And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to a mile!

— Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*

COPYING, CONVERTING AND “USING” IMAGES ARE COMMON PRACTICES TODAY. SOME OF THESE PRACTICES HAD ALREADY BEEN IN USE AT THE EARLIER STAGES OF IMAGING, BUT NEVER ON SUCH A SCALE AND WITH SUCH INTENSITY AS TODAY. IMAGES ACCOMPANY US DURING OUR DAILY ACTIVITIES, AT WORK, AND IN MUSEUMS; WITH THE USE OF CAMERAS, THEY ARE REPRODUCED, PRESENTED AND DISCUSSED. IMAGES CO-CREATE OUR REALITY ON A SCALE SO LARGE THAT IN MANY CASES THEY ARE NO LONGER NOTICED AND BECOME “NATURALIZED” IN A PARTICULAR WAY. THIS HAPPENS EVEN TODAY IN THE FIELD OF ART HISTORY, A DISCIPLINE THAT SEEMS TO LARGELY OVERLOOK THE CHANGES WHICH HAVE OCCURRED IN RECENT DECADES AT THE INTERFACE OF TECHNOLOGY AND IMAGING PRACTICES.

Conservative art history and museology rarely engage in any extensive reflection on the ontologically and epistemologically diverse reality in which they operate on a daily basis. On one hand, we are, as individuals, surrounded by a massive, self-reproducing reality of digital and analogue images. On the other, when entering an archive or a museum, we examine the original or re-

constructed works, often falling into the trap of idealization – and uncritically focusing on a certain artificial segment of the world of images. Also in the practice of exhibiting, and not without reason, new technologies are rather infamous, because they are aesthetically incongruent with the formula of fine art institutions on one hand; and, on the other, because they are complex and expensive to operate.

From year to year, the need for a wide-ranging discussion concerning the use of technology in the context of visual arts, especially in the art world, has become more and more urgent. Of course, we may continue to push the issue aside, focusing instead on the “original”, defined individually for research purposes, and not taking into account the social context in which the original functions. This, however, has become increasingly difficult. This is due to a dynamic development of the new technologies of digital duplication, and to the fact that more art institutions apply these technologies in their work. Today we are dealing with a world of imaging marked by a particularly rich diversity, which requires of us a proper attention and critical discussion. I think that a good starting point to initiate this discussion is found in one of the basic tools of an art historian – photography, the medium responsible for the production of mechanical and digital reproductions of objects of art2.

In this essay, I propose to examine such imaging theories and moments of images which comprise an alternative to attitudes that idealize the original work and reject the potential of copies. By building upon and developing the threads of Horst Bredekamp’s argument presented in his essay “Image Media”, the following analysis intends to show that the classification of facsimiles as legitimate objects of research in art history is both necessary and urgent in the modern world. In this context, Bredekamp’s argument will be related to Walter Benjamin’s concept of the aura of a work of art, and its current elaborations and interpretations. At a purely theoretical level, this essay can be defined as an attempt to identify and characterize the point in the modern process of image production where the ordinary quantitative difference in the set of digital copies of works of art turns into something qualitatively different, thus changing the status of both the original and the copy itself (il. 1).

**Walter Benjamin and the German school of reproduction**

Living in the first decades of the 21st century, we very often encounter art works outside museums. Digital and analogue reproductions are available in the online archives, or mass produced “great masters” albums. At the same time, art has shifted to the foreground of the cultural policies of developed countries across the globe; the art market is booming, and museums are enjoy-

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2 In order to indicate relations between new media and the history of art, this essay draws upon the following work of crucial importance: Horst Bredekamp, „Media obrazowe”, [in:] Perspektywy współczesnej historii sztuki: antologia przekładów „Artium Quaestiones”, ed. Mariusz Bryl, Poznań 2009, p. 943. Angielska Wersja
The work of art in the age of digital reproduction

ing unfaltering popularity. If we go beyond fine art understood hermetically, however, we will see that this global domination of images began at a very particular moment in history: the invention of the photographic medium and its wide dissemination in the course of the 19th and 20th century. One of the most important reports of first changes in this field is to be found in the texts by a representative of the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin.

In his essay “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction”, Benjamin describes the radical change that took place in the reproduction of artworks owing to the development of the photographic medium. At the beginning of the 20th century, man came into the possession of a tool whereby each work of art can be reproduced any number of times, transferred to other media, or propagated on a thus-far unimaginable scale. At the same time, at the very beginning of this paper, we identified a distinctive feature which, according to Benjamin, distinguishes the copy from the original. It is the “one and unique relationship between a work of art and the time and place of its existence”.

As part of this relationship, the original work manifests “changes which it suffered over time, both in its material structure, as well as property relations”. So, the notion of authenticity encompasses the relationship of the original time and place of the work’s existence. Benjamin divides the category of the copy of an art work into two distinctive classes: 1. a manual copy, preserving in itself a part of the authority represented by the original; 2. a technical copy, which stands out against the autonomy of the original, and remains in a more complex and ambiguous relationship to it. Technical reproduction, unlike manual reproduction, has the ability to extract from the original certain specific values and details which pass unnoticed to human perception. It is also an extension of the original because, thanks to the copy, the original can achieve things which it would not be in the position to achieve as such – that is, to reach forward to the viewer. However, technical reproduction may also have an adverse effect on the original, owing, paradoxically, to all of the above-mentioned advantages. This is because the relationship between the original and its time and place is blurred, thus liberating the artwork from the auratic shackles regulating its existence. In the process of mass reproduction, an object loses its authenticity; for Benjamin this is the constitutive feature of an original work of art. The technical reproduction also affects the spatial conditions in which the object operates, allowing the recipient to experience the work of art without having to travel to the place where it is stored. This is the entire process which allows for the work of art to function in the imagination of a mass audience with a new speed and on a new scale. Benjamin’s theses crystallize into a dialectical image of interdependencies which arose at the beginning of the 20th century between the original work and its copy. Visual

4 Benjamin, „Dzieło w dobie reprodukcji masowej”, p. 69.
5 Benjamin, ibid., p. 85.
6 Ibid., 91.
7 Ibid., 100.
culture, broadly understood, in which works of art existed in two available forms for centuries – the original and its manual copy – suddenly faces the appearance of a separate technical copy independent from the original.

It should also be added that harnessing photography in the process of archiving artworks has specifically changed the epistemological status of a work of art. For photography, an artwork is a map which can be seen from different angles, its surfaces registered from a distance. Thereby, a new mode of artwork’s duration appears on the horizon. A documented and archived object automatically turns into a set of pictures, with the original as its basis, around which new copies are continually budding. They bear some resemblance to the original work, but, thanks to the technology of photography, they also retain their special autonomy.

I realize that Benjamin’s essay can also be read differently – as a defence of what is unique and original in a work, and as against the devastating practice of mass copying. However, the way of understanding Benjamin’s argument presented here relates directly to the history of research into art. Specifically, it relates to a group of art historians whose attitude towards a photographic copy of artworks may seem to us today at least surprising. We are referring to researchers who, as early as in the middle of the 19th century, fiercely defended photography in the context of art. Although it seems quite unlikely, given the romantic moods of the period, researchers such as Alfred Woltmann, Herman Grimm, Wilhelm Luebke, Jakob Burckhardt, or Bruno Meyer, defended the thesis elevated photography as the preferred method of studying art.

Woltmann, for example, argued for the introduction into the history of art, through the medium of photography, the same degree of accuracy as in natural sciences; for Grimm, the cognitive value of photography exceeded the original work; and Luebke attributed to the photo a capacity of reproducing an artwork in the totality of its existence. Burckhardt, in turn, saw in photography the salvation for objects otherwise “disappearing and falling into impotence”. Bruno Meyer, and Heinrich Wölffin after him, were researchers responsible for establishing the foundations for modern education in the field of art history. They advocated the technique of image projection, which was initially completely ridiculed because of the fairground connotation of the medium. It was Wölffin, at the beginning of the 20th century, who fully developed the technique of projecting a copy, so that he could juxtapose artworks of different ages, the only limitation being the variety of institutional archives.

Reference to such a wide range of names indicates that, at the very roots of the field discussed, a debate continues which had been pushed to the background and forgotten in the process whereby the medium of photography

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8 Horst Bredekamp, Media obrazowe, p. 944.
9 The subject to be taken up later in the text.
10 Bredekamp, op.cit., p. 949.
11 Ibid., p. 950.
12 Ibid., p. 950.
penetrated the imaging practices\textsuperscript{13}. Certainly, the whole process should not be associated with some ideological reluctance within the history of art, but rather with a gap between the material dimension of technology and its users. In the 19th century, photography was still a medium which was intelligible to anyone who had even a negligible knowledge of chemistry. Today, digital production of images takes place in secret subsystems of our cameras, which effectively eliminates our desire both to understand its processes and reflect on their implications.

\section*{Digital photography}

I suggest we embark upon a reflection on the medium of digital photography by starting from the shift of emphasis to the trans-individual realm of imaging, encompassing the body, the medium, and the image. In “An Anthropology of Images” by Hans Belting we find some particularly important and suggestive insights into digital images that are being incorporated into the bodily dimension of our being in the world.

In the chapter titled “The digital image”, the author attempts to ascribe the modern synthetic image to his new history of art object\textsuperscript{14}. He pays particular attention to the lack evoked by the image coming in contact with the virtual world. A digital image appears to us as an entity without reference to either its bearer, which has become ambiguous and hidden, or to the recipient’s body, which has dissolved into a limitless and all-encompassing virtual space. The author points to the instability of digital images, as well as to the ontological change which negates the image while highlighting the matrix – the bearer of the image. As a confirmation of the thesis of the lack of analogies between the real and the virtual worlds, Belting cites passages from the work of Eric Alliez, which show that there has been a complete ontological rupture between the two worlds while, at the same time, the concept of a natural body is itself going through a kind of crisis\textsuperscript{15}. Referring in turn to a study by Raymond Bellour, Belting returns to his thesis according to which (a) synthetic images supposedly affect man in the same way as analogue images, and (b) the epistemology of the synthetic image is based on the same principles\textsuperscript{16}.

This in turn leads him to conclude that digital images impact on our impressions and haptic feelings, stimulating the imagination which always remains a place of refuge for images: their permanent habitat. It is here that we find the fundamental distinction between the material and the immaterial presence of images in our reality. Belting, however, does not indicate the significant qualitative change which occurs in the production and perception of digital images. Their presence is supposed to bring to mind the familiar pres-

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 958.
\item\textsuperscript{14} Hans Belting, Antropologia Obrazu, p. 49.
\item\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 52.
\item\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 53.
\end{itemize}
ence of images reproduced analogically, but their material dimension ceases to be transparent or easily describable; it is represented by the abstract “hardware” of appliances and computers. On the other hand, the intangible persistence of images in our minds is becoming all too evident, but also susceptible to interference and changes due to “software” and the interface displayed on the screens of devices.

On the basis of Belting’s ideas, we may conclude that the analysis of the digital image should take place between the spheres of material tools which produce/store images, and the immaterial conditions of their display. I propose that the former should be assigned to the realm of the living body (including the mind) extended by technological prostetics. In turn, we shall consign the screen, together with the software, to the realm of a medium-bearer, upon which the image settles in order to disappear after a while under the influence of the user’s click. The examination of how the images operate on the screen can be reduced to their quality. The quality here is of top priority, because it is responsible for forming or breaking the illusion of an analogy with the real world.

In looking at a selected image on the computer screen and in reality, we notice the differences only at the time of close contact with the matter it is made of. In the case of a material image, it will be the grain of analogue photography, brush strokes on the canvas, the projections and texture of bas-relief. In the case of a digital image, what will appear to us are small squares – pixels – which negate our comprehensive overview and reduce the visible to a set of artificially generated technical elements. The open view of pixels, i.e. the matrix, and “naked” carrier image, distorts the “experience” of the digitized image. Pixels are also the foundation of digital photography, being the smallest individual elements on the screen of an electrical equipment. As such, they are the atoms of virtuality, providing the basis for information processing on the screens of devices, which, in turn, form our only connection to the reality of their functioning. Thus, when studying the digital image, we must delve into a single pixel in order to understand how it works.

The name pixel derives from two commonly known terms: image (picture) and a part (element). The word therefore refers to the process in which the basic elements of virtuality produce an analogy of the real world. With the use of three (or four) colours, pixels form the image of the parts of the real world on the matrix. It is an immaterial image, and yet based closely on the way in which our eye perceives reality. The images in the virtual world, therefore, exist in an unstable mode as a result of setting the same three colours in different configurations. This is a significant change in the context of discourse about the digital image – poor image quality will interfere with our experience of the image, while a very good quality can approximate the digital image to an analogue one.

17 Ibid., p. 50.
Gigapixel photography

We have thus established the basic theses concerning the experience of the digital image in the context of a work of art. Art historians today, when conducting archival work and looking at the artwork they analyze, usually document it using digital photography. As a result, they are able to return to an image, a document, or sculpture from a spatial and temporal distance, and from the point where they came into contact with the same in reality. This is a basic procedure of research in this field, even though it does not constitute the subject of complex theoretical analysis or of practical training. Reproduction allows researchers to distance themselves from the examined object, which provides an ideal starting point for a formal analysis and a rationalization of the artwork. Regardless of what impact the work had on its recipient when viewed in reality, its reproduction allows for a selective experience, a reduction in favour of the work’s traits useful for an academic work. We can therefore conclude that in the process of „academic reproduction” the epistemology of an artwork changes. To use a metaphor: the territory is turned into a map. As a result, this change makes it possible to construct such historical, analytical or academic discourse which calls for a distance to the object of the narrative. Paradoxically, however, a desire to create the perfect map results in a perfect reproduction of the territory, exactly what the cartographers in the stories by Borges19 and Lewis Carroll did20. Analogue technologies exclude in advance the possibility of producing this type of copy. Analogue photography embodies the elements of reality, but it returns them as a certain coherent whole, which is conditioned strictly by the method of image formation. The case of digital photography is different, since it provides endless possibilities of reproducing and processing the photographed reality, so actually bringing us closer to the creation of some kind of a perfect copy. The best example of such a process is the development of gigapixel photography technology.

It is difficult to trace the origin of the gigapixel image. What is known, however, is that its dissemination occurred at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. This technique found its predominant use in landscape photography, where it was able to furnish an unprecedented accuracy of detail by combining small images into one larger photo. Almost immediately, it also found a use in surveillance systems, and the army installed gigapixel cameras in unmanned drones21. It took some time before this specific technique of collage was applied in the photographing of individual objects, and when it did happen, it was through art. The camera lens does not interfere with the structure of an artwork, permitting a reproduction in a resolution which reflects even the smallest loss and detail in its matter. For the purposes of this text, I will illustrate the specific features and institutional practices associated with gigapixel reproduction technique with reference to the Google Art Project (il. 3).

20 Lewis Carroll, Sylvie and Bruno Concluded, New York, 1893.
Google Art Project

At present, a number of projects are dealing with digitization using gigapixel techniques, the oldest of them being the Italian Haltadefinizione\(^{22}\). Large corporations immediately spotted an extremely attractive field of development, resulting in the Google Art Project platform. Some of the activities of this global company based in the Silicon Valley can be illustrated by the passages already quoted from Lewis Carroll about the idea of maps covering their territory in the scale of 1:1. Although it is not openly stated, in its flagship projects Google carries out precisely such an operation – it is mapping the world in real scale, transporting it into their servers and their services. How else can we characterize the Street View project\(^ {23}\)? The same is happening with artworks from museums around the world, which are being reproduced in the gigapixel technique, while their maps – virtual skeletons – are transferred to a portal serving education and familiarizing global society with the most outstanding works of art\(^ {24}\).

The project was initiated on 1 February 2011 by Amid Sood, a designer at Google, in collaboration with Nicolas Serota, the director of London’s Tate. Seventeen museums around the world joined in, including the Tate, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Uffizi Gallery in Florence\(^ {25}\). Currently, one can watch more than 45,000 exhibits on a high definition platform, and the number is increasing from year to year. Polish cultural institutions, such as Wilanow Palace Museum and the Museum of Art in Lodz\(^ {26}\), have also joined the project. The company has developed a special robot for the purposes of the program, allowing one to traverse the space of the museum in the footsteps of the machine. Not only are we offered the opportunity to experience the same work with an accuracy greater than that when actually visiting the museum, we are also given an understanding of how the paintings are arranged and installed. Thanks to the robot, we virtually experience the architecture of the museum\(^ {27}\). This project, despite its short history, has provoked a number of observations relating directly to the status of facsimile in contemporary reality. Consider, for example, the very foundation of a digital image, the single pixel. Although the human eye cannot discern it in gigapixel productions, it is the pixels that determine the “imperfections” of copies. We can only receive an ideal virtual mirror image, when a pixel equals the size of


\(^{23}\) Street View project is part of Google Maps, see: [maps.google.com](http://maps.google.com)

\(^{24}\) “Google’s mission is to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful. The Cultural Institute is an attempt to make all important treasures of culture available and preserve them in digital form, in order to educate and inspire future generations”, see: [https://www.google.com/intl/pl/culturalinstitute/about/](https://www.google.com/intl/pl/culturalinstitute/about/) [access: 21.01.2015]

\(^{25}\) [https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/partner](https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/partner) [access: 21.07.2016]


the atom which builds up compositions of a material object. Such accuracy, for economic reasons, is however impossible in the near future. A gigapixel reproduction is therefore still a reproduction, although it is ontologically closer to a map rather than to the work itself. The image processed in this way makes a huge impression – using Google Art Project we can rediscover Van Gogh, watching his brush strokes; we are left breathless watching the glaze on the works of the old masters. The virtual space frees us from the limitations we experience in a museum. There is no alarm, no glass shields, no inquisitive bodyguards. This new relationship to the art work is characterized by a previously impossible intensity. Indeed, we are able to see every brush stroke, every crack; we can trace micro-stresses and concentrate on the matter itself without the distracting presence of other viewers, and not limited by a set distance from the work itself. Google Art Project also facilitates comparative work, offering tools enabling the comparison of two different artworks; these tools are similar to those introduced into art history by Heinrich Wölfflin.

The works which actually reside in museums on both sides of the globe are suddenly presented to us in all their formal glory. Of course, for the time being, this is all happening in the context of a very limited number of objects, but the Google base is constantly expanding and replicating entire museum collections, focusing not so much on more or less known works, but rather on invitations from art centres. So, what has changed in the way we experience, reproduce and disseminate images since the publication of Walter Benjamin’s essay, or since the much more pertinent arguments advanced by Bredekamp? We have been given a tool which allows us to study images without compromising their structure, while availing ourselves of the smallest detail. With gigapixel photographs, images begin to settle permanently in the virtual space in a form which corresponds to the original in real space. While traversing the enlarged fields of a painting online, we experience a different register of emotions than in the case of actually visiting the museum. The experience is much more private, analytical and cold; but it is at the same time full of emotion owing to the proximity to the materiality of the image.

Migrations of the aura

At this point, we face a major challenge – is it possible to reconcile over 200 years of reflections by historians of art and culture concerning the status of the copy with the way the copy functions nowadays? To do that, it may be help-

28 It is an impossible thesis for many reasons. Yet, it is necessary, in order to establish a certain limit, a horizon of reproduction.
29 What follows here is a characteristic moment of quality displacement, where the quality is no longer situated in the sphere of our perception of the work, but rather in the work itself. It thus becomes an ontological feature of a reproduction.
ful to refer to an essay by the sociologist Bruno Latour and the art historian Adam Lowe on the concept of the migrations of aura\textsuperscript{31}. In this essay, the authors oscillate between the acceptance of Benjamin’s theory and its total re-evaluation, and they propose a notion of the aura of a work of art which is both new and well-established in contemporary reality.

Latour and Lowe claim that it is the quality, and not the originality, which should be considered as an indicator of the value of contemporary art objects. \textit{Good reproduction} is a concept proposed in response to a strict categorization and a denial of interest in non-original artworks\textsuperscript{32}. The two researchers show the strength of \textit{facsimiles} produced with a sufficient accuracy and installed in appropriate spaces. A painting exhibited in a museum is often covered by a thick pane of glass, but even then, we recognize very quickly if it is unoriginal – the aura of the work disappears. The case is different with a \textit{facsimile} which is made with the meticulousness of its original creators, and placed in a location first reserved for the original work. Here, the experience of confronting a copy, as the authors of the essay suggest, can be as strong as, or even stronger than the original\textsuperscript{33}.

Continuing their reflection, the authors propose a radical discourse in which there are no originals, but only good or bad copies. Let us ask, following their remarks, who is really the creator of all the historical works hanging in museums all over the world? The artists, as undersigned? Or perhaps the conservators, who have restored them, conserved – and changed for years? Can we say that the recently damaged painting from the Irish National Museum collection, stapled together and re-painted over the larger part of its surface, is still the original painting by Monet\textsuperscript{34}? Or perhaps it still has the original aura, but it is only a copy of the original object? Undoubtedly, such an interpretation of the original, or rather the negation of the notion, has given rise to considerable controversy. The concept of the expositional value is based on the originality of the work. However, if we actually try to employ the innovative interpretation, it may work in a positive way, disrupting our patterns of thinking about exhibited objects of art. The notion at the same time links together Benjamin’s theses on the virtuality of the experience of art, pointing to places where we could freely negate the authenticity of the object itself in favour of the authentic experience of its atmosphere.

This is a productive thesis, and to support it one can find many examples in contemporary reality. Walking through large collections held at European museums is often a chore owing to the lack of oxygen, and crowds. Most popular paintings are usually surrounded by swarms of tourists, and all we get to see is the reflection in the tablets raised to take a photo. Such an atmosphere completely annuls the aura of the work. At the same time, however, we need to

\textsuperscript{31} Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe, “The migration of the aura or how to explore the original through its facsimiles”, \textit{in:} Switching Codes, ed. Thomas Bartscherer, University of Chicago Press, 2010.

\textsuperscript{32} Latour and Lowe, op.cit., p. 9.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 8.

\textsuperscript{34} The damaged painting by Eduard Monet displayed in the National Gallery in Dublin: http://dailym.ai/16NZwET [access: 21.01.2015]
ask ourselves whether we are able to avoid such an experience while viewing the work in the virtual space? Does the aura’s migration also apply to a digital reproduction? The essay discussed above does not offer any guidelines on this subject, but we do know that, in line with the authors’ intuitions, we should concentrate on the epistemology of the object viewed on the screen rather than focusing on its ontological dimension.

This means that, rather than applying the universalist perspective of searching for the original, we should turn to a relativist approach, concentrated on the quality of understanding. Once we do that, we will quickly realize the importance of gigapixel reproductions in the new reality. They have a real potential to transport the aura of the original work from the material reality onto the virtual space. Of course, as we have argued above, they lend themselves to criticism and cannot be treated as the only possible solution. At the same time, however, it is difficult not to fall prey to the impression that both the appearance of gigapixel photos and the accelerated development of the practice of good reproduction will soon transform our perception of a work of art.

**A facsimiles museum?**

We have thus made a full circle of a kind, even though the starting point was not quite the same as the one we have now arrived at. Inspired by Horst Bredekamp’s arguments, having considered the theory of Walter Benjamin’s aura in the context of art history experiments with photography in the 19th century, and having reconstructed the thought of Hans Belting, we have finally reached the contemporary efforts to re-evaluate the status of facsimiles. In the field of material analysis, we have traced the development of digital reproduction techniques, starting from the vernacular to the complex gigapixel collages, which seem to define today the horizon of artwork reproduction. Finally, we critically approached the technical work methods of an art historian in order to highlight the changes, transitions, and ruptures in the idealized structure of object-discourses. With the breakdown of the components of a certain representative, yet certainly simplified, structure of the field, we are able to establish anew the ecology and relations of images, people and symbols functioning in the field.

To establish a new relationship with a work of art and its copy is to do more than just attuning our research apparatus to the changing reality. Our actions constitute a new, different policy within the field, and thus also form alternative models of community, ethics and aesthetics. Thanks to these changes, we should be able to understand more, and open up to, the reality of imaging in all its complexity and ambiguity. In this way, new levels of sensitivity and understanding will be established, which will be close to the surveyed objects and their material and immaterial structures. A work of art ceases to be a rigid and arbitrary idealization of itself. Instead, it becomes a diverse constellation

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of images and materials, thereby increasing its strength and the quality of interaction. Subjects involved in the process of the ontological and epistemological constitution of a work of art also acquire a new meaning. Conservation, the photographer’s documentation of the work, and finally the activity of art historians and curators who let the objects resound in the full diversity of their functions, are now on a par with the foundational activities of the artist.

Undoubtedly, therefore, art institutions also play a major role in the production of new imaging ecologies and in the exploration of new modes of coexistence of art objects and their copies. Museums, in particular, are good examples of spaces where traditional and alternative strategies concerning a work of art mingle and coexist. It is these institutions which, consciously or not, have tested the effect of the virtual world on the reception of artworks in recent decades. It has often led to failure, of course, but some global projects realized in cooperation with museums, such as Google Art Project, can be considered a breakthrough. Museums, while manipulating collections, archives and new technologies of presentation, have the chance to establish new ways of how artworks exist and are perceived in the world. Thanks to the mobilization of new technologies, they could return the work of art to the hands of a mass audience, while at the same time transferring not only the physical characteristics of objects, but also – potentially – particles of their auratic power.

**Artwork in the era of digital reproduction – summary**

The article is an analysis of the status of the reproduction of an artwork towards the original in the context of transformations in the visual media and perception of images that has been taking place in recent decades. The methodology of this study is based on Hans Belting’s triad: media-image-body and the aura theory by Walter Benjamin. The researcher points to the changes that have taken place in the artwork both on the level of its medium and the experiencing body. By supplementing the classic theory of aura with reflections made by Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe, the article points to the possibility of a more flexible, contemporary understanding of the theory. The researcher presents the studies of German art historians from the early 19th century who explored positive possibilities of analogue photography in order to move to pondering on the digital and giga-pixel photography. The latter one is introduced using the example of Google Art Project. In the course of study, Benjamin’s aura becomes more nuanced and gets interpreted in a more positive fashion. The description of image media is being updated and diversified. The text’s final chapter deals with the above mentioned conclusions and suggests they should be taken into consideration in work for the institution of culture, especially museums.

**Key words:** Copy, original, facsimile, photography, aura