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For Everyone's Eyes Only: Digital Art as Public Art (Agency, Accessibility, and Aura)

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**FOR EVERYONE'S EYES ONLY: DIGITAL ART AS PUBLIC ART
(AGENCY, ACCESSIBILITY, AND AURA)**

by
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**SUBMITTED TO POMONA COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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"You never know when contemporary art is going to insinuate itself into a normally art-free zone."

– Roberta Smith

Introduction

In an age of rampant digitization and technological development, how are new innovations impacting the politics of art and shaping its form and function in society? As media continues to seep into all aspects of daily life, both artists and aficionados are using an influx of new, reformative resources to interrogate preconceived notions of materiality and meaning. In a way, the questions posed by digital art mirror the discourse surrounding the emergence of public art: both mediums express dissatisfaction with the exclusivity of traditional art practices and institutions and advocate for the preservation of accessibility and community engagement. But, this is not to say that all virtual art meets the qualifications set forth by public art; rather, I propose that while digital art and public art share historical roots in counterculture and contemporary interest in public appeal, digital art is a fluid form that can fluctuate between private and public realms based on its presentation and intended function.

In order to better understand this relationship, I conducted a series of interviews and case studies with international digital artists, public artists, and design firms about the relationship between digital and public art and how they are approaching issues of ownership and viewership in their own practices. Thematically, these studies were grouped under issues of agency, accessibility, and aura. Under each theme, I included the opinions from one analog public artist and one digital public artist; I then traced areas of overlap and dissonance and reflected on the significance of these comparisons.

Agency refers to an individual's control over their work in the face of external influence; I examine this concept alongside the contemporary rise of the attention economy and the networked commons and how precedents set by such models impact artistic integrity. I proceed to analyze accessibility from two main perspectives with references to enclosure: the first being the availability of a piece to the general public and the second being the reciprocal relationship between the viewer and the artwork when engaging with a public installation; I also briefly inspect how intuitive the digital art industry is to emerging artists. Finally, I consider how aura, broadly based in Walter Benjamin's definition, manifests in the digital and public art space. I want to explore agency because of its close relationship to the artist perspective, accessibility because of its ties to publicly-related audiences, and aura as a concept that stems from the artwork itself. By covering these three departments, I hope to complete a more holistic cross-examination.

I chose interview subjects after researching various project portfolios, artist biographies, and published platforms and based my preferences on notable thematic overlap or ideological alignment with one of my chosen realms of inquiry. Questions that were used to evaluate and narrow down the selection include:

1. *Agency*: Has this artist completed a project in collaboration with/commissioned by a third party? How relevant are these projects to the individual's practice?
2. *Accessibility*: Does the artist offer unorthodox methods for engagement? Is public access a core part of their reputation or mission?
3. *Aura*: Does the artist's work have aura? How have they gained or developed this aura?

I also bring in historical background and theoretical context to situate my findings within existing literature and extend the application of theories developed in the pre-digital era to our contemporary period. Ultimately, I do not make a direct negative nor positive evaluation on the subject at hand, because my aim is to not reach a finite conclusion, but to explore the complex, dynamic function of digital art by comparing it to a more established, traditional practice.

History of Public Art

The history of public art as an artistic practice is somewhat ambiguous: while some consider early cave paintings found in Lascaux historical evidence of the form, others attribute the start of public art to the creation of the Federal Art Project (Fig 1.0) (F.A.P) under the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A) after the Great Depression in 1935. Yet, there are also scholars



Fig 1.0: Artist Eric Mose working on a mural for a F.A.P project in New York (Source: Wikimedia Commons [Public Domain])

who reject both of these claims because public art was not officially recognized until the National Endowment for the Arts created the Art in Public Places program in 1967.¹ Perhaps this is also in part attributed to the enigma of the term “public art”

itself. Certainly, in the late Renaissance and Middle Ages, distinctions between private and public art did not exist to the degree it does now, since art was used to “bespeak the shared values and convictions of cultural communities” in “edifices and open places where people

¹ Cartiere, Cameron, Shelly Willis, and Cameron Cartiere. “Coming in from the Cold: A Public Art History.” Essay. In *The Practice of Public Art*, 7–17. New York, NY: Routledge, 2008.

regularly gather.” In other words, privacy was an adverse concept in the realm of aesthetic appreciation; art, in the form of decorated ornaments and artifacts, were commissioned as cherished objects of spectacle in society.² But, this “art” was primarily available to upper class citizens, who were only granted entry because of existing affiliation with or membership in elite social circles. For example, religious authority greatly contributed to this narrative, since many artistic works and artifacts were representations of divinity and treated as such. This all changed when humanism began promoting ideals of individuality and unique personhood in the Renaissance; under this new ideology, independence and autonomy were prioritized above all else, which uplifted personal expression, but in turn undermined the importance of unified, community discourse.³ Nevertheless, even under this model, no artists adopted a truly “private” practice, since art maintained its inherent relationship to social and political influences, albeit in a more integrative, subtle manner, that were shaped by the public eye.⁴

From an art history perspective, public art has commonly been discussed alongside architecture and urban design: buzz words like spatial practice, social practice art, and service art are mentioned in these debates about public art’s position in the field. In this regard, the genre expanded in the 1980’s and 1990’s as part of a larger, postmodern movement protesting against the institutional limitations of fine art and seeking emancipation from these creative structures. During this era, artists wanted to escape the physical constraints of the gallery or museum space on their practice; subsequently, they began shifting installations of self-contained and monumental works to city centers and community commons.⁵ In this sense, public art seems

² Hilde Hein, “What Is Public Art?: Time, Place, and Meaning,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no. 1 (1996): pp. 1-7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/431675>, 1.

³ Hein, “What Is Public Art?: Time, Place, and Meaning.”

⁴ Cartiere and Willis, “Coming in from the Cold: A Public Art History.”

⁵ Cartiere and Willis, “Coming in from the Cold: A Public Art History.”

rooted in creative counterculture: a collective effort to shift away from traditional valuations of art and evoke a new, liberating way of creating and experiencing art.

In the midst of all of this confusing, contentious history, one thing rings true: public art is a dynamic, interdisciplinary practice that engages with “ephemeral interpretations of site, memory, and meaning.”⁶ Despite such abstractions, there are general, working guidelines that can serve as qualifying, categorical indicators for what is considered “public” art; these are outlined by Cartiere and Willis (2008) as follows:

1. Art in a publicly visible and/or accessible place
2. Art that accounts for or addresses public interest
3. Art with community use value and function
4. Art that is publicly funded⁷

These metrics should not be understood as rigid definitions, but rather flexible building blocks that help with identifying public art in the creative world, especially in comparison to other mediums or genres.



Fig 1.1: Sample of Fetter's 3D Human Model for Boeing
(Source: dada.compart-bremen.de)

History of Digital Art

It is difficult to examine the emergence of digital art without also inspecting the rapid development of technological innovation in the wider world.

As technology advanced in the 1940's and 1950's, people became increasingly interested in not only the relationship between machines and humans, but also the potential implications this yielded for revolutionizing daily life. MIT

⁶ Hein, “What Is Public Art?: Time, Place, and Meaning.” 2.

⁷ Cartiere and Willis, “Coming in from the Cold: A Public Art History.”

developed the first graphic display on a vectorscope to be shown in a public demonstration in 1951, forever changing how computer interfaces responded to human commands and requests. The earliest remnants of digital art, however, can be traced back to William Fetter and his coining of the term “computer graphics” in 1960, which was used to describe his virtually designed cockpit drawings for Boeing (Fig 1.1).⁸ Following this important milestone, the inaugural computer art exhibit was held at the Technische Hochschule in Stuttgart, Germany in 1965. In the next couple of decades, attention toward digital art would skyrocket; this includes the invention of many iconic design platforms, such as the SGI IRIS 1000 graphics workstation (1983), Amiga (1985) (Fig 1.2), Softimage (1986), and Adobe Photoshop (1989).⁹

What is most fascinating about the extensive and expedited growth experienced by digital art is the act of collective learning experienced by all individuals involved in the field. Artists were suddenly exposed to technological developments that plotted new, uncharted waters for creative exploration; while this pushed the boundaries of what could be considered “art,” it also incentivized dialogue between the creator and their public, who embarked on an adjoined journey of transformative learning and profound realization. There is also an inherently playful quality to the application and dissemination of digital art: its novelty inspired a childlike approach to engaging with the experimental medium,



Fig 1.2: Andy Warhol with Debbie Harry at the 1985 Amiga Launch at Lincoln Center (Source: Computer History Museum)

⁸ Richard Colson, *The Fundamentals of Digital Art* (Lausanne: AVA Academia, 2007).

⁹ Colson, *The Fundamentals of Digital Art*.

fueled by a “pioneering spirit” founded in a charming sense of unfamiliarity among all practitioners.¹⁰ This lack of pre-existing expertise meant that while many viewers were navigating virtual environments for the first time, artists were also evolving their own skills in order to execute their creative intentions and ideas through online materialities.

Marshall McLuhan explores the impact of technology on media in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964). Although this piece pre-dates the invention of the internet in the 1970’s, it foreshadows the prominent influence of technology on mediated affairs in the digital age. The core theory McLuhan proposes is “the medium is the message,” a statement asserting that materiality of the content carries significant weight in impacting how embedded meanings are digested and perceived by the public.¹¹ The media theorist was also interested in how media ecology could stimulate unique ratios of sense perceptions, which would then, by extension, change the way audiences think, feel, and act about the content they were consuming.¹² Certainly, it is important to acknowledge that McLuhan himself was likely a proponent of technological determinism: he believed that media technology critically dictated societal behavior as one technological era shifted to another, for better or for worse. Although this does not completely invalidate his argument, it does invalidate the autonomy maintained by individuals involved in digital art and media, who are not completely oblivious to the dangers of over relying on technology. Regardless, McLuhan outlines a meaningful theory for the historical and contemporary development of digital art: unlike other mediums that were reproduced to adapt to mediatization, digital art was a direct product of modern-day technological innovation; all engagements with the medium are moderated by

¹⁰ Colson, *The Fundamentals of Digital Art*. 20.

¹¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 1964).

¹² McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.

virtual spaces and structures, which naturally alter the external, sensory, and emotional experiences that transcend from the piece and outward to the physical world.

There is also a third party involved in this relationship between digital art and society: capital. As seen in Fetter's illustrations and other graphic design works, early productions of what can be considered digital art are tied to commercial art; they had a distinct, corporate use value outside of creative innovation or exploration. After the fall of Web 1.0, which marked a shift from solely user-generated online media to corporate platform and social media monopolies, the influence of capital on digital art production and reproduction became even more apparent in the creative market. Now, blockchain technology and NFTs have become household names, incepting a new model for ownership and collecting among virtual art communities. This is not to say that digital art became an exclusive, private practice, since this model was dictated by public participation: "in a decentralized, distributed, online market, it is the buyers and sellers that send signals about how much they desire a (digital) object."¹³ Virtual aesthetics, even more so than other mediums, are dependent on a degree of "spectatorial generosity," meaning that if the spectator refuses to look at digital art through a possessive lens, "then appropriation will be impossible."¹⁴ However, when these acts of looking do define value through perceivable fungibility, NFTs add an aura of exclusivity to pieces that were being bought and sold at prices mirroring, and at times even surpassing, those seen in fine art auction houses. For instance, a series of NFTs titled *The Merge*, by Pak, was sold at almost \$92 million USD in 2021, setting a record "for an artwork sold publicly by a living artist."¹⁵

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines digital art as follows:

¹³ Usman W. Chohan, "Non-Fungible Tokens: Blockchains, Scarcity, and Value," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2021, pp. 1-13, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3822743>, 6.

¹⁴ David Joselit, "NFTs, or The Readymade Reversed." *October*, no. 175 (April 10, 2021): 3-4. 4.

¹⁵ Fang Block, "Pak's NFT Artwork 'the Merge' Sells for \$91.8 Million," *Barron's* (Barrons, December 7, 2021), <https://www.barrons.com/articles/paks-nft-artwork-the-merge-sells-for-91-8-million-01638918205>.

Art that relies on computer-based digital encoding, or on the electronic storage and processing of information in different formats—text, numbers, images, sounds—in a common binary code. The ways in which art-making can incorporate computer-based digital encoding are extremely diverse.¹⁶

Interestingly, the very diversity mentioned above is both what deters and draws artists and viewers to the industry. While more resources intuitively provide more opportunities for creative expression, it also encourages competition in a virtual market that is becoming increasingly crowded, rigorous, and unaccommodating.

Agency

Art in a Attention Economy and Networked Commons

The continuous saturation of content in both digital and physical spaces have produced a market that thrives on the attention of consumers. This is by no means a completely unforeseen dynamic: even prior to the age of social media and online gallery openings, artistic recognition was dependent on visibility. Public art perhaps falls most victim to these acts of public scrutiny; as their history and name suggests, installations commissioned in shared spaces have to reflect the social values of that given community, insofar as to not instigate protest or disapproval from surrounding constituents. When examined through a lens of agency, in order for a painting to be more than “just a piece of canvas smeared with colored mud,” artists have to do more than effectively communicate meaning from an aesthetic standpoint; they also have to coherently align these intentions with the interests of their viewerbase to sustain validity through audience approval.¹⁷

¹⁶ Katherine Thomson-Jones and Shelby Moser, “The Philosophy of Digital Art,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Stanford University, August 1, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/digital-art/>.

¹⁷ John Seed, “On Art in the Age of the ‘Attention Economy’,” *HuffPost*, 2017.

Now, virtual algorithms produce an unavoidably competitive arena, in which attention has become the ultimate prize and valued currency dictating this aforementioned approval. In short, the digital age phenomena has produced an “Attention Economy,” a concept coined by economist Herbert Simon referring to how “human attention is scarce and that our receptiveness to information—both on the web and off the web—is becoming increasingly limited.”¹⁸ Under this model, artists are incentivized to produce work that will stand out and effectively draw interest from a restless follower base. In his Huffpost article, Professor John Seed (2017) outlines several “intangibles” that can help work succeed, two of which being immediacy and personalization: efficient production of work that targets “self-focussed audiences.”¹⁹ During periods of extensive mediatization and instantaneity, “any form of agency is mediated:” it is hard, if not impossible, to exert complete control over how pieces are spread and received, since global audiences play a crucial, participatory role in this process of distribution.²⁰

Certainly, this is not to say that public voice is a completely negative force. In many ways, the close relationship between art and society, as mediated through the internet, can foster a feeling of mutual understanding and empowerment that can overcome temporal and geographical boundaries. For example, Paul (2006) states that “digital technologies and new media art have expanded, challenged, or even redefined concepts of what constitutes public space, the public domain, and public art,”²¹ which interrogates pre existing notions of “agency, control, and governance [...] by enhancing possibilities of various kinds of intervention” in the public sphere.²² She values expressions of agency based on their capacity to responsibly mobilize

¹⁸ Seed, “On Art in the Age of the ‘Attention Economy’.”

¹⁹ Seed, “On Art in the Age of the ‘Attention Economy’.”

²⁰ Paul, “Digital Art/Public Art: Governance and Agency in the Networked Commons.”

²¹ Christiane Paul, “Digital Art/Public Art: Governance and Agency in the Networked Commons,” *First Monday*, 2006, <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v0i0.1616>.

²² Paul, “Digital Art/Public Art: Governance and Agency in the Networked Commons.”

creative meaning to affect external, societal realms. In other words, since digital spaces are characterized as prime ecosystems for the fusion of solidarity and mediation, they additionally can act as hosts for important social discourse and successive, widespread reformation.

Tying back to public and digital art, these metrics bring up interesting, albeit somewhat concerning questions: to what extent does the attention economy force artists to sacrifice artistic agency? Are deeper meanings being lost in a contemporary public realm dominated by virality? How can agency be restored? In an attempt to address these lines of inquiry, I interviewed two artists based on their respective backgrounds in public art and digital art: Fahcheong Chong, a seasoned public sculptor who has collaborated with government bodies, who talks about striking a balance between public servitude and personal legacy, and Romain Braccini, a trending digital illustrator with recent experience in the NFT industry, who spoke on using the medium to document personal chronicles. Through our conversations, they were able to critically shed light on their personal perceptions of artistic agency, how these conceptions have developed throughout their career, and what they feel sustains agency in the present and future.

Fahcheong Chong

Fahcheong Chong is a Singaporean sculptor who has completed various public art projects across Asia. Although he is now an established figure in the public art industry, he has a unique, somewhat unconventional creative background that synthesizes religion with teaching. In an interview, Chong talked about how his experiences at a religious institution embedded lessons of servitude and humility that shaped his interest in teaching. In this sense, his beginnings as an artist were rather serendipitous: his sense of creative agency was greatly guided by an influx of leftover community materials, such as lumber, that led to experimentations in wood carving. This

then progressed into more extensive explorations in sculpting with other materials as well, which became a crucial component of his practice and artistic repertoire. Despite this emphasis in sculpture, which is the main medium dominating public art, Chong asserts that he never considered notions of privacy nor visibility when pursuing a career in the arts. Rather, he feels that everyone is granted a degree of “TAP:” a term he coined and continues to teach to his students that stands for “Time and Place;” to him, this refers to a selection of temporal, social, and cultural “happy accidents” specifically given to one individual, of which they can use as a



Fig 2.0: *People of the River* by Fahcheong Chong
(Source: Wibowo Rusli/Getty Images)

creative toolkit to produce unique, unparalleled impacts. In many ways, Chong feels that one’s palpable life experiences are the building blocks for artistic identity and agency; they motivate continued involvement in artistic creation and by preserving vested interest throughout the creative process.

For Chong, this agency is also inherently tied to legacy. As a Singaporean native, he feels an obligation to leave behind site-specific, historically relevant works that figuratively symbolize important parts of the nation’s past and present; he makes an active effort to not

only design pieces that contribute to development, but also act as articles of remembrance that connote to memories locked in the minds of his Singaporean viewers. To him, this component of his agency is non-negotiable, since it is a fundamental part of his creative mission and journey.

When asked about his piece *People of the River* (Fig 2.0), which was commissioned by the Singapore Ministry of Culture, Chong described the process as collaborative as opposed to instructive. The commissioner wanted a piece that could act as both a tourist attraction and a meaningful representation of Singapore's cultural history. After these intentions were communicated, the entire sculpting and review process went comfortably and smoothly, since Chong was essentially given free rein to execute within the scope of this vision. The final product is composed of multiple bronze-cast sculptures of children in a queue jumping into the riverbank; the nudity of the figures reflects a relatable, childlike joy from a simpler time, one the artist feels is neglected in the modern-day hustle. When talking about this project in relation to agency, Chong implied that completing public art projects does not detrimentally diminish a sense of agency, despite the predetermined expectations; instead, it calls for an integrated, yet positive awareness for a projected audience and installation space, considerations that are arguably present in all creative sectors, but particularly applicable to sculpture. The public artist asserted that a reason *People of the River* was able to gain significant traction in the public eye was because of its situation along the national riverbank:

“Sculptures need to be seen in the physical realm.”²³

The interaction between dimensionality, materiality, and geography allows for it to communicate a nostalgic narrative of innocence rooted in naturality that would otherwise be inaccessible, especially in vastly modernized and urban hubs like Singapore. To Chong, public art is about making communal connections through visual storytelling; if this entails compromising a certain, albeit not detrimental, degree of creative agency, it is a sacrifice the artist is more than willing to make.

²³ Fahcheong Chong. Interview by author. Personal Interview. Virtual, October 6, 2022.

Romain Braccini

Romain Braccini is a France-based Digital Artist specializing in motion design and illustration. He attributes his interest in digital art practices to the expansive range of expressive possibilities afforded by various platforms. Braccini started drawing or painting at a young age; however, when he began pursuing art as an adult, he switched to virtual applications like

Photoshop and Illustrator because of their convenience and flexibility. Now, the artist primarily uses 3D software to create animated works that convey a playful spirit, as exemplified by his *36 Days of Type* project (Fig 2.1). Instead of seeing such software as potential inhibitors of agency, since they can unintentionally place restrictions on things like texture or dimension, Braccini feels that modern

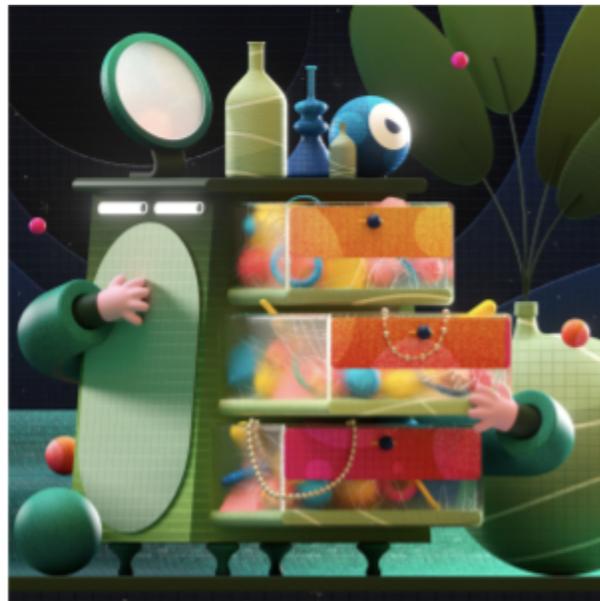


Fig 2.1: Sample from Braccini's *Illustrated Type 2022* series (Source: InspirationGrid)

applications are quickly developing and

diminishing such obstacles; subsequently, these digital tools can support creative agency by providing an alternative supply of means to actualize previously-impossible artistic visions.

Despite this, he also acknowledges that digital art is very integrated in advertising, marketing, and branding as a way to garner consumer attention. Personally, however, Braccini identifies as a creator who works outside of these commercial industries; he maintains that despite the prevalence of virtual design to business-driven campaigns or projects, there are still many artists

who are unwilling to sacrifice agency for monetary gain and create works rooted in personal expression.

Braccini likewise enjoys the collaborative aspect of the digital art industry. When asked about where he draws his inspiration from, he credits both real-life and online exchanges, whether it be with media sources like film or music or other designers. In this sense, he feels that agency is not always about executing an idea that is unequivocally original, but is rather about bringing a sincere, personal touch to the universe you create through art. In relation to this, the motion designer shared that he also finds great fulfillment from collaborating with other artists on a project: when he works on a piece with someone else, Braccini views it as a synthesis of creative visions, one that can act as a catalyst for innovation and push the boundaries of what was previously, independently imagined. He feels especially grateful for all of the international collaborators he has been able to encounter throughout his professional career in the digital art community because of the global nature of the space.

Recently, Braccini has been making waves in the NFT industry. When asked about agency in the world of cryptocurrency, he mentioned that his goal is always to commit to a style or vision. In fact, the designer feels that the invention of NFTs actually affords a greater degree of artistic autonomy and recognition in comparison to outside commissions or more traditional auctioning procedures:

“It's very different from a classic professional work because there is no client, only you manage your artistic project.”²⁴

On one hand, Braccini is acutely aware of the importance of public perception; yet, he makes a conscious effort to only take this into consideration after the creative process is complete, so as to not undermine his own artistic integrity. When he first starts a project, he is not preoccupied

²⁴ Romain Braccini. Interview by author. Personal Interview. Virtual, October 28, 2022.

with projected popularity and is concentrated on executing an idea he feels passionate about. Braccini does, however, greatly cherish positive and negative feedback after his work is disseminated, as this teaches him new things and allows him to grow as an artist. Ultimately, he feels that “what belongs to [him] in a creation is the idea.” The elusive and omnipresent nature of the internet means that he cannot control how others aesthetically interpret or judge his designs after they are distributed; consequently, “the most important thing for an artist is to express something” outside of purely aesthetics. Since this narrative is inherently tied to its storyteller’s identity and authentic experiences, it secures agency in permanence and prevents it from being diluted.

Accessibility

(En)closing in on Ownership and Engagement

While agency is an important concern for many artists, accessibility acts as an equally important, unavoidable force to be reckoned with. When accessibility is brought up in relation to the arts, questions surrounding spatiality likewise arise. As stated earlier, the rise of public art was largely in protest against formal establishments like galleries, who many felt represented elitist, inaccessible institutions. Yet, as public dominions become more and more influenced by capitalist modes of production, public property also becomes a commodity in markets of exclusivity.²⁵ Prior to the counterculture art movement in the 1980’s, Jürgen Habermas postulated that the emergence of the public sphere took place when private individuals occupied independent, civil spaces to discuss state powers. Soon, there were institutions, like debate salons and coffee houses, that functioned outside of the state and economy. To be an active member in

²⁵Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (London: MIT Press, 1991).

this bourgeois conception of the “public,” individuals had to first meet a set of prerequisites: belonging to property-owning classes on the socioeconomic hierarchy and educated literacy.²⁶ In many ways, similar requisites apply to participation in the modern creative realm: accessibility is commonly brought up alongside social and cultural capital, which refer to tools for social mobility granted through one’s upbringing and background. When it comes to public art commissions, contentions arise over the ambiguity of ownership and sponsorship: who has authority over creative projects completed in the public sphere? To what extent should the community inhabitants contribute to this affair? In the digital arena, notions of accessibility become even more blurred and ambiguous: while virtual forums boast openness, the influx of devices like NFTs, which bring ownership to digital art content, have sparked controversy by allegedly threatening the legitimacy of this inclusivity. David Joselit describes this as a hijacking of the readymade: a process of overturning fungibility by “[deploying] the category of art to extract private property from freely available information.”²⁷ If this is the case, are these digital art pieces really more accessible than their physical counterparts? If virtual media is also subject to the same process of commodification and enclosure, will this inevitably compromise democratic metrics of engagement?

There is also a physical, sensory layer to accessibility in the arts that contends with how audiences interact with a piece. When the public sees an installation in a public setting, they are uniquely situated in a position where they occupy not only same space as the artwork, but more importantly an open space that has abolished all barriers to entry; this decreased, perceived distance between the viewer and the piece incites acts of engagement that are inherently more intimate and multisensory. When it comes to digital art, however, all encounters are virtually

²⁶ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

²⁷ Joselit, “NFTs, or The Readymade Reversed.” 3.

mediated, which can alternatively act as barriers to accessibility, since creators are unable to judge how digital renderings could potentially impact authentic feel and public assessment of their piece. Regardless, in the case of both public art and digital art, there is a limit as to how much control the artist is able to exert over the viewing experience. In gallery spaces, the structural and curated design of the exhibition encourages a standardized, contemplative flow for spectatorship that tells the visitor where to start and where to end. The same cannot be said for viewership in public domains, where there is minimal guidance and patterns of engagement vastly differ based on the individual's existing circumstance: one constituent could spend mere seconds glancing at a piece while another could spend an hour leisurely dissecting the same work throughout the day.

Such seemingly arbitrary factors can play a critical role in discourse surrounding how creative works are framed in the greater art community. Hilde Hein (1996) reflects on the active role of the onlooker in realizations of public art and the subsequent, inevitable attachment of social and political meaning to these displays. She cites art critic and theorist Michael North in her piece "What is Public Art?": "It is not the public experience of space but rather public debate that becomes a work of art."²⁸ While Habermas believed that public opinion was engineered by media from civic, privatized bodies, hence leading to its self-disintegration, North's sentiments communicate an alternate, harmonious dynamic of reciprocity: indeed, institutions guide dialogue in the public sphere; yet, the opposite is also true. Effective accessibility can actualize creative discourse by introducing new, diverse voices into public dialogue that must now be acknowledged by authoritative institutions. While professional critics, historians, and artists might offer evaluations enriched by past literature and expertise, feedback from the general

²⁸ Hein, "What Is Public Art?: Time, Place, and Meaning." 4.

public is fundamental to a piece's contemporary scope because it encompasses an objective, stripped perspective free from comparative bias.

When evaluating accessibility, I reached out to Tonkin Liu, a creative firm specializing in architectural and landscaping design, to converse with founder Ann Liu about the relevance of accessibility to their projects and how it is integrated in their practice. Similarly, I spoke with Liam Pitchford, a 3D digital artist who has uniquely embraced the lack of control over the temporality of viewership by creating pieces that are universally accessible both in terms of composition and emotional impact. Both Liu and Pitchford placed accessibility as necessary components to their practice; yet, they likewise emphasized that this does not have to follow standard patterns of engagement under traditional models, but can find ways to manifest in unpredictable, exciting forms.

Tonkin Liu

Tonkin Liu is a leading London architectural and public design firm with a portfolio that includes buildings, sculptures, and landscapes. After entering and winning their first landscape competition in 2004, they quickly gained recognition for public design projects that integrated industrial elements with natural motifs. When asked about their creative process and methodology, Director Ann Liu underlined that a core part of their mission is to not only build something that blurs lines of separation between landscape, architecture, and artwork, but to more importantly produce a piece that many people can access and enjoy in unexpected ways. For example, their piece *Singing Ringing Tree* (2007) is a musical sculpture made up of industrial metal pipes that sits on a hill in Crown Point, Burnley. As the name suggests, the piece takes in surrounding wind and produces echoes that “sing” from the structure, drawing in nearby

passersby. The nature of the sculpture embraces an air of serendipity that suggests an unconventional approach to accessibility: the slightly concealed and offsite location of the work



Fig 3.0: *Singing Ringing Tree* by Tonkin Liu (Source: Tonkin Liu Website)

means that some viewers may hear the sounds it produces prior to seeing its physical form; as such, it encourages visitors to conceptualize what the structural design and materiality could be before examining it. Moreover, since viewers may not have encountered the piece with the prior intention of

engaging with it, they are forced to adopt a candid approach of artistic appreciation that allows for them to see the sculpture through an unfiltered lens. This presents a codependent relationship between the artwork and the viewer: one where the imagination of the person critically amplifies the public piece’s potential for reinvention.

To Tonkin Liu, accessibility is also about subverting expectations. As stated by Director Liu:

“We want to take everyone to a new place.”²⁹

This entails a process of regeneration and rejuvenation that makes the familiar unfamiliar in a way that does not completely transform the space, but instead seeks solutions that “[tie] values to help individuals access and expand projects.” Especially after the pandemic, the firm felt that public art was elevated to a position beyond solely aesthetic design; alternatively, shared spaces were prioritized and valued for their capacity to counter isolation by inciting interpersonal

²⁹ Ann Liu. Interview by author. Personal Interview. Virtual, November 3, 2022.

interactions fundamental to one's personal health and wellness. This methodology is grounded in the search for a shared community identity that fosters a foundation of trust between the artist and the audience. Liu underscores the importance of forging meaningful regional relationships when completing a project: on a logistical level, this involves connecting with local manufacturers during the outsourcing process; on a creative level, however, it calls for a thorough examination of what the community desires for a given space and how to best accommodate these wishes through improved public design. In other words, if a work cannot, to some degree, align with the anticipations of users who frequent the space, then accessibility is no longer an issue of visibility nor miscommunication, but one of public disinterest.

Liam Pitchford

Liam Pitchford is a 3D animation designer based in the United Kingdom. He first encountered the world of digital art as a graphic designer in the advertising industry; as Pitchford began exploring virtual applications more and more in his spare time, he found himself going back to 3D to express his thoughts because they overcame compositional issues of depth. Like other digital artists, the creator is drawn to digital art because of its continued novelty and subsequent endless supply of learning possibilities. Pitchford feels that many of his digitally-completed projects would have been implausible or highly time-and-cost-intensive had they been executed physically, since it would require hiring a photographer or finding “oddly specific” production equipment that “may not even exist.” Yet, in the virtual sphere, the artist can conveniently access all of these tools, resources, and materials with the simple click of a mouse from his home office. In this sense, Pitchford feels that the digital art industry is more intuitive

and accessible for artists than their more traditional counterparts, since there are less barriers to entry.

When discussing the role of NFTs in furthering or diminishing accessibility online, the 3D designer stated that although NFTs have introduced a degree of exclusivity to the industry, it has also brought more attention to and interest in digital art from all demographics, which has increased engagement across the board. Before, the primary way to interact with digital art was through advertising and similarly business-oriented design projects. Now, Pitchford notes that there are increasing opportunities for digital art to be accessed outside of commercial contexts and in ways that have elevated positive public recognition toward the field and its practitioners. Certainly, he acknowledges that this is a dual-edged sword, since this desire for increased exposure and accessibility can detract from deeper artistic messages; but, because the success of NFTs are shaped by what the public deems interesting, this can uniquely allow artists to get immediate insight into their audience demographic in an otherwise unpredictable market. As stated by the digital designer:

“There’s no longer a middle man. The artist can self-publish and communicate directly with their followers about their work.”³⁰

When describing accessibility in his own pieces, Pitchford highlights promoting experiences that are personalizable and tactile. A majority of his work are products of a multimedia, audiovisual approach that seeks to deliver a sense of escape. One major theme present throughout Pitchford’s work is restfulness: the digital artist wants to disincentivize strict metrics of linearity, time, and instruction to instead encourage individuals to get lost in pastel tones, organic shapes, and curated instrumentals; he wants to push his audience to create their own model of engagement consisting of their irreplicable sensory experience. This way, the

³⁰ Liam Pitchford. Interview by author. Personal Interview. Virtual, October 25, 2022.

viewer can “keep looking at [his work] for ages and keep seeing new things” in a regenerative manner. Integral to this sense of restfulness are motions inspired by human anatomy; for instance, Pitchford describes patterns of “breath” as a sensation that provokes the user to feel like they can “reach into the screen and touch the digital entity.” Interestingly, the animator posits that digital art is incredibly accessible in the virtual environment, where designs and other work saturate online platforms, but perhaps less so in the physical world. Therefore, Pitchford



Fig 3.1: Snapshot from *Lavender (living)* by Liam Pitchford (Source: Instagram)

hopes to bridge this gap through his designs, but also looks forward to seeing digital art diffused more in public spaces beyond a device screen so that accessibility is no longer limited to audiences in virtual arenas.

Aura

The Appeal of the Unknown

If agency and accessibility are both tangible characteristics that can be accounted for by the artist, aura is far less controllable and reliable. In his influential 1936 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin defines aura as a relation between a spectacle and its spectator suspended in a “strange tissue of time and space.” It refers to a nonphysical, yet omnipresent sense of authority held by an original work of art through “the unique apparition of a distance,” which adds to the fascination and appeal of a piece.³¹ At first

³¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Harlow: Penguin Books, 2008). 23.

glance, distance seems counteractive to It also connotes an intersubjective encounter: one experienced through the perceived, directed gaze of an object at the viewer. In his argument, Benjamin claims that this mysterious tension is diminishing due to reproductive media technologies.³² Although aura is valuable in garnering attention for a creative piece, which in many cases is transferred into vested interest in the artist themselves, its somewhat arbitrary origin and definition can produce conflicting opinions toward its distribution. For instance, in an interview in 1975, Andy Warhol said the following about aura:

“Some company recently was interested in buying my "aura." They didn't want my product. They kept saying, "We want your aura." I never figured out what they wanted. [...] I think "aura" is something that only somebody else can see, and they only see as much of it as they want to.”³³

Indeed, Benjamin had a significant impact on Pop Art; while Warhol's sentiments may not have been directly referencing Benjamin's definition, his concern with the subjective and uncertain complexion of aura are not abnormal. In fact, Benjamin himself felt that the steady liquefaction of aura was productive for cultural and political democratization: because “the unique value of the 'authentic' work of art has its basis in ritual, [...] mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.”³⁴ In other words, although “the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity,” maintaining originality should not be unconditionally valued over the process of democratic dissemination promoted by reproduction practices.³⁵

In public art, aura is destabilized through physical accessibility and integration. As mentioned in the aforementioned section, physical artworks are commonly placed in communal

³² Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

³³ “5. Fame,” *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, accessed November 21, 2022, <http://thephilosophyofandywarhol.blogspot.com/2009/09/5-fame.html>.

³⁴ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. 224.

³⁵ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. 11.

locations, such as parks, where local visitors can experience the piece on a leisurely and informal basis. North (1990) depicts this aesthetic shift in focus “from the object to the experience it provokes” as one that elevates the relationship “beyond mere implication: the public becomes the sculpture.”³⁶ As opposed to detracting from influence by diminishing aura alongside distance, this process of permeating the public sphere by “taking the spatial experience of its audience as a subject” is described as “seductive,” a term also used when illustrating the power of aura, because it “dissolves old opposition between artist and audience” by unifying the two in a cultural space.³⁷ Yet, this poses a fundamental question toward the existence of public art: does public art have aura? If aura is dependent on a degree of, albeit invisible, distance between the work of art and the individual, can this entity be replicated in the public realm, where minimal dissociation exists? Alternatively, does the very existence of public art, and the recognition such works have achieved, challenge the traditional importance of aura?

When examining aura and digital art, the two seem to counteract one another. As stated by Benjamin, technology has dismantled the very notion of aura because it clouds aesthetic originality with countless cycles of regeneration and reproduction.³⁸ However, contrary to traditional genres, digital art does not attempt to appeal to conventional metrics of valuation: “digital art does not consider the aura as the core value in defining something as a work of art;” rather, “digital artists think that art can exist within a digital object and maintain its uniqueness.”³⁹ The saturated nature of the internet market, as outlined by the attention economy, could account for this reliance on public, as opposed to institutional, recognition. Nonetheless,

³⁶ Michael North, “The Public as Sculpture: From Heavenly City to Mass Ornament,” *Critical Inquiry*, 1990, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343772>. 861.

³⁷ North, “The Public as Sculpture: From Heavenly City to Mass Ornament.” 861.

³⁸ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

³⁹ Badry, A.I., and A.Y. Lubis, “Digital art and its uniqueness without aura.” Essay. In *Cultural Dynamics in a Globalized World*, 7–17. New York, NY: Routledge, 2017. 89.

this does mean that digital art cannot have aura. As seen in the high-profile nature of many online auctions, some of which have even been conducted by esteemed auction houses like Sotheby's or Christie's, correspondents are carrying out virtual art collecting practices in a manner that parallels enthusiasm seen in traditional communities. This model of ownership inherently strengthens the correlative relationship between scarcity and aura. In other words, the original still exists in digital art; it simply takes on a more hidden and, therefore more valuable, form.

Although Benjamin's definition was critical in building a theoretical foundation for aura, my interpretation of the term diverges from the definition's original framework so that I can more broadly analyze contemporary components that contribute to artistic appeal. This application draws upon Hito Steyerl's sentiments on the rise of the poor image in the digital era; namely, how circulations of reproduced, dematerialized virtual art and media creates a new type of aura: one under "an alternative economy of images" that "reconnects dispersed worldwide audiences."⁴⁰ I chose to conduct two case studies on how aura could be applied to and traced in public and digital art: first, I examined the rise of Banksy, who started out as a public graffitist before gaining the allure of an established, global artist in the high art world; I also analyzed how David Hockney's iPad series potentially depicts aura as a flexible entity that can be transferred and built upon throughout an artist's career. The two case studies highlight how aura, despite its traditional origins, can exist outside of comprehensible metrics of value in a fluid fashion. Moreover, both Banksy and Hockney notably reject institutional authority throughout their careers, despite their widespread fame.

⁴⁰ Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image - Journal #10 November 2009 - e-Flux." Accessed December 8, 2022. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

Banksy

Despite being nominated for *Time* magazine's 2010 list of the world's 100 most influential people, Banksy's origins lie with street art and graffiti; such art "is generally produced in urban settings, placed on property without the property owner's permission, and displayed where the public can see it."⁴¹ In this sense, the artist is most known for his contributions to an art form that is arguably the most publicized and commonly encountered in habitual life. Yet, this is not to say that street art is a less effective medium; rather, its fortitude lies in "viewers' material engagements with street art:" as highlighted by Hansen and Flynn (2016), graffiti is a visual dialogue that frames its audience as "competent social actors capable of understanding, appreciating, and actively and materially engaging with" the artists' intentions.⁴² Street art insinuates that the artist and the public belong in the same status quo; therefore, it is unsurprising that this is one of Banksy's primary mediums of choice, especially in his early career, as it aligns with Banksy's commitment to being an artist on his own terms, with no mediation from institutions or third parties. In an interview in 2003, he maintained the following about his desire to directly connect with public constituencies:

"There's a whole new audience out there, and it's never been easier to sell [one's art]. [...] You don't have to go to college, drag 'round a portfolio, mail off transparencies to snooty galleries or sleep with someone powerful, all you need now is a few ideas and a broadband connection. This is the first time the essentially bourgeois world of art has belonged to the people. We need to make it count."⁴³

Interestingly, Banksy mediates this connection through a layer of anonymity. While his creative predecessors, like Andy Warhol, promoted their art alongside a visible, curated personal identity, Banksy insists on letting the production and execution of his art speak for itself. Although this

⁴¹Peter N. Salib, "The Law of Banksy: Who Owns Street Art?," *The University of Chicago Law Review*, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43655484>. 2296.

⁴² Hansen, Susan, and Danny Flynn, "'Darling look! It's a Banksy!'" Viewers' material engagement with street art and graffiti." Essay. In *Aesthetics of the City*, 103-115. Łódź: Łódź University Press, 2016. 103.

⁴³ Will Ellsworth-Jones, "The story behind Banksy," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2013.

seems counterintuitive to establishing a legacy as an artist, concealing his true persona generates a dichotomy between Banksy's highly visible, public art "bombings" and his invisible identity, hence sparking a lasting, widespread sense of intrigue. Indeed, the artist has used unconventional methods to showcase his work and gain the attention of mass media outlets and other parties alike. Most of his "exhibitions" take place through impromptu "bombings:" instances where a



Fig 4.0: *Turf War* by Banksy (Source: Sotheby's)

Banksy creation will emerge at an unforeseen location. For instance, in 2003, Banksy installed one of his works, titled *Crimewatch UK Has Ruined the Countryside for All of Us*, at the Tate Britain without the museum's consent by simply entering the gallery and evading security. In the next year, he did the same at many other prestigious art spaces, including the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁴⁴ In many ways, Banksy's

counterculture methodology also contributes to a sense of aura through association, as it paints him as a creative vigilante: a mysterious, but influential figure who is elevating street art and paving new paths for artistic engagement outside of expected norms. This "outsider" method is further supported by his use of symbols and mediums: throughout his work, Banksy embeds his perspectives on political themes through bold prints and color, commonly to express opposition against existing, corrupt societal systems and structures. For example, his breakthrough exhibit

⁴⁴ Ellsworth-Jones, "The story behind Banksy."

“Turf War” featured a portrait, also titled *Turf War* (Fig 4.0), of Winston Churchill with a green mohawk, as well as a satirical depiction of Queen Elizabeth II as a chimpanzee.⁴⁵

Ultimately, Banksy seems to have unintentionally devised the optimal formula for aura: ironically, his anti-institutional ideology, when paired alongside his anonymous, yet infamous reputation and iconic artwork, is the source of his aura-infused stardom. In this case, public voice has uniquely overturned traditional distributions of aura normally seen in formal valuation or collecting practices; Banksy’s global following as a public artist eventually forced important art organizations to recognize, as opposed to penalize, the artist’s practice. Now, one of Banksy’s pieces is valued upward to over \$20 million USD, a hefty price point that mirrors the high public status achieved by the artist.⁴⁶

David Hockney

David Hockney is “regarded as one of the most distinctive post-war artists” because of his distinct painting practice, characterized by a blend of Baroque, Cubist, and British Pop Art qualities.⁴⁷ He is accredited for revitalizing a style of figurative painting that draws visual inspiration from the language of advertising; yet, Hockney is also known for portraying intimate, domestic scenes that honor personal themes from his surroundings.⁴⁸ For instance, *American Collectors* (1968) depicts two of his close friends, Fred and Marcia Weisman, waiting to greet guests outside of their home, whereas a previous painting titled *A Bigger Splash* (1967) illustrates a pool in the back of a quintessential, modernist Californian home.⁴⁹ Although his

⁴⁵ Ellsworth-Jones, "The story behind Banksy."

⁴⁶ “Banksy Print Value: Find out Prices Prints & Sell to Collectors.” Accessed December 6, 2022. <https://www.banksy-value.com/>.

⁴⁷ David Hockney. *David Hockney*. Vol. 1. Manchester University Press, 1995. 2.

⁴⁸ “David Hockney Paintings, Bio, Ideas,” The Art Story, accessed November 26, 2022, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/hockney-david/>.

⁴⁹ “David Hockney Paintings, Bio, Ideas.”

painting is what originally developed a sense of aura, having given Hockney “a broad popular appeal from the get-go,” like Banksy, Hockney was able to sustain this reputation by presenting himself as a spokesperson and educator who was unafraid to spark controversy and reject the highest honors if they do not align with his values.⁵⁰ The artist once remarked:

“I don't have strong feelings about the honors system. I don't value prizes of any sort. I value my friends.”

In fact, he notoriously turned down an opportunity to paint a portrait of the Queen due to alleged scheduling conflicts.⁵¹ Certainly, his critical role in renewing figurative painting already granted him a degree of legitimacy and authority: for example, other well-known artists and creative professionals like American painter Chuck Close and director Martin Scorsese have integrated elements of the painter's aesthetic influence, such as his marked color palette, into their own work.⁵² However, Hockney actively took part in teaching and contributing to the art history community as well, as seen in his research on the Old Masters and subsequent proposition that these artists likely used cameras when painting, which challenged existing literature on the topic.⁵³ This combination of aesthetic, theoretical, and advocacy work solidifies the artist's relevance among diverse demographics.

Another prolific part of Hockney's artist ideology is his willingness to embrace new emerging mediums and methods in his pieces. Although he predominantly worked with traditional materials for most of his career, his later explorations in digital art reflect his flexibility and adaptability as an artist who embraces modern technological advancement. Hockney first ventured into this realm of virtual creation in 2008, starting first with drawings on

⁵⁰ “The Tate Dives into the Art of David Hockney,” *The Economist* (The Economist Newspaper, February 14, 2017), <https://www.economist.com/prospero/2017/02/14/the-tate-dives-into-the-art-of-david-hockney>.

⁵¹ “David Hockney Paintings, Bio, Ideas.”

⁵² “David Hockney Paintings, Bio, Ideas.”

⁵³ “David Hockney Paintings, Bio, Ideas.”

his iPhone before eventually devising similar compositions on his iPad as well.⁵⁴ Despite the change in medium, the artist was able to successfully transfer his aura as a traditional artist over to the world of digital art while simultaneously reinventing his practice in novel ways. As seen in Fig 4.1, his iPad drawings sustain the playful, Hockney mood that is also found in his earlier collages and acrylic work; yet, they also have a unique, fresh quality due to their technological materiality. In 2010, Hockney curated an entire exhibition of these digital pieces, titled *David Hockney: Fleurs Fraîches*, which ran from October to January, 2010 at the Fondation Pierre Bergé - Yves Saint Laurent, Paris.⁵⁵



Fig 4.1: *The Arrival of Spring in Woldgate, East Yorkshire in 2011* by David Hockney (Source: Christie's)

When interviewed about the series in 2010, Hockney recognized the underlying impact of the prestige generated by his creations on the Apple device and how digital art would shatter traditional modes of production and irreversibly change the nature of how art is shared:

“Picasso would have gone mad with this. So would Van Gogh.”⁵⁶

In many ways, this remark speaks to the endless array of possibilities afforded by digital creative platforms; but, it also alludes to the idea that established artists already have an advantage over their less-recognized counterparts because of prior exposure and assumptions of aura. Indeed, not

⁵⁴ Martin Gayford, "David Hockney's iPad art." *Last modified October 20* (2010).

⁵⁵ Gayford, "David Hockney's iPad art."

⁵⁶ Gayford, "David Hockney's iPad art."

all emerging digital artists experience the same level of exposure and recognition harbored by Hockney's iPhone and iPad explorations. While the enthusiasm generated by Hockney's digital series could in part be attributed to their innovations in the field and Hockney's personal efforts to "[work] with the strengths and limitations of the device," there is also a clear tension between the leisurely methods of distribution used to disseminate the artwork, which mainly consisted of "[sending] these techno-sketches to friends, who may then pass them on, collect them or do whatever they want," and the rapid permeation of such works into exclusive institutions, who scrambled to showcase the digitally-drawn compositions.⁵⁷ Therefore, this case suggests that aura can exist outside of notions of originality or authenticity, since "each image as it appears on another iPhone or laptop is virtually identical to the original;" rather, as described by Warhol, aura can be more broadly applied to the artist, meaning that it is malleable and transferable, irregardless of medium and materiality.

Conclusion

After conducting various interviews and case studies, I propose that the relationship between digital art and public art is not explicit nor fixed. On one hand, the two genres share very similar roots in counterculture, with public art having historical ties to anti-institution and social practice art. Digital art likewise establishes a presence through interpersonal relationships and shared learning outside of formal, authoritative bodies. Furthermore, both digital and public artists synthesize public discourse with personal narrative; when this is executed in a manner that aligns one's aesthetic practice with one's social or political practice, it can generate public and institutional interest. On the other hand, public art and digital art are inherently different, especially when it comes to how environmental constraints, or lack thereof,

⁵⁷ Gayford, "David Hockney's iPad art."

impact the production and dissemination process. Therefore, digital art can qualify as public art, but this public status is not irrevocable. Public art sets the framework for art to exist outside of formal institutions, but digital art adds a degree of fluidity to this foundation that allows it to uniquely appeal to audiences in private and public sectors, depending on the motive behind its creation or the method with which it is distributed.

When it comes to agency, both public and digital artists have to face similar issues of maintaining artistic integrity in their practice. Both Chong and Braccini emphasized maintaining balance between accounting for public feedback and committing to their own creative narrative. However, while digital artists can tip this balance depending on their project or intention, public artists must always take a fixed degree of external opinion into account because of preset guidelines and conditions dictated by an external party. They also postulated that these two forces are not necessarily always in opposition with one another; they can also coexist, or, in some cases, even fully align, in serendipitous ways that can elevate a work to new, unexpected heights. In this sense, agency is not a fragile, separate entity that is easily diminished when exposed to the public sphere and must be protected as such, but is instead inherently tied to an artist's background and personal voice. This means that effective expressions of agency can generate greater public awareness and interest surrounding a creator's work, since it materializes a unique, visual mode of storytelling that is relatable, and accessible, to a wider array of viewers than in the comparatively more limited private art sector. In this regard, digital art does meet the conditions for public art set forth by agency and confronts issues of authenticity using similar resolutions.

Accessibility, on the other hand, appears subject to incalculable variants in time and space. First, accessibility in digital art is intrinsically linked to visibility: similar to how public

art installations draw in a crowd based on where they are placed, digital art must likewise tackle the challenges of creating in extremely occupied spaces in order to produce public interest. After this initial attention is harvested, accessibility molds into a matter of engagement: although public and digital artists have a degree of preliminary control over how a piece is perceived and accessed, they can never fully predict these metrics of engagement nor reception. As such, artists, regardless of materiality and genre, must account for potential outliers or discrepancies during the production process. Yet, this is not to say that this unpredictability has discouraged creators looking to permeate the public sphere. As exemplified by Liu and Pitchford, the beauty in art lies in its ability to connect audiences; rather than seeing accessibility as an obstacle that needs to be overcome, artists have unlocked innovative ways to embrace their viewers' unique circumstance. Such pieces do not insist on an instructive consumption method, but alternatively promote a reciprocal viewing process, in which the audience contributes to the meaning of the piece through their interaction. In this respect, digital art is preoccupied with similar questions of public exposure and participation; however, not all digital art is made for public projects. While public art emphasizes general accessibility, since many people encounter the piece at the same time, digital art focuses more on personal accessibility, since the viewing process takes place on a more personal, independent basis and can vary based on the digital algorithm and the individual's given circumstance.

In both digital and public art, artists do not have to reestablish aura with each new piece they create; instead, their new works can reclaim past instances of recognition associated with the artist and emanate the same allure. To a certain degree, both Banksy and Hockney relied on their infamous persona to gain recognition for their public and digital artwork. This makeshift aura greatly assists in generating a cumulative cycle of exposure that builds upon existing

exposure and increases with each new project. Of course, one could argue that the same applies for traditional artists. However, the intrinsically public infrastructure of digital art means that one's identity can act as a valuable asset that can increase positive or negative sentiments toward one's art. Ironically, public art, despite its namesake, seems to better suit desires for anonymity. It would have been substantially more difficult for Banksy to maintain his mysterious aura had he began his career in online art forums, given the democratic, participatory nature of the digital art community, which incentivizes exchange between constituents. On that account, it is possible for digital art and public art to develop aura in similar ways; in both fields, if the artist has a distinct, memorable character that is stylistically aligned with the aesthetic of their work, they are more likely to reap the rewards of public interest. However, digital artists have to consider other notions of recognition, since aura founded in mystery is far less sustainable among virtual demographics. Indeed, virtual art and media seems to have created its own definition of aura: one "no longer based no longer based on the permanence of the "original"," but on "visual bonds" formed through shared history among a new public.⁵⁸

Because digital art is not limited by physical materiality, it can exist anywhere: it can start off as a private NFT under exclusive ownership; but, "that contract can be broken" when NFTs are rereleased and reproduced in public domains.⁵⁹ In short, digital artists can uniquely appeal to audiences in private and public sectors and are not limited to one target market or demographic. Moreover, this definition is not fixed: the unpredictable dissemination of the medium across open, participatory virtual spaces grants it the capacity to shift forms and functions in an unprecedented manner. While this ambiguity may blur definitions of the genre, I argue that this

⁵⁸ Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image - Journal #10 November 2009 - e-Flux."

⁵⁹ Joselit, "NFTs, or The Readymade Reversed." 4.

very adaptability is what strengthens its existence, since it continuously presents new opportunities for creative renewal and growth.

American art critic and writer Lucy R. Lippard once said: “Conceptual art, for me, means work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary.”⁶⁰ Indeed, digital art embodies this very process of dematerialization and reimagination. Its existence is contingent upon its appeal as a medium that challenges limitations established by traditional art practices through creative revitalization. Artists are able to utilize tools and resources granted by modern-day technology and media to explore an otherwise unfathomable array of ideas; these visions can then meaningfully shape public perceptions of the arts and beyond. As such, the fact that not all digital art qualifies as public art does not place it in an inferior position; alternatively, the genre has set forth its own metrics for production, installation, and engagement that can both permeate existing creative realms and operate independently outside of them. In a broader sense, the rapid development and ascendancy experienced by the digital art industry speaks to how technology has diminished material and environmental limitations and amplified the importance of inciting new ways of participating in the art world that subvert established norms. This not only acts as a pillar for a diverse myriad of creative messages, but also forges a more interwoven, symbiotic dynamic between the artwork, the artist, and the audience.

⁶⁰Lucy R Lippard., ed. *Six years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*. Vol. 364. Univ of California Press, 1997. 7

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This has been one tumultuous, yet wildly enriching ride; my final moments of revision were filled with bittersweet reflection and the final product feels almost like a series of miraculous Deus ex Machinas. Yet, I feel proud of how far the project has come: this thesis accumulates all of the academic adventures I have embarked on throughout my Media Studies degree, and I would not have it any other way.

Appendix: Interview Questions (in order of appearance)

1. Agency

- a. Tell me about your practice, how did you get into digital/public art and what was that process like?
- b. Where do you draw your inspiration from? What is the development process like for a project and who is involved in the collaboration?
- c. How has the digital/public art industry changed throughout the years? What do you think has caused these changes?
- d. Do you consider public perception of your work during the creation process? What kinds of messages do you hope people take away from your work?
- e. How does the digital/public nature of your work impact your sense of agency? That is, do you feel a sense of ownership for your works even after it's been shared? Where do you draw the line?

2. Accessibility

- a. Tell me more about your creative process: where do you draw inspiration from for your designs and what is your end goal in terms of visual effect (emotional impact, etc)?
- b. What do you prioritize most in a creative project? What are important considerations (public perception, etc).
- c. Tell me about a project you feel strongly about: what was the creation process like and what message does the work send?
- d. How do you hope for the public to perceive or interact with your work; is there an aspect of practicality you consider? How do you balance this with artistry?
- e. Do you feel that digital/public art is an accessible industry? What are potential barriers to accessibility? How do you personally counter those obstacles?
- f. What do you hope to see more of in the future? How do you envision your contribution to that future?
- g. What do you feel is the relationship between technology and art? Do you think that capital is inherent in this dynamic? How do you see this relationship developing over time?
- h. Do you think digital art should be considered as public art? How do virtual platforms shape the work you create in terms of materiality and marketing?
- i. More specifically, is digital art more or less accessible than their traditional counterparts? Is this accessibility important and how do you engage with this notion in your practice?

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