

The Democracy of the Machine Extending Through Time and Space

As my eyesight and my physical strength have deteriorated in recent years, I have had the opportunity to put into practice an idea I began considering over half a century ago: the democratization of art through mass production. When I published "Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge" in 1948, I highlighted what I saw as the benefits of machine-made art at the time:

The implications of mass production of original works of art are tremendous. For one thing, it would put an end to the old notion of "originals" with all the destructive, possessive behavior of many of those who own them, because in the new art it will be impossible for anyone to distinguish the first "original" from any of its hundreds, thousands, millions of "reproductions." Actually, in the old sense, original works of art cease to exist! But a new kind of "original" art comes into existence, bringing with it all kinds of needed corrective measures. For instance, the new kind of "original" art will be desired not for the pleasure of possessing the only, expensive original, but for the experience which the art itself makes possible. Artists and laymen who put printed reproductions on their walls are often far more genuine in their appreciation than many who have an original sequestered in their homes. The former wish to possess the experience of the art to such a degree that they are willing to take whatever substitute they can get; the latter too often want the art because they alone possess a highly sought after original which no-one else can experience unless they permit him the privilege. This has further destructive consequences in that the artists who inaugurate necessary changes in art are restricted by the efforts of dealers and collectors to maintain the value of the old in terms of money. Art thus becomes a kind of stock market.

...In the future the Machine will help to prevent money values from playing such an important role. Pecuniary differences will not determine who shall be the honored possessors of "original" works of art. As Frank Lloyd Wright put it: "The machine is here to stay. It is the forerunner of the democracy that is our dearest hope." The artist should accept every genuine opportunity he has for mass producing his work. Thus he will gradually destroy the stupid notions of rarity in art as regards money values. Lewis Mumford, writing on this problem, says: "The machine devaluates rarity: instead of producing a single unique object, it is capable of producing a million others just as good as the master model from which the rest are made. The machine devaluates age: for age is another token of rarity, and the machine, by placing its emphasis on fitness and adaptation, prides itself on the brand new rather than the antique: instead of feeling comfortably authentic in the midst of rust, dust, cobwebs, shaky parts, it prides itself on the opposite qualities-- slickness, smoothness, gloss, cleanness. The machine devaluates archaic taste: for taste in the bourgeois sense is merely another name for pecuniary reputability, and against that standard the machine sets up the standards of function and fitness. The newest, the cheapest, the commonest objects may, from the standpoint of pure esthetics, be immensely superior to the rarest, the most expensive, and the most antique. To say all this is merely to emphasize that the modern technics, by its own essential nature, imposes a great purification of esthetics: that is, it strips off from the object all the barnacles of association, all the sentimental and pecuniary values which have nothing whatever to do with esthetic form, and it focuses attention upon the object itself."

We would happily agree with those who claim that mass-production methods in art will make it into a mere "common" commodity, for we believe that if the value of art depends upon its rarity and great cost, then it cannot have any more value for mankind than fur coats and the like. We have had enough of that attitude towards art. Art has an incomparably more important role than that. Its function is to give humans more satisfaction to live in a more human way. So let us make it available to everyone now that we can. Let everyone have an "original" work of contemporary art as a distinct part of everyday life.

This democratizing influence extends through both time and space. With the proper tools and instructions, a machine or a master technician could produce new works one day after the original conception by the artist, or two hundred years later; in the same town as the original was conceived, or halfway around the world. All the inherent values of the "original" would be present in such works; only the false, useless values of rarity and economic worth would be lacking.

For the past five years I have been physically unable to make art, though my desire to do so has not diminished. I have relied on others to help me accomplish what little I've been able to do-- a friend is drafting this very essay for me under my supervision. Last year my friend Neil Larsen sketched a variation on a sculpture I had once done in homage to the artist of the Venus of Willendorf. I liked his version well enough that we decided to produce it as a finished work. Another friend, Max Cora, executed the work for us, demonstrating a technical skill that I didn't know he had. I began reconsidering the idea of mass-produced art as a result. I approached Max with the following proposition: If he would produce "copies" or "multiples" of some of my past works-- specifically a series of sculptures conceived in 1937-- under my supervision and to my specifications, I would allow him to sell them at a nominal profit. He readily agreed. We have since completed the first work; a version of #58, 1937. The shape was determined when the work was conceived more than sixty years ago. I dictated the size, the materials, and the color scheme just a few months back. Max then executed the work to my perfect satisfaction.

This is an example of "the democratization of art" in action. Though the work was made by hands other than my own, in a space unfamiliar to me, the work itself is undeniably mine. Max is authorized to continue producing such works so long as there are people interested in obtaining them, even after I'm long gone. The future works will be as "original" as the one sitting before me now. Multiply this modest beginning by the thousands and millions of identical works capable of being produced by modern methods, and you have a vision of the future of art. Rather than foreshadowing the "death of art" as feared a century ago, the machine offers a method of making the best art available to all at affordable prices. People of average means could own works of art as easily as they now can own musical recordings or copies of great works of literature. All it requires is the will to proceed.

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