WALTER BENJAMIN ON SNAPCHAT

Return of the aura ???

a final presentation by sharada tolton
This presentation is a THOUGHT EXPERIMENT:

Does Walter Benjamin’s theory of art and mechanical reproduction apply to the digital age? Is the “aura” fully absent in digital art?
first: WHAT IS “AURA”?

Benjamin defines an artwork’s “aura” as its "embeddedness...in the context of tradition" (Benjamin, Part V).

The aura of a work of art is the material residue of the historical circumstances of its creation (III).
The artwork holds ritual value because of its uniqueness “here and now” (III).
second: HOW DOES MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION SUPPRESS THE AURA?

Precisely by taking away the here-and-now-ness of the work of art. Mass produced art doesn’t contain the historicity of its original making.
Benjamin’s case study:

FILM
Benjamin argues that **IN FILM:**

- Reproducibility replaces cult value with **exhibition value** (IX)
- **Subject to intervention** by a group of experts, the actor’s performance is more **test-like** than ritualistic (X)
- The **editing** process strips away ritual “single stroke” value (VII)
Now that we’ve reviewed the basics, it’s time for the thought experiment:
Digital-reproduced video on social media is a recent evolution of photo and film, but does it lack “aura” like the earlier forms?
criterion 1

“now-ness”
With “disappearing” media, Snapchat and Instagram simulate the fleeting immediacy of perceiving a handmade artwork:

our experience of the video or photo comes to exist in a unique moment in time.
This effect only intensifies with LIVE STORY on Instagram
For which I receive a notification saying,

“@lauren_artgirl started a *Live Video*,
catch it before it ends”
The app’s authors remind me of the fleeting now-ness of the video.
criterion 2

“here-ness”

"Step into my office 😎"
On social media, the network imitates the uniqueness of place.
Some accounts are private, signalling exclusivity, while others are barely followed, signalling obscurity.
and columns of comments show the historical residues of viewer reactions.
So is social media really NETWORKING and LIVE STREAMING aura?????
Does a disappearing image or live video successfully simulate the “strange tissue of space and time”? (IX) _
To resolve the question, I turn to **exhibition value**
Despite these feints at cult value and uniqueness, social media is powerful expressly because of its potentially massive, simultaneous audience.
The *exhibition value* of this massive audience is returned in brand sponsorship and in some cases, organized political action.
Benjamin would say it is up to us whose political agendas are advanced by this media.
If it’s in our hands, let’s tip Instagram and Snapchat in favor of the people, let’s follow the corners of these social networks where otherwise voiceless people are given voice.
Sources: