The Work of Charity in the Age of Digital Reproduction

By Niall Lynch

There is nothing easier to praise than charity. It is, indeed, seen as the charity given to charity. The lavish tip society gives to the most attentive waiter or waitress, who has been waiting on someone else.

And this is the difficulty of praising it. Because, in doing so, we can subtly trivialize what it is we are praising. A nice pat on the head. Good boy. Here's a lollipop. And are we not wonderful people for saying so? Praise of charity runs the risk of degenerating into self-congratulatory kitsch. Hence the dilemma facing the person tasked with providing this praise in a meaningful way. A dilemma I find myself in at this moment, in writing about Piso Roma's charitable exhibit "Circulos Virtuosas". And I am happy to be here.

Happy because the very nature of this undertaking, and the social and technological contexts it both assumes and exploits, provides an opportunity to reflect upon the role of both art and charity in a digitized world of infinite reproduction. Which is itself another act of charity.

Thinking about this dilemma led me to recall the great philosopher Walter Benjamin's book, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production" (*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*), published in 1935. In the middle of a decade when the fetishizing of the advancements of industrial technology, particularly by fascist movements and governments, was reaching a crescendo. Being a German philosopher, his argument, and style of argument, are of course very complex and often obscure. But his basic understanding of the subject he poses to himself for analysis is very important to what is happening today, even if in ways he could not himself have anticipated. So it is worth at least summarizing his point of view before we go any further.

Benjamin begins with the observation that until "the age of mechanical reproduction", reproducing any work of art was a very difficult, painstaking process that often involved as much skill, effort and time as the creation of the original. The copyist had to be almost as skillful as the original artist (which is still true of art forgery today). Because of this, the reproductions could not diminish or threaten the worth of the original. At most, they could create more interest in experiencing the original, which only added to its

value. Ancient forms of reproduction, then, were publicity for the original, not a replacement for it.

But this asymmetric dynamic was reversed, according to Benjamin, with the invention of photography. Because photography could infinitely, and cheaply, reproduce not only life observed in real time, in the real world, but also any and every work of art. Photography, to Benjamin, is the first type of art that is inherently mechanical. It is not a secondary way of producing something non-mechanical. This revolution in turn transformed the work of art into an infinitely reproducible set of transactions within the nexus of capitalist exchange.

This transformation led to another that is perhaps more fateful. The process of mechanical reproduction, once perfected, severed the work of art from what Benjamin calls its “aura”. That is to say the rich accumulation of cultural and historical significances the original work of art incorporates over time. The aura of the work of art allows it to evolve like a living thing, absorbing new meanings and expelling old ones, receiving the ability to represent new realities that could not have been imagined when it was originally created. Mechanical reproduction, however, erases this process, by freezing the original like a fly trapped in the amber of a photograph, where it will never change or become something new in the eyes of new beholders.

The final triumph of mechanical reproduction becomes its ability to require that art be produced in such a way that it can be easily reproduced in an infinite series. Thus obliterating the very possibility of an “original”. The art of Andy Warhol represents the end-game of this process. It is the processes of mechanical production that now define what art must be. Art becomes the copy, because it has no inherent value otherwise.

So what can all this philosophizing mean when applied to an auction of donated artworks in support of cultural bloggers and critics on the internet? Let us answer this question with another question: What would Benjamin’s analysis look like if applied to the age of digital reproduction, rather than to the age of mechanical reproduction?

On the surface it would seem that digitization represents yet another avatar, and a higher evolution, of what mechanical reproduction introduced into our experience of art. Yet this would be a mistake, because this perception does not detect the irony involved in the relations between the two processes. A relation of conquest masquerading as continuity. Because digitization, and its home on the internet, have displaced the mechanical copy as the center of artistic value in the same way the mechanical copy replaced the artistic original. For in the digital world, there are no copies. Only things that appear and disappear, without origin or destination. Graphic representations on the internet cannot be copies of something preceding them. No one asks whether that JPEG is an “original” or the copy of another. It would be considered a ridiculous

question. They cannot be copies to begin with, since no “original” has ever existed. They exist in an eternal now, where they will be replaced in a second by other representations that spring from nothing, and collapse back into nothing when you hit “refresh”. Their disappearance no more original than their appearance.

As interesting as this phenomenon may be (or not - your choice), the crucial thing to note is that this obliteration of the distinction between original and reproduction also obliterates the power relations between them, regardless of how those power relations may have evolved and reversed in the past. Which means, in turn, that their economic relations - and the market forces created by them - no longer exist either. Because this was the heart of Benjamin’s argument. That the dialectic between original and reproduction was only superficially cultural, but fundamentally *economic*. A master-slave relationship serving capital, no matter which polarity was dominant at any given time.

Because this is so, the meaning of the act of charity also fundamentally changes. As do the conditions of its possibility. Throughout the history of art, until very very recently, the fundamental act of charity was to the artist. An act of charity embedded within the artist’s relationship with a wealthy patron, who sponsored his art, who required of him nothing but to create art that would enhance the patron’s own status. It was a social contract from high to low.

Yet in Circulos Virtuosas we see the reversal of this ancient feudal bond. For in this case it is artists who are creating the act of charity. It is artists who are donating to those who would otherwise have nothing. It is artists who have become the patrons. Which means the objects of their charity - the art bloggers who selflessly give their intelligence, labor and passion to these artists - have now become the new artists. And all of this is occurring without the need for feudal social relations or economic slavery. It is the act of charity that has inherited the aura that once encased the work of art, liberating it from its bondage.

Perhaps what we should be celebrating is that Benjamin’s brilliant analysis allows us to see this, and see as well that, in being wrong about the primacy of the original, he was right about everything else.