

# The Aura of Art

By Christina Tan



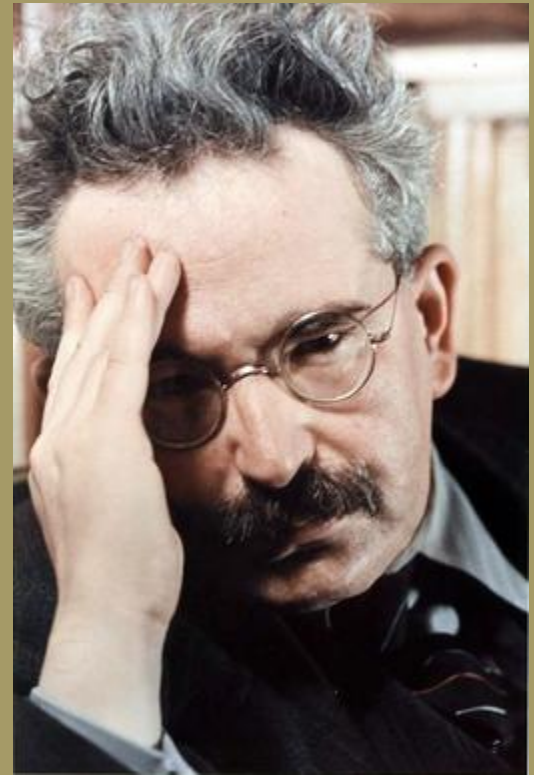
*“An ancient statue of Venus, for example, stood in a different traditional context with the Greeks, who made it an **object of veneration**, than with the clerics of the Middle Ages, who viewed it as an **ominous idol**.”*

*“Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its **aura**.”*

– Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*

# Walter Benjamin

- Born July 15, 1892  
Berlin, German Empire
- German Jewish philosopher  
and cultural critic
- Introduced the idea of an “aura”  
in art and the loss of it in  
reproduction.



# What Defines “Aura” in Art?

- A unique identity
- Ritualistic/Cult value
- Rooted in tradition
- Context in history
- Distance from the viewer

# Uniqueness

- Though intangible, an artwork's "aura" gives it its own presence.
- A sense of authenticity.
- A one of a kind existence in the world.



# Ritual and Tradition

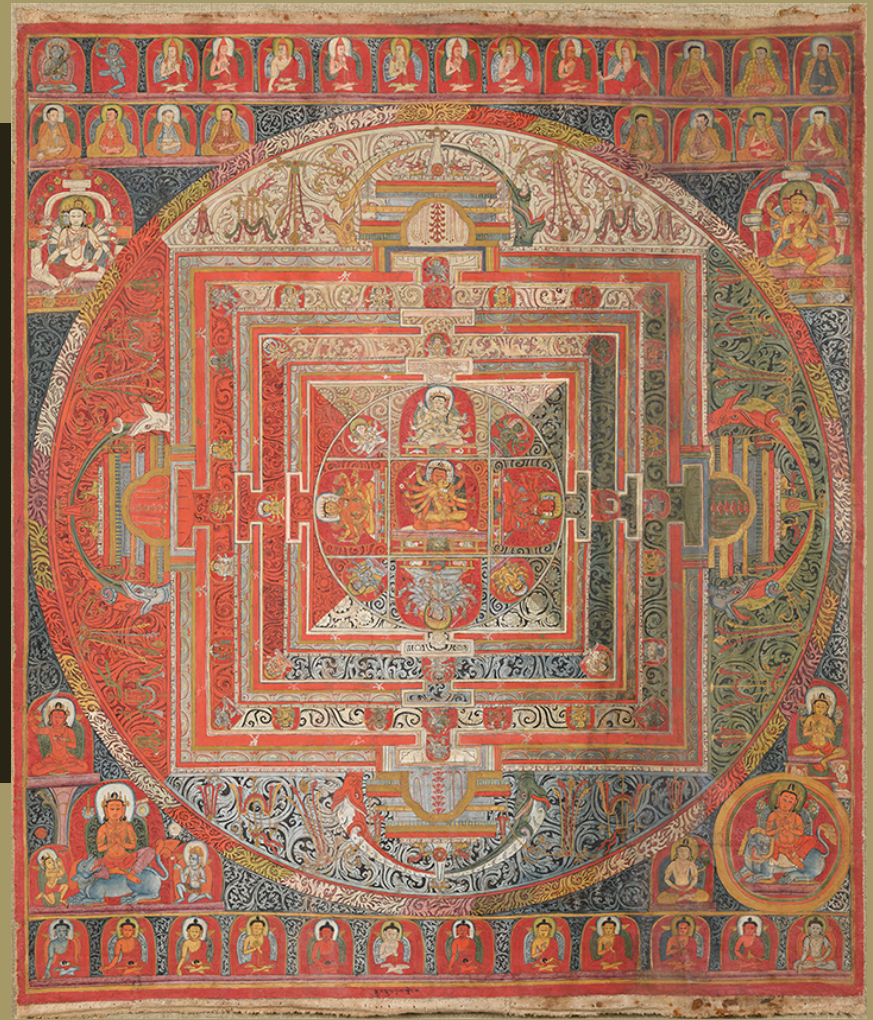
The uniqueness of art is intrinsically bound to tradition.

It contains its own context and cult value.

This here is a statue of the Buddha from Sarnath, 4th century CE. People came to it for prayer because they believe in the spiritual power it holds.



- In Indian religions, a mandala is the artistic depiction of the universe.
- It aids in spiritual guidance and meditation. Its presence also denotes a sacred place.
- Without its ritual function, it would have little meaning or context.
- It would be without aura!



# Context in Time

- The context of art in time goes hand in hand with its function.
- Production of artwork is reflective of its time period/history.



Terra Cotta Army



Cave paintings



Mausoleum





*“Seated Woman of Çatalhöyük”*, made from baked-clay.

- It is estimated to be from around 6000 BC.
- Generally believed to depict a fertile Mother Goddess due to her pregnant-looking form.
- That tells us that during those times, in the context of history, they valued fertility and life.
- There are many small statues similar to the pregnant mother, unique to this era in time.

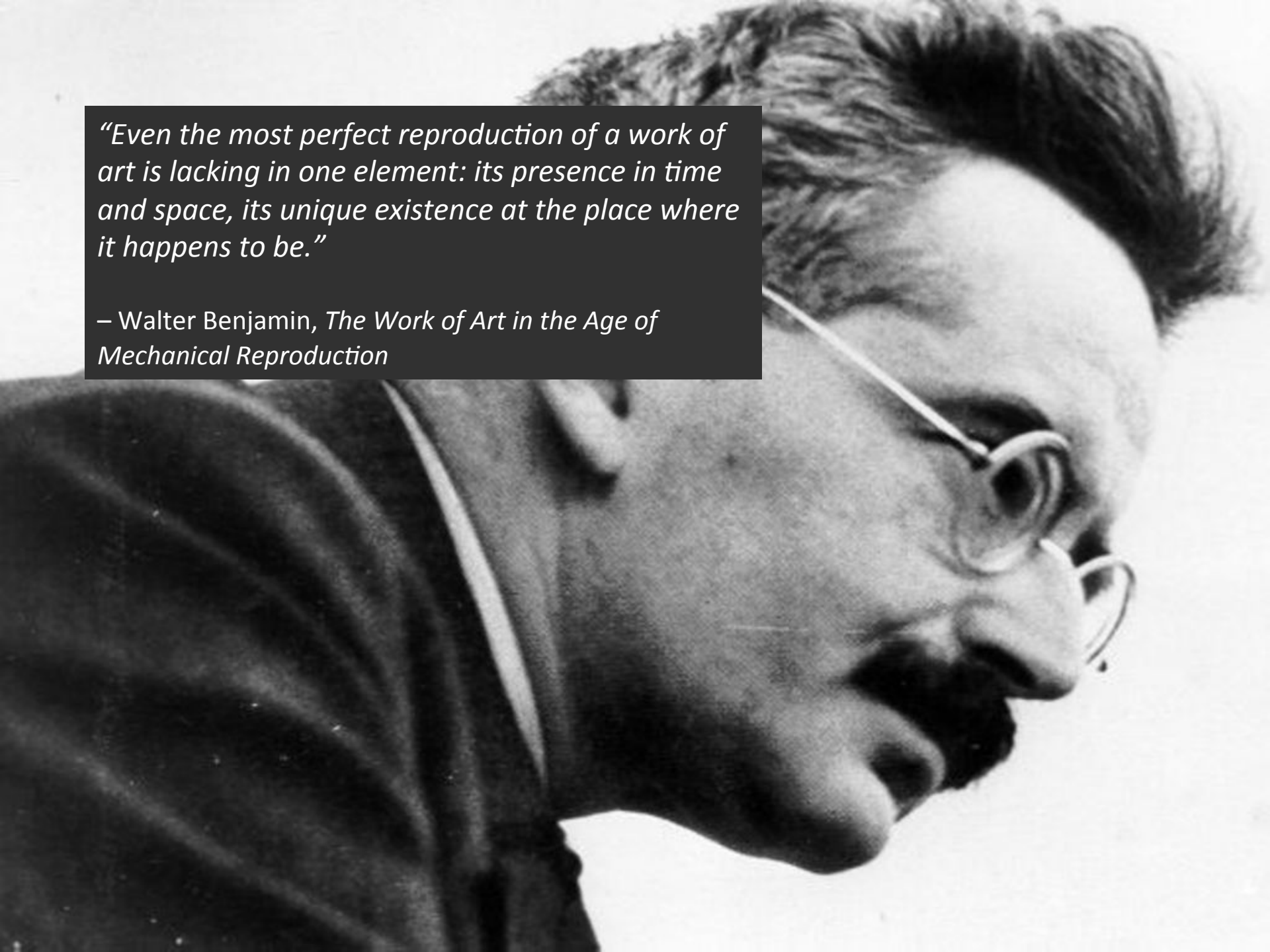


# Distance

The distance of art also lends to its natural aura. A sight that is only available in one place is unique to that place alone.

For example, the paintings inside the Sistine Chapel that cover as high as the ceiling itself.

To move it outside the chapel would remove its aura as well. It would lose its significance.



*“Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”*

– Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*



# The Decay of Aura

- As reproduction of artwork becomes more convenient, the aura of the original diminishes.
- People desire to close the distance of aura and thereby accept reproduction, overcoming the uniqueness in art.
- Art and its aura have a “parasitical dependence” with ritual, but now art is being selected for its exhibition value over cult value.





- Lithography was surpassed by photography for providing images quickly and efficiently. Photography therefore became a vehicle for political means and for documenting events- “Evidence” of reality.



- Theater was surpassed by film, which could manipulate the audience’s eyes into seeing what the director wanted them to see. The camera is always in control in a movie, whereas a theater goer always has full view of the stage.

- Aura is lost** in these media because of how easily duplicated they are. A photo can be copied, a movie can be watched more than once, and the content would always be the same each time.



*"Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former."*

*– Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*



# My Thoughts



With the continued advancement of technology and the convenience that comes with it, Benjamin's "aura" of art may be further lost. After all, taking a photo these days is as easy as taking out your cell phone.

However, I feel that despite that, it'll only make an artwork's aura even stronger. It'll create an even greater appreciation for the unique.