

digital

image

book



A u r a

in a Post-Authentic Era

by Alicja Gromadzka

Fragile Presence

Exploring how aura survives as presence within contemporary art, performance, and fashion through vulnerability, ritual, embodiment, and philosophical interpretation.

content

All chapters are interconnected. Read sequentially to follow the conceptual development of aura across art, performance, and fashion.

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To understand how meaning and authenticity survive in a post-authentic era

Introduction

“The soul and the aura are totally different. The aura is about the electromagnetic waves that you generate. The soul? That’s a spiritual thing” – Mick Rock

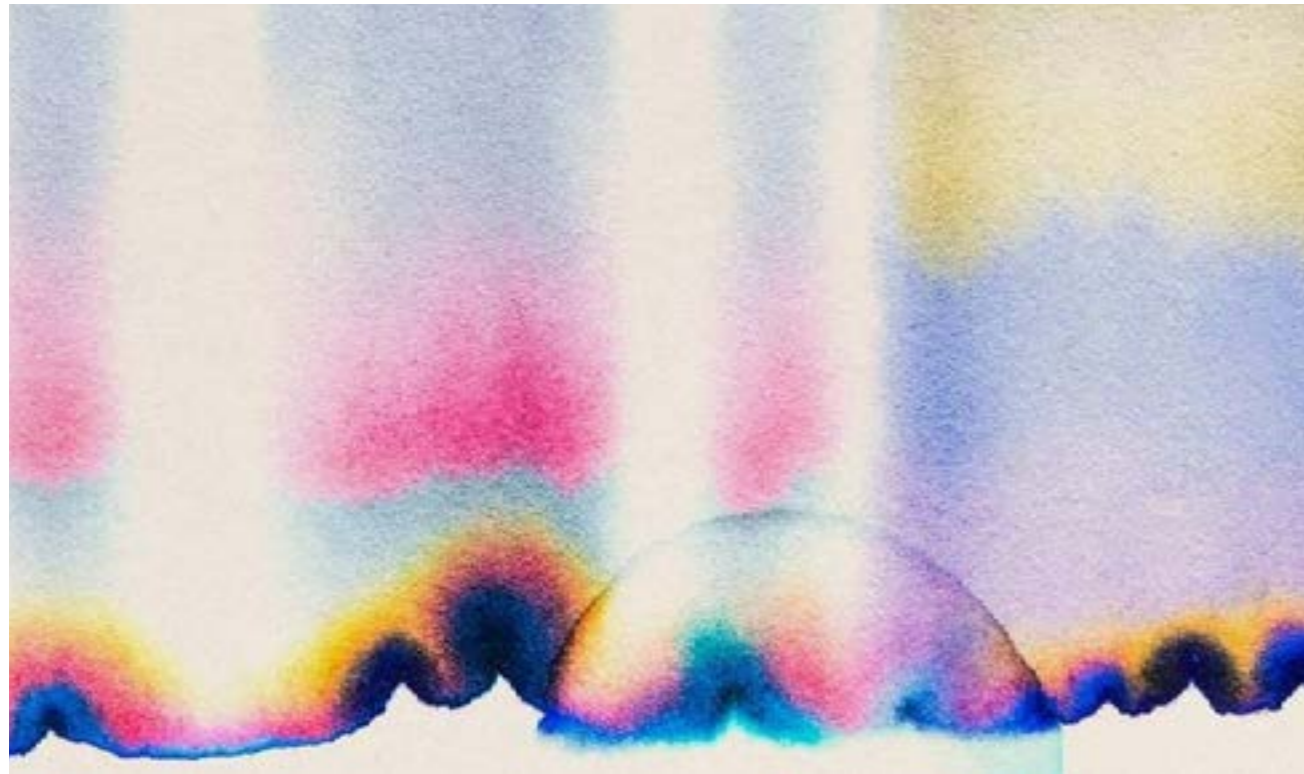


Marcel Duchamp, *Portrait of Dr. Dumouchel*, 1910. Artists Rights Society(ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Succession Marcel Duchamp. Image courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2018.

This thesis focuses on artists and designers such as Wolfgang Tillmans, Mark Rothko, Georges Rouault, Marina Abramović, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Rei Kawakubo. It investigates the concept of aura—introduced by Walter Benjamin—as it manifests in contemporary visual arts, performance, and fashion. While rooted in Benjamin’s 1936 theory in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, this research analyses aura’s relevance from the late 20th century to today. The study situates aura within Western contemporary art institutions, global fashion houses, and digital media landscapes. In a world dominated by reproduction, simulation, and fast visual consumption, understanding aura’s transformations is crucial to understanding how meaning, presence, and authenticity survive—or dissolve—within culture. Walter Benjamin described aura as the unique presence of an artwork: its connection to time, place,

He argued that photography and film marked the beginning of aura’s disappearance, as images became detached from their origins. Nearly a century later, this question feels more urgent than ever. In a cultural landscape dominated by screens, simulation, and performance, is aura truly lost—or has it evolved? This thesis employs secondary research, analysing philosophical texts, art historical literature, and critical theory to examine how aura has been constructed, challenged, and reimagined in contemporary practices. The approach is theoretical and interpretive, drawing upon existing scholarship rather than primary interviews or fieldwork. This thesis argues that aura is not a fixed property of an artwork—it is an effect, an experience, a negotiation. It is something that can be constructed, dissolved, and even faked. In a post-authentic era, aura survives not as permanence, but as a fragile atmosphere shaped by cultural attention—or lack of it. Across three chapters, this thesis traces the shifting shape of aura as it moves through physical presence, ephemeral performance, and finally, the relational field of fashion and embodiment.

The Artist's Presence – Constructing Aura in a Post-Authentic Era



https://www.juniqe.com/uk?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=pinterest_feed

Aura in the 21st century often emerges not through objects themselves, but through the presence of the artist—whether emotional, physical, or stylistic. In a time marked by oversharing, accelerated visual culture, and digital disembodiment, the artist's body, gesture, and vulnerability become central to constructing a sense of truth, emotional gravity, and authentic connection. This presence is not merely visual but deeply embodied; it carries traces of intimacy, labour, and subjectivity that resist the flattening effects of mass reproduction. The artist becomes both medium and message, transforming their own visibility into sites of meaning, encounter, and aura.

Wolfgang Tillmans

Cultivates aura through apparent simplicity. His photographs are candid fragments of everyday life: friends brushing their teeth, bodies lounging in sunlight, ephemeral objects caught in soft focus. His prints, often pinned to walls unframed, destabilise the traditional aura of the gallery. Yet paradoxically, this modest presentation creates intimacy. The aura in Tillmans' work is not distant or sublime—it is quiet, accessible, and felt. His images carry the emotional imprint of presence, of "having been there," and of observing the world closely without manipulation.



Tillmans W. Lutz & Alex sitting in the trees" (1992), <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/program/calendar/event/nSlcbMZ>



Tillmans W. "Still life, New York" (2001), <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/program/calendar/event/nSlcbMZ>

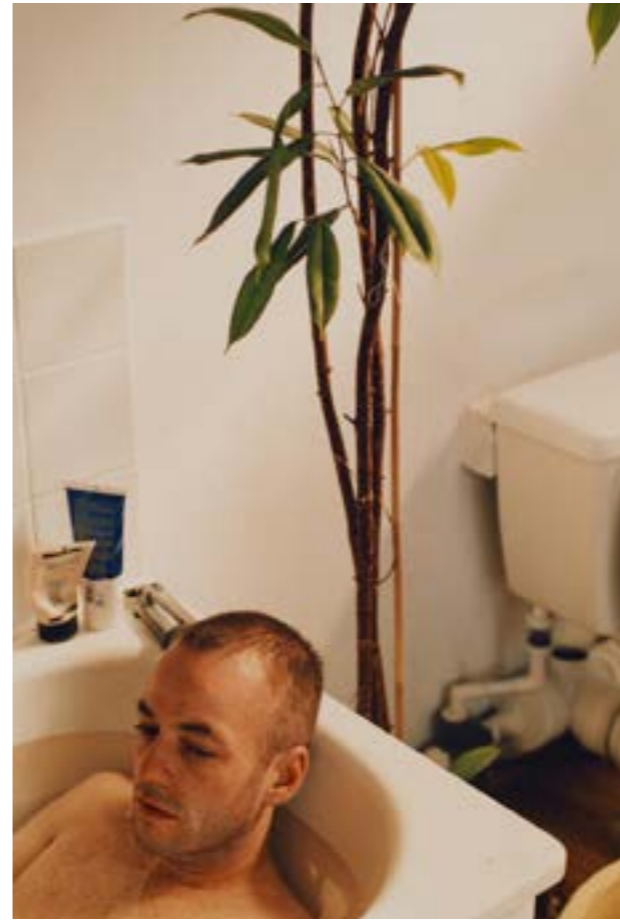




Tillmans W. "Drawing with light" (2003), <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/program/calendar/event/nSlcbMZ>



Tillmans W. "Drawing with light" (2003), <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/program/calendar/event/nSlcbMZ>



Tillmans W. "Jochen taking a bath" (1997), <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/program/calendar/event/nSlcbMZ>



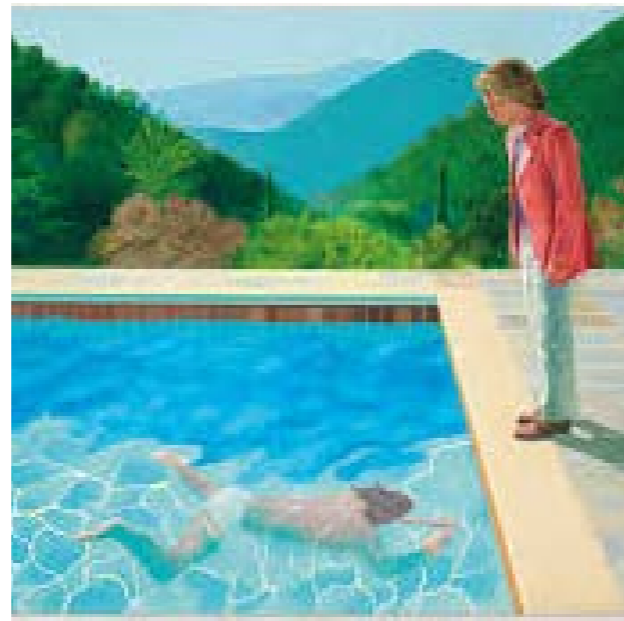
Tillmans W. "Drawing with light" (2003), <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/program/calendar/event/nSlcbMZ>



Tillmans W. "Astro Crusto, a" (2012), <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/program/calendar/event/nSlcbMZ>

David Hockney

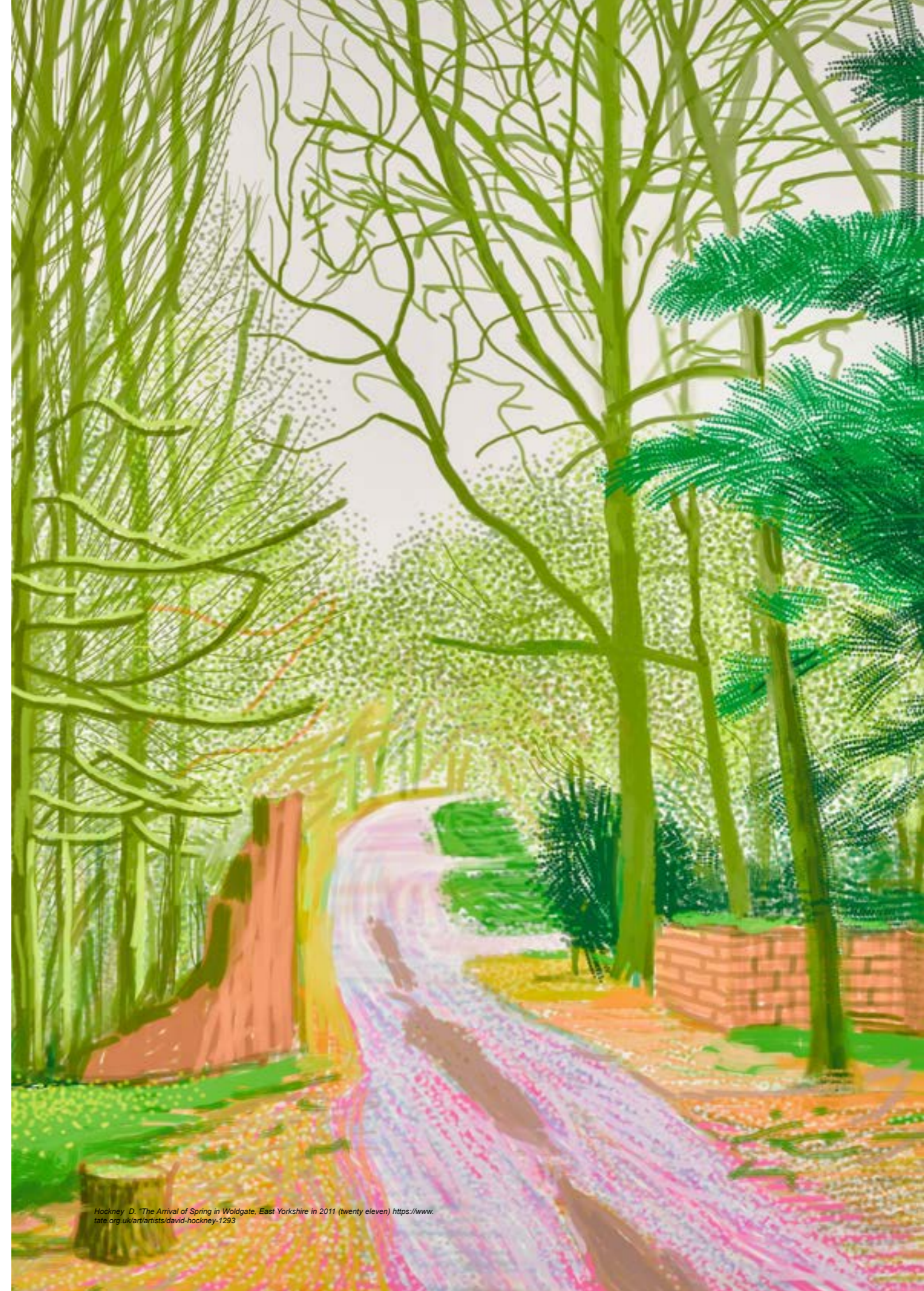
By contrast, evokes aura through joyful experimentation with perception and process. Like the painting pools in 1960s California. Hockney imbues his work with a tactile immediacy. His portraits are full of attention—every line shaped by care. Aura here is the result of looking with love. Even his technological explorations do not strip away aura but translate it into new forms, proving that digital tools, when guided by an artist's sensibility, can still transmit a profound sense of presence.



Hockney D. "Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)" (1972) <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/david-hockney-1293>



Hockney D. "A Bigger Splash" (1967), <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/david-hockney-1293>



Hockney D. "The Arrival of Spring in Woldgate, East Yorkshire in 2011 (twenty eleven)" <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/david-hockney-1293>



Ephemerality and the Vanishing Aura – Performance and the Moment



<https://www.cosmos.so/e/536880220>

Aura is often inseparable from temporality. Unlike static works of art, which can be revisited indefinitely, ephemeral practices—such as performance, ritual, or durational cinema—rely on their unrepeatable nature to generate meaning. In these contexts, aura emerges as a fleeting, atmospheric presence grounded in the here and now. Performance-based practices reveal how aura is not a quality contained within an object but an event or experience shaped by temporal and relational conditions. The temporality of aura resists commodification. Its unrepeatable nature prevents it from being fully captured, reproduced, or circulated. Even when performances are documented, their aura is inevitably diminished, as the energy of co-presence and immediacy cannot be replicated on screen or in photographs. This points to aura's dependence on presence: the living encounter, the shared space between bodies, and the unfolding of time that demands patience, attention, and vulnerability from both performer and viewer. Ephemerality also creates a heightened sense of attention. Knowing that something will vanish intensifies the focus of those witnessing it. Performance art and time-based cinema become powerful arenas.

This ephemeral aura is not about ownership or mastery; rather, it is about surrendering to the flow of time and entering a liminal space where meaning is not fixed but constantly negotiated. In a broader cultural context dominated by fast, repeatable images, ephemerality offers a counterpoint by reintroducing slowness and ritual. It asks us to pause, to witness, and to be present. It reminds us that meaning is often born in moments that cannot be archived or reproduced without loss. Thus, ephemeral practices illuminate aura's deepest paradox: it is strongest precisely when it is most vulnerable to disappearance.

Marina Abramović

Creates sacred space through endurance and stillness. In *The Artist Is Present* (2010), she sat silently for over 700 hours, inviting visitors to sit opposite her. The performance became a site of communal intensity; many cried, others lingered wordlessly. Aura resided not in an object but in shared attention, proximity, and ritual slowness. Abramović's body, unmoving and fully present, became a site of spiritual concentration. Her work reintroduces aura as something mystical and intimate, created through vulnerability and presence.



Abramović M. "Rhythm 0" (1974) <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/964>



Abramović M. "Rhythm 0" (1974) <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/964>



Abramović M. *Rest Energy* (1980, with Ulay) Marina Abramović



Abramović M. *Balkan Baroque* (1997) Marina Abramović



Abramović M. *"The Artist Is Present"* (2010) <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/964>



Abramović M. *"The House with the Ocean View"* (2002) <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/964>



Abramović M. *"The Artist Is Present"* (2010) <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/964>

Andrei Tarkovsky

Movie director uses duration, silence, and uncertainty to evoke the metaphysical. The film unfolds in long, slow takes, with minimal plot. The characters journey into "The Zone," a mysterious space rumoured to grant inner desires. The camera lingers on rusting objects, overgrown landscapes, and still faces, allowing time to stretch and breathe. Tarkovsky constructs aura not through narrative spectacle but through ritualised attention. The viewer is asked not to consume but to contemplate. give me movies that do the aura of him



Tarkovsky A. "Ivan's Childhood" (1962) <https://mubi.com/en/cast/andrei-tarkovsky>



Tarkovsky A. "Ivan's Childhood" (1962) <https://mubi.com/en/cast/andrei-tarkovsky>



Tarkovsky A. "Mirror" 1975 <https://mubi.com/en/cast/andrei-tarkovsky>





Tarkovsky A. "Mirror" (1975) <https://mubi.com/en/cast/andrei-tarkovsky>



Tarkovsky A. "Ivan's Childhood" (1962) <https://mubi.com/en/cast/andrei-tarkovsky>

Ana Medieta

Constructs aura through her intimate, ephemeral performances that merge body and earth. In her Silueta Series (1973–1980), she imprinted her body's silhouette into landscapes using mud, sand, blood, and flowers, creating fragile traces of presence and absence. The aura of her work arises not from permanence but from ritual, vulnerability, and ancestral memory. Her Cuban heritage and exile imbue each gesture with longing for belonging and origins. By dissolving her body into nature, Mendieta evokes aura as a sacred, fleeting atmosphere—an embodied ritual that resists commodification, leaving only the powerful resonance of what once was.



Mendieta A. Anima, Silueta de Cohetes (Firework Piece), 1976 Available at: <https://www.mariangoodman.com/content/feature/3810/detail/artworks63344/> (Accessed: 08 July 2025).



Ana Mendieta Untitled: Silueta Series, 1979, Ana Mendieta. Available at: <https://www.mariangoodman.com/content/feature/3810/detail/artworks63344/> (Accessed: 08 July 2025).



Ana Mendieta, Imágen de Yagüé, 1973, Ana Mendieta, Marian Goodman. Available at: <https://www.mariangoodman.com/content/feature/3810/detail/artworks63344/> (Accessed: 08 July 2025).



Mendieta A. Isla, 1981, Mendieta, A. Ana Mendieta, Isla, 1981 Marian Goodman. Available at: <https://www.mariangoodman.com/content/feature/3810/detail/artworks63344/> (Accessed: 08 July 2025).



Mendieta, A. (2019) Ana Mendieta, Available at: <https://www.mariangoodman.com/content/feature/3810/detail/artworks63344/> (Accessed: 08 July 2025).

Fashion, Visibility, and the Flesh – Reimagining Aura



The aura of couture by Rahul Mishra (no date) The Voice Of Fashion. Available at: <https://www.thevoiceoffashion.com/centrestage/fashion-shows/the-aura-of-couture-by-rahul-mishra-5981> (Accessed: 02 July 2025).

In contemporary visual culture, fashion occupies a unique position: it is material and immaterial, intimate and public, object and performance. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's concept of the visible and the invisible, as well as his notion of flesh as the intertwining of seer and seen, this chapter reframes aura within fashion as an embodied phenomenon. For Merleau-Ponty, the visible is never simply what is seen as an object of detached analysis; it is a field structured by flesh—the elemental being that is at once seeing and visible, touching and touchable. Fashion operates within this chiasmic structure: garments become extensions of embodied perception. A dress, jacket, or veil acquires meaning through its relation to the wearer's flesh and its projection to others' gaze.

Haute couture stages aura through meticulous craftsmanship and exclusivity, but its impact lies in mediating designer intention, fabric tactility, wearer posture, and viewer perception. Each garment becomes a style—"a certain manner of being, a radiance that organises space and time around it." Runway shows illustrate his idea that "to see is always to see more than one sees." Garments in motion reveal invisible dimensions of drape, transparency, and kinetic energy that static displays conceal. Aura emerges as a fleeting interplay between visible fabric and invisible atmospheres of fantasy, status, and desire. Yet fashion also problematises aura in mass reproduction. The same dress on Instagram loses embodied thickness; its aura collapses into pure surface imagery. Fast fashion and digital filters simulate style without the material relationality that flesh demands, flattening the visible into visual code. Designers such as Rei Kawakubo reclaim aura through sculptural garments that challenge bodily norms, forcing viewers to reconsider clothing and flesh. Her designs think with the body, rendering visible the invisible architectures of identity and materiality.



Rei Kawakubo – Comme des Garçons SS97 "Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body", <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/43/702>



Roversi P. – Comme des Garçons SS97 "Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body", <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/43/702>



Rei Kawakubo – AW2012 "White Drama" Collection, Paris, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1997-ready-to-wear/comme-des-garcons>



Rei Kawakubo – AW2012 "White Drama" Collection, Paris, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1997-ready-to-wear/comme-des-garcons>



Rei Kawakubo – AW2012 "White Drama" Collection, Paris, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1997-ready-to-wear/comme-des-garcons>



Rei Kawakubo – AW2012 "White Drama" Collection, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1997-ready-to-wear/comme-des-garcons>



Rei Kawakubo – AW2012 "White Drama" Collection, Paris, <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1997-ready-to-wear/comme-des-garcons>



Rahul Mishra AURA COUTURE FALL 2024 The Hindu god Brahma, Paris, <https://www.thevoiceof-fashion.com/centrestage/fashion-shows/the-aura-of-couture-by-rahul-mishra-5981>



Rahul Mishra AURA COUTURE FALL 2024 The Hindu god Brahma, Paris, <https://www.thevoiceof-fashion.com/centrestage/fashion-shows/the-aura-of-couture-by-rahul-mishra-5981>



Rahul Mishra AURA COUTURE FALL 2024 The Hindu god Brahma, Paris, <https://www.thevoiceof-fashion.com/centrestage/fashion-shows/the-aura-of-couture-by-rahul-mishra-5981>



Rahul Mishra AURA COUTURE FALL 2024 The Hindu god Brahma, Paris, <https://www.thevoiceof-fashion.com/centrestage/fashion-shows/the-aura-of-couture-by-rahul-mishra-5981>



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Conclusion

Aura today is not lost—it is contested. In a world defined by reproduction, visibility, and simulation, aura no longer rests in objects alone but in fragile, intentional gestures and our conditions of attention. Through intimacy, vulnerability, ritual, and duration, artists such as Tillmans, Rothko, Rouault, Abramović, Tarkovsky, and designers like Kawakubo offer paths back to presence. Their works demonstrate that aura can still be evoked—
through care, risk, and embodied attention.

At the same time, aura remains at risk of being imitated, aestheticised, and emptied, especially in mass digital culture where even authenticity becomes stylised. Yet within this landscape of scrolling and simulation, the human longing for presence remains. Ultimately, aura is not something we simply witness—it is something we participate in. It demands slowness, attention, and vulnerability. In a culture obsessed with speed and spectacle,
this remains a radical act.



thank you



David Hockney

PAINTING



Wolfgang Tillmans



Marina Abramović

PERFORMANCE



Ana Medieta



The term "aura", by Walter Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) refers to the unique presence and irreproducibility of an artwork—its situatedness in time, space, and ritual.

CINEMA



Andriej Tarkowski



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