

# Cultural Dynamics in a Globalized World

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Editors

Melani Budianta  
Manneke Budiman  
Abidin Kusno  
Mikihiro Moriyama



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*Editors*

**Melani Budianta**

*English Studies Program, Literature Department, Faculty of Humanities,  
Universitas Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia*

**Manneke Budiman**

*Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia*

**Abidin Kusno**

*Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, Toronto, Canada*

**Mikihiro Moriyama**

*Department of Asian Studies, Faculty of Foreign Studies, Nanzan University, Nagoya, Japan*



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## Table of contents

Organizing committee	xiii
<i>Social norms, social movements, and ethics</i>	
Foreword by Manneke Budiman	3
Social conflict resolution and the need for a system of ethics <i>A. Seran</i>	7
Editorial cartoons and the visualization of corruption at the beginning of the New Order (1968–1974): Case study of <i>Indonesia Raya</i> daily <i>A.M. Padiatra &amp; A. Setiawan</i>	15
The 19th-century <i>Undang-Undang Ternate</i> : Structure and power analysis <i>P.F. Limbong &amp; T. Pudjiastuti</i>	23
KPK and the commitment of the Indonesian government to eradicate corruption (2004–2014) <i>H.R. Mufti &amp; B. Kanumayoso</i>	29
Autonomy and historicity of an individual as a moral agent <i>J.P. Kamuri &amp; H.S. Pratama</i>	37
Redefining ethics and morals in colonial space: Creation of leisure in the colonies in Van Zeggelen (1911) <i>C.T. Suprihatin</i>	43
Moral consciousness in <i>Kresna Duta</i> 's characters: An analysis through moral theory of Lawrence Kohlberg and the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas <i>M.W. Nurrochsyam &amp; E.K. Ekosiwi</i>	51
Transposition of epistemology to hermeneutics: Richard Rorty's philosophy of edification <i>F. Hadinata &amp; A. Y. Lubis</i>	59
Leader's attitude towards terrorism: A critical discourse analysis of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's diplomatic letters <i>B.E. Pranoto &amp; U. Yuwono</i>	65
Stimulus of request in Japanese and its relation to <i>wakimae</i> as a cultural context: A discourse analysis on culture in conversation <i>Filia, N.J. Malik &amp; U. Yuwono</i>	75
Toraja people's involvement in Qahhar Mudzakkar's DI/TII movement <i>R.D. Kabubu &amp; Abdurakhman</i>	83
Digital art and its uniqueness without aura <i>A.I. Badry &amp; A. Y. Lubis</i>	89

# Digital art and its uniqueness without aura

A.I. Badry & A.Y. Lubis

*Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia*

**ABSTRACT:** Modern technology plays an important role in our daily lives. Many people use technology for their works, interactions, and special interests such as art. Art as a discipline, which expresses human emotion and creative side, takes a new form for its contextualization with the help of information technology. A neologism for this discipline is “digital art.” Some experts who employ a traditional value in their aesthetical perspective consider this new approach unlikely. Walter Benjamin, an eminent figure from this group, stated that art must have an aura in its production as is the case in paintings. With this aura, the work of art and not artwork has uniqueness of value. However, the problem arises when information technology becomes a predominant tool for the work of art. Digital art does not consider the aura as the core value in defining something as a work of art. Furthermore, digital artists think that art can exist within a digital object and maintain its uniqueness. Parallel with the latter, this article will describe the dispute and make a clear statement that a work of art in the digital age does not require aura.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The discourse of digital art<sup>1</sup> is one of the contemporary aesthetic issues that emerged in the 20th century and covers an interaction between art and information technology. In addition to functioning as a new area for creativity or expression, digital art is always faced with a debate in terms of the originality of a work of art. In this context, the origin of the debate comes from the famous article written by Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” He introduced the concept that the originality of a work of art must be based on the “aura,” while something that is mass-reproduced by machines, such as a photograph,<sup>2</sup> cannot be called a work of art.

Before attempting to understand Benjamin’s argument and explain why this argument can be debatable in parallel to that of William Vaughan, we would like to step back further to the description of the relationship between art and technique. This is important as the foundation for gaining a comprehensive perspective about the ground of digital art’s discourse itself.

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1. The term digital art is much more popular than electronic art. For coherence in this article, we prefer to use “digital art” rather than “electronic art” as a technical term. It is because the core of contemporary electronic art is based on digital data and not analogue data.

2. We use the guidelines mentioned in Clive Cazeaux (Ed.). *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*. London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 322–343 for citing this article. See the argument by William Vaughan about the debate on Benjamin’s position in his writing, “History of Art in the Digital Age: Problems and Possibilities,” which is published in Anna Bentkowska-Kafel, Trish Cashen, and Hazel Gardiner (Eds.). *Digital Art History: A Subject in Transition*. Bristol: Intellect Books, 2005, pp. 6–7.

### 1.1 *The relationship between art and technique*<sup>3</sup>

Discourse about this relationship can be traced back to the ancient Greek period. Technique has an etymological root in Greek, i.e. *tekhnē* (Τέχνη), which means “every skill to do something.” It was differentiated from *physis* (instinctive ability) or *tyche* (possible ability). *Tekhnē* is a special term in philosophy used by Plato in his dialogue entitled *Politeia* or *Republic*. This term also appears in the *Protagoras* dialogue. In other dialogues, i.e. *Sophistes* and *Politikos*, Plato preferred to use the term *tekhnē*, which means “art.” An explicit example in using this term can be found in one phrase, i.e. *maieutike tekhnē* (midwifery art). This phrase illustrates well Socrates’ dialogue method, which could open someone’s mind about his/her fallacies.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to Plato, Aristotle defined *tekhnē* as *hexis* (characteristic), which stresses the production side (*poietike*). With this definition, all actions that do not produce anything cannot be called *tekhnē* and belongs only to the domain of *praktike* (action). In short, *tekhnē* is the accumulation of experienced knowledge to produce something.<sup>5</sup> According to this definition, *tekhnē* can also be interpreted as “craft.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the problem arises when *tekhnē* has a dual meaning, such as in Aristotle’s definition. A synonym between art and craft can be easily interpreted. In contemporary art, for artists, critics, and aestheticians, synonymy between art and craft must be rejected.

The origin of this opinion dates back to the end of the 17th century. As a continuation of this opinion, Robin George Collingwood and Benedetto Croce made some theoretical formulations to elaborate it as a clear argument in the beginning of the 20th century. For Collingwood and Croce, craft is imitative and does not result in a new creation. Because *tekhnē* is the production of something, craft is the production of something guided by a model. Besides, art produces something in its interaction with the object and cannot be predicted as is the case with craft. Therefore, art is creative and produces some innovations.<sup>7</sup>

Even though the latter is important, the core problem of the relationship between art and technique is not about the differentiation between art and craft itself. It will be based on truth as the foundation of the core problem.<sup>8</sup> To understand this, we must refer to the argumentation of Martin Heidegger. He stated that art would bring truth outside from its hiddenness. For example, Heidegger analysed Vincent van Gogh’s painting entitled *A Pair of Shoes* (1887). The question for this work of art is very simple. For what purpose was this painting created? In that painting, we can only see a peasant woman’s pair of shoes and nothing more. However, for Heidegger, it does not stop there. He is capable of seeing many possibilities of “beings in there,” including the peasant woman herself that Heidegger describes as working hard and wearing the shoes until late in the evening. Therefore, we can learn that the work of art can be understood as an unconcealed thing. The work of art has an *aletheia* (unconcealedness or truth) in its presence.<sup>9</sup>

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3. This section was first discussed in Ahmad Ibrahim Badry’s *Konstruk Tanda dan Citra di Dunia Cyber: Analisis Semiotik atas Kasus Bahasa Pemrograman dan Cyberspeak* (Sign and Image Construct in the Cyber World: Semiotic Analysis on the Case of Programming Language and Cyberspeak). Yogyakarta: Fakultas Filsafat Universitas Gadjah Mada, 2003, in section 1. 2. 1. In writing this article, we revised this part for inclusion in the article, and more detailed arguments compiled from other sources were added.

4. See the description of *tekhnē* as a special term in F. E. Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon*, New York: New York University Press, 1967, pp. 190–191, and for *maieutike tekhnē* in Plato, “Thaetetus,” see sect. 150b, in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Ed.), *The Collected Dialogues of Plato (Including the Letters)*, Bollingen Series LXXI, 6th print, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 855.

5. Peters. *Op.cit.*, p. 191.

6. Nicholas Bunnin, and Jiyuan Yu. *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p. 679.

7. See further explanation about this history in Dabney Townsend’s *Historical Dictionary of Aesthetics*. Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2006, p. 79.

8. This statement is inspired by the writing of Herman Rapaport, entitled *Is There Truth in Art?* New York: Cornell University Press, 1997, especially when he describes Heidegger’s position in questioning the essence of art on pp. 19–35.

9. Martin Heidegger. “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in Cazeaux. *Op.cit.*, pp. 86–87.

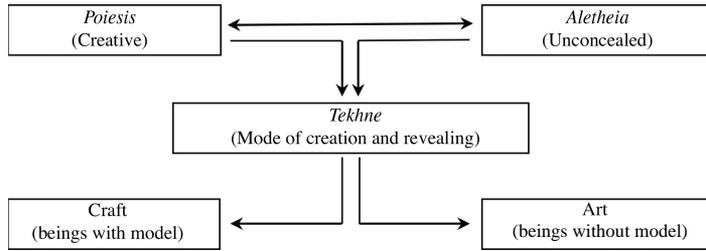


Figure 1.

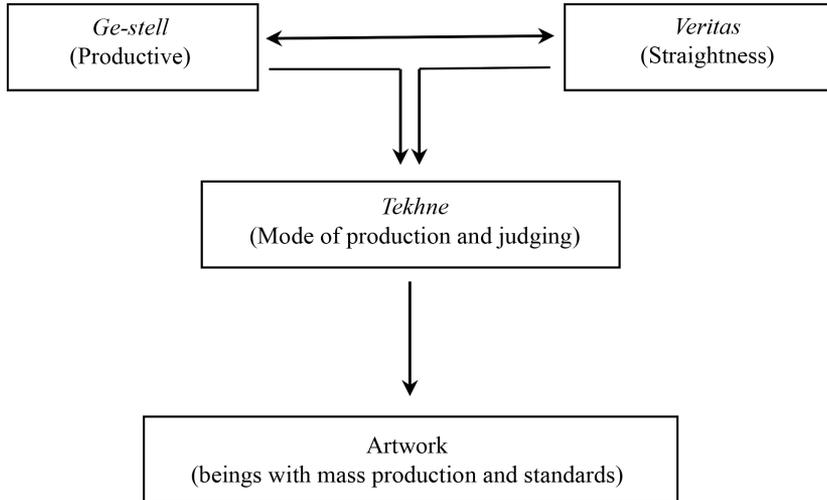


Figure 2.

Furthermore, we can consider another important contention by Heidegger about *tekhne* in relation to art. He reminded us to think about *tekhne* carefully. With his knowledge of ancient Greek, Heidegger showed us that *tekhne* can be a mode for *poiesis*, which has a creative character, and *aletheia*, which has an unconcealed character. Within *poiesis*, there are craft and art.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, if we make a diagram of his explanation while also considering Collingwood and Croce's differentiation, the result would be the following:

Besides this opinion, we note that Heidegger's attitude toward technology is rejection. For him, technology is a *tekhne* without *poiesis* or *Ge-stell* (enframing). In *Ge-stell*, the mode of creation is substituted by the mode of production, whereas the mode of revealing is eliminated or cancelled. In other words, *aletheia* as truth is not becoming.<sup>11</sup> Hence, truth that comes from this side is a *veritas*. *Veritas* as truth has a rigid character like a formal logic and meaning, as does *rectitudo* (straightness) or *iustitia* (justice). Not only are there all these characteristics, but *veritas* must have an agent to distinguish true (*verum*) from false (*falsum*).<sup>12</sup>

If we do not misinterpret Heidegger's contention about his attitude toward technology in its relationship with art and truth, we can make another diagram to complete our first diagram. The diagram is as follows:

10. See a good resume of Heidegger's formulation in Jay M. Bernstein's *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992, p. 112. For a comparative explanation, see Townsend. *Op.cit.*, p. 147.

11. Bernstein. *Op.cit.*, p. 113.

12. See Rappaport. *Op.cit.*, p. 20.

From these diagrams, we can summarize the relationship between art and technology in two models. As a result, models of relationship between art and technology can be used as a guideline to differentiate several opinions that come within this context.

## 1.2 *Production and reproduction of the work of art*

After discussing the relationship between art and technology, now we will discuss Benjamin's article. In his article, Benjamin stated his thesis that "*in principle, a work of art has always been reproducible.*" With the development of technology, especially when humans found a mechanical way of reproduction, the reproduction of a work of art can be done in a short time and in large quantities. This is a massive reproduction of a work of art. In spite of all this, Benjamin noted that even massive reproduction of the work of art has one deficiency, i.e. "*its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be*"<sup>13</sup> is non-existent.

The supposition that a work of art must be unique in Benjamin's argument is another way of saying that a work of art must be original or authentic in its core values. Anything that was reproduced is neither original nor authentic. This is parallel with the case of reproduction via machine. For the case of reproduction, Benjamin also noted that, first, the process of reproduction via machine is free from originality if we compare it with manual reproduction. When a machine implements duplication, it does not work like the original. Therefore, we can say that the machinery process of reproduction produces "originality," because it is different from the original way of making the product. Second, technical reproduction can be made into an imitation with a quality beyond the original in a special context. For example, when a photograph or a recorded sound functions as the representation of the original, its status of imitation is better believed than the original.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the fact that a machine can produce "the original," to differentiate it from the actual original, Benjamin formulated originality as follows:

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that 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.<sup>15</sup>

In relation to originality, there emerges the concept of aura. Merriam Webster's Dictionary defines aura as "a special quality or feeling that seems to come from a person, place, or thing."<sup>16</sup> However, it has a special meaning in Benjamin's view. First, aura is related to authenticity itself, because the situation of the weakness of aura is based on substituting the pluralities of the uniqueness. Second, aura must have a distance, a quality that impresses someone for its presence. Finally, it is important to underline individuality as a quality of aura as it cannot be taken away from its shell.<sup>17</sup>

After comprehending the machinery reproduction of a work of art and its impact on the work itself, we can say that the technology that produces the machine has a negative effect on a work of art. On the one hand, this opinion is true, but we must also note a different side of it. Photography and film, as shown by Benjamin, have reached their status as art via machinery reproduction. However, their status as art has a dilemmatic side as they conduct

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13. Benjamin. *Op.cit.*, pp. 323–324.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 324.

15. *Ibid.*

16. See the definition in: <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aura>>, accessed on the 28 September 2016.

17. Benjamin. *Op.cit.*, pp. 325–326. Identification of the key features of aura in Benjamin's argument was adopted from Martin Donougho's "Walter Benjamin," in Stephen Davies et al. (Eds.). *A Companion to Aesthetics*. 2nd Ed. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, p. 176.

mass production and lack the aura. He noted too that massive production can be used as a propaganda instrument, such as what the Nazi did in Germany.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, if we relate Benjamin's contention to the models of relationship between art and technology, Benjamin's position is the same as Heidegger's. All statements of Benjamin serve as examples for what Heidegger said as *Ge-stell*. However, in this case, we cannot say that aura is parallel with *aletheia*. Benjamin's intention, perhaps, is not meant as a search for truth via aura. His position is more similar to that of Immanuel Kant, who claimed that aesthetical experience is unique.<sup>19</sup>

Even though we are aware of Benjamin's position, there is another essential problem related to the production of a work of art, i.e. how we can comprehend what is meant as the production of the work of art itself. In this case, if we imagine a simple method, we can come to the conclusion that in producing a work of art, such as paintings, poetry, and songs, we must have a suitable tool. As illustration, to paint in a primitive way, we only need charcoal or blood. This model of painting can be seen in the old caves and is recognized as the origin of the painting technique.

Based on this, analogically, we can say that this method has an inherent technique or technology. In other words, to produce this work of art, we need to have a tool suitable for our technique or technology. Producing a work of art presupposes a technique or technology as Aristotle said. This presupposition can also be applied in the machinery reproduction, because the machine is only a new suitable tool. Therefore, the core problem of originality of a work of art has shifted to the way or method of production and is not based on aura. The originality of a work of art always comes with a new tool in its production. For example, if we can paint a new object using a tool that is different from ink, then the painting has its originality and uniqueness.

Meanwhile, the reproduction of a work of art, especially through mass reproduction, is not an essential problem for us. We can say that mass reproduction is part of art appreciation or socialization. We cannot know about a work of art if we do not have any copy of it, even if it is, minimally, in a catalogue. A work of art without appreciation is like nature without man. Thus, unlike Benjamin, we do not agree that aura and mass production are to be seen as core values to judge a work of art as "real or original art" in its context.

### 1.3 *Digital art as part of the production mode of a work of art*

In contemporary life, humans cannot be separated from technology. As a result, the fast development of technology has created a convergence between information technology and communication technology. This convergence bears a new tool, such as a personal computer with visual display, or the Internet. It has revolutionized the world and made it transparent and connected. With the help of this convergence, digital art comes into realization.

Currently, similar to traditional art, digital art has many branches, such as digital photo manipulation, cartoon animation, movie special effects, 2D and 3D modelling, electronic games, hypertext poetry, visual designs, web designs, multimedia presentations, and simulation. From digital photo manipulation to simulation, they have one primary key feature, that is the fact that the data are digital. It is the reason why art based on digital data is called digital art. The word digital itself means a binary code because the data format has only two numbers. It symbolizes the electric gate as consisting of two conditions. The first is 0 (zero) for the "off" condition and the second is 1 (one) for the "on" condition.

We can imagine that by only using the signs 0 and 1 someone whose profession is a digital artist can make a manipulation of images and colour in any way that s/he wants. For this purpose, computer engineers are capable of making a variation of codes to "paint" a form using digital data. It is coded on the byte that has an  $8 \times 8$  bit of data in one square. As illustration, we show a letter "A" on the diagram below as coded in 1 byte of data.

Each letter that we can see in this picture is written as "bulk" of data like this:

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18. Benjamin. *Op.cit.*, pp. 336–337 for the epilogue.

19. Townsend. *Op.cit.*, p. xxix.

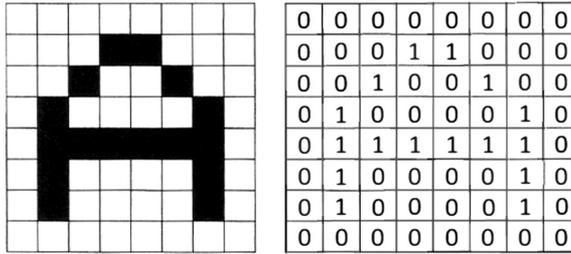


Figure 3.

1. 0000 0000
2. 0001 1000
3. 0010 0100
4. 0100 0010
5. 0111 1110
6. 0100 0010
7. 0100 0010
8. 0000 0000

It is not easy for us to understand this code if we cannot see the pattern of the letter A. We observe that the capacity of engineering and manipulating data like these is parallel to the capacity of painting. Computer engineers and painters do not look different in their capacity of painting something. The difference is only in the tools they use. Computer engineers paint on visual display (monitor) by code generation within the computer, whereas painters paint on canvas or paper using oil or water colour.

For this case, it is not relevant for us to consider aura as proposed by Benjamin to judge the originality of a work of art. Otherwise, we cannot say either that the letter A used by computer engineers does not fulfil the criteria to call this as a work of art. A letter itself is one of the examples of creativity in the computer world. This is a new creation with a new tool.

Parallel to this conception, Vaughan argued that digital art challenges the concept of aura in two ways. First, the possibilities of infinite reproduction from the digital image can be a barrier for aura to enter digital art as one criterion for judging authenticity. This is true, but when he said that “it is nothing but reproduction,” Vaughan did not recognize computer engineers as “painters” as described above. He just focuses on the digital artist who manipulates digital photos. Second, with the dependency on performative nature, digital artists express creativity in their interpretation of phenomena, fragmenting, analysing, and reproducing objects and realities. Thus, the aura for the second point is not needed anymore because every process in digital art presupposes creativity. However, when he said that digital art is “passive reproduction,” we do not agree with his statement either. Digital art is not merely a reproduction.<sup>20</sup> We tend to agree with John Andrew Fisher, who said:

“... new technologies have not only expanded established art forms, generated new art forms, and affected the way traditional art forms are experienced, but perhaps also diluted the very status of the fine arts in general.”<sup>21</sup>

If we consider this observation in the context of the production of a work of art, digital art has uniqueness and originality as opposed to what Benjamin said in the context of machine reproduction. However, the mode of the production of digital art is not the same as that of traditional production or machine reproduction of a work of art. Digital art is based on

20. Vaughan. *Op.cit.*, p. 6.

21. John Andrew Fisher. “Technology and Art,” in Stephen Davies, et al. (Eds.). *A Companion to Aesthetics*. 2nd Ed. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, p. 559.

immaterial production. It does not need too much of the real material as part of the production except a computer with a display to process this material. A work of art in digital art can exist without material form.

## 2 CONCLUSION

From the above explanation, we show that originality in the context of digital art can be traced to its method of production. If we recognize that the problem of originality is not based on aura but on the method of production, every new form of technique or technology to express art can have its originality. Besides, digital art has its uniqueness even without aura as its character is immaterial. With this immateriality, digital art can absorb every traditional form of art into its area with the process of digitalization.

However, if we consider the first diagram depicting the relationship between art and technology, especially related to Heidegger's contention about truth, digital art cannot answer it temporarily. With the characteristic of *veritas* as the truth that they have, it is difficult to counter the statement that digital art has exercised an "essential domination"<sup>22</sup> as exemplified by digitalization. It is also interesting to say that digital art is not an eliminated character of "reflexivity." It can help humans to contrast and to mix something unreal with something real within one domain. It is unlike Heidegger's concern that focuses on the need to open concealedness. Instead, digital art tends to open "nothingness" in reality.

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22. We borrow this term from Rappaport in *Op.cit.*, p. 21.