

Slicing and Stretching Time: Luke DuBois and Digital Manipulability

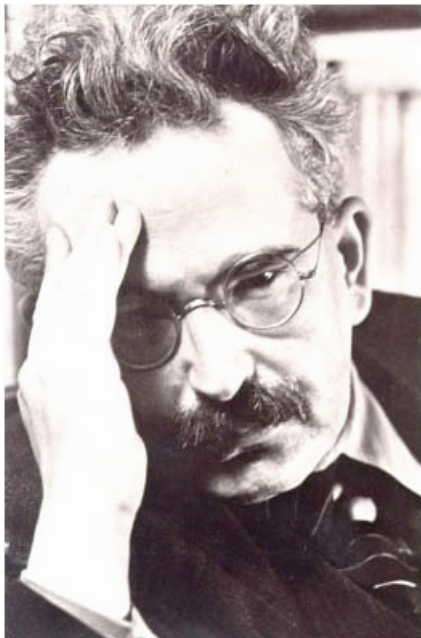
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The subject of this brief essay is temporal scale and its manipulation in the work of composer, performer, digital artist and filmmaker, R. Luke DuBois. In particular, I consider the relationship of this work to the relatively recent idea of “infinite digital reproducibility” in the context of Walter Benjamin’s idea of mechanical or technical reproducibility and what Benjamin saw as its affect on art.

Instead of thinking of the digital as a kind of reproducibility, I assert that it is better thought of in terms of the manipulability it allows and ultimately fosters. For this musing, which is both brief and incomplete, I focus on two works: the multi-sited, digitally-determined, text-based piece *Hindsight is Always 20/20* (2008) and the musical composition/performance *SSB* (2008) to help tease out how we can think of its paradigmatic relationship to the so-called “mechanical” reproduction discussed in Benjamin’s essay.

This exercise works through the problematics of Benjamin’s theory of mechanical or technical reproducibility; Luke DuBois’s digital art and its potential difference; and the ever-present problem of degree versus distinction in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century art and culture. In short: is work like that of DuBois just a step on an evolutionary ladder first drawn by Benjamin in 1930s Germany, or is it in fact a completely new phenomenon in the same sense that Benjamin pinpointed photography as such a rupture?



Walter Benjamin

In his seminal and far-reaching 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” the German/Jewish intellectual and cultural critic, Walter Benjamin, argued “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.” Benjamin defined the aura of the traditional work of art as based upon its status as a unique object and dependent upon the presence of an “original.” The presence of the original, according to Benjamin, is a prerequisite for the concept of authenticity. The unique object has its own history over the time of its existence. This history is characterized in the work of art by both its physical condition and its changing ownership status (provenance), each of which contributes to its unique aura.

Benjamin points out at the start of his essay that art has always been reproducible. His survey starts with the examples of students copying masters and moves on to the most rudimentary processes of Greek founding and stamping. Arguing that mechanical, or what may be better translated from the German as technical reproduction, advanced intermittently over time, but with accelerated intensity. Benjamin states emphatically that technical reproduction of works of art “represented something new.”

Benjamin was concerned with this something new because he felt that the superstructure that supported traditional art in his time—modern times—was seriously out of synch with the lived experience of modern peoples. Significantly, for Benjamin, around the turn of the 20th art itself. According to Benjamin, it is this new base altering status that marks a distinct and inherently political shift in art.

Unlike manual copies, such technical reproduction, primarily photography and film, resisted the status of forgery for two reasons: 1) the process of technical reproduction was more independent from the original, as with enlarged photography and slow motion film, and 2) technical reproduction can put the copy “into situations which would be out of reach” of the original. Above all, to



R. Luke DuBois at Pulse, 2009
(*Hindsight*, 2008, letterpress prints in background.)

Benjamin, technical reproduction “enables the original to meet the beholder halfway,” as in the photograph of a painting in one’s study or the phonographic recording of a concert played in the parlor.

According to Benjamin, this situation must be understood to somehow affect the original object. On that point he states:

“The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of the presence is always depreciated...In the case of the art object, a most sensitive nucleus—namely its authenticity—is interfered with. (...) The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that it is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.”

What better way to describe the affect of digital reproduction than a state where “substantive duration ceases to matter?”

Known for its almost uncanny prescience, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” has become a classic object of study and debate. Truth be told, however, Benjamin could not have seen how ubiquitous technical reproduction’s effect would become and how much of a change it would really wreak. This is obvious. No one would argue now with the assertion that technical reproduction not only changed art but also essentially changed how we live. It would also be hard to argue that the digital age does not represent a significant, if not necessarily absolute, shift of its own. What is not so obvious, then, is what actually constitutes the nature of the digital shift.

Does digital reproduction stand as a new moment of transformation or just a fantastic fruition of the ideas laid out by Benjamin about the withering of the aura of the work of art in the wake of mechanical reproduction? Or, could we assert that the digital age is characterized by the withering of the aura of mechanical/technical reproduction? In this essay I make the case that a qualitative shift based more on manipulability than simply on reproduction could in fact be significant enough to at least deserve such consideration. I also argue here that an artist like Luke DuBois should be considered in this discourse of reproducibility and manipulability and can help us think about the possible distinction between digital vs. mechanical/technical reproduction.



Luke DuBois performing

R. Luke Dubois was born in New Jersey in 1975. He is a composer, artist, and performer who explores the temporal, verbal, and visual structures of cultural and personal ephemera. He holds a Ph.D. in music composition from Columbia University in New York City. His own origin narrative includes the story that at nine years old he asked his father for a bicycle and was given a bus pass and computer instead. Upon interacting with the machine, he quickly noticed that holding the space bar down for too long produced a tone. From this, he declares, he became a computer musician. He is an active visual and musical collaborator and the co-author of *Jitter*, a software suite for the real-time manipulation of matrix data. He appears on nearly twenty-five albums both individually and as part of the avant-garde electronic group The Freight Elevator Quartet. He currently performs as part of *Bioluminescence*, a duo with vocalist Lesley Flanigan that explores the modality of the human voice, and in *Fair Use*, a trio with Zach Layton and Matthew Ostrowski, that looks at our accelerating culture through electronic performance and remixing of cinema.

Hindsight is Always 20/20 (2008) emerged from Dubois’s desire to make a political piece during the 2008 election season. Declaring himself an artist in residence in the University of California Santa Barbara’s American Presidency Project (there was not an actual position), Dubois settled in to survey this ambitious digital archiving project that declares itself to be “the most comprehensive collection of resources pertaining to the study of the Presidency of the United States.”

In time, DuBois zeroed in on the State of the Union addresses as his object of focus. He was attracted to the facts that the addresses are the only constitutionally mandated speeches/texts a president has to deliver and that the delivery is to the Congress who as representatives of the people are in effect the president’s boss. Once pinpointed, Dubois worked with a statistician and a computer engineer to plot an algorithm that would analyze the speeches side by side. Slicing away at the texts, he used word frequency as the meter and compiled lists of words uttered by each president.



Hindsight in Denver 2008 Public commission for the City of Denver. Forty-three fluorescent lightboxes, weather-resistant aluminum; 41 eyecharts, 1 title, 1 synopsis. Each light box: 72" x 48" x 6" / 183 x 122 x 15 cm

First commissioned by Denver as a public art project shown during the 2008 Democratic National Convention there, Hindsight presented the lists of the most unique words of each president across the speeches in the form the Snellen eye chart. A play on the idea of political vision, the charts seen as a whole reveals much about each president and his times, while also being carefully critical of what such a reductive analysis can tell us. Take the case of Johnson, for instance, whose most frequently used, unique word was “tonight.” This was the first televised state of the union address and the administration was keen to highlight its live and broad reaching nature by emphasizing its real time nature.

The project ultimately took a number of forms both physically and in location. It existed as publically installed light box installations in Denver and at Philadelphia’s National Constitution Center on Independence Mall. A set of letterpress

prints of the eye charts were produced in New York by his gallery and shown first at the Weisman Art Museum in Minneapolis, coincident with the 2008 Republican National Convention in St. Paul. That edition of the print portfolio was then acquired by the Weisman and is now a part of its permanent collection. It travels to the Ulrich at the University of Kansas in Wichita this fall to be exhibited during the gubernatorial election. Another set of this edition of the prints was shown at bitforms, the artist’s gallery in Manhattan. The project is also posted on the artist’s personal website.

These different sitings allow for a larger and more far flung audience, in effect bringing the work closer to the contemporary version of Benjamin’s masses. Sometimes the different iterations of the project were literally simultaneous, negating further the idea of an or at least one original Hindsight. In addition, the manner of DuBois’s practice or technique of rearranging the historical texts in such a way that could not be practically done by most of us without the help of sophisticated computer equipment telescopes time to bring distinct eras together and also closer to us. Through both its wide variety of essentially equal “originals” presented in unique and varied art contexts and through crossing the texts with one another and comparing word frequency, Hindsight brings us at once closer to the original(s) and at the same time devalues its/their aura as unique untouchable object(s)/event(s). In these ways Dubois’s Hindsight enacts the Benjaminian thesis of meeting the beholder halfway.

For SSB (2008), Lesley Flanigan performed The Star Spangled Banner and DuBois used digital technology to stretch the piece over four years—the duration of an American presidential term. Stretched out in this way Flanigan’s voice reveals surprising variation in single notes and tones, something DuBois is keen to highlight both as a composer and a media-based artist. This sort of literal manipulation of our experience of time speaks to the ways in which we do not necessarily know what we think we do.

Of course artists, particularly film makers such as the Dadas and Surrealists, used the mechanical aspects of their media to play with time. Exploiting sped up and slowed down playback and even reversing film, those artists – like DuBois - sought to critically alter how we experience and ultimately understand our everyday existence. In the case of SSB, DuBois uses the digital format to the extreme—something not practically possible with film or sound tape. The digital allows for such radical stretching without distortion through its ability to focus on and present very small bits of information producing an acoustic magnification that allows us to hear what we could not before.

Near the end of his life, physicist Richard Feynman commented on what he saw as the frontiers for the scientists who would follow him. One of those frontiers was the realm of the very, very small, where scientists were beginning to discover that long held rules of physics did not apply. Like Einstein before him, Feynman pinpointed scale as a key element for knowing—and not knowing—the world we are part of. Einstein, of course, isolated time and remade what we thought we knew of it. Though



HINDSIGHT. Hindsight is Always 20/20, 2008. Installation view at the National Constitution Center. Public commission for the City of Denver. Forty-three fluorescent lightboxes, weather-resistant aluminum; 41 eye charts, 1 title, 1 synopsis. Each light box: 72" x 48" x 6" / 183 x 122 x 15 cm. Photo credit: Photos by Carol Feeley.



Philadelphia installation at night with viewers.

Einstein could never reconcile himself to the intellectual firestorm his key early theories unleashed, it was nonetheless beyond him to stop it even in his own time.

These historical details from the world of physics are relevant here because they highlight how much a shift in our perspective brought on by an acknowledgment of scale can alter our reality or, as Benjamin would say, bring on a “completely heretofore unknowable way of living.” This heightened attention necessarily comes in close and focuses on the most mundane and common elements of our lives. Although, as Benjamin points out, the effects of such revelations take a long time to truly permeate and alter the level of our everyday existence, some developments, such as photography for Benjamin, push us over—to use a popular contemporary phrase—the tipping point. I wonder whether the capability to so much more radically alter our sense of scale—especially that of temporal scale—is in fact a kind of revolution.

Through this brief musing on how these selected works by Luke DuBois exploit “reproduction” into a state better understood as one of manipulability, I can begin to believe that there is something distinct about “digital reproduction.” That distinction hinges on both the technical uniqueness but also the qualitative point of how and why manipulability is put to use in digital work. A key point of this effect can be clearly seen in DuBois’s work: the propensity to play with scale in the extreme that is not only possible but encouraged by the digital medium.

In the end, I believe that work such as DuBois’s may represent more than an evolutionary step in the withering of the aura of the work of art, as Benjamin described it. If we can use the tools at hand to actually make the unseeable and even the unknowable evident, or at least imaginable, art in its social, aesthetic, and technical contexts will have been put to work and to play, possibly changing, while not necessarily denying, the world we know, which may indeed be “something new,” as Benjamin would say.