



Being David Hockney

Description

David Hockney sends digital paintings of flowers to his friends by email. These are pictures he created on his iPhone and iPad. Some of these images are now on show at a gallery in Paris (Fleurs Frañches at the Fondation Pierre Bergñ). It's pleasing that artists of his stature can embrace new technologies and explore their potential. [Press coverage](#) of the exhibition leads to inevitable questions about originality and authorship, which this work is thought to challenge ([BBC item](#)). How can an image, produced digitally using an iPhone app such as [Brushes](#), that can then be emailed instantly to a list of friends, preserve its status as an original work of art?



This is not a Hockney

Issues raised by mechanical and electronic reproduction are not new. Walter Benjamin raised the question in 1935 in his famous essay "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction." The mass produced artifact supposedly loses its "aura" when so produced, an indictment on the application of industrialized processes in the creation and dissemination of art.

From a contrary point of view, Jacques Derrida suggests that the idea of a "first time," that original and authentic moment where something starts, should strike us as a more unsettling concept than that something gets repeated or reproduced. When we think about it, reproduction is the norm not the exception. The first step an infant makes is not the first step ever, but that ascribed to a particular moment of agency. When does any process ever really begin? In diminishing the idea of a starting point

we are also positing a challenge to originality. Originality always has been a contingent matter, even before processes of mass production and electronic dissemination. It's a term avoided by many, but where "originality" is used, it pertains to conventions and agreements about attribution, intellectual property rights, and fair dealing.

Perhaps the concept of an original begins with the thing that the painting represents. We readily think of a particular painting as representing a flower in the sense that it corresponds in some way to the flower (its colour, shape, the experience it invokes). But the representational aspects of the artwork resides in the fact that every time we look at the painting it is being presented to us, re-presented, anew. This is a further strategy to unsettle the concept of an original. The representational aspect of art is not that it presents to us a particular flower again, but that the artwork presents to us anew on every viewing. This is an inference drawn from arguments advanced by Hans-Georg Gadamer on interpretation in art.

So originality is a limited metaphor, investing authority in a metaphor of origins, starts, primary moves, and authorship. An alternative metaphor, developed by Gadamer, is that of play. Playing about with drawing tools on a high-tech gadget reminds us of the play element in all art, and any other practice that claims purchase in the area of representation, such as design.

Category

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Tags

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