The Beauty of Inconvenience

Keith Hui King Yin

Why light scented candles when you can buy diffusers? Why listen to LPs when you can digitally stream music on Spotify or Amazon? Why visit galleries or museums when images of many of the artworks throughout human history have already been uploaded digitally to every corner of the Internet? Why, in essence, would we sometimes prefer these things that are more inconvenient? The answer to these questions may not necessarily come down to the quality of the end-product we receive and perceive, but to our attitude towards the idea of an "experience."

To start with, my definition of the term "inconvenience" is a lifestyle inseparable from the concept of "the past." As time progresses, our society proposes new ideas to bring about technological innovations and development in general, subsequently leading to the emergence of products and services that allow the world to operate more quickly, efficiently, and effectively. Nevertheless, as we move forward and continue to improve our quality of life, this "inconvenience of the past" is also inevitably disfavored, forsaken, and eventually eliminated.

However, it is also exactly this association of "the past" to inconvenient things that may captivate some of us, for it to be capable of either reminding us of collective memories or convincing us that these outdated things are genuinely better. If you are familiar with the Renaissance and/or the Enlightenment, it is not difficult to notice people's tendency to appreciate the past over contemporary times for its claimed virtues—the Renaissance would look back at Dante; and in the 18th century, Johann Winckelmann would return to the idealized beauty belonging to ancient Greece. Similarly, some people nowadays would argue that the past is better because "things required hands-on efforts and hard work" or "it boasts a slower-paced lifestyle where people can actually sit down and enjoy things." What history (particularly art history) has taught us is that such judgments are neither benign nor malign. It simply demonstrates the endless possibilities of individual preferences—to think that traditional scented candles are better because of the warmth absent in diffusers, or that the plates of LPs are better because they play analog music which retains more details compared to its digital counterpart.

Of course, there can also be a more pragmatic reason for people to favor inconvenience: social capital and pride. People often feel superior when they prove themselves to be distinct from others. As I have discussed earlier that inconvenience is a past lifestyle already abandoned by the mainstream, it becomes a perfect implement to show individual taste and uniqueness. "Sorry you guys could enjoy your Nespressos, but I'd like my coffee meticulously aged, roasted, and then served by a barista."

There are so many more reasons accounting for people's fondness for "inconvenience," but for now we must first return to a discussion more art related: why would we shed off a few hours just for visiting a certain gallery and museum to view art? It should not be about preferring the old ways, and certainly not for pride—then why? In her article *Looking at Ophelia: A Comparison of Viewing Art in the Gallery and in the Lab*, Sandra Dudley presents an interesting and useful study for us by comparing audiences' viewing experience of the famous 19th-century work Ophelia.[1] Dudley observed that those visiting the exhibiting museum in person spend more time scanning the entire canvas, while those in the lab looking through a digital screen fixates longer on Ophelia herself. How I would comprehend such a phenomenon is that museumgoers and gallery-goers focus more on "experiencing" art, as if wandering around a sacred, liminal space produced by the artwork in front of them; as opposed to those looking at digital screens who are finding specific subject matters—targets—to "investigate." In the comparison of "experiencing" versus "investigating," the former is provoked to art in real life. It may shock us with the work's immediate size, it may inspire us with historical importance and connotations with the real work presented right in front of us. It may also intensify our senses as the work gives off the smell of its paint or its wooden frame, or it may simply captivate us by providing a large, open, clean, and calming viewing space isolated from the outside world. Whatever the cause, or however these causes add up to each other, these many unique qualities that only an on-site visit can provide prove the importance of "inconvenience" to

1 Sandra Dudley, "Looking at Ophelia: A comparison of viewing art in the gallery and in the lab," *Advances in Clinical Neuroscience and Rehabilitation* 11, no. 3 (July/August 2011): 15.

art. And for art to be an experience-based subject matter itself, "inconvenience" seems necessary as well on the other way round.

As inconvenient as some things may be, like museums and galleries in contrast to online viewing rooms, they always have unique elements and features that their counterparts cannot provide. And thus, there will always be individuals that prefer this beauty of inconvenience.

Bibliography

Dudley, Sandra. "Looking at Ophelia: A comparison of viewing art in the gallery and in the lab." *Advances in Clinical Neuroscience and Rehabilitation* 11, no. 3 (July/August 2011): 15–19.