

### **Authenticity and its vicissitudes—traversing the analog-digital-analog spectrum**

During the course of the next few pages I will endeavour an attempt to map the trace of the artist in “the age of mechanical reproduction,” by considering the im/material practice of representation in the art of Max Ronnersjö, who is problematizing notions of uniqueness, authenticity, and the serialization aspect inherent to hyper-commercialized market-calibrated art.<sup>1</sup> In using several intermediaries between the stroke of his hand and the final artwork, Ronnersjö divorces himself physically from his drawings while nonetheless leaving his mark on the canvas. He creates his drawings digitally on a computer or touchscreen device, his cognitive vision mediated in the first instance through the stroke of his hand—this is the ground of the timeless craftsmanship. What comes next, however, is the point at which the flow of creative energy, its auterual origin as it were, disseminate on the grid of possibly endless reproduction. After the creation of the digital drawing, the artwork is emailed to an online print service where it is printed on a canvas and delivered back to the artist or the exhibition hall. What can be said of the status of the material outcome of this im/material methodology?

Max Ronnersjö was born in 1984, in Stockholm, Sweden. The working title of his exhibition is simply, *iPad Drawings project, 2014*. After working several months as a restaurant runner, Ronnersjö tells me, he had the cash to buy an iPad. With it he was now able to continue his project involving drawings made on tablet devices (prior to this, created on the much smaller screen of his iPhone). He maintains that drawing, to him, always has been about the gesture of the artist and, secondarily, the lines that constitute the actual image. The immediate connection between the finger and the touch screen, he tells me, provides a feeling of closeness with the essence of drawing: *gesture*.

Making drawings and sketches, often outside bars or in the park, his subjects include bar- and restaurant-related things; wine glasses, openers, foods, but also flowers, portraits, caricatures, and abstractions; having crafted black-and-white drawings for a long time, the move to the iPad platform sparked the idea of his upcoming exhibition.

Ronnersjö strives for the feel of stock imagery, generic visual signs, logos; *is there any aura of authenticity to be found?* What are the implications of cutting the middle man, the physical labor of painting a canvas? Is Ronnersjö providing a strategy for trivializing the fetishism of the unique object, the magic of the commodity?

He wants to show that the craftsmanship, the trace of the artist, is as present as ever—even within the seemingly abstract digital paradigm. Through his stripped and clean paintings Ronnersjö strives to show us that *the determining factor of capitalist relations resides in the material mode of production*.

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<sup>1</sup> Visit his website for an overview at <http://maxronnersjo.se/> See also the interview at <http://radarmagazine.se/arts/in-the-studio/max-ronnersjo/>

Within the context of the art gallery, the serialized, industrial, impersonal, even cheap feel of Ronnersjö's printed canvases gains an edge; even irritating some of the guests, a visitor at one of his prior exhibitions equated Ronnersjö's paintings with those of pre-fabricated department store art; to Ronnersjö, however, this was a good reaction.

Many of his artworks takes no more than fifteen seconds to produce.

In contrast to other artists working within the digital realm, who uses the Internet as their canvas (see, for example, Rafaël Rozendaal<sup>2</sup>), Ronnersjö utilizes the digital realm as archive, as a space of documentation, rather than an integral tool in the production of the art itself. Working within the framework of artistic craftsmanship—no matter how many instances of mediation between hand and final product—Ronnersjö maintains that the message resides in the gesture. *The trace of the artist remains*. This methodology represents a highly developed understanding of the experience of a gap between the world of digital abstraction and that of unique materiality. Following this, I will attempt to sketch an ediface bridging the gap over which the trace of the artist travels.

In order to map out some of the theoretical critique of the authenticity of artworks, let us begin by considering the work of Walter Benjamin. In his seminal article *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, he maintains that the artwork has always been reproducible by the hand of man, but that the “mechanical reproduction of a work of art, however, represents something new.”<sup>3</sup> Benjamin notes that, “around 1900 technical reproduction had reached a standard that not only permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art and thus to cause the most profound change in their impact upon the public; *it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes* [my italics].”<sup>4</sup> Here, in speaking of photography and the cinema, Benjamin touches upon something crucial, namely *the art* of reproduction itself.

In stating that even the most elaborate and skilled reproduction still lacks one fundamental element inherent to the original, “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be,” Benjamin maintains the view that “the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.”<sup>5</sup> Hence the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction loses its “aura,” its unique existence, when it is removed from the sphere of tradition and inserted into the endless plurality of the copy. Again, Benjamin notes how “the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility,” a trait certainly apparent in many a contemporary artistic expressions—Ronnersjö's practice included.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Internet artist Rafaël Rozendaal uses the Internet itself as his canvas, have a look at <http://www.newrafael.com/websites>

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Marxist Internet Archive), <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Before this brief outline of Benjamin's essay is complete, I need to examine some of his interesting statements about the nature of the cinema and its proclaimed inauthenticity. The correspondence in appearance between theatre and cinema, cause Benjamin to differentiate the two by highlighting the lack of contact between the film actor and the cinema audience in comparison to the stage actor and the theatre patrons: "The [cinema] audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera."<sup>7</sup> Aura, for Benjamin, tied to presence—in this case the presence of the actor—cannot be replicated:

The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However, the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays.<sup>8</sup>

This statement seems strange and somewhat confused and brings us on a short detour to film theorist Christian Metz who, during the 1970s, developed elaborate theories on the ambiguous state of the cinematic signifier. In the theatre, Metz argues, the absent fiction is (mis)perceived as present due to the actual presence of the actors. However, in the case of cinema what we end up with is a kind of double absence, the pictures and their fiction both absent; this (mis)perception of presence rests on a fundamental absence. In this way the theatre invokes *an absence through a presence*, in cinema however, *an absence invokes yet another absence*.<sup>9</sup>

How could it be feasible to claim that a contemporary actor could project the "aura" of a Scottish king who died in 1057? Disregarding this impossible Benjaminian claim, the overall argument of presences and absences (regarding the authenticity and non-authenticity of an object of art) still remains problematic. That which is invoked *through* representation, be it through theatre or cinema, is always absent; the absent signified of the absent theatrical fiction as well as the absent signifier of the absent film actors represented onscreen, *in addition* to the absent signified of the absent cinematic fiction.

Perhaps there never was any aura to begin with, no authentic starting point to trace, only appearances from the get go? What if the concept of aura is an idealistic delusion that has no place within a revolutionary materialism?

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Rushton and Gary Bettinson, *What is Film Theory. An Introduction to Contemporary Debates* (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2010), 43f.

If the supposedly violent paradigmatic shift in visual representation exposed a gap, a loss in aura—as described above; what then does the “digital revolution” entail for the representational practices of visual culture? The fundamental difference between analog and digital representation resides at the level of the sign. Whereas these are different techniques for rendering visual the ontology of our lifeworld, neither of them robs the sequent image of any “aura.” Just because the sign of an analog photograph with its crystallizations is of another order than that of the pixels of a digital photography, does not alter the ontology of that which was depicted nor that which reaches us—perceptually different, yes—albeit *in both cases always already embedded within the representational paradigm of visual art*. The painting, the analog photograph, and the digital image—all of them, in the last instance simulations of material phenomena; different regimes, yes; however, no aura to be lost in any case, only shades of material representation.

Much of the criticism of technology focus on the perceived loss of the sense of touch, manifested in such expressions as Henri Focillon’s description of photography as the “handless eye.”<sup>10</sup> Focillon argues that: “Even when the photograph represents crowds of people it is the image of solitude, because the hand never intervenes to spread over it the warmth and flow of human life.”<sup>11</sup> Here again, we come across the nonsensical notion of authenticity through the logic of a mystical touch. What kind of magic is Focillon writing about here? The representation of “crowds of people” never was more than just that, “the image of solitude,” whether painted by hand or photographed. If we go along with this, apparently overwhelming need to apply the illusion of magic to the handmade artwork, why then not go to the end? Is it not a fact that the camera is manmade, even *handmade*? Is it not also a fact that the frame of the photograph is the result of an ever so human agent? Even if one lose oneself in idealist notions of authenticity as magic touch, there is a certain fallacy in this line of reasoning, since the camera is as materially grounded as the easel brush.

Craft theorist David Pye distinguished between “workmanship of certainty,” technological workmanship, and the “workmanship of risk,” manufacturing by hand—the latter of the two, the only one offering traces of humanity.<sup>12</sup> How then to describe the methodology of Ronnersjö whose craftsmanship involves both that of certainty and risk? The *risk* apparent in any analog line drawn by his hand, and their subsequent crossing over to the *certainty* of the digital pixels of the data file?<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew Rampley, “Visual Practices in the Age of Industry,” in *Exploring Visual Culture: Definitions, Concepts, Contexts*, ed. Matthew Rampley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 182f.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Index of Max Ronnersjö’s drawings at <http://maxronnersjo.tumblr.com/tagged/drawing/>

Florian Cramer expounds some very interesting, albeit intuitive, views in one of his articles about digital art. In it he argues that most digital media, in the technical sense, are *analog*.<sup>14</sup> What does he mean by this? Well for starters, the electricity surging through the computer chip with its arbitrary, undifferentiated values is analog. “Only through filtering,” Cramer continues, “can one make a certain sub-range of high voltages correspond to a ‘zero’ and another sub-range of low voltages to a ‘one.’”<sup>15</sup> Going further, all digital sound, however distinct and “countable” when stored, immediately goes analog when turned into sound waves. Giving yet another, perhaps surprising example, Cramer notes how the LCD screen is a digital-analog system, digital on account of the countable pixels, analog on account of the light emitted by these very same pixels—a light measured on an analog continuum.<sup>16</sup> Not to mud up the clarity of Cramer’s account, the next paragraph is cited at length:

Consequently, there is no such thing as digital media, only digital or digitised information: chopped-up numbers, letters, symbols and any other abstracted units, as opposed to continuous, wave-like signals such as physical sounds and visible light. Most ‘digital media’ devices are in fact analog-to-digital-to-analog converters: an MP3 player with a touchscreen interface for example, takes analog, non-discrete gesture input and translates it into binary control instructions which in turn trigger the computational information processing of a digital file, ultimately decoding it into an analog electrical signal which another analog device, the electromagnetic mechanism of a speaker or headphone, turns into analog sound waves. The same principle applies to almost any so-called digital media device, from a photo or video camera to an unmanned military drone. Our senses can only perceive information in the form of non-discrete signals such as sound or light waves. Therefore, anything aesthetic (in the literal sense of aisthesis, perception) is, by strict technical definition, analog.<sup>17</sup>

Here, one of the fundamental aspects of Ronnersjö’s artistic methodology is laid out, theorized, and to some extent clarified: the non-discrete, non-differentiated stroke of his hand, his “workmanship of risk” as it were, like a creative ray of light—or wave of sound—reverberating through the glass of the tablet device—analogically expressed—digitally recorded—analogically printed.

The everyday definition of the “digital,” adhere to an idealist fiction of abstracted immateriality.<sup>18</sup> This fiction, Cramer notes, takes on metonymical functions, so that anything connected to the world of digitality and computers, can be called digital; he himself uses the example of an advertisement where a camera tripod is marketed as “digital.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Florian Cramer, “What is ‘Post-Digital’”, *HZ-Journal*, no. 19 (July 2014), <http://hz-journal.org/n19/cramer.html>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Advertisement at <http://www.hz-journal.org/n19/img/fc/4.jpg>

Karl Marx noted long ago that the ruling ideology was idealistic in nature. This obviously still holds sway today, when the discourse on the mystified sphere of digitality manages to incorporate physical tripods, gadgets, and even material practices into its territory! Internet is material, a physical factory, not—as discourse goes—a cloud of idealistic steam which in its utter immateriality has now started to envelop even the material world.

This is the ultimate ideological inversion.

In trying to keep the ideological appearance of immateriality to the Internet intact (concealing the infrastructures and sweatshops—the seedy underbelly that keeps it all going), the “digitalization” of *banal material things* serves as a strategy to heighten the perceived feel of *innate immateriality* to the “digital realm,” the periphery token gadgets presented as (pseudo-)digital, in an effort to maintain the gooey idealistic core to the bourgeois dream of “the Net.”

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The aspect of mass-(re)producibility and open-ended seriality of Ronnersjö’s analog-digital-analog art, add to a critical understanding of how the workings of commodity fetishism twist the consumerist mind. By way of the altogether divorced production-methodology of his work, it lies in the nature of his art that it cannot be signed or marked. The trace is where it is *at*, forever infused by the gesture, no need for scribbles of signature the sole purpose of which to sustain the age-old obligation to Authenticity.

Ronnersjö’s approach exposes one of the fundamental ideological illusions expressed within the art-capitalism paradigm, and is a direct critique of commodity fetishism—the fetish component, exposed in its utter banality as a naive, idealist fiction. *The authenticity, in this case, outsourced to a certificate.*

In a recent conversation I had with Ronnersjö, he emphasized the likeness of his art to ready-made department store art, adapted for the masses of the market, then he added: “Isn’t this kind of department store art-commodity, albeit gallery-priced, *the ultimate form of art?*”