

ON COPY

In painting, a copy is more or less an exact imitation of another painting called the original. Usually, a copy is made for the purpose of acquiring artistic skills, as a substitute for the original, or as a forgery. We could consider all of these to be trivial cases of copying.*

Now, let us take a look at the copy of the painting *Composition No. III*, by Piet Mondrian. Assuming that it is not made for the reasons mentioned above, it would be an interesting case to study.

By definition, both an original and a copy are undistinguishable on the level of syntax. Semantically, they could be very different. For example: Is a copy of an abstract painting, an abstract painting? In the copy we still see the original, thus it should be an abstract painting; on the other hand, being a faithful reproduction of another painting (object), it should be also a realistic painting. This ambiguity shows how a simple copy of an abstract painting could transform something “known” into something “unknown”, turning the entire modernistic paradigm upside-down, and revealing that our idyllic backyard could be a minefield, too.

Another question: Is an author of a copy, an author? If “author” is defined as an exceptional and unique individual, able to express him/herself in a way no one else can, then only an author could produce the unique and exceptional work we call an original. The maker of a copy could not be an author. Furthermore, in a copy we still see only the original and its author, while the maker of the copy completely disappears.

A copy could short-circuit the history of art. Instead of being chronological, implying both development and progress, art history could become a loop if two formally identical paintings (the original and the copy) appeared at two different points on the historical time line.

We could also understand a copy to result from (express) the process of “observing the observer.”. If an original is a reflection of reality, then its copy is a reflection of a reflection, or a reflection of the second order.

It might be interesting to look at a copy as a character in a play. We could interpret a copy of *Composition No. III* by Mondrian, as “playing the role of the original.” Furthermore, this could help us to see even Mondrian, not as a real person, but as a “role in a play”. All those “great modern masters” unaware they were playing roles, playing themselves on the “art stage,” were essentially “naïve artists.”

A copy will become more important than the original when the narrative (the story or play) it belongs to becomes more important than the narrative of the original. For example, the history of art, instead of being a meta-narrative, as it usually is, could become the internal subject matter of the work. The question is: What would be the meta-narrative of the work which internal subject-matter is history of art?

A copy can be understood as a memory. Memory is, by its nature, the antithesis of what is remembered; on the other hand, it may be the only way the past can be actualized, brought into the present so that it becomes alive again.

Ending, then, with something about the difference between a fake and a copy. While a fake (deceptively) wants to *be* the original, a copy (overtly) tries only to *imitate* it. Thus the purpose of a fake is to conceal, while a copy proposes to reveal. A fake is essentially opportunistic, it does not question the system: undetected, it is the original; uncovered, it is discarded as a forgery.** On the other hand, a copy is out in the open, obvious and blunt; once it is incorporated in the system, it starts questioning everything.

Walter Benjamin
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*A more interesting case of copying is so-called “appropriation art.” Essentially this can be seen as an offspring of Pop Art, where instead of a soup-can, flag or cartoon, the subject matter is a well-known work of art treated as a pop-icon. However, judging by the results, it remains superficial in its understanding of the copy.

**A special kind of fake is the “original” that openly pretends to be the original and thus is perceived to be intentionally ambiguous. This is the work that overtly puts in doubt its authenticity, placing the burden of judgment on the observer. This kind of “fake” is not like ordinary fake and could play the same role as the copy does.