

## Dawn Roe

### Conditions for an Unfinished Work of Mourning: Beauty As an Appeal to Join the Majority of Those Who Are Dead

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Hundreds of footpaths cross the Pyrenees Mountains in Northern Spain, crisscrossing the border with France. Among those closest to the Mediterranean Sea is The F-Route, known to be the trail taken by philosopher and cultural theorist Walter Benjamin during his ill-fated attempt to flee Nazi persecution in 1940, which resulted in his suicide (an option exercised by many during these passages). The woman guiding Benjamin was resistance leader, Lisa Fiitko. This route intersects with related paths of exile traversed by over half a million refugees during The Spanish Civil War, and World War II.

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Walter Benjamin's discussions of "aura" throughout his writings from the 1930s (the most widely referenced included within the various translations and versions of "The Work of Art" essay) describe it as both tangible and metaphysical. Benjamin simultaneously laments and celebrates natural and contrived "aura" as "that which withers" in its reproduced, or removed form. Film historian, Miriam Hansen, and artist and theorist, Ariella Azoulay, are among those who have taken up Benjamin's "aura" in recent years, reassessing his complex and often contradictory assertions, finding new relevance for a heavily mediated, global landscape fraught with histories of displacement and loss.

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The cyanotype is one of the oldest forms of photography, its image resulting from a simple reaction to UV light. A camera-less technique, it records imprints of duration, invariably speaking to both presence and absence at once. The British botanist, Anna Atkins, produced the first book consisting entirely of photo-based representations in 1843.

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The phrase, *Conditions for an Unfinished Work of Mourning: Beauty As an Appeal to Join the Majority of Those Who Are Dead*, combines a passage in Ariella Azoulay's essay, "On the Work of Death in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" with a translated line from a footnote defining beauty and its relationship to history and nature in Benjamin's 1939 essay, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," referenced in Miriam Hansen's article, "Benjamin's Aura." These texts consider the implications embedded within visual representation, and provide a means of situating historical concepts and occurrences within a contemporary space – both physical, cultural, and aesthetic.