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LEONARDO THINKS

Opinion: Something about Art

ISSN No: 1071-4391

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Originally published in: *Leonardo* Vol. 30, No. 2 (1997), pp. 164-166

Print: ISSN 0024-094X, Online : ISSN 1530-9282,

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1576437>.

I write fiction as well as nonfiction, and was alarmed when I found out that one of my published short stories, the novella "Love Over The Wires" that had appeared in *Wired* magazine [1], had been made available post-publication on the *Wired* site on the Internet. I was unable to figure out my reaction after all, the journalism I have produced has been available for years on countless electronic databases that I probably could not even afford to access myself; my reporting has been reprinted and sold to publications other than the ones I originally wrote it for without my permission; and work with my byline has been made part of reading-material packets by those who make money by teaching in the what-should-I-do-with-the-rest-of-my-life adult-education market. I shrug all this off. But news of the Internet version of my fiction provoked deep feelings of proprietaryness and violation-and I did not know why. Its digital rein-carnation disturbed me mightily. Other friends in the art world shared my upset, but they were no more capable than I was of articulating what was wrong.

Rationally, I knew people could photocopy the print pages where the story, or any of my other stories, had first appeared. And I still held the copyright; if film director Robert Altman wanted the screenrights, he would clearly still have to bicker with me. I know pioneer network thinkers such as Ted Nelson envisage an ideal universe where anyone can be a publisher/information provider and that anyone else can contract to buy material from any provider through the Internet once proper net-billing mechanisms are in place. I am aware of the massive intellectual property-copyright battles going on, both in the courts and in the minds of cyberthinkers. I even sympathize with the National Writer's Union, which has a test-case class-action suit going against several publishers who sold off secondary electronic rights of authors' works without giving those authors additional royalties.

But legal precedent is not the issue here; the concern is with how people think and feel about art, and not with the reworking of the machineries of commerce. There is a difference between fiction and reporting, between art and information. At least in the Western world (since the cathedral age), art is very much tied up with the cult of the individual. Context, provenance,



authentication: all of these matter not just to insure the tidyness of the art market, but to help one see and understand the work itself. If someone makes art-bothers to go through with the foolish, unremunerative, self-referential and beautifully useless act of creation by composing a song, painting a painting or writing a novel-then she is asserting her own blow against entropy and chaos. The imagined universe of a work of art is precisely an artist's simulated world-and to loosen control over that universe strikes deeply against what art has come to mean.

Painters care about how their paintings are framed and hung; writers choose what magazines they want to submit their work to. Once, through the wonders of digitization, art becomes unmoored, released from the artist's environmental controls, some-thing gets lost from the *aesthetic* calculi. A group of artists in New York in the 1970s began to assert permanent copyrights over their art, even after the works had been sold-as much because they wanted a say in how their works were reproduced as for any monetary benefit. Think of how versions of familiar songs as performed by amateurish bands can make one laugh, while the originals-straight from the exactitudes of the arranger and the sound engineer-made one want to dance; think of the vogue of releasing the director's cuts of previously released movies. There is some-thing fundamentally appealing about preserving the artist's original vision, unrevised. In my case, after hearing from a woman teaching my story in her freshman English composition class, I was dismayed to see, from the student comments she forwarded to me, that my readers had gotten lost in trying to ascertain who was addressing who in the piece's email dialogues. One character was poetic, and her email read as such. I had labored over her line breaks, and she wrote, a la e e cummings, with no capital letters. The art director at *Wired* honored the idiosyncratic way I had laid her words out on the page, taking care that the story's layout preserved her proto-poetry-making. The story's other main character wrote straight-ahead business prose; his paragraphing would have done a wire-service reporter proud. Photocopying, an older and analog technology, retains at least what computer folks refer to as "look and feel"; there can be no such guarantees for online reproductions, particularly of texts-at least until imaging technology gets a whole lot better and a whole lot more common. And while not all fiction relies on the conventions of concrete poetry, nonetheless there was a message here. What I realized was that these layers of cues-the visual as well as the verbal-were in danger of being lost through translation into bits. Communication works precisely because redundancy is built into it, a truism most commonly understood when a tone of voice and a facial expression expand and clarify the sense of the written word. And no one in the world-no artist, no lover-ever does anything for just one reason (how the words were arrayed on the page mattered even as their sense mattered). But this richness of semantic redundancy is in danger of being lost when art turns into bits. In his essay "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," German literary critic Walter Benjamin [2] posited that art, which started out in the realm of sacred, continued to fill people with awe until the mechanical reproduction of works of art-pictures of the Mona Lisa available to anyone for the price of a postcard-killed that awe. His view was too simple, as anyone who has ever had a numinous encounter with a painting in person after seeing it first in reproduction will concur. But he was onto something with the idea that art inspires a special kind of reaction, can move us deeply in ways we do not really understand. The furor over Bill Gates's Continuum multimedia company purchasing exclusive electronic rights from museum collections tapped right



into human art-atavism: museums were uncomfortable not knowing how their holdings would be used. No one really knows the values of these rights, so it was nervous-making to sign them away. But the issue may be that no one really knows how to conflate the primordial respect for whatever art is with the reality of the digital metaverse. Art is not information; information can easily become outdated. Part of what appeals to us about art is that it can last and last: unless we are historians or specialists, we care far more about Etruscan sculpture than Sumerian cuneiform. Yet once art goes digital, it can be transposed, replicated, tampered with in any old way-its permanence comes into question. Keats's sentimental poem "Endymion" [3] has the treachery lines in it "a thing of beauty is a joy forever"-meaning, I think, that life is short and art is long. Until some means is developed to protect this peculiar singularity of art and distinguish it from all the other content that is getting turned into ones and zeroes, the queasiness will abide. Imagine a world where the metaphor of colorization could be applied to any work of art. All those lawsuits over musicians who sample without authorization are not just about money. They are, in part, about recognizing that a work of art has a distinctive signature that custom honors. It is true that artists such as Warhohl and Kostabi with merriment or cynicism knock the whole concept of the artist's signature on its head, freely acknowledging their workshops as mass-production factories; but even here, the artists *themselves* set up the factory. They chose to create their art by mass production, as anti-art-establishment and mercenary as it may be. While spoofing the piety of the artist's individual imprint, they are also paying homage to it: only true believers blaspheme. Postmodernism has it that everything is appropriation, palimpsest, redux; that art is only what the ruling hegemony says is art. But I think not. There remains something of Kant's notion of art being that which has universal subjective validity-a form that somehow triggers Art-Alert pattern-recognizing neurotransmitters. Edvard Munch demonstrated this in his attraction to Japanese woodcuts. It is evident in a Seattle technical writer's romance with the music of Mali. We know art when we see it-and we do not necessarily want it to be morphable. If it can become anything, be changed by anyone and be presented in any format, then what is its point? Remember that it has not yet been demonstrated that anyone wants to interact with movies.

Art created for the Internet-designed upfront to be mostly a meme to be passed around and duplicated-may turn out to be a different kind of beast. Yet for now, art is not information as long as it does not want to be free-freely duplicable and free to be transformed in any of the ways computers can change any image, text or sound. And I remain uneasy, knowing that "Love Over The Wires," created for print, is available online.



Endnotes

[1] Paulina Borsook, "Love Over The Wires," *Wired*, 4, No. 1 (September/October 1993).

[2] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Marxism and Art*, M. Solomon, ed. (Detroit, MI: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1964).

[3] John Keats, "Endymion," in *The Poetical Works of Keats*, Revised and with a new Introduction by Paul D. Sheats (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1975) book first, p. 49."

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