

The Dilemma of Educational Disciplinary Practices and Artistic Subjectivity: An Ethnographic Analysis of the Art Education Practices in Local Universities

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Abstract: This study utilizes an aesthetic ethnographic approach to explore the contradictory relationship between educational discipline and artistic subjectivity in the art education practices of local universities. The study finds that exam-oriented education, represented by the art examination, narrows artistic creation into standardized technical training, weakening students' independent thinking and creative subjectivity. Despite some curriculum expansion in local universities, the "technical inertia" and "standardized discipline" in teaching practices continue to profoundly restrict students' artistic creation and the development of subjectivity. While some teachers advocate for "free creation," students still face expressive anxiety in their creations due to the lack of systematic methodological support, and are unable to break free from the shackles of technical training. At the same time, implicit evaluation criteria exacerbate aesthetic homogeneity, leading to conservative and standardized creations, thus systematically eroding individual creative subjectivity. The study reveals that the current art education in local universities is characterized by a dual alienation of technique and art, severely limiting students' creativity and artistic expression.

Keywords: educational discipline, artistic subjectivity, technical inertia, aesthetic homogeneity, local universities

1. Introduction

In recent years, the enrollment scale of art majors in local universities has expanded, with a surge in student numbers. However, whether the educational system can effectively cultivate students' aesthetic subjectivity has become a controversial issue. Many local universities still adopt an exam-centered teaching model, focusing classroom efforts on basic skill training and exam preparation, neglecting the necessary space for sensory experience and reflection in artistic creation. This study aims to explore how this teaching model influences students' creative motivations and self-identity, offering reflections and reform suggestions for educators.

This study is based on the aesthetic ethnographic method, collecting data from the learning experiences and creative practices of 10 undergraduate students majoring in art at a local university through participant observation and in-depth interviews, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Information on In-Depth Interviews with Art Major Undergraduates

No.	Gender	Family Background	Hometown Type	Aesthetic Preference	Characteristics
A	Female	Middle Class	First-tier	Realistic Portraits	Classical, elegant, and atmospheric styles
B	Male	Farming	Third-tier	Realism	Art inspired by real life, depicting everyday scenes
C	Male	Self-employed	County Town	Abstract	Harmonious color schemes, emotionally expressive
D	Female	Farming	County Town	Realistic Landscapes	Quiet, pure, and fresh style
E	Female	Self-employed	County Town	National Style	Soft tones, delicate shapes, poetic compositions
F	Male	Farming	Rural	Abstract Expression	No fixed style, based on emotional and spiritual responses
G	Female	Doctor	First-tier	Freehand	Calligraphy, especially cursive script
H	Female	Farming	Rural	Realistic	Fine detailing in artwork
I	Male	Freelancer	County Town	Portraits	Rich in color
J	Female	Marketing	Second-tier	Realistic Still Life, Landscape	Strong aesthetic sense, able to express ideas

2. Technical discipline in the joint art examination

The Joint Art Examination (JAE) in China is a key selection mechanism in the art education system, and its training process embodies an aesthetic discipline model centered on “technical rationality.” The outdated exam model is disconnected from contemporary art practices.[1] Students commonly rely on mechanical imitation of standard model drawings to complete technical training, and the creative process is reduced to replicating a “standard answer.” According to John Dwyer’s Cognitive Load Theory, to facilitate effective learning, external cognitive load should be minimized while increasing the associative cognitive load, ensuring that total cognitive load does not exceed the learner’s capacity.[2] However, JAE training imposes a significant external cognitive load on students, requiring them to handle technical demands, evaluation standards, and time pressures, thereby depleting cognitive resources on non-creative tasks.

Although the JAE can relatively fairly assess students’ realistic abilities, it essentially constitutes Foucault’s “body discipline” mechanism, controlling students’ bodily practices and cognitive methods through repetitive labor and standardized evaluation. Bourgeoisie’s theory of “habit” further reveals the deep effects of this mechanism: JAE training internalizes the singular aesthetic standard of “painting accurately” into students’ bodily practices and cognitive inertia, making technical standards the default basis for artistic value judgment. Many students stated in interviews that during the pre-exist training, the unified foundation courses narrowed the differences in students’ visual experiences, leading to a homogenization of technical mastery and style presentation between urban and rural students. “JAE training limited my thinking in painting, it solidified my style” (C). “It has become rigid, I can no longer feel the passion I had before, that’s my regret, I wish I could get back to my former self” (E). The equation of technique and art gradually solidifies, transforming creative activity into exam-oriented technical labor, systematically weakening students’ aesthetic subjectivity.

3. Technical Inertia and the Suppression of Subjectivity

3.1 Persistence of Technical Inertia

In local universities, although the curriculum has expanded, both teachers and students generally believe that mastering basic techniques is essential for a solid foundation. As a result, traditional exam templates, such as having students copy model drawings for still life, remain in practice. Students have become accustomed to passively following instructions, making it difficult for them to raise questions or try new ways of expression. “Every time I draw, I have to ask the teacher if it’s okay, afraid that making a mistake will affect my grade” (E). This mindset makes it hard for students to break free from “exam-oriented creation.” China’s art education and management models have long been relatively closed, rigid, and conservative. [3] This has led to the persistence of the “technical inertia” left by the JAE, which is reinforced by the conservative attitudes of some teachers. To improve teaching efficiency, teachers often adopt a unified curriculum and schedule, ignoring individual student differences. In drawing classes, all students use the same still life and follow fixed steps for shading and composition. Teachers emphasize “correct answers,” such as accurate proportions and standardized lines, with students practicing according to these standards. Although this training strengthens basic skills, it simplifies evaluation criteria and weakens students’ abilities for independent observation and innovative expression. Some students attempted abstract treatments of objects but were told by teachers that it “did not meet the teaching requirements.” Over time, students develop a habit of following teacher instructions, making it difficult to generate spontaneous creative impulses.

3.2 Limitations in Visual Experience and Innovation

This teaching model results in art students at local universities having visual experiences that are generally conservative and outdated, reflected in their insufficient grasp of modern and contemporary art history and diverse aesthetic discourses, as well as their lack of critical thinking and innovative expression. Compared with students at prestigious art academies—who possess a stronger exploratory spirit and richer social resources—local university students suffer from misaligned self-perception, insufficient resource allocation, a weak academic atmosphere, and a lack of cultural support. Consequently, their artistic practice is strictly confined to imitation and technical training, with a severe shortage of independent aesthetic judgment.

3.3 Subjectivity and the Alienation of Art Education

During “free creation” sessions, students commonly display cognitive confusion and expressive anxiety, unable to overcome the technical dependence and standard replication ingrained during exam training. The “technical rationality—standardization” educational logic reduces art education to mere technical training—an alienation of art education and a fundamental departure from aesthetic education. This model systematically suppresses students’ subjectivity, creativity, and expressive ability, further marginalizing the spiritual and intrinsic value of art education. In the end, art education becomes

purely technical education, fixing students as technical specialists and leaving artistic talent as a hollow shell without a soul.

4. The False Openness of “Free Creation” Discourse and the Double Setback of Subjectivity

4.1 The Disconnect Between Ideals and Reality

In local university art education, some progressive teachers promote “free expression,” “individualized creation,” and “imagination” to create an open learning atmosphere. However, two main issues arise: a lack of methodological support—teachers assume free expression is innate, ignoring the cognitive and procedural foundations it requires—and a mismatch between students’ abilities and expectations. Shaped by long-term exam-oriented training, students focus on standardized tasks and fixed evaluation norms, lacking experience in creating from personal perspectives. Interviews reveal that “free creation” sessions often lack structured guidance in conceptualization, narrative techniques, and visual language, leaving students without the skills to translate ideas into independent artistic works.

4.2 The Lack of Resources and Methodological Support for “Freedom”

Although courses such as thematic creation or cross-media experimentation claim to encourage “free creation,” this freedom often lacks support: studios have limited resources, materials are scarce, and guidance is vague, relying on teachers’ personal experience rather than clear methodologies. Students, constrained by traditional painting techniques, lack access to advanced equipment, professional mentorship, and external art networks, making it hard to engage with contemporary art or diverse media. Without systematic training in creative thinking, they struggle to organize and develop ideas, turning “freedom” into an abstract, unguided directive that shifts responsibility to students and fuels expressive anxiety. As one student noted, without knowing what they wanted to paint, they spent an entire morning unable to start—a clear sign that unsupported “freedom” can become a covert form of discipline.

4.3 The Dual Setback in the Construction of Subjectivity

The false openness of “free creation” discourse results in a double setback of students’ subjectivity. First, under the guise of “free expression,” students are placed in a double dilemma of expressive risk and self-denial. The creative process is commonly seen as a “self-correction” risk behavior rather than an effective path to achieving subjectivity construction. Second, the so-called “freedom” more often reflects a shift of teaching responsibility and becomes the source of students’ expressive anxiety, resulting in a typical phenomenon of a disconnect between discourse and practice, covertly extending educational power within the system. In reality, it weakens students’ right to express themselves and their artistic creativity. Ultimately, this false openness not only fails to solve the problem of subjectivity loss caused by technical discipline but further exacerbates students’ creative obstacles under the name of “freedom.”[4] Thus, art education, under the seemingly progressive discourse, continues to maintain systemic suppression of students’ creativity, forming a more covert yet equally harmful form of educational alienation.[5]

5. Implicit Evaluation Standards and the Institutionalization of Aesthetic Homogeneity

5.1 Formation of Implicit Standards and Institutional Reinforcement

The aesthetic homogeneity of local university art programs stems from the institutionalization of implicit evaluation standards. Over time, teaching and review practices have shaped unwritten criteria, evident in graduation exhibitions where selected works share realism, complete composition, coordinated colors, and especially clear themes. Though not formally codified, students learn the “approved” styles through teacher feedback and past exemplars. These standards are reinforced by exhibitions, awards, and other mechanisms, signaling that innovation and individuality are secondary, with personal expression often marginalized. While teachers speak of fostering creativity, institutional practices convey the opposite, prompting students to take safe approaches to align with prevailing aesthetic and thematic norms.

5.2 Aesthetic Convergence and the Internalization of Self-Discipline

The mechanism of implicit evaluation not only shapes students’ short-term creative choices but also systematically disciplines their aesthetic orientation through the production and distribution of cultural capital. According to Bourgeoisie’s theory of cultural reproduction, the power dynamics within the educational field subtly drive students toward aesthetic conformity. The exhibition system, as a core part of the academy’s aesthetic “field,” reinforces implicit standards by embedding “realism,” “normality,” and “safety” into cultural capital, further strengthened by awards and scholarships. To minimize

risk and increase selection chances, students rationally prioritize standard paradigms, while peer groups develop a shared consensus around “standardization” as a marker of quality. This “mimetic adjustment” is internalized rather than imposed externally. At the conceptual stage, students proactively exclude nonconforming ideas, steering their work into the institution’s “safe zone.” This covert, lasting discipline transforms external compliance into internalized conformity, producing an art ecology that appears stable and orderly but is essentially trapped in aesthetic uniformity and creative conservatism. While implicit standards maintain order and efficiency, they severely limit the development of subjectivity, leaving art education with a superficially diverse yet fundamentally uniform production model, laying the groundwork for creative alienation and assimilation of individuality.

6. Creation Alienation and Subjectivity Assimilation Under Implicit Discipline

6.1 Transformation of Creative Motivation and Decline in Aesthetic Competence

The long-term effects of implicit disciplinary mechanisms not only shape the surface-level creative tendencies of art students in local universities but also lead to the fundamental alienation of their artistic practices on a deeper level. Firstly, this alienation is directly reflected in the shift in creative motivation. With the institutionalization of evaluation standards and the continuous aesthetic homogeneity driven by peer discipline, students’ original creative intentions gradually move away from the intrinsic need for individual emotion and experience expression, and instead focus on fulfilling institutional norms and external evaluations as the main goal. What should be an artistic activity that carries self-thought and emotional projection gradually becomes a “task-based labor” that aligns with standards and produces predictable outcomes. “Now, I basically paint to complete assignments and participate in competitions. It feels more like work than an expression” (H). Secondly, implicit discipline also leads to the degradation of students’ aesthetic abilities. Heidegger summarized the two main characteristics of an artwork as “unveiling the world, presenting the earth”[6]. However, standardized education traps students’ creations in “triviality,” preventing them from reaching a true “unveiling” state.

6.2 Internalization of Self-Discipline and the Conservatism of the Creative Ecology

Long-term reliance on fixed paradigms in creative training limits students’ inquiry into art’s essence, making the process overly technical and eroding aesthetic diversity. This “mimetic adjustment” arises from students’ rational assessment of institutional logic and risks, leading them to prioritize avoiding “unacceptable risks” and internalize self-discipline. At the conceptual stage, they preemptively exclude “unqualified” ideas, steering work toward the institution’s safe zone. This covert, enduring internal discipline reshapes values, shifting students from external compliance to internal conformity. Consequently, art creation in local universities becomes conservative and homogeneous—technical standards remain, but innovation and individual expression decline. Institutional risk suppression fosters uniformity, diminishes expressive capacity, and contracts aesthetic diversity, limiting artistic exploration and cultural vitality. Although implicit standards ensure order and efficiency, they severely restrict subjectivity, creating a superficially diverse yet fundamentally uniform production model. Alongside “technical discipline” and “pseudo-free creation,” this forms a layered control logic that progressively erodes subjectivity, from exam-driven training to institutionalized aesthetic conformity. This structural issue undermines creativity and diversity, ultimately fostering “creative alienation” and “subjectivity assimilation.”

7. Conclusion

This study, through an ethnographic analysis of the art education practices in local universities, explores the contradictory relationship between educational discipline and artistic subjectivity. The research finds that the exam-oriented education system, represented by the Art Examination, confines artistic creation within a standardized technical training framework, severely weakening students’ independent thinking and creative subjectivity. Although some local universities have expanded their curricula and advocated for the concept of “free creation,” students still struggle to break through the limitations of technical training due to the lack of systematic teaching methods and theoretical support, often facing confusion and anxiety in their creative expression. At the same time, the existence of implicit evaluation criteria exacerbates aesthetic homogeneity, further restricting students’ individualized creation and diminishing the diversity and creativity that art education should foster. The exam-oriented education model and implicit disciplinary mechanisms lead to a conservative and standardized trend in students’ artistic creations, lacking personal features and innovative spirit. To promote the comprehensive development of students’ artistic subjectivity, universities should reassess the current educational system and explore more open and inclusive teaching methods. They should support students in expressing themselves individually in free creation while emphasizing the cultivation of critical thinking and innovative abilities. Only in an educational environment that respects individual differences and encourages free creation can students truly unleash their artistic potential and develop independent

and mature artistic subjectivity.

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