open to including works on the periphery of this definition, as long as they satisfied two criteria for inclusion in the corpus I selected. First, the art had to qualify as database/archival art.[20] Second, I required the works to have a significant connection to Benjaminian themes I identified previously in *We Feel Fine*,[21] in order to create a point of comparison with *We Feel Fine* and other data mining artworks. I anticipated that this leeway would allow me to find a body of artworks with enough variation to identify differences in auratic experience between real-time data mining artworks and non-real-time, non-algorithmic and/or non-automated artworks that involved similar—albeit manual (non-automated)—processes of collection.[22]

3.4.2 Typology Formation: Channelling the Flâneur's Disengaged Engagement

As I could find no established repertory of data mining artworks to use as a sampling frame, from which I could later select a smaller corpus of works to be studied in greater detail, I began by developing search terms to locate and document relevant artworks.

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[20] Data mining art was conceived as a subcategory of database art—new media art involving databases. Please see Chapter 2 for a thorough discussion of what I will be taking the database (and its archival sibling) to mean for the purposes of this project.

[21] See beginning of Section 3.4.1 for list of themes.

[22] For example, in addition to analyzing works such as *We Feel Fine* which data mine their information algorithmically, I am also analyzing an online work documenting a Post-it note collection, which was amassed by hand, physically collecting (and then scanning) pieces of paper from sidewalks and other "real-world" locations.

For the initial discovery and gathering process I channelled an observational technique used by Benjamin in his unfinished *Arcades Project* (1940/1996a) as well as in "One Way Street" (1928/1999b). These two cityscape documentation or mapping projects are written (uncharacteristically for Benjamin) in the first person; they exhibit the wandering and browsing eye of the flâneur, changing focus or direction from time to time based on what catches the eye or interest at a particular moment, free of more traditional and systematic mapping and writing conventions.

Benjamin's flâneur strikes an ambiguous balance between engagement and disengagement, a figure of 19th century Paris who strolls along the streets and through the arcades. He is a dandy, an observer, the one who watches. He is one who takes pleasure in the sights and sounds of the city, but is not really part of them. He maintains a critical distance from the bustle of the city though he stands in the midst of it. He is a spectator for Baudelaire, but a detective for Benjamin, mentally cataloguing and taking stock of the modern city. Wandering, strolling and gazing. The flâneur strikes a peculiar balance between being a cultural critic on the one hand and a complicit participant deriving pleasure from the surrounding culture of commodification on the other, making him an ambivalent figure (Hartmann, 2004).

This character and way of being in the world is one I only adopt as a way of initially discovering and navigating the online space, documenting a body of artworks that I later draw from for my closer analysis. Applying flâneurie in an online context is not unprecedented. The concept of the cyberflâneur/cyberflâneuse was introduced in the 1990s to describe the media literate online user who strolls the cities and streets of

cyberspace. This cyberflâneuse tends however to be portrayed as somewhat more reflective and critical and a less complicit and ambivalent critic than the 19th Century flâneur (Hartmann, 2004).

For this study, I use this concept of the flâneur in the online environment not as a perfect metaphor, but to achieve very specific aims. When I adopt the eye of the (cyber)flâneur I do so in order to achieve a very particular balance of distance and closeness required for this stage of the project. I use the wandering gaze of the flâneur to manoeuvre through online art collections and follow my interests and path of online wanderings, to find a balance between engagement and disengagement that allows for a way of actively participating, forging a navigational path of interest from browsing online art collections, to following up on projects mentioned in e-zine articles, while at the same time continuing to wander and watch with a flâneur and researcher's disengaged engagement.

This wandering perspective can also be compared to that of the street level walker in Michel de Certeau's (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*: the individual at street level navigates the city tactically, often cutting corners and taking detours despite the uniform grid of the city and the direction of movement intended by city planners. Similarly, I allowed my online navigation to be guided by unregulated elements of chance in addition to both tactical[23] and spontaneous decision making, while still under the influence of existing structures of the Internet and the parameters of the research and selection criteria.

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[23] Pre-meditated and purposeful; thought out.

After documenting or "collecting" twenty or so artworks that applied to my criteria, I arrived at a point of saturation: I stopped coming across wholly new creative formats, and the concepts embedded in the works became increasingly repetitive. I then began to map out a rough typology by trial and error. After several iterations and refinements I arrived at the grouping outlined in Table 1. These categories manage to account for all of my collected artworks, although some works share the characteristics of more than one group.

The first category presented in Table 1 ("Dynamic Collaboration: A Performance") includes works that emphasize collaborative and performative interaction with co-participants or the surrounding environment. The data that is being manipulated, visualized or utilized in some way in these works is generated through the participants and environment. An example of such a work would be *Unstable Empathy* by Mettia Casalegro. In this work two participants are selected from an audience; electrodes are then mounted on the players making it possible for their brain activity to be visually rendered in real-time. Participants mentally navigate cooperatively to create shared imagery.

The second category ("If and Then: Logical Processes") consists of works that involve a series of steps or abstractions intended to evolve into and discover new patterns and creations. A work begins with a data set of some sort, which is then transformed and re-presented. An example of such a work would be *Shuffle* by Elevator Repair Service with Mark Hanson and Ben Rubin. *Shuffle* is a performance installation where phrases from iconic literary works are algorithmically reconfigured and

regenerated anew in real-time. Actors spread throughout the audience then perform

improvisationally in response to these new literary works.

The third and final category ("Archive and Database: Collections in Time") is

related to memory and emphasises the documentation and recording of particular

moments in time. It includes artistic renderings of historical archives, collections,

databases, as well as real-time feeds culminating in the present. Jonathan Harris's *We*

Feel Fine, which I described previously, exemplifies this category. This is in fact the

category I eventually choose as my focus, meaning that the six works I research closely

all belong to this third category.

Table 1

Categories of Database Art

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Descriptive Title (invented)	Dynamic Collaboration: A Performance	If and Then: Logical Processes	Archive and Database: Collections in Time
Notes	Collaborative and performative interaction with co-participants or surrounding environment. Participants generate initial data.	If/then experiment: a series of steps or abstractions intended to evolve or discover new patterns or creations. Begins with a data set which is then transformed and re-presented.	Includes artistic renderings of historical archives, collections, databases, as well as real-time feeds culminating in the present.
Example	In *Unstable Empathy* by Mettia Casalegro, two participants are selected from an audience; electrodes are then mounted on the players making it possible for their brain activity to be visually rendered in real-time. Participants mentally navigate cooperatively to create shared imagery. http://rhizome.org/artbase/artwork/49198	*Shuffle* by Elevator Repair Service with Mark Hanson & Ben Rubin is a performance installation where phrases from iconic literary works are algorithmically reconfigured and regenerated anew in real-time. Actors spread throughout the audience then perform improvisationally in response to these new literary works. http://earstudio.com/category/projects	*We Feel Fine* by Jonathan Harris data mines or collects "feelings" (sentences which include the words "I feel" or "I'm feeling") in real-time from various blogs and websites across the Web, and displays these feelings as multi-coloured dots swarming about the screen. Past data is archived and can be displayed in various illustrative graphical formations. http://wefeelfine.org
Concepts/ Keywords (to help describe, apply and refine categories of analysis)	Interactivity; collaboration; participation; synergy; negotiate equilibrium; navigate cooperatively; give and take; performative; dynamic;	Translation; interpretation; process; if/then; logic; abstraction; algorithmic; steps; series; Situationists; experimental; precise; variables; re-presentation; evolution;	Time; historical time; now time; real-time; historical materialist time; collection; memory; remembrance; map, record; conserve; explore; experience; watch; observe; collect;

3.4.3   Case Selection

In Benjamin's methodology concepts and themes are built upon and developed, referenced, revisited and reconsidered time and again. Rather than undertake a more superficial study of a large number of cases—which would run counter to Benjamin's methodology—I elected instead to do an in-depth comparative analysis of six works from a single category. I was most clearly engaged with the Group 3 artworks, as evidenced by the amount of notes and impressions generated by the various works in that category as compared to the others. I therefore selected from Group 3 six works to which I was significantly drawn, and which exhibited strong aesthetic variation[24] and potential for comparison.

3.5   Close Analysis of Selected Works

3.5.1   Stages of Research

There are two stages of exploration involved in this main research phase. The first stage of the exploration is based on Benjamin's (1915/1996a) "A Child's View of Color" and is more intuitive, while the second stage is a more conventional analysis requiring attention to detail and critical reflection. Both stages were designed before the research commenced. I viewed, navigated and "performed" all the works myself in a quiet, private location on the same personal laptop computer screen (rather than a screen projection), as that is likely how these works are most often experienced.

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[24] Based on the criteria described in Chapters 1 and 2.

Initial visits were intended for basic descriptions and impressions which included

documenting names of artists and artworks, dates of publication, web addresses, and

brief descriptions of form and concept, as well as any strong initial reactions,

impressions or thoughts. Based on these notes a smaller selection of works was chosen

for closer analysis and a second series of visits was undertaken, this time documented

through a "screen capture" computer application that records movement and

interaction on the screen in addition to still images. The capture includes an audio

recording of my verbal impressions, reactions, and commentary. At this stage verbal

impressions were then transcribed. Next the moving screen captures (or recordings)

were screened in a final series of viewings, documented in "thick"[25] oral description and

subsequently reflected upon in writing.

3.5.2   Stage 1: "A Child's View of Color"

For Benjamin, one who sees with a child's eyes sees colour as what delineates

boundaries, rather than being "a layer of something superimposed on matter, as it is for

adults" (1915/1996a, vol. 1, p. 50). For a child, the boundaries between objects are fluid;

"their eyes are not concerned with three-dimentiality [*sic*]" as their "ability to correlate

the different senses" has not yet matured (p. 50). A two dimensional screen appears full

of colour and shape and movement, without outlines or "skins" enclosing objects or

bodies. Benjamin describes that "[w]here color provides the contours, objects are not

reduced to things but are constituted by an order consisting of an infinite range of

nuances": in the spirit of "A Child's View of Color," the first stage of this exploration

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[25] See Geertz's (1973) "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture."

involves a flowing and immediate channelling of impressions into expressions, without concern for detailed analytic descriptions of specific elements (p. 50). The response aims to be a more emotive, direct, stream of consciousness response in line with the autophenomenological accounts of athletes cited by Hockey and Collinson.

In order to document the artworks and my experience of them in this impressionistic stage of experiential observation, I take video captures of my computer screen, which simultaneously record my voice as I speak about my reactions and observations to the screen, about what I am experiencing, as opposed to written note-taking. Oral recordings enhance my ability to express myself more freely, naturally and spontaneously.

3.5.3 Stage 2: Transcription, Reflection and Analysis

Similar to the process of compiling analytical field-notes in ethnographic studies, in this second stage of analysis, I replay my recordings multiple times as needed, transcribing my monologue and adding in a more reflective and detailed account of the artworks. I then compare my various experiences of the artworks, based on my recorded interactions with them.

After compiling my research, I synthesize my observations and reflections on auratic potential. I reassess my initial positions and research objectives in the context of my findings, and consider the implications of this study on the aesthetics and meaning of aura in new media art.

4: RESEARCH: SIX ENCOUNTERS

4.1 *We Feel Fine* by Jonathan Harris and Sep Kamvar, 2005

4.1.1 Introduction

Jonathan Harris (2009) is a computer programmer and artist based in Brooklyn,

New York ("Artist Statement" ¶3). In 2005, together with fellow artist and programmer

Sep Kamvar, Harris designed and programmed the *We Feel Fine* applet. The project "is

an exploration of human emotion on a global scale" (Harris and Kamvar, 2006, "Mission"

¶1). Every ten minutes the applet data mines public blogs, dating sites, forums and

social networks "including LiveJournal, MSN Spaces, MySpace, Blogger, Flickr,

Technorati, Feedster, Ice Rocket, and Google" for the phrases "I feel" and "I am feeling,"

and collects any sentences containing these terms ("Methodology" ¶1). If an image is

part of the post, it too is saved. The engine then "[analyzes] and [processes] these data

sets in real-time" categorizing these feelings by geography, gender, weather, time of day

and emotion (Harris, 2009, "Statement" ¶2). The rate of the archive's growth is "15,000

to 20,000 new feelings per day" (Harris and Kamvar, 2006, "Mission" ¶3).

4.1.2 Description

As I replay my screen capture/recording of my encounter with this artwork, I

watch how upon initiating the *We Feel Fine* applet, a window with a solid black

background—smaller than the index page but still comfortably sized—opens. It takes

several seconds to load before launching suddenly into a world of moving, reactive,

multicoloured dots, each linked to an associated feeling/image in the ever-expanding

collection. The dots are colour coded: "the angry feelings we chose to be shades of red,

the calm feelings shades of blue, and the happy feelings shades of yellow" (Harris and

Kamvar, 2006, "Faq" ¶27).

The dots or particles also react to my curser movements, clumping and swarming

around the curser. As I watch my curser roll over a particle, a yellow outline appears

around the particle to indicate selection, and the feeling category (e.g. happy, sad,

angry) is displayed directly adjacent to the selected particle. When a particle is clicked,

the other dots disperse (see Figure 1).
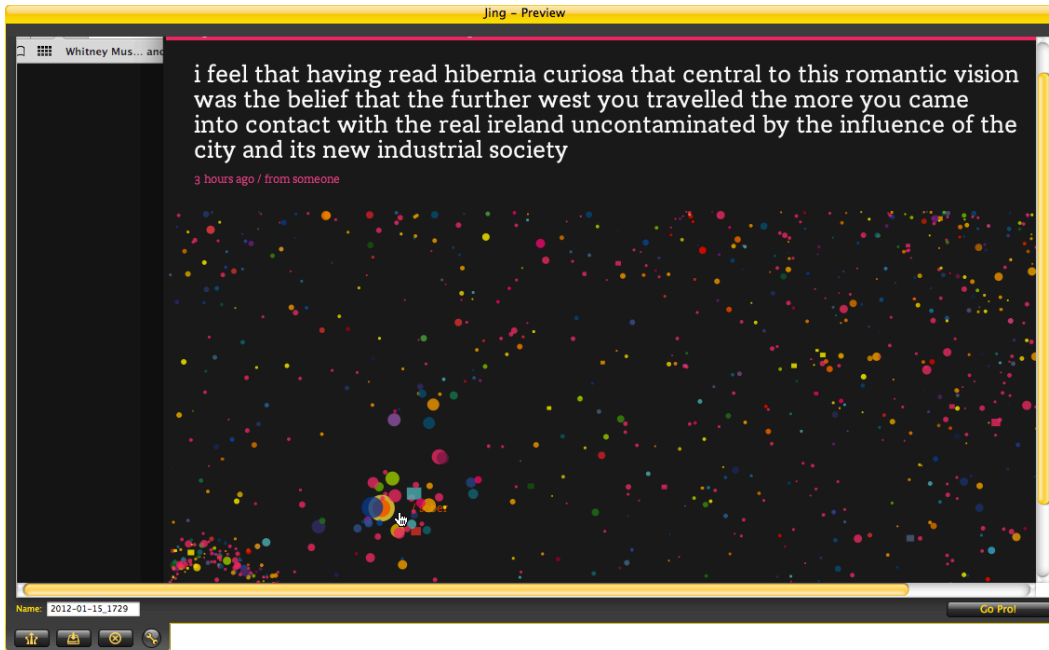
Figure 1.   **Screen capture of researcher's desktop during recorded navigation of *We Feel Fine*. From *We Feel Fine* by J. Harris and S. Kamvar, 2005, http://wefeelfine.org/. Copyright 2005 by Jonathan Harris and Sep Kamvar. Reproduced with permission.**

The letters of the sentence containing the keywords "I feel" or "I'm feeling" form

a circle around that dot and then spring to the top of the page laying themselves out in

large white slab serif typeface line by line to be read. The "I" in "I feel" is not capitalized;

capitals are not used at all, echoing the casual atmosphere of a text message. The

cheerfully round shape of the circular dot atop the informal lower case "i" (called a

tittle) also contributes to the sense of approachability.[26]

Some of the swarming particles are square as opposed to circular. A square

feeling connects to an image as well as a sentence. When a square is clicked, the image

fills the screen and the sentence is overlaid mid-way down the image (see Figure 2).
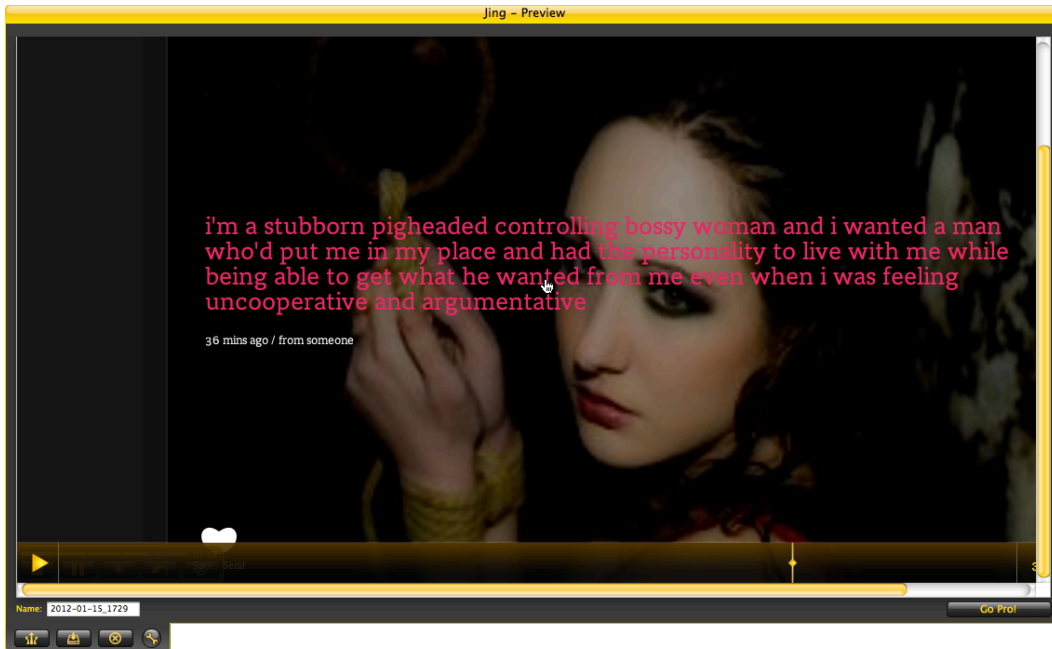
Figure 2.   **Screen capture of researcher's desktop during recorded navigation of *We Feel Fine*. From *We Feel Fine* by J. Harris and S. Kamvar, 2005, http://wefeelfine.org/. Copyright 2005 by Jonathan Harris and Sep Kamvar. Reproduced with permission.**

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[26] In many typefaces (e.g., Helvetica), the *tittle* is square and as a result of its angularity appears harsher or edgier than the perfectly circular tittle of *We Feel Fine*.

When the curser clicks on an enlarged feeling-sentence, the screen should change to the original site of the blog from which the feeling was mined, instead it goes to a "404 page not found" message.

I notice that the graphics are clean and the black background sets off the bright colour palette (the hyperlinks are hot pink and white) to dramatic effect. Even though some of the collected feelings are negative, the overwhelming atmosphere of the site appears to be fun with a touch of kitsch (hearts are a noticeable motif).

I recall from previous exposure to this artwork (see Appendix 1 for my earlier response to this work) that the feelings can be displayed in various organizational models or "movements," including the default movement—"madness"—in which dots buzz about in all directions. I return to the site to briefly describe these movements, which seem not to have interested me during my recorded impression and interest-based visit to the site. I note that the "murmurs" movement allows the feelings to arrive on-screen one at a time, similar to a Twitter feed. "Montage" shows an array of some of the images the applet has collected. "Metrics," "mobs" and "mounds" display more quantifiable representations: information is displayed in a comprehensible synthesis of some sort—as graphed data—rather than concentrating on the individual feelings as the "madness" and "murmur" movements do, or qualitatively collaging an array of images such as can be seen in "montage" mode.

On this visit I notice that not only can the sentences hyperlink back to their blogs of origin; it is also possible to save and/or email a favourite image. I never noticed this option during my previous encounters with this artwork. Perhaps it is a new feature, or

perhaps I simply missed it before. Potentially, with this feature, one could go to the blog from which the post was mined, locate contact information for the blogger, and email the feeling back to its source I attempt this process, but it is more difficult than expected to locate the feeling in its original format and context and to then find a corresponding email address. My attempts result in dead ends.

4.1.3 Reflection

I cannot help but think of *We Feel Fine* as an assemblage of frames—a collection of internet film stills. But in this case they are literally taken from other narratives, categorized and reassembled. Besides, Harris and Kamvar's work could never function as a whole in the same seamless way that film does: there is too much emphasis on the individual snippets of content. It is still more "database" than "narrative," to use Manovich's (2001) terminology. Categories and graphs, even photo montage, do not allow the viewer and view to coalesce. The project displays a collection of snatched moments without any kind of immersive narrative cohesion.

And between the snatched moments, empty space. To create an image of connectivity often depends on accentuating separate elements (in this case swarming dots), so that they can then be illustrated as coming together. This technique produces (perhaps unintentionally) in Harris and Kamvar's work a sense of absence as well as presence: In the recording I see the space between the dots, the snatched moments. And I imagine the vast physical space between the people represented by the dots. I imagine each person alone in front of a separate screen, as separated as they are

connected. The physical viewer, the act of sitting at a personal computer, alone

connected through a glowing screen—this viewer is both outside the screen, viewing

the piece within, and at the same time metaphorically inside the work. Even if my

"feelings" are not actually present in the artwork, they are still symbolically there—

represented within this system that imagines all of humanity forming a collective

consciousness. I can visualize myself simultaneously off and on the screen, caught in a

metaphorical loop of sensing myself watching everyone inside the screen, including my

potential self, also watching. Or as Harris describes it: a "two way mirror," where

viewers "see reflections of themselves even as they voyeuristically glimpse the lives of

others" (Harris, 2009, "Artist Statement" ¶2).

Yet I see this work less as an infinite loop or a mirror than as an echo chamber:

the frames of Harris and Kamvar's narrative are distinct, and do not blend one into the

next, further accentuating the empty space, the distance between the dots and their

contents—between feelings, between people. But upon revisiting the site once more, I

notice when I spend enough time watching and interacting with the work, a sense of the

artwork as a whole concept rather than a collection of snippets starts to take hold. I

begin to lose interest in the snippets. I realize that they are replaceable. The only

purpose of the individual snippet is supporting the "whole." In the end, content takes

second place to the context for me in this work: the micro images—the snippets or

isolated film stills, cut off from each other and from their various original contexts, their

meanings floating in auratic ambiguity—become less significant. The macro image—the

totalizing rush of real-time connectivity (more inclined towards the futurist aesthetic of culmination and convergence)—takes over.

4.2 *Anthroposts* by Noah Pedrini, 2010

4.2.1 Introduction

AnthroPosts is a collection of Post-it notes found and assembled by Noah Pedrini, an interactive developer and artist based in the Greater New York City area. Pedrini (2010) sees discarded Post-it notes as "a special kind of trash" ("About" ¶2). He claims to be enchanted by the way they mirror the brevity of text messaging and at the same time have the handwritten quality that text messaging lacks.

Pedrini, it seems, is looking for aura in a digital world. He uses Post-it notes to rediscover the aura of the handcrafted original work of art. He consciously considers the role of Post-its in our lives, and the journey a Post-it note takes throughout *its* life:

> I call them *AnthroPosts*: documents, urban artifacts, that hold something interesting for those willing to look. Not only do they document a moment in the life of a stranger but they hold something of the stranger himself: the way they write, how they capture ideas. And collectively they document my own life, all the places and times I've looked down and found a pastel square looking back at me ("About" ¶5).

The project is similar to *We Feel Fine*, but with a far stronger sense of materiality and consequently, I believe, stronger aura: the notes are collected and scanned into the computer to show every crease and pen mark, instilling in this project a handcrafted element despite its online character.

4.2.2   Description

Replaying my recording, I note how striking the site's graphics are. The splash

page background image is a textured concrete surface, magnified. In the centre of the

concrete is a neon green and white rectangle (similar to the shape of a Post-it note). In

the recording my curser clicks the link to enter the site.

The image turns to solid grey. The project name *AnthroPosts* is visible in white; it

fades as a lime green loading bar appears.

Once loaded, the Post-it notes are shown from a bird's eye view, scattered over

the original concrete backdrop (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.   **Screen capture of researcher's desktop during recorded navigation of *Anthroposts*. From**
**   *Anthroposts*, by N. Pedrini, 2010, http://anthroposts.com/. Copyright 2010 by Noah**
**   Pedrini. Reproduced with permission.**

Except for the background and the hand-scrawled detail on the found notes themselves, the graphic style draws from the vivid colour scheme of Post-it notes— yellow, lime green, bright purple, neon orange—plus black and white. Hand-drawn materials and textures juxtapose flat computer generated colour. Complementing this visual contrast is the typeface: a sans-serif with both rounded corners and tall thin rectangular proportions.[27]

The soundtrack too follows a pattern of deliberate juxtaposition. Consisting of street traffic from freesound.org overlapped with readings of selected notes, it sounds like a car radio with multiple frequencies filtering in at once (¶10). The selected readings are the work of online "crowd-sourced workers […] solicited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk"[28] (Pedrini, 2012, ¶3). Overall, the site is "edgy" and "urban," a result of the visual contrasts and strong colour palette, reminiscent of bright neon graffiti sprayed on concrete (despite the colour coming from office supplies in this case).

The viewer can limit the number of notes shown at once to specific geographic locations or topics. S/he can look for common words, or arrange by colour or size of the Post-its.

In the screen capture/recording, there is a section of experimentation with a few of the different organizing principles. When the notes are organized by common words the notes orient themselves into a spiral with lines drawn between notes with shared

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[27] The specific typeface Pedrini uses is Greyscale Basic from greyscale.net ("About" ¶10).

[28] Amazon's Mechanical Turk is an online marketplace run by Amazon Web Services, where programmers can request and coordinate "human intelligence" to complete tasks computers are not yet able to complete satisfactorily.

terms. The notes in the centre are the most networked. There is also a timeline available

charting when and where notes were found. A majority of the notes I happened to

interact with were from the Manhattan area; however, according to Pedrini's timeline

and listed statistics, he has collected notes from a total of six countries and twenty-five

cities. It is likely that Pedrini was the sole collector: the timeline shows clusters of notes

found in particular areas of the Americas at particular times, rather than an influx of

notes from multiple places over the same period of time.

In the recording, I click on a Post-it note and it fills the screen, pixelated for a few

moments before the details become visible (see Figure 4).
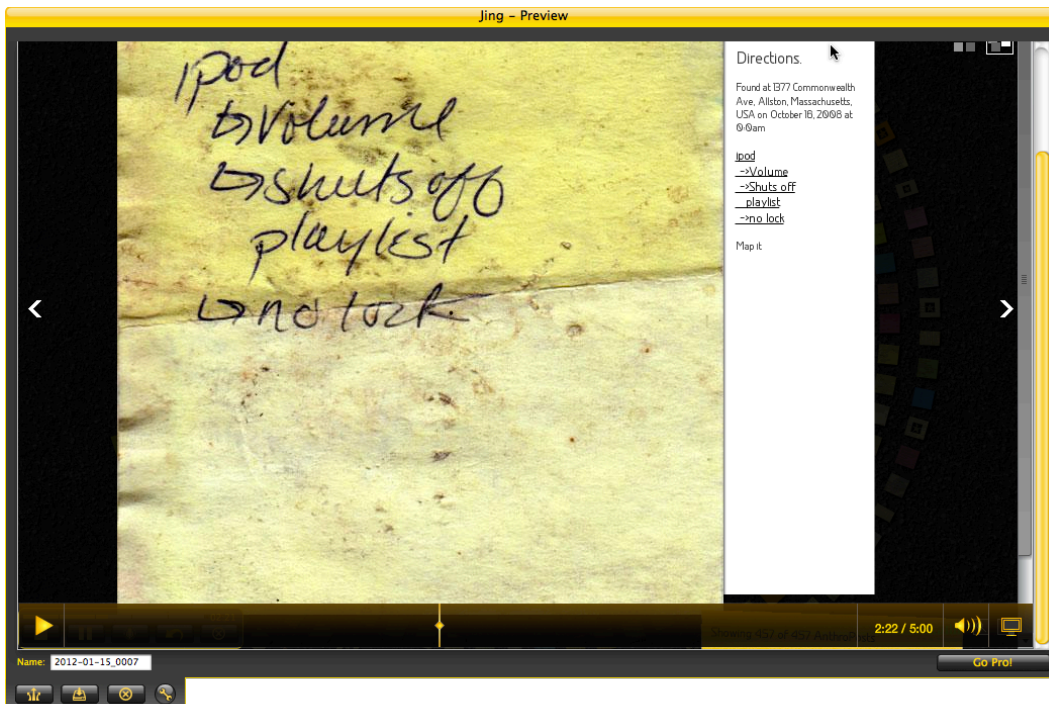
Figure 4. **Screen capture of researcher's desktop during recorded navigation of *Anthroposts*. From
Anthroposts, by N. Pedrini, 2010, http://anthroposts.com/. Copyright 2010 by Noah
Pedrini. Reproduced with permission.**

Bringing my curser to the right of the note, a white "Contact Info" tab opens beside the enlarged Post-it, with a (more readable) typed version of the text. It also lists where the note was found and gives me the option of "mapping it," which takes me to the Google street view coordinates where it was discovered, allowing me to explore its neighbourhood.

4.2.3   Reflection

"Mapping it" seems to me to be the most auratic aspect of this work—more auratic even than the handwriting and "authentic" creases. The "mapping it" possibility contains mystery, an absence of information. Upon revisiting the site, when I look at the shop windows around where a Post-it was found, I try searching for clues to decode the secrets of the note's existence, trying to make connections, to find a narrative. And in this process of mystery and potential discovery I find something else entirely. I am faced with the limitations of the partially immersive image.[29] By "mapping it" in Google street view, I can see the neighbourhood, but I cannot *know* it. I cannot quite get there mentally. I am faced instead with auratic distance and limitation.

Unlike *We Feel Fine*, I notice that *AnthroPosts* has the ability to incorporate multiple languages. It is not as limited by alphabets, and anyone from around the globe can help translate and transcribe through Amazon Mechanical Turk enabled outsourcing. In this sense, communicative distance is overcome. But diversity brings its own aura, its own misunderstandings and gaps in cultural and linguistic comprehension.

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[29] Total-immersive presence (also referred to as telepresence) involves "'the sense of being physically present in a remote or synthesized environment'; a sense which is 'preconditioned' by 'sensory immersion'" (Fisher as cited in Nechvatal, 1999, p. 34). See section 2.2.

There is also no automation in *AnthroPosts.* Pedrini has to mine the data himself,

manually. So not only do the images have aspects of hand-crafted materiality, the

process does too. This quality, in addition to the difference in movement and speed (the

snippets of data in this case do not buzz about), allows the work to have a more calm

and restful sense of time about it. It is more manageable than *We Feel Fine*. There are

under 500 Post-its in total. (*We Feel Fine* draws in 15–20,000 items every day.) Sheer

numbers make this work easier for me to explore comprehensively and to appreciate

the individual pieces of content.

I notice a kind of voyeuristic mystery in the discovery and contemplation of the

notes. Pedrini's sense of this is likely stronger than the viewer's because he has spent

time working with the Post-its, but there is always a curiosity and mystery about a

note's origin. It would be interesting to know for sure whether Pedrini collected the

notes, brought them home and scanned them onto his computer, or whether he just

digitally photographed them and left them in place undisturbed. The undisturbed option

is unlikely because of the flat, undistorted, detailed images of the notes (difficult to

produce with a camera lens), but it is more auratic in theory: the site would be

symbolically linked to the temporary resting places of Post-it notes still in circulation as

opposed to having completed their journey. There would be more unknowns, more

variables, more complexity, more potential.

If Pedrini indeed collected the notes, I am curious about what he did with them.

After he scanned them into the computer did he throw them away? Did he put them in

a shoebox in his apartment? And assuming he is still collecting (although this is

unlikely—according to the timeline no new notes have been added since September

2011) should there be unlimited growth of the archive? Or at some point, if the archive

reaches a certain capacity designated by Pedrini, should he begin to discard the oldest

notes? Is documentation a kind of captivity from which the notes should eventually be

released?

And finally, I can't help but wonder if anyone has ever tried calling the various

phone numbers scrawled on several of Pedrini's Post-its? To what extent might such an

obtrusive action change the artwork's atmosphere and consequently its aura?

4.3 *Wish* by Vicky Isley and Paul Smith, 2007

4.3.1 Introduction

Vicky Isley and Paul Smith of the National Centre for Computer Animation at

Bournemouth University in the UK have created a digital interpretation of the *Lam*

Tsuen Wishing Tree of Hong Kong. According to legend, visitors to the tree:

> […] write their wish on a yellow paper tied to an orange […] they try their
> luck at getting it to hang on one of the branches of the wishing tree. If
> your wish hangs in the tree it will come true, if not the myth claims you
> have made your wish too greedy (Isley and Smith, 2008, ¶1).

Both local and overseas visitors come to offer their wishes and prayers to the

wishing tree, especially around Chinese New Year. Interestingly, the wishing tree that is

presently visited is not the original tree. Over time the original wishing tree became

"quite literally overburdened with wishes" and "collapsed and died" (Ingham, 2007, p.

222). Luckily there were other banyan trees in the area: "an adjacent banyan tree was designated as the new wishing tree" (p. 222).

Initially, based on the artist statement, I was led to believe that this tradition was based on an ancient "eastern myth" (artists' phrasing), but in fact this is not the case. According to Ingham "it only dates back thirty years, when a boat-dweller prayed in front of the tree and then recovered from a debilitating disease" (p. 222).

4.3.2 Description

As I replay my recording of the encounter with this work I notice just how much attention the designers of this site have paid to detail, both in terms of motion graphics timing as well as the visual detail onscreen. Upon entering the site I encounter a silent black screen. In the centre of the screen there is a small turquoise rectangle, with almost square dimensions about the size of a Polaroid snapshot. Its edges are feathered, i.e., the square edges of the image have been softened, allowing the image to fade gently into the black background.

The turquoise image resembles a window or picture frame: only parts of the branches of the tree peek through, the rest is cut off by the frame (see Figure 5).
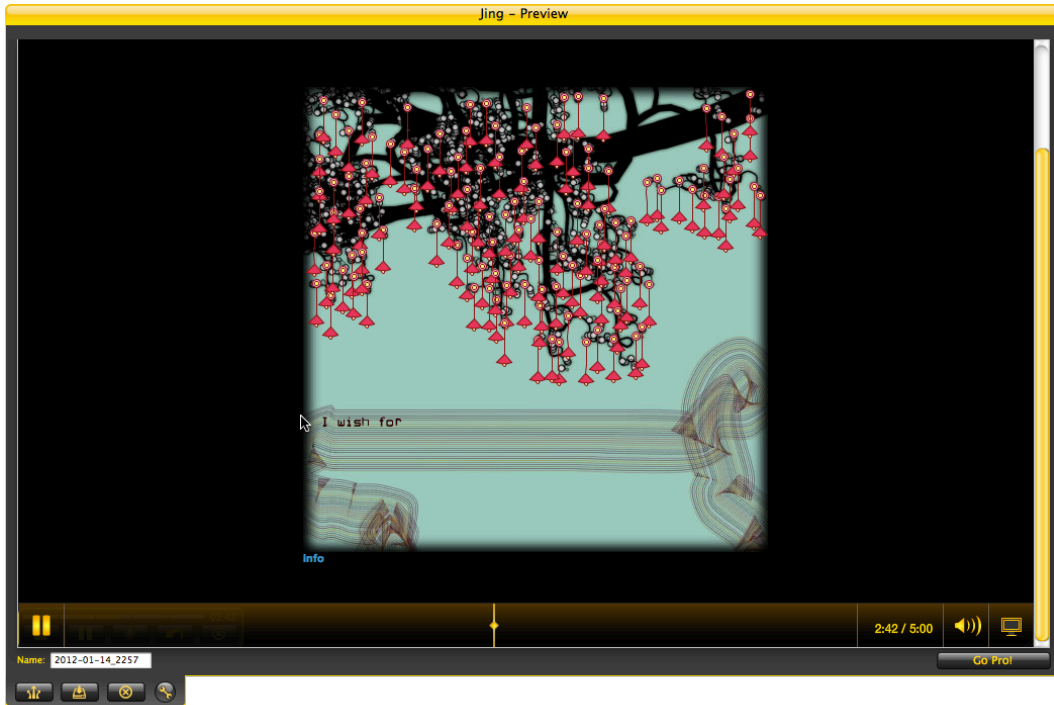
The small size of the turquoise frame and its soft (feathered) borders in the

centre of my screen gives the work a precious quality. There is an asymmetrical

arrangement of flat black angular branches at the top of the frame/window, focused in

the top left. Dark pink lampshade-like blossoms spring down and bounce a couple of

times just after the initial turquoise window appears. Their formation is similar to how

the branches on a willow tree hang. White circular blossoms with dark pink

embellishment are also part of the image, but these are decorative rather than

functional elements.

Below the black branches and pink blossoms, a sweep of semi-transparent brown and off-brown lines run across the lower half of the window: a ribbon of lines with overlapping flourishes at either end or a piece of sheet music with extra lines and no notes.

When my curser clicks on a wish lamp/blossom, it lights up in pale yellow with a pink outline. A string of text in a monospace (typewriter-style) typeface whips down onto the sheet music lines. The simulated physics are such that the letters experience a slight bounce or ripple before they settle. They scatter upwards, toward the top of the turquoise square, and then away altogether. When I type a wish it appears first in white; the brown typewriter letters follow. When its letters scatter, they fade into transparency as they leave the screen. A trace shadow remains for a brief moment, hovering in place of my wish.

When I aim my wish at the tree branches, preparing to "toss" it, the pink lampshade becomes an enlarged triangle that I drag with my curser and point at the tree. At this point, the lampshade begins to resemble an upside-down kite: it is a giant pink upside-down triangle that responds to my curser's movements without necessarily touching it, as if an invisible string exists between us. The wish fails to catch numerous times. One wish does eventually catch though.

4.3.3 Reflection

In the recording the lines on the lampshade can be seen to wiggle in an imagined wind. It seems to me that the delicacy of simulated physics such as these, along with the

trace shadows mentioned in the description, create some sense of materiality in this

artwork despite it being entirely computer generated and lacking any photo-based

images of real world objects. The retrievability of the wishes (which do not disperse or

disappear, but remain fixed indefinitely in the tree) also make them seem more physical

or object-like. They don't just fade into oblivion and they aren't continuously swarming

and difficult to relocate like the feelings in *We Feel Fine*. There are a manageable

number of wishes to explore and once attached to the tree they remain grounded in

place, in contrast to the rejected wishes that dissipate into virtual oblivion. Even the

spelling errors and typewriter-style typeface add a complementary materiality. The

typeface references mechanical, noisy, harder to press keys with physical output (on a

typewriter the words materialize, imprinted into paper). I am not convinced that such

noisy mechanical associations are helpful for this piece. Still, in terms of the rhythms

and pauses conducive to typewriting (as opposed to keyboarding) there is an aspect of

typewriting which suits the project: on a typewriter I must pause to consider my

sentences more carefully because they cannot be erased. Similarly, in *Wish*, every

proposed wish has the potential to be the one wish that is accepted. I cannot know

what logic the tree uses, so I ponder over my word choice, wondering if there is a

pattern or internal logic (as opposed to it being random, which *is* far more likely as it is

easier to program). There is one entry that reads "./cooookies" and another with

random jumbled letters, so the program is obviously not too intelligent, otherwise such

non-wish and joke entries would likely have been rejected. Or possibly the physics

simulation is such that the way the mouse is released and the trajectory of the wish

determines whether it succeeds or not. The tree's logic is unexplained in the artists'

description of the work, but this speculation is part of the interactive viewing

experience: there is an "element of chance and hope and intrigue to what is effectively a

very simple message board" (Isley and Smith, 2008, "Full Description" ¶4).

Despite being a message board, there is no observable dialogue or link between

messages. Communication is solitary—one way—from the wisher to the tree. This is

consistent with how the legend suggests the tree be used, but need not rule how the

tree is used. However, because almost every wish is rejected, an extended conversation

between wishers is next to impossible and would certainly require persistent dedicated

effort.

The aura of this piece is most pronounced visually in the limited materiality of

the simulated physics, and conceptually in the incorporated aspects of chance and

uncertainty as well as the sense of loneliness and longing related to each wish being an

anonymous externalization of a private thought, without its context or its originator.

Looking through my personal computer screen, my published wish still feels private,

although I know anyone can see it. There is a possibility that someone could be looking

in at the tree and even my own wish at the same time as I am, that someone else *may*

be present. This potential or ambivalent shadow presence is another possible source of

aura as it is an ambiguous, limited and uncertain presence.

4.4 *Diarna* and the *Digital Restoration of Esther's Tomb* by Digital Heritage Mapping and Yassi Gabbay, 2011

4.4.1 Introduction

Diarna (which translates as "our homes" in Judeo-Arabic) is an initiative of the

Boston non-profit organization Digital Heritage Mapping dedicated to digitally restoring

Jewish heritage sites across Iran and the Arab world that have fallen into disrepair. Their

work amounts to digitally reassembling and documenting these heritage sites by

"[combining] traditional archaeological and historical scholarship with digital

technologies." The *Digital Restoration of Esther's Tomb* is the most complex *Diarna* work

to date. It is a shrine/synagogue in Hamadan, Iran, where the heroes of the Jewish

holiday of Purim, Esther and Mordechai, are said to be buried:

> According to Persian-Jewish lore, the biblical queen Esther and her uncle Mordechai—celebrated in the Book of Esther for having prevented a mass slaughter of their fellow Jews during the time of the Achaemenid emperor Xerxes I—are buried at the shrine. But construction of the site most likely post-dated by a few centuries the events depicted in the Book of Esther. A different Persian-Jewish queen—Shushan Dokht, wife to the 4th-century Sassanid emperor Yazdegerd I—may actually be buried there (Ahmari, 2012, ¶5).

The shrine was a primarily Jewish pilgrimage site located in Hamadan, Iran that

fell into disrepair over the centuries. In 1972, the shrine was physically restored and

renovated with the government's blessing: Elias "Yassi" Gabbay was commissioned to

repair and revitalize the site as the Jewish contribution to the Shah's "extravagant

celebration of 2,500 years of Persian monarchy" (Ahmari, 2012, ¶9). The restoration

included "[adding] a subterranean synagogue while retaining much of the original shrine

structure and surrounding cemetery" (Ahmari). After the Islamic revolution in 1979, the

shrine again was neglected as an estimated 60,000 Iranian Jews left the country,

including Gabbay (Ahmari, 2012, ¶11). Street-level indicators of the site's Jewish

character were removed: the shrine's fence was taken down due to its six-pointed star

motif—despite it being in part "an homage to an Isfahani mosque ceramic" (Digital

Heritage Mapping and Gabbay, 2012).

When the *Diarna* initiative contacted Gabbay, now residing in Beverly Hills, C.A.,

to try to digitally restore the site to its 1972 status, they learned that the architect's

original plans for the site had been lost prior to his emigration. Gabbay managed to

reconstruct them from memory, although he recognizes that "[j]ust as people often

question the origins of the Esther shrine, so I have to question the accuracy of my

memory" (as cited in Ahmari, 2012, ¶13).

4.4.2   Description

The shrine was computer modelled in 3-D using Google Sketch-up (see Figure 6)

with the assistance of the *Diarna* project's modelling assistant, Erin Okabe-Jawdat, and

launched on Google Earth in March of 2011 (Digital Heritage Mapping and Gabbay,

2012).
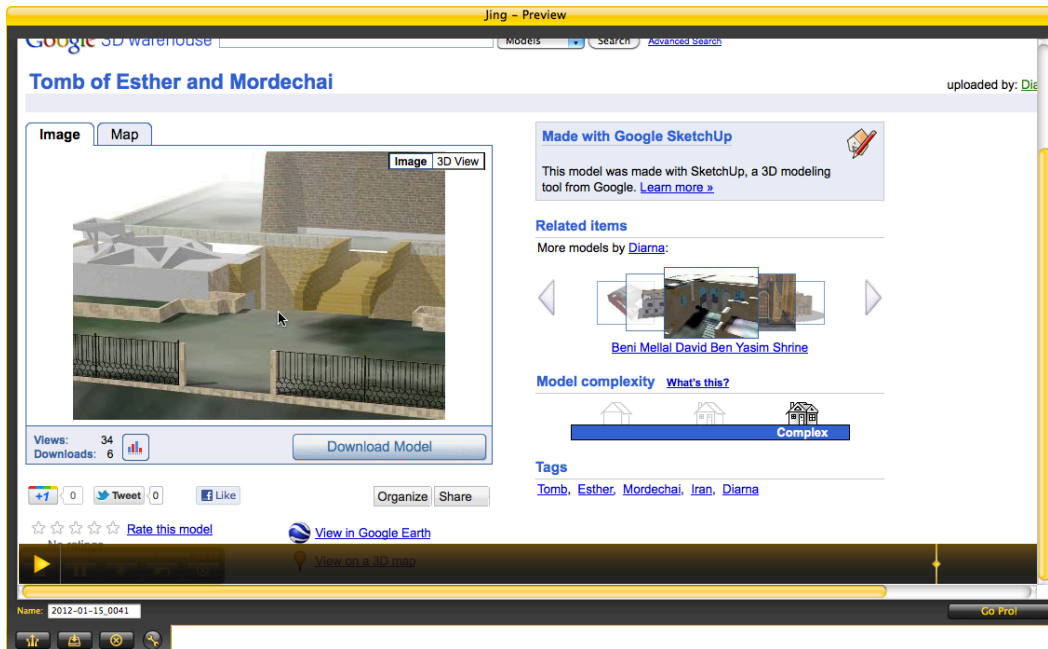
Figure 6.   **Screen capture of researcher's desktop during recorded navigation of the 3-D Google Sketchup model of the Tomb of Esther and Mordechai. From Google Trimble 3-D Warehouse, uploaded by "Diarna," http://sketchup.google.com/3dwarehouse/details? mid=14c0552b294d5a24fdcaab6788b75154&prevstart=0. Copyright 2011 by Google Trimble 3-D Warehouse. Permission to reproduce accorded by Google Trimble 3-D Warehouse Terms of Service, http://www.sketchup.com/intl/en/3dwh/tos.html.**

To see this particular digital restoration the viewer is required to download and install a special Google Earth plug-in which allows the viewer to see the heritage site on a map (almost) identical to what you see on Google Earth. (To clarify, the standard Google Earth has not been altered to include these sites, but the process by which you download a plug-in is the same, as is the navigation. There are many such plug-ins; presumably anyone who can master Google Sketch-up can create an alternate Google universe for themselves.)

While a new website *will* be launched soon at www.diarna.org, it must be noted that the current site provides a less than smooth navigation experience. Besides the

slew of design sins which make the site both visually and functionally unpleasant (including use of gradients, the overused typeface Papyrus, lack of alignment, use of frames, poor justification of type, inconsistent menus/access to links, and clashing colours), once I finally found the link, downloaded the plug-in and installed it, suffered through numerous browser crashes in Safari, was rescued by Firefox, and eventually arrived to explore the shrine, the tiny frame I was given to navigate the shrine was insufficient (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. **Screen capture of researcher's desktop during recorded navigation of Geoeye application embedded in the *Diarna* project website. From *Diarna* project, by Geoeye, Google Trimble 3-D Warehouse, Digital Heritage Mapping and Yassi Gabbay, http://www.diarna.org/ wordpress/Diarnawp/wordpress/uncategorized/march-2011-–-diarna-releases-3-d-model-of-esthers-tomb/. Copyright 2012 by Geoeye. Reproduced with permission.**

I kept going through walls and completely losing my sense of direction. This attempted pilgrimage through the tunnels of cyberspace was an exercise in frustration.

4.4.3 Reflection

I am troubled by my realization (which occurred when I downloaded and viewed the *alternate* reality of the Google Earth plug-in required to view the project), that I had been unconsciously accepting the standard version of Google Earth as a true representation of the globe. Even though it does not function in real-time—Google Earth is updated bimonthly, a few patches of the globe at a time, and information can be up to 3 years old (Sherwin, 2010)—in my mind I had somehow come to see the map as synonymous with the existing world.

Maybe that is why seeing an alternate world evokes a strange uneasiness in me. Why would the standard plug-in be sacred to me, while this plug-in feels like a counterfeit copy rather than an added layer of meaning? What is the symbolic nature of a digitally altered landscape? In the standard Google Earth many of the buildings in major cities are computer modelled in 3-D. Why is this model any less real than the commercial skyscrapers that have achieved official Google Earth status? The only difference in method is that you can actually see inside the rooms of this 3-D model. Like *Diarna*'s shrine, real skyscrapers are also not as physically perfect as their digital counterparts. The shrine is still physically present in Iran, just not in this pristine computer generated state. It is the same as any other building, so how is this an altered or less "authentic" reality—except that Google has not authenticated it.

I suppose Google Earth (the authentic or official version) is like an original artwork then, with its own place in space and time. Even though it changes and can be viewed anywhere, anytime, it has the aura of uniqueness. We know it is unique because

it can have a doppelganger; the copy in this case fails to assert the authority of the original. But again, if the world according to Google is constantly being created, edited, updated and improved, should Google be considered authentic at all?

In an article for *Tablet Magazine* describing the project, Iranian-American journalist Sohrab Ahmari laments how endangered shrines such as Esther's tomb must survive by hiring "a team of programmers to restore them in Google's soulless, if infinite, memory." He prefers the scars and damaged reality of the physical sites to their immaculate digital reproductions. Might the soulless and infinite externalized collective memory of Google be quintessentially non-auratic, if aura is an absence/presence, dwelling in the imperfections, absences and negative spaces? Or could Google's non-auratic nature be a result of it being used regularly as a mere tool as opposed to being considered art? Does constant business and entertainment related use—taking Google or similar technology for granted—remove the aura? Could the aura potentially be restored through considered and conscious use or participation?

Incidentally, for this particular website, the idea of Google having a perfect memory contrasts sharply with my frustrating experience trying to explore the site, an experience I have the displeasure of revisiting as I watch and listen to my recording. So my question to Ahmari is: Google's memory may be infinite and perfect but if the Google Earth plug-in navigation I have access to is poor and anything but immersive, can these technical difficulties count as scars and imperfections of experience, seeing as they take away from potential immersion within the virtual? In short, the impediments are so extensive that the immersion is almost lost completely. The only possible

immersion would have been the belief in Google Earth's realism, and with that now

dissipating (since learning that I too have the power to create an alternate Google

Earth), the building just seems super-imposed on a static map. It has been demystified

and has little auratic value left for me. I cannot even begin to be immersed, so there can

be no gap or discontinuity of immersion that might call aura into play. There *is* a kind of

distance at play here. But it is a documentary distance à la Atget.[30]

The need for better navigation adds the ingredient of imperfection. This type of

imperfection (frustrating disfunctionality) may not seem particularly auratic, but it *has*

put distance between me and the shrine, as I am unable to properly investigate the

building and grounds. Immersion is again limited as was the case with Google street

view in *AnthroPosts*. The closest I can come to the shrine is to learn its secrets of

construction. I know what application it was produced with and I observed a version of

the model without its Google Earth surroundings, emphasizing its ability to be edited

and altered. But I cannot and will not ever truly reach or possess this place or even its

representation.

Even the kind of time I experience in this work is difficult to capture and remains

uncertain. There are at least two aspects to consider: the kind of time Google Earth

embodies and the kind of time evoked by having the historical memory of the shrine

imposed on today's (the present) Google. Google Earth time is really a "delayed time" or

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[30] In "Little History of Photography" Walter Benjamin (1931/1999a) describes photographer Atget's work as scenes devoid of life, which are meant to destroy romantic notions of a city. Emptiness can at times be auratic, but this emptiness is said to be like a hotel between visitors, disinterested documentation (vol. 2, p. 515).

"catch-up time," since it is essentially a staggered update. If I add the element of the shrine's time, "alternate (delayed) present" best expresses how time feels to me in this piece. Ultimately, although Google Earth's "present" is really a "staggered refresh," I still want to think of it as happening *now*, though not with as much immediacy as real-time. Like *We Feel Fine* which updates its data every ten minutes, the sensation and idea of real-time operates, even with the delay.

With so many temporal possibilities, to identify a single type of time operating here is not a feasible option. And it is not simply the type of time that remains undefined for me in this work. Overall, my notes consist primarily of questions. There was a great deal of uncertainty in my experience of and reflections on this artwork. While uncertainty and aura go hand in hand, in this case there was perhaps too much uncertainty for an auratic experience to occur. I wasn't sensing it. This work did not sit on the cusp of presence for me, at least in this encounter: I could not get close enough to the limit, to immersion, to touching, or to clarity/certain meaning to create significant auratic tension.

4.5   *The Great Book Robbery* by Benny Brunner, Arjan El Fassad, and Karina Goulordava, 2010

4.5.1   Introduction

The Great Book Robbery is a digital restoration initiative similar to the *Diarna* project, but with significant deviation in terms of its visual expression. This work attempts to document, translate, bring to light, and if possible return 6000 of the

estimated 70,000 books taken during the Nakba[31] on behalf of the newly formed Israeli

state from Palestinian homes and libraries between May 1948 and February 1949:

> […] thirty thousand books, manuscripts, and newspapers were seized
> from the abandoned Palestinian homes of west Jerusalem while forty
> thousand books were taken from urban cities such as Jaffa, Haifa, and
> Nazareth" (Aburawa, 2011, ¶6).

The majority of the 70,000 books were "absorbed into National Library of Israel's

general collection," making them difficult to trace (Goulordava, 2012 ¶3). The 6000

books that the project has committed to restoring are those which were "categorized as

foreign and placed in the Eastern Studies Department of the National Library" (¶3).

These books are still technically the property of the Custodian of Absentee Property,

and as such are labelled AP. They can therefore be identified, unlike the others (¶3).

Written documentation which mentions the collection of Palestinian books was

discovered by PhD student Gish Amit only recently (Brunner, El Fassad and Goulordava,

2010, "Background" ¶3), which explains in part why this is a largely unexplored aspect of

the Nakba. Brunner, a Dutch-Israeli filmmaker involved with the project, suggests that it

is also overlooked because the destruction of the villages was the primary focus of the

Palestinian authorities, becoming *the* "symbol of the Palestinian existence":

> […] they highlighted traditional village customs such as the way people
> dressed in the village, the embroidery, the music they listened to, and
> their culture, which is very different from what was going in Haifa, Jaffa,
> Acre, and Jerusalem. What these events do prove is that in Jerusalem you
> had big private libraries where people collected many, many valuable
> books. There was clearly a very lively cultural scene in Palestine. That was
> lost in 1948 (Brunner as cited in Aburawa, 2011, ¶20).

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[31] The Nakba (Arabic) which translates as catastrophe in English refers to the fleeing and expulsion of
Palestinians from their homes and villages following the creation of the state of Israel in May 1948.

Another factor likely contributing to the lack of attention this theft has received is that those who "collected" the books didn't think they did anything wrong. Brunner explains: "Documents from 1949 and 1950 refer to the collection of the books as an operation of cultural—how should I put it?—they think that they saved these books from cultural destruction" (¶13). Brunner believes that while the initial drive may have had decent intentions, the collectors in effect looted Palestinian culture: "the Palestinian books became "our" books, "our" cultural heritage, and the National Library is a very important Israeli cultural institution now"(¶17).

The Great Book Robbery project involves compiling a digital library, seeking to rectify or at least begin to repair the damage inflicted by this loss, this appropriation of cultural heritage. The book restoration and archival process and creation of this digital library is an active process involving making records of books, translating them, looking for owners' names, booksellers stamps, marginalia and attempting to return to Palestinian hands what is possible to return. The website for the digital library is designed by Buropony and Lifesized design studios. The full extent of what information and content will be accessible online is unclear from the site, although the project team is actively recruiting Arabic translators, so translated content may eventually be uploaded. A documentary film of this project and its process, directed by Brunner, a Dutch-Israeli filmmaker, is also in production.

4.5.2   Description

Upon reviewing this recording right after the one of *Diarna*, I notice immediately

how the digital library site appears as the visual antithesis of the *Diarna* website. It has a

lot of white, chunky dark grey or bright blue slab-serif[32] headlines, with a pop of orange

on the left-hand side to highlight the contribution tab (see Figure 8).
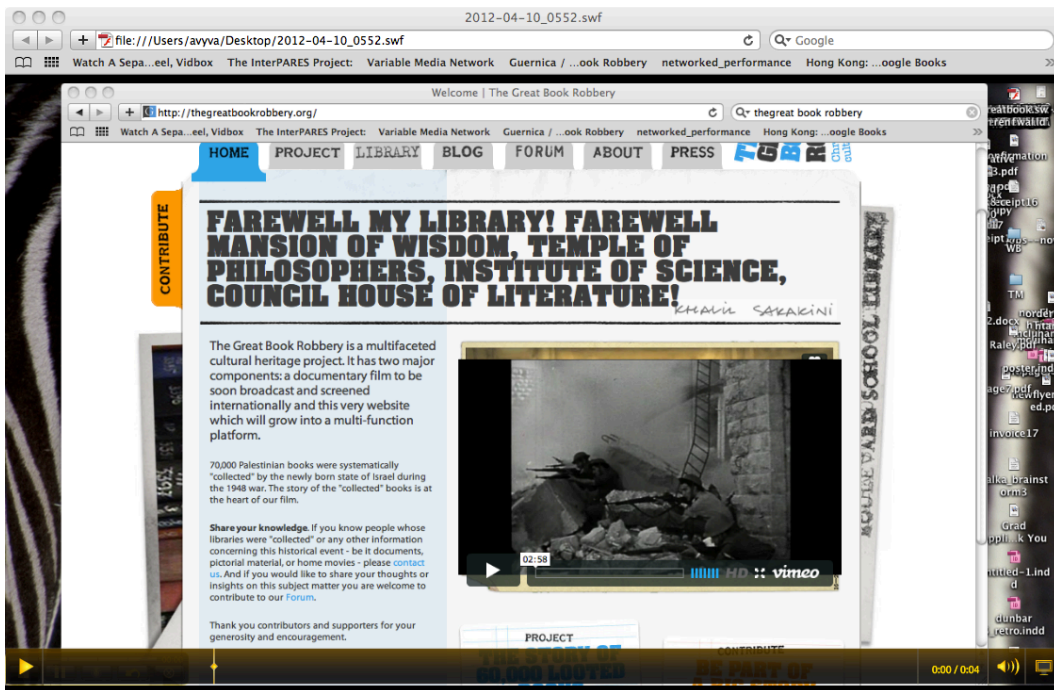
Figure 8.   **Screen capture of researcher's desktop during recorded navigation of *The Great Book Robbery*. From *The Great Book Robbery*, by Benny Brunner, Arjan El Fassad, and Karina Goulordava, http://thegreatbookrobbery.org/. Copyright 2010 by Lifesized, Iskra and Buropony. Reproduced with permission.**

The design strategy involves making the site look and operate like a folder with

dividers and tabs, scraps of paper, paper-clipped notes, "worn" rounded corners. It uses

off-white grey, pale yellow and blue accents of colour for the attractively arranged notes

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[32] This is a category of typeface, also referred to as Egyptian. Slab-serifs evolved from the Modern style—more geometric, and less based on calligraphic letterforms—of type design. The serifs (specific decorative elements which can improve readability) in a slab-serif typeface are thick, bold and rectangular. See "Farewell my library!" in the above image.

or loose papers. There appears to be an overall attempt to create a hand-crafted look (indeed in the bottom left corner it says in a stamp-like grunge typeface that it is "handcrafted" by the designers) but the design clearly belongs to the digitally-crafted imitated scrapbook category. It does not have the same aura of *AnthroPosts*' close up textural scans of post-it notes bearing hand-drawn marks and creases, even though it echoes the language of collage and scrapbooking. There are a few photographs of actual books on the site, but I cannot get close enough to the books in those few small photos, even when I pause the recording, to experience their pages in a materially satisfying way. Overall, the site is clean, its design upbeat, colourful and devoid of overt visual emotion-sparking cues, despite its subject matter.

4.5.3   Reflection

There is an interesting juxtaposition between the site's message and its visual language. The site looks fun and young, but combined with the tone and word choice, it creates a message imbued with sarcasm. For example, the cheerful-looking top right corner of the menu sports diagonally and vertically-oriented chunky sky blue and bold grey type that reads "The Great Book Robbery: Chronicles of a Cultural Destruction." Perhaps ambiguity or inconsistency between visual and linguistic meaning can be considered a potential source of aura.

Unlike *Diarna*, there seems to me to be excitement in this work. These books are "living" physical objects: their lives are in progress, and have been awakened from their dusty collection state. The website is the only stable/definitive visual representation of

the project I have to use as an art object, and it is less an object than a trace or index of

the invisible auratic connection between the "located" books and the "dislocated"

diaspora—a folder for collecting the pieces, testaments and memories that fill that

space between the two. The site's active in-process status gives the work a

moving/directional sense of time, with a forward trajectory (as long as it doesn't get

dragged down into stagnant Kafkaesque madness, an entirely possible disintegration

considering the bureaucratic hurdles that these activists could face).

Upon reflection, and an additional visit to the site, I am beginning to see the

benefit to the contradictory lightness of the visuals and the resulting chipper sarcastic

tone: it saves the work from trite nostalgic aura. There are still auratic features, but they

are not excessive: there is still an expansive feeling of distance between the viewer and

the books—which could increase rather than diminish through the act of digital library

restoration. Bringing the books ever so slightly closer would I think emphasize the aura

of separation and longing, bringing it closer to that cusp of presence.

4.6   *Light and Dark Networks* by Ursula Endlicher, 2011

4.6.1   Introduction

The Whitney Museum of American Art is presently curating a series of online art

projects structured around the daily sunrise and sunset transitions. Each "installation" is

visible for ten to thirty seconds on the Whitney's (2012) website at dawn and at dusk

every day over a period several months, before being replaced by a new installation

("Sunrise and Sunset" ¶1). Twice daily, based on Eastern Standard Time (the time zone

of New York City) a different performance takes place, interrupting the usually static website. It lasts briefly and no trace remains aside from the change in the website's background colour, which transitions from white to black or from black to white during each performance, depending on whether it is marking the sunrise or sunset. The current installation, *Light and Dark Networks* by Ursula Endlicher, began on December 15, 2011 (¶2). No end date is listed as of yet. Past installations are documented with an image and a blurb, but will not be performed again "live."

Endlicher uses physical/environmental networks as inspiration for her creation, exploring the intersections between data networks and living organisms as she navigates within/between artificial and natural parameters:

> Visitors encounter depictions of a spider's web at sunrise and a mushroom's mycelium—a network of hidden branching filaments that absorb nutrients for the mushrooms to grow—at sunset. Virtual creatures, a spider and mushrooms impersonated by the artist, are activated to perform different "data dances" according to the changes in their habitat, which is defined by current New York City weather and carbon dioxide (CO_2) levels. The spider web is blown into different locations on the Museum's website according to wind direction and speed in New York City, and the number of mosquitos buzzing around the web is determined by the levels of CO_2 in the atmosphere (¶2).

4.6.2 Description

In order to observe this artwork, one must plan. One must calculate the time difference, set an alarm in preparation, and wait.

15 January 2012: I go to bed between one and one thirty in the morning. I set my alarm for 04:15 (the sunrise is scheduled for just after 07:15 New York time). I am anticipating/dreading waking up three hours later. I wake up several times during those

three hours, and my sleep is restless. I dream about my project. I don't remember the

exact nature of my dream, but I know that at some stage of the dream I see my thesis as

a data-point on a graph/timeline. The data-point is shown as an outline of a circle,

rather than being solid. But this graph/timeline is charting the progress I am making

with these artworks that I am *right here* exploring. And my thesis is one of those

projects, with the data-point outline being gradually filled in (*as well* as being the entire

contents of the graph). Yes, *this* is how I experienced the passing of time while waiting

for the sunrise of a different time zone.

Alarm at 04:15. I jump up and turn on my laptop to wait for the performance to

begin at 04:18. I start recording although I still have a few minutes to spare (I set my

alarm early so I wouldn't miss anything, and so I wouldn't be rushing). When the piece

actually "happens" (see Figure 9) for what feels like just a few seconds, it is somewhat

anti-climactic.
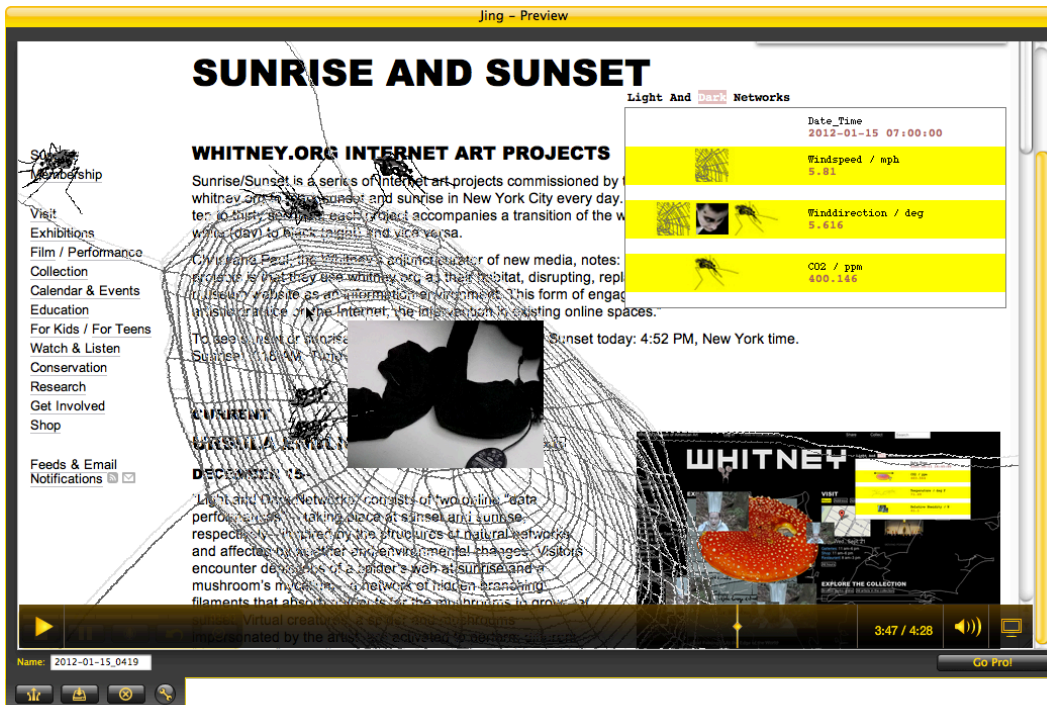
Figure 9. **Screen capture of researcher's desktop during recorded navigation of *Light and Dark Networks*. From *Light and Dark Networks*, by U. Endlicher, http://whitney.org/sunset. Copyright 2011 by Whitney Museum and Ursula Endlicher. Reproduced with Permission.**

At 4:18 the screen turns white (no complex transition at all—just a non-smooth jumpy gradational change from black to white, and then a moment/pause later a black spider web (illustrated sketchy lines) appears on the screen. Again nothing gradual—it shows up suddenly, as do some rather plump spiders (matching the black and white illustrative style of the spider web), jolting about from one location to another without any subtlety of movement. A rectangle frame showing filmed footage also appears and after two capital "N"s cross the frame for whatever reason, a person (presumably the artist) comes into view. She appears to be doing the crab (or in this case spider) walk. But only intermittently. She is not entirely in the frame of the live-action video, which despite occupying only about a fortieth of my screen real estate, occupies most of my

attention (probably since its contents are obscure and not entirely discernible or understandable). Then, as quickly as the sudden illustration appeared, it disappears.

4.6.3   Reflection

An anticlimactic experience? Certainly. Except that I recorded the performance. Does the record make it less fleeting? I know the recording isn't live and has little meaning now, but simply being able to see the graphic performance again for the purpose of analysis makes the live performance less auratic to watch, because it can be revisited in an external memory and isn't subject to the gaps and imperfections of my own memory.

I wonder if anyone was watching the performance at the same time as me? Would having that information available (either knowing I am the only one, or wondering about who the others are) elicit stronger or weaker auratic potential than the curiosity and mystery of not knowing anything at all?

According to the Whitney's description and explanation of the work, the *Sunrise/sunset* exhibition is supposed to help us experience consciously the flow of time, but this project made me experience only a linear progression of evenly spaced bits of time: digital time. For example, the webpage turned from black (night) to white (day) when the digital clock on the page struck the exact second the sunrise was scheduled for—and not a moment earlier. There was no slow gradual change. In this work, time is fleeting (and in that way ephemeral, unconquerable), but also precise. I set my alarm so as not to miss the event; it was a date I had to meet and for which I did not want to be

late. I planned to have five minutes before it started to collect my thoughts, so I wouldn't be rushing and miss it. I inconvenienced myself, disrupted my sleep in order to watch this digital sunrise in another time zone, and didn't even watch the actual sunrise in my own time zone. I didn't think of the possibility of watching the real Vancouver sunrise until the next day. The work did mark a sunrise that reminded me of the natural rhythms of life, but the work's interpretive rendering of this time was overwhelmingly digital—involving precise mechanistic divisions of time and the sudden switching of numerical figures without any of the cyclical references found in a traditional analog timepiece.

And while the artwork was in real-time, the experience (which is also part of the artwork) was ahead of real-time: future-oriented. The preparation and lead-up was more important than the event itself. Does materiality decrease as the time becomes more future oriented? This would be consistent with my experience of *We Feel Fine* and *AnthroPosts*. On the other hand, my description of the work emphasizes my phenomenological experience, which *is material*—just not visible or lingering. Perhaps this work shows the extreme other side of the archival spectrum: the opposite of owning a permanent collection that is immaculately preserved. This is a work that does not hold on at all to its performance. It verges on pure art *event* without an art object. Archiving or taping the performance—adding it to a personalized "collection" of favourite artworks on the Whitney Museum's website—cannot capture the artwork; at most it can trigger the memory of the live moment.

4.7   Next

In this chapter I explored and reflected on my experiences with six new media artworks. In the next chapter, I consider the entire study as a whole. I first discuss certain challenges I faced over the course of this study. I then synthesize observations made throughout this past chapter, discussing their implications in terms of understanding auratic presence in new media art.

5: REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Facing the Conceptual Challenge of Aura

At the outset of this study my intention was to consider the concept of aura beyond thinking of it as a feature of the unique original work of art. I intended to examine it instead as an aesthetic concept. My goal was to develop an aesthetics of aura—to identify the visual, auditory, and other sensory characteristics that correspond to Benjamin's conceptualization of aura—then modify and apply these identifications to new media art forms, taking into account differentiating characteristics of new media.

I initially used the work of Benjamin—as well as theorists whose interpretations of his work resonated with and further enriched my own perceptions of his work—as foundational sources for reflections of what constitutes auratic aesthetics. I then theorized how this would translate into a new media environment. Finally, I tested my theoretical formulations in practice, using autophenomenographical methods as well as methods inspired by Benjamin's own research, to analyse six online artworks, experiencing and describing embodied auratic encounters.

From the beginning I faced significant challenges, most notably with regard to defining the concept of aura. The terminology I originally adopted was inconsistent and lacked precision. Aura is a concept that even Benjamin does not explain clearly (which according to Hennion and Latour, 2003, is the very reason behind such extensive interpretation of his work).

Aura *is* mystique and disclarity. How could I even fathom pinning it down

definitively without running counter to the elusive spirit of the concept? Furthermore,

as someone with a background in design theory and practice, I am inclined to make the

form and method of my work whether artistic or academic, articulate, *be* the ideas

rather than acting solely as (academic discipline-standard) packaging for my content.

This is in part why Benjamin was so captivating and inspiring to me. His work not only

demonstrates its own aesthetic sensibility (which I will discuss momentarily), but he

clearly believes that form and content, that aesthetics and ideology, are intrinsically

linked. In the "Work of Art" essay he counters fascism's aestheticization of politics with

a call to politicize art. This does not mean making political art, rather it implies an

imperative to reveal and acknowledge the ideological meanings and underpinnings of

aesthetic expression[33] (Buck-Morss, 1992).

The aesthetic Benjamin espouses through his modes of writing is interestingly

akin to fundamental features of aura. Benjamin's body of work is made up of fragments,

pieces of writing, many of which remained unfinished or went unpublished in

Benjamin's lifetime. Adorno recalls how Benjamin compared his writing to weaving,

composing an image from interconnected strands that overtime come together to form

a constellation of interconnected concepts, but never definitively. Benjamin's body of

work is described by Adorno (1955/1991) as "finding itself by losing itself in multiplicity"

(p. 242): ideas begin to crystallize, but not completely as the collection of writings

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[33] The German National Socialists very purposely used aesthetics for propaganda purposes, exemplified by
Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, the official Degenerate versus Proper German Art exhibition, as well
as the Nazis' embrace of classical architecture. Interrogating the ideological underpinnings of these
sorts of aesthetics is a necessity for Benjamin.

remains a living text, subject to interpretive interaction with its readers, commentators and critics. The fragmented, unfinished and ambiguous nature of Benjamin's work, which encourages critical engagement and makes the reader long to understand and make it whole, is consistent with my theorization of auratic aesthetics based on Strathausen (2001), Kuppers (2001) and Sherratt (1998).[34] Like Benjamin's writing fragments—which together form a constellation of ideas that never becomes completely clear but is continuously crystallizing—aura is partially present, never completely fulfilled, never completely understood or made whole, but forever existing, being worked upon and engaged with nonetheless.

How could *I* write about Benjamin and aura with any measure of implied certainty when his work is defined by ambiguity? Friedlander (2012) requires an entire book—three hundred pages—to put together a comprehensive theory unifying Benjamin's notoriously ambiguous writings into a philosophical project, a way of writing and of life. Based on Benjamin's essay on translation, Friedlander implies that Benjamin's "truth" is based on difference; he writes that the essence of a language can only be determined by the unsuccessful attempts to translate that language into another (Friedlander, 2012, p. 24). The gaps in translation between languages are where the essence of the language in translation can be found. Benjamin's philosophical outlook can only be "unified" through its fragmentation and disunity.

Thus, initially, the idea of using Benjamin's ideas and extending them without remaining consistent with the ideological positioning of his methods felt like the

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[34] See Section 1.5

equivalent of using quantitative methods for ethnographic research. I felt initially that

this would undermine everything. Eventually though I realized that Benjamin's ideas on

aura are multi-dimensional. Different aspects of aura were relevant to Benjamin at

different points in time. Aura could have multiple registers of meaning. The "Work of

Art" essay and "Little History of Photography" are not conflicting accounts of aura. It is

not a matter of either/or. And it is not imprecise to then describe these various registers

and explain how this polysemy makes aura into a richer concept, each meaning adding

yet another layer of nuance and complexity. These registers *together* underlie the

association between aura and longing that emerges in my analysis.

5.2   Findings: Synthesis of Key Commonalities and Differences Between Artworks

My objectives and considerations for this project involved researching how aura

can be identified in new media art, specifically in database and archival art. Inspired by

Manovich (2001), who sees the database as embodying the essential core of new media,

my study focuses on artworks that incorporate a database or archival dimension. I

selected a range of works for analysis; some were more archive oriented, and "stable,"

mimicking or borrowing from the physical qualities of the material world. Others were

more ephemeral or fleeting, more oriented towards the virtual. My study considers the

significance of "virtually-oriented" versus "materially-oriented" aesthetics on the way in

which aura is encountered and experienced within these works (similar to how, in "Little

History of Photography," Benjamin discusses different degrees of mystique and

accessibility and reveals the implications of these varying degrees of mystique and accessibility on the presence of aura within the field and history of photography).

In the previous chapter I documented specific experiences of aura in six artworks. In the next sections (5.2.1–5.2.3), I describe my overall observations related to the differences between the six works in terms of temporal and material attributes. I examine how these different attributes relate to how aura becomes present in varying ways across the temporal and material spectrums of new media art.

5.2.1   Relationships between the Temporal and the Material

Over the course of my various encounters, I generally found that the more future-oriented a work was, the more dematerialized, ephemeral and ungraspable it seemed; correspondingly, the more historically or past-oriented the work, the stronger its material orientation was. For example, on the more historical, stable and material side of this imagined spectrum is the *Diarna* initiative: a digital archival project documenting and preserving the memory of historical religious shrines (in an alternate Google Earth reality). At the other end (the future-oriented, fleeting and dematerialized end) is *Light and Dark Networks*, a real-time performance under thirty seconds long, non-repeatable in its exact form, and even requiring anticipatory preparation—future thinking. *Diarna* tries to digitally recreate and imitate *physical* reality, to conserve, collect and recollect.

The aesthetics of the past are more material, stable, grounded, and those of the future (and present) are more virtual and fleeting. Past-oriented works are tasked with

documenting originally non-virtual items and transferring them to a digital platform. These works embody more of the traditional qualities of the auratic object such as permanence, timelessness, and history. The present and future-oriented works on the other hand tend to be specific to new media. They are more inclined towards visualizing, changing and creating something entirely new using the unique possibilities offered by the medium instead of using it to keep and record works that came before.

The categories of space (tending towards materiality, tangibility and permanence) and time (tending towards the ephemeral, fleeting and dematerialized) are naturally interrelated. Our aesthetic perceptions of space and time are based on phenomenological human experience and modes of existence in the world where space and time are inseparable. Communication and Literature scholars have theorized spatial and temporal characteristics in a complementary relationship (that is in opposition to each other). Examples of this include Innis's space/time bias, where the printed word allows empires to grow and cultures to become spatially rather than temporally oriented (Mullen, 2009), as well as McLuhan's anticipation that the electric age of television and beyond would return us to orality and the simultaneity of a (mythologized) pre-literate acoustic space (Rogaway, 1994, p. 6). In the literary terminology of Bakhtin, the spatial and temporal spheres are even combined in the singular literary expression *chronotope* to describe a particular sense of time and place such as "Adventure time" in the Greek novel (Dentith, 2001). In the context of Literary and Communication academic traditions of conceiving space and time as interrelated, it

is anything but odd therefore that the perceived materiality of a work would influence how time is also perceived in that work.

5.2.2   The Aura of Fragments and the Aura of Concepts

The extent of a work's materiality (or lack thereof) additionally plays a role in determining whether each "item" within the larger archives and databases—whether it be a feeling, Post-it, book, shrine or weather datum—can stand alone as an individual art object or whether it requires its collection to contextualize it and produce artistic meaning. Take *Diarna* for example, an archival initiative, recording *multiple* landmarks for posterity. This shrine *alone* has rich possibilities for exploration: I ignored the other virtual restorations within the *Diarna* archival initiative and chose to concentrate solely on *Esther's Tomb* at Hamadan. *Esther's Tomb* is more materially and spatially-oriented, aesthetically "weightier," and is based on an actual physical structure, making it an interesting environment to explore in its own right.

On the other hand, completely abstracted data that lack any sense of tangibility and physical "weight" require a unifying concept to give them significance and meaning as a combined entity. The fleeting and future-oriented *Light and Dark Networks* data-mines bits of weather data that are already broken down, numerically abstracted and simplified; they can only be artistically meaningful in the context of the unified artwork. *Light and Dark Networks* is built by abstracting real-world phenomena (weather) into pure data that is then algorithmically programmed to create and recreate the artwork every twelve hours based on newly collected data. The data within the collection are in

this case unable to stand alone as works of art. They are mere ingredients for the larger art project.

The other artworks fall partway along this continuum. *Anthroposts* for example relies on the entire concept of the collection for meaning, but its handwritten Post-it notes can also be individually beautiful and captivating with their material creases, smudges, wear and tear. While the larger project of collecting the Post-its is more interesting than a single note, each Post-it also carries with it its own individual background story—its own form of meaning.

The relative materiality and "physical" links discussed earlier (reminders of the real-world) contribute to pieces in the collections/datasets being more or less able to make meaning standing alone. In *Light and Dark Networks*, when I was drawn primarily to the larger concept of the collection without much interest in individual components, it was because the artist takes a numerical abstraction of a physical event like wind or rain, and then transforms this data into a new representation that serves the project as a single "whole" art event. *Light and Dark Networks* has a conceptual dimension because of its process of creative transformation by way of abstraction (compared to a project like *Diarna* which focuses on preserving shrines and landmarks as closely as possible to their original material forms). Conceptual works like *Light and Dark Networks* are *made* for new media rather than existing in the non-virtual world and then being transferred over for the sake of preservation.

5.2.3 Summary

Different patterns emerged during my analysis of the artworks' temporal and material characteristics; works where the objects were more reliant on concept for meaning tended to require fewer material markers or real-world reminders. This may be because this type of artwork is a conceptual unit, not merely a collection of data that exceeds the sum of its individual components. The perceived aura in such a work relies significantly on the *idea* of the project—on processes of abstraction, dematerialization and recreation (instead of preservation). Aspects of the "real-world" are abstracted into the virtual realm and woven together like Benjamin's writings, to create something new, something continuously developing, changing, fleeting. On the other hand, those works with stronger (but still limited) material remnants can create aura simply with the partial presence of their materiality—visually pictured or physically and mentally experienced creases and traces.

5.3   Aura by Design

The above discussion regarding how auratic partial presence "functions," brings to the forefront one of the problems I have experienced throughout this project: the sneaking suspicion that despite each encounter with one of the artworks being unique, there are ways to manipulate the presence of aura and bring it into existence—to instrumentalize it. Perhaps this is the designer rather than the critical theorist within me speaking, but as someone with design training I have learned how to lead the eye around a page or screen. I know how different colours tend to affect the viewer. I know what we are generally drawn to and what fades into the background. I cannot help but

also view these works in terms of effects they seem to commonly share. I cannot help but think about how I could, even if the intention is contrary to the concept of aura itself, create a work that purposely gives the viewer a sense of aura. My intention would be that of the photographers using soft focus filters to reproduce the effects of aura in "Little History of Photography." But for the viewer, if the impact is the same and the artist's intention is unknown, in the end would intention even matter? I have a lot of trouble with these thoughts as I of course believe them to be contrary to the spirit of aura. On the other hand it seems in light of my research findings to be a legitimate ethical concern.

5.4   Aura by Happenstance

Even if I were able to aesthetically channel aura to some extent—even if I were to conclude that there may be certain structural attributes that can potentially create an auratic effect—design decisions and aesthetic choices of the works *should not be* what characterizes their aura when all is said and done. In "Little History of Photography" photographs taken with soft focus filters only imitated aura. They did not restore the aura. All the works I analysed were designed to a certain extent. But *only* to a certain extent. At some point the artist relinquishes her control over the artwork. Nothing is entirely as planned and oversights happen.

My most auratic moments with the six new media artworks should therefore not be defined by the auratic indicators I mention above, but rather by the anomalies.

Ambiguous and accidental journeys are inevitable. There will always be 404 Page Not Founds.[35]

Additionally, the performative non-repeatable nature of these "digital images" (Hanson, 2004) means that navigation can be designed, but in the vein of De Certeau's (1984) street-level walker, will not necessarily be followed. As a designer, if I were to purposely take this research as a formula for creating aura, it *could* work to a certain extent. But in the end, the most auratic moments will always be those that require an element of chance and are unique to each individual encounter with the work. When I visited my "research sites" it was fairly clear to me what was intended and what was inconsistent, accidental, and out of the creator's control. The aura is in the slip-ups, the scars, flaws, and fragments—the rare and unique.

This brings me full circle, back to the aura of the unique original work of art.

Except that in a new media art context, I seem to be positioning aura not as the mesmerizing immersion of an original work of art, but as an interruption of that immersion.

5.5 Concluding Remarks

Once upon a time, the techno-rationality of modernity was needed to destabilize the pre-modern aura's hold over the viewer. Shades of such aura of course still exist today in museums, art galleries, religious institutions and more, but the prevailing order in a modern secular capitalist society is no longer that of the aura of religious tradition

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[35] See Section 4.1.2

or even that of the unique original work of art. Benjamin describes this shift both in the "Work of Art" essay (1936/2002a) and in the "Storyteller" (1936/2002d). He describes the collapse of tight-knit rural communities and timeless traditions and the rise of the city, the individual, and the zeitgeist. The older world gives way to the era of the copy, the mass-produced commodity, the novel for solitary individual reading, and the immediacy of news and information. The emphasis turns overwhelmingly to the growth and progress of modernity. As aura continues to wither and goals of technological progress and development prevail, aura represents the exception to the rule rather than the rule. When the barrage of images and information is daily, hourly, even real-time, only then can whatever is left of the once powerful aura become potentially emancipatory. The aura in a growth-obsessed and progress-focused world is forced to dwell in the mysteries of happenstance and error, disrupting the Gesamtkunstwerk[36] rather than immersing the viewer in the Gesamtkunstwerk. In this way aura does have the power to disrupt the status quo, but only as long as it is the anomaly, so long as it is primarily absent and barely present rather than being the almost fully present prevailing order of things.

Although my treatment of aura throughout this study may seem unduly favourable, I will not deny aura's negative implications. The utopian/dystopian full presence of aura or even almost full presence of aura may indeed be harmful.[37] But I would argue in retrospect that it is not aura itself that supports or disturbs power: it is

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[36] See Section 2.2.
[37] See Section 1.5.

the balance of aura. It is the issue of whether auratic difference, uniqueness, rarity and exception is expressed as a challenge, a contradiction, a question, an interruption. Or on the other hand whether auratic uniqueness is that of a single "truth"—an authoritative, distinctive, elitist, answer. This study of "dematerialized" new media art, when compared to the "timeless" original artworks Benjamin speaks of, expresses the give and take of a dynamic relationship. In this dynamic each have elements of the other but overall the one asserts and represents authority and singular-narrative aura, while the other challenges such totality, interrupting the fantasy of algorithmic and technological perfection.

APPENDIX 1:
AURATIC RECOLLECTIONS

The following essay raises more questions than it provides answers. It consists of ruminations and observations on six themes in Benjamin's work as they relate to the artwork *We Feel Fine.* This was the entry point into my study and is included here as a time capsule that foreshadows my ideation process and is integral to understanding the development of the study and of my thinking on the subject of aura in new media art.

Collection and Archive

Jonathan Harris is a computer programmer and artist based in Brooklyn, New

York. Positioned at the nexus where art, design and programming converge, his work

deals with abstract evolving cybernetic representations or maps of humanity, harnessing

programming and data mining—which are usually considered functional or commercial

activities/processes—for more conceptual and creative purposes. Harris's work,

according to his artist statement, can be divided into two categories: finding man in

machine and finding the machine in man. *We Feel Fine* is a work belonging to the former

category; it continuously collects (mines) data sets from public blogs, dating sites,

forums and social networks for the phrases "I feel" and "I am feeling"; the software then

"[analyses] and [processes] these data sets in real-time, extracting stories and patterns,"

categorizing these feelings by geography, gender, weather, time of day and emotion

(Harris, 2009, ¶2). As of 2009, when Harris last updated his artist statement, the rate of

the archive's growth was approximately 15,000 new "feelings" per day. ❖

The object with all its cultural, that is, barbaric aspects[38] is retrieved from

standard use as a commodity, taken from circulation and kept[39]—possessed by

Benjamin's archetypal historical materialist: the collector, Fuchs. Not kept as in removed

out of time however, as this is a part of the course of the object's existence. The object

is not dropped into the present as the culmination of all things past, but is part of a

constellation of images in their unique places/moments throughout the past.[40]

"One-Way Street." Stamp collections. Wholeness (of a sort) must matter in

collection. When stamps are mutilated and collaged, like moths they live on (Benjamin,

1928/1996b, vol. 1, p. 476). But not in the same way as before—their fragmented selves

are not whole in the collector's sense of whole, where books are not read, things are not

used, and all is maintained in pristine condition. Instead there is an element of

corruption (p. 476). It is never quite the same as before, explains Benjamin. Maybe in

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[38] "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Benjamin, 1937/2002c, vol. 3, p. 267).

[39] "The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are frozen as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them" (Benjamin, 1931/1999c, vol. 2, p. 487).

[40] "Historical materialism sees the work of the past as still uncompleted. It perceives no epoch in which that work could, even in part, drop thing-like, into mankind's lap" (Benjamin, 1937/2002c, vol. 3, p. 268).

time the fragments can be seen again as whole—like a book when old and torn. When the spine breaks, and then is bandaged together with duct-tape, it is anything but healed.

Still, rescuing of an old book is something that can delight Benjamin (1931/1999c) as a collector in "Unpacking my Library."[41] Does time return a sense of aura to the fragmented? Can an old book, left and forgotten, become full again under a renewed gaze: an embodiment of Benjamin's observation that time forgives but does not reconcile?

When an artist paints, she steps back from the painting and wonders how complete it is. It is easy then to add another brushstroke—the paint is even still wet. Give it an hour, a day. A week. It starts to grow a skin that is harder to approach, let alone alter. The distance that exists around the original work of art begins to take hold and the presence of aura is felt.

How does the nonconcrete object change this equation? Is the idea of possession at all possible or applicable? Information is only virtual and undependable, sites disappear, change, 404 sites abound; yet traces, caches, remain long after—information returns to haunt. I have a data-double—she is the compilation of the traces of my online activity.

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[41] "[O]ne of the finest memories of a collector is the moment when he rescued a book [...] because he found it lonely and abandoned in the marketplace and bought it to give it its freedom" (Benjamin, 1931/1999c, vol. 2, p. 489).

An artwork by Columbian artist Oscar Munoz: *Breath/Aliento*, an installation of small steel discs etched with line drawings of the disappeared—people whose images the artist collected from obituary columns—they remain invisible until the viewer is right in front of a disc turned mirror and breathes on it, allowing a brief stay of the fleeting image (Martinez, 2008, ¶7).

In Harris's work the snippets of information are similarly less than concrete and they too can only be held for a moment. But Harris's work does not have even this kind of ephemeral materiality. There seems to be no tactility, no auratic sensory element. Real-time is a flattening dimension. Moments with individual original contexts in space and time coalesce at a single point.

Ritual is a kind of tactility that may apply. Fewer people read the printed newspaper over breakfast, and we may feel nostalgic pangs for the old tactility's loss, but we create new ritual that gradually takes on the memory of what it has replaced. There is still ritual in morning routines of checking email, or updating one's online status.

The question is whether ritual based tactility provides enough materiality to permit a possession of the virtual object.

Just as words on hard paper exist materially, physically as ink—so Harris's work has a material side. The programmer's fingers poised on the keys of his keyboard; the bloggers too—index fingers passing over the bump/line on the "f" and "j" keys, the gaps

between the raised keys, anchoring the typist. Qwerty speaks the memory: do not jam the typewriter, it says.

Straightforward interaction and touch cannot however be considered the entire tactile or material life of *We Feel Fine*. Just as in the film production processes Benjamin describes in the "Work of Art" essay, which remain outside the camera frame (Benjamin, 1936/2002a, vol. 3, p. 115), there is a distance between digital tools and the material infrastructures that enable them. It takes a discussion of internet usage caps (Marlow, 2011) for us to begin to consider how we even got online, to consider who owns and maintains the infrastructure—so opaque and natural has the illusion become.

Possession of the virtual object in a historical materialist sense is difficult to fathom, unless we consciously consider it with an awareness of the historical and material constellation which grounds the virtual object.[42] Otherwise it will remain illusive—servers "host"; engines "search"; computers "view." Even software is rising into the "cloud." Everything references and connects, to something, somewhere else. Material anchors are few and far between.

The virtual image/thought/object may have to become even more fleeting, more dissipated, less possess-able, graspable, handle-able, and at the same time more all-

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[42] As a historical materialist, the researcher "must abandon the calm, contemplative attitude towards his object in order to become conscious of the critical constellation in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself with precisely this present" (Benjamin, 1937/2002c, vol. 3, p. 262).

encompassing, more restrictive, before it can be seen through a historical materialist

lens. For now death will not touch our room.[43]

Closeness

Harris (2009) self-congratulatorily observes how profound his works are on

account of the fact that "[they] are never 'finished,' as they continually add new data

from the Internet as it becomes available, growing and changing every few minutes like

organic digital creatures or creative machines" (¶2); he also claims to "[imagine] a future

where technology itself becomes spiritual, and this [he says] is finally something [he] can

believe in" (¶4). Upon initiating the *We Feel Fine* applet, it explodes into a world of

moving, reactive, multicoloured dots, each embodying an individual feeling, some

including images, some simply words, that can then be navigated as a continuously

uploading window into the nature of human expression, bonding us to others halfway

across the world in a universe of connectivity, presumably alleviating our longing to be

heard with the powerful unity of collective human experience. ❖

In Benjamin's Eden the name was the essence of the thing. Or rather, the thing

was the essence of the name. On earth, human language no longer had the ability to

name with divine spirit and naming became a kind of over naming—an imprecise over-

precision in terms of the need to try to delineate something that could never again be

exact (Benjamin, 1916/1996c, vol. 1, p. 62–74).

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[43] "[D]ying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living. It used to be that there was not a single house, hardly a single room, in which someone had not once died" (Benjamin, 1936/2002d, vol. 3, p. 150)—yet another element of our removal from the background noise of reality.

Harris works toward a return to paradise: overcoming all physical, spatial, temporal barriers and through technology achieving a state of pure communication, an all-encompassing unity of expression. An auratic *rausch*.

The programming algorithm is the seed of perfect language—it is the content at the core that actually creates the visual context, and through the algorithm, the feelings are pulled in as filler. The algorithm is name and essence, from it derives all else. It is the search/collection/sorting mechanism.

The anonymous de- and re-contextualized feelings are plentiful and individually irrelevant. When all the collected feelings and snippets are labeled and tagged and searchable, delineated to an extreme, they become mute filler data that cannot speak for themselves. Benjamin cites "overnaming as the linguistic being of melancholy" (p. 73). Human overnaming of beings guarantees the muteness of those beings. Individual words, snippets of content, become secondary to the meta-expression—the form/parameters of Harris's site. There is only this synergy, free of bodies and contexts, giving off an aura that has much in common with a futurist mentality.

Yet the violent side of technological reifying power and bloodlust of futurism are absent from the piece. The futurists could/would experience their own annihilation as a "supreme aesthetic pleasure" (Benjamin, 1936/2002, Work of Art, vol. 3, p. 122).

Harris's feeling-dots should start eating each other like Pacman. Everything becomes incorporated into the great traveller's life-fabric. Everything comes closer, becomes part of his truth (Benjamin, 1929/1999d, vol. 2, p. 248).

We can hardly witness anymore the grotesque as distorted reality. Russian Dolls, Jersey Shore,[44] GOP/Tea-Party Express candidate debate on CNN. We embrace the grotesque in all its glory, commodify it, assimilate it into normalcy. We have eaten the thing, wrapped ourselves in it so tightly. Immersive adornment, we have become the thing—"furnished" that is.[45]

Memory and Trace

We Feel Fine is, like film, an assemblage of frames—but in this case they are literally taken from other narratives, categorized and reassembled. Harris's work therefore cannot function as a whole in the same seamless way that film can: there is too much emphasis on the individual snippets of content. What Harris's project in fact displays is a plethora of snatched moments—an assemblage of an asynchronous world. Moreover, his snippets can be momentarily held, but never abducted completely. Although the snippets can be maintained for a time on the screen, each of these fleeting moments or snippets belongs within a discrete moment in time and space, and cannot be removed from the passage of time and stalled the same way as can a moment captured in a physical photographic print. The notion that in Harris's piece we are able to "stop and isolate" a snippet of time but cannot maintain the seizure, speaks to the temporality of existence as depicted in anything real-time. Data may be forever archived

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[44] For example, Russian Dolls and Jersey Shore are "cultural" reality TV shows, with substantial displays of consumerism and excess.

[45] "What we used to call art begins at a distance of two meters from the body. But now, in kitsch, the world of things advances on the human being; it yields to his uncertain grasp and ultimately fashions its figures in his interior [...] in the dreams, as well as the words and images, of certain artists—is a creature who deserves the name of 'furnished man'" (Benjamin, 1927/1999e, vol. 2, p. 4).

online, but there is still an affective element that makes it seem as if these snippets are meandering alone, lost in virtual space. ❖

Remembrance, according to Benjamin (1940/2003a), is history's original role (vol. 4, p. 401). At that time, the past existed in past-time. The positivist past-made-present is a distorted "false aliveness" (p. 401). Spatially scattered comments are mined by Harris and broadcast as if from a single position. They are not truly alive; neither is the momentary past depicted as precisely "live." Memory is a medium of experience, but memory is not a search engine, a catalogue, or excavation site of the past (Benjamin, 1932/1999f, vol. 2, p. 576).

In universal history causal events are tied in a neat little ribbon, pulled together by a common denominator like culture, bringing us to today, the culmination of what has passed. The concept of progress is implicit.[46]

In the dialectical image there are numerous frayed histories and strands, some picked up again, some not. The dialectical image unleashes the destructive aspect of historical materialism, which unravels so-called universal history, unravels the idea that history can be narrated. Instead history can be explained within theoretical frames, the epic moment liquidated, which allows stories of the anonymous to emerge (Benjamin, 1940/2003a, vol. 4, p. 406).

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[46] "The notion of universal history is bound up with the notion of progress and the notion of culture. In order for all the moments in the history of humanity to be incorporated in the chain of history, they must be reduced to a common denominator—'culture,' 'enlightenment,' 'the objective spirit,' or whatever one wishes to call it" (Benjamin, 1940/2003a, vol. 4, p. 403).

Although its empathy may be with the anonymous voices, Harris's project is still the essence of reification. It is not merely each day that is treated as a culmination of all things past, constantly refreshing itself—it is every single moment, swarming at once in front of the screen.

Citing everything that came before. Giving continued sustenance, in its different individual moments, but conceived of in this one present. The eternal lamp. The idea of every today as judgment day of all past days—a summary justice (p. 407). It contains all that has passed in its present, like the item dropping "thing-like" into someone's lap (Benjamin, 1937/2002c, vol. 3, p. 268), where every today is a culmination of all the todays before. This is the present the historian sees—the present being the constant moment of happening encompassing all else (Benjamin, 1940/2003a, vol. 4, p. 407).

The past for Benjamin moves further and further away. The eternal for him is never a culmination of time. It can only be contemplated through fragmented and transient time.[47]

Laurent Mareschal has created a replica of the kind of tiled floor pattern found in old Palestinian homes but with spices—turmeric, sumac, zaatar, white pepper. Because of the delicate nature of the piece, it is not possible to walk into the room, onto the floor—only to view/smell the work from the entrance-way, but never to meet it (Ben Ami, 2011, ¶52).

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[47] "To grasp the eternity of historical events is really to appreciate the eternity of their transience" (Benjamin, 1940/2003a, vol. 4, p. 407).

Distance

The isolated snippets or segments that make up Harris's work are not seamlessly united. Between the fragments of the assemblage exists a gap—an absence. So despite Harris's artist statement and its alignment with utopian ideas of togetherness, due to the collaged nature of the content there becomes an emphasis on empty space, on what is lacking. Interestingly, part of the desire to create an image of connectivity often depends on accentuating separate elements, so that they can then be illustrated as coming together. This attempted technique produces in Harris's work a sense of absence as well as presence. ❖

To show unity, there must first be separation. All Harris's dots/feelings want to converge—there is a magnetic pull to a centre, yet each individual represented by an emotion sits behind a glowing screen alone. This pull, this desire for closeness, potentially emphasizes physical distance and isolation over the grasp of nearness and totality.

Turning to Benjamin's use of Atget who looks for what is forgotten, cast adrift. The photographer is somewhat like the historical materialist; he gives voice to the anonymous. The images show hotels, streets. There are no people in his photos, and no aura. Somehow he doesn't allow nostalgic aura—the aura achieved by lamenting the absence of aura—to manifest itself. These are the kind of images meant to destroy romantic notions of a city. Emptiness can at times be auratic, but this emptiness is said to be like a hotel between visitors, disinterested documentation (Benjamin, 1931/1999a, vol. 2, p. 515).

Google Earth is a site of disinterested documentation too. Artist Melanie Coles imbued it with aura, painting Waldo on a city rooftop and challenging residents to a Google Earth enabled community wide game of *Where's Waldo* (Coles, 2008). Is anything—even a disinterested documentation of an empty room—exempt from auratic potential? What could necessarily be immune to auratic potential, if aura is considered to be a projected gaze onto an object or idea?

Testing abilities of auratic projection. Rearranging numbers into pleasing configurations. Can numbers one through five all be viewed in a romantically auratic way, exhibiting some sort of wholeness or element of nostalgia?

One is easy: unity, aloneness, and totality all can be conjured. Two exhibits balance, magnetism. The eye likes divisions of thirds; three images evenly spaced in a series. Four is a perfect square or the cardinal points of a compass. Five items can group or bundle, consolidated again as a single unified entity.

If aura can be willed, its projection, which is a matter of perspective, can be altered from an all encompassing reifying nearness to contemplative, fragmentary absence/presence.

Methods of altering visual perspectives. When looking at a form as if about to draw it, default perception is suddenly gone. You must decide whether to follow contours, colours, shadows. You draw as if feeling along the surface, or map out the structure and proportions.

Step back and reconsider the positioning in space in relation to your own. Which hand to use—one requires far more concentration than the other, but emphasizes the bumps and nibs and wrinkles. Focus on one part of the form, change focus, foreground, background, let the image blur. Draw the space around the form; allow the form itself to emerge.

Such a perspective requires more than distance from the object. It requires distance from the self. This contemplative distance is a matter of practice and consciousness.

Wandering and Flâneurie

The physical viewer her/himself, and the act of sitting at a personal computer, alone connected through a glowing screen, also demonstrates the tension of absence/presence. The viewer is both outside the box, viewing the piece within, and at the same time inside the work, symbolically represented within this system that imagines all of humanity forming a collective consciousness. Each glowing screen/individual viewer is one of the dots or feelings within the frame. This is a viewer represented simultaneously off and on the screen, caught in a metaphorical loop of watching the self watching the self: a "two way mirror," where viewers "see reflections of themselves even as they voyeuristically glimpse the lives of others" (Harris, 2009, ¶2). ❖

The one who watches the feelings emerging on the screen sees inner thoughts that may be in the public domain, but there is something about their de/re-

contextualization that increases the aspect of voyeurism and invasion of privacy. We are calling up humanity's innermost thoughts, using these voices' pains and joys to warm our moment, like the novel "warms" our lives.[48]

Harris's artist statement suggests that one could potentially be seeing oneself—like a two-way mirror. This suggests a kind of transportation—at the same time watching and existing behind the screen somewhere. A paradoxical image of seeing oneself inside looking inside looking inside. This is just the impression however: the chance of finding one's own comment is slim.

It would prove difficult to track a single person—individuals fade back into the crowd. This voyeurism is propelled by a compulsion towards the newness of every feeling, the continuous ongoing flux of innermost thoughts. This is the man in the crowd, fascinated by others but not really belonging.[49] According to Harris (2009), viewers may come across their own content. Such a crowd is a crowd of flâneurs: there is no crowd, only cubicles.

The flâneur seeks as much in the gaps between the snippets of data as can be gleaned from the words and images of the snippets themselves. "[Casting] an 'early' glance at what has already become old" (Benjamin, 1927/1999g, vol. 2, p. 264). For someone eternally restless, the flâneur in this environment would have to be gruelingly physically patient. Foot tapping and fidgeting may be on the rise.

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[48] "What draws the reader to a novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about" (Benjamin, 1936/2002d, vol. 3, p. 156).

[49] Poe's flâneur is "an unknown man who manages to walk through London in such a way that he always remains in the middle of the crowd" (Benjamin, 1938/2003c, vol. 4, p. 27).

Playtime. Bombard the program with fake comments on the blogs it mines/pulls from. The flâneur is the one who destroys, who bashes the clocktowers,[50] the parameters themselves, paving the way for a scavenger hunt to see what others do not see.[51]

This is why the destructive character is necessary. He has the strength to shake off the burden of reified culture, to clear out pervasive opacities. He is not susceptible to communal meaning.[52] He doesn't see any danger in breaking myth, in tearing a person apart in order to expose their narrative's larger constellation of existence. But the f flâneur's distance from society does not allow him to be particularly adept at self-reflection, preferring lists and facts and memorization to people, stories and memory.[53]

He has his place and time. Sometimes Benjamin calls on him.

Benjamin rarely speaks as "I"; he almost exclusively writes in the third person (Adorno, 1991, vol. 4, p. 255). His use of the first person viewpoint is acutely specific: it is limited to engagement in flâneurie—playing the destructive character. When Benjamin is observing the city in sections of the *Arcades Project* (1940/1999b) he writes

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[50] "[C]alendars do not measure time the way clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness of which not the slightest trace has been apparent in Europe, it would seem, for the past hundred years. In the July revolution an incident occurred in which this consciousness came into its own. On the first evening of fighting, it happened that the dials on clocktowers were being fired at simultaneously and independently from several locations in Paris" (Benjamin, 1940/2003b, vol. 4, p. 395).

[51] "The destructive character has the consciousness of historical man, whose deepest emotion is an insuperable mistrust of the course of things and a readiness at all times to recognize that everything can go wrong" (Benjamin, 1931/1999h, vol. 2, p. 542).

[52] "The destructive character has no interest in being understood. Attempts in this direction he regards as superficial. Being misunderstood cannot harm him. On the contrary, he provokes it" (Benjamin, 1931/1999h, vol. 2, p. 542).

[53] "[T]he flâneur memorizes lists like a child, insisting like an old man on the truth of what he knows" (Benjamin, 1929/1999g, vol. 2, p. 266).

as a critical observer, but lacks personal reflection: the destructive character's "deepest

emotion is an insuperable mistrust of the course of things" (Benjamin, 1931/1999,

Destructive character, vol. 2, p. 542).

Benjamin's accounts of the Paris arcades are at times channeled through the

destructive lens of disinterested interest of one who "has no interest in being

understood," and he considers such attempts to connect with others "superficial" (p.

542). He looks without seeing his own inner presence, sees only his reflection in glass

windows and mirrors—a disembodied image.

Alternately, the third person for Benjamin is not a removed perspective. He is

aware of his presence, conscious of temporality and mortality: this is auratic

contemplation. Subjectivity is here spoken as if objective, while "I" is implicit. Ambiguity

and fragmentation, delicately held together by memory, is the signature.

Time

Yet this work is less an infinite loop or a mirror than it is an echo chamber. There

is a residual presence, a lingering presence, where emptiness is made visible through

the gaps in the assemblage and the temporal fragility of the experience. Since the

frames of Harris's narrative are distinct, and do not blend one into the next, the work

creates a very particular sense of the passage of time. Instead of encountering the work

as a cinematic narrative, a broken rather than smooth progression is experienced,

accentuating the sense of loss implicit in the in-betweens or absences. If one stays on

the site long enough, a sense of the perpetual does eventually take hold, as the macro

image/idea overcomes the content of individual snippets and each piece becomes less significant in the face of the wider picture. So rather than have these discrete lacking-part-objects be featured, the longer the viewer remains on the site, the more the overarching concept begins to overcome. Eventually the only purpose of the individual snippet becomes supporting the "whole." The content takes second place to the context, as the macro image of connectivity outweighs the micro image of absence/presence. ❖

Only a redeemed mankind will be able to cite all time's moments (Benjamin, 1940/2003b, vol. 4, p. 390), even if the chronicler narrating the event does not distinguish between major and minor events—if he counts every twitter feed. That is today's goal—the citing and searchability of all of humankind's moments. But they still cannot be in focus, viewable and understood all at once, even under the Google gaze. Benjamin noted the decline of experience and the rise of information and news where currency is of utmost importance (Benjamin, 1936/2002d, vol. 3, p. 143). But interest in everyday experience of the diary sort is resurging. Harris's work takes that experience, plucks it from its place and time, grinds it up and churns it out of his "new feelings" feed.

The live event. The true sports fan, like the news addict and the early adopter, must know everything as it happens. He flips on the TV and opens his internet browser and regardless of whichever is the better quality image, or reception—the one that is ahead—closer to real-time, closer to the event itself—has higher value. If he foolishly checks his radio too, and it is even further ahead—it fundamentally devastates the entire experience for him, as he must choose between the image and the "live" factor.

Real-time. What is it about jumping over time—meeting the present—all of humanity sharing a moment of some world event? This is essentially the definition of closeness, when all the moments happening in their spaces can come together—this is telematic proximity to the actual event. We are a society that worships speed as progress; we move towards anticipating movement and desires rather than simply transmitting them. This speed is not about taking off into the future; it is a convergence at a point of the present, an anticipation of the present. It is a crystallization—eclipsing time—possession of all moments simultaneously. Harris's angel faces the future and looks at the ground, at its own feet moving.[54]

A book found on a public bench. The inscription invites me to read the novel and place it anonymously on another bench for someone else to read. This project provokes awareness of a constellation of past and future experience around a material object. The traces of this yellowed book's past travels are palpable. I am not watching an automatic progression of thoughts algorithmically pulled through a glowing screen/window, where the feeling of awe comes from the speed of going into so many minds at once, and where moments once distinct in space and time are cited together. Instead, there is a sense of privacy in this shared time; each moment is calm in its own

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[54] "This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm" (Benjamin, 1940/2003b, vol. 4, p. 392).

historical moment. Rather than being a convergence or accumulation of every moment

into this moment, time's presence is felt, and a different kind of aura surfaces.

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