

## Reconsidering Walter Benjamin (Leeds, 6–8 Apr 06)

P.

"A Tremendous Shattering of Tradition": Reconsidering Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'

Association of Art Historians  
University of Leeds  
6.4. - 8.4. 2006

### CALL FOR PAPERS

Association of Art Historians Annual Conference:  
'Contents.Discontents.Malcontents'  
(University of Leeds, UK, 6. 4. - 8. 4. 2006)

Academic Session: "A Tremendous Shattering of Tradition":  
Reconsidering Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of  
Mechanical Reproduction'

### Session Abstract:

This session will commemorate the 70th anniversary of the publication of Walter Benjamin's seminal essay 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', translated into English by Harry Zohn in 1968 (year of revolutionary discontent) as 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.

In 1936 the essay offered a challenge not only to Fascist appropriations of art, but also to conventional Marxist aesthetics as well as to phenomenological theorisations of art - witness its problematic reception by Adorno and others, its expressed discontent with what it sees as depoliticised modes of aesthetic engagement, and its analysis of "a world without aura" (Rodolphe Gasché). These challenges are repeated in different ways in the essay's influence on the turbulent intellectual scene of the late 1960s. It has contributed significantly to the development of both Marxist and postmodernist theorisations of culture, as well as to the ongoing art-historical reassessment of the art work and its roles in contemporary media-dominated societies. In short, Benjamin's essay constitutes a major, if continually contested, contribution to debates about modernism and postmodernism that retain their currency in the age of

digital reproduction, "a period when politics as spectacle has become a commonplace in our televisual world", as Susan Buck-Morss argues.

The essay's perennial appeal to discontented Marxist and other modes of reading modern and postmodern art may constitute one line of enquiry. Papers are also sought that will explore the essay's continuing significance for contemporary theories, practices and histories of art. The essay has exerted a profound influence on the work of key theorists (eg October) and practitioners (Warhol, Burgin, Sherman); papers may wish to explore or assess aspects or examples of this influence. Other topics might include Benjamin's notions of the aura of the art work, of originality, of reproduction; changes in the significance for art history of mechanical and other forms of reproduction; the implications and consequences of accommodating photography and film (Benjamin's exemplary modern media) within the configurations of art historical practice, and the essay's contribution to current debates about inter- and trans-disciplinarity (the 'contents' of the discipline of art history); the essay-form itself as exemplifying politicised, interventionist aesthetic practices of modernist and postmodernist malcontents; the essay itself considered as a work of art, enacting its own arguments in fragmentary, inconsistent forms; and considerations of the various publication contexts and initial critical receptions of and responses to Benjamin's essay.

Papers are invited that address these and other topics in relation to reconsiderations of Benjamin's essay.

#### Details for Submission of Proposals:

Papers must not exceed 30 minutes. Please email a 200 word abstract to the session convenors before the 11th November 2005. Include the title of your paper, your full name and contact details and institutional affiliation (if applicable).

Session chairs / organisers: Patricia Allmer, Loughborough University  
School of Art and Design, Epinal Way, Loughborough LE11 3TU,  
sears@allmer.fsnet.co.uk

John Sears, Manchester Metropolitan University (Cheshire),  
Interdisciplinary Studies, Hassall Road, Alsager ST7 2HL,  
J.Sears@mmu.ac.uk

Please note that the call for papers for all the conference sessions will be published in the June edition of the AAH Bulletin and at the AAH website: [www.aah.org.uk](http://www.aah.org.uk)

Reference:

CFP: Reconsidering Walter Benjamin (Leeds, 6-8 Apr 06). In: ArtHist.net, May 4, 2005 (accessed Jul 6, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/27239>>.