



## About the Definition of Art

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**Abstract:** In view of the meaning of art is constantly advancing with the times, the definition of art as an eternal proposition has the value of constant exploration. From the aesthetic nature of art, people's subjective initiative, technology and theory, and the intention of the creator, the meaning of art can be summarized as activities or works created by people that can bring aesthetic experience to people. It needs a certain degree of technology or theory as support, although not necessarily created for the purpose of aesthetic, but in line with the rule of aesthetic.

**Keywords:** art, aesthetic, essence

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The definition of art is a pivotal issue that many artists and ideologues have been trying to explore and discuss for thousands of years. Meanwhile, it is also a problem that many artists have never understood in their lives. There is no denying that to many people, this problem does not seem to be necessary, especially for the artists who are directly engaged in the creation. Because what they pursue is always only beauty itself, and beauty itself is mysterious and refused to be defined, as Plato pointed out at the end of *The Greater Hippias* — all beautiful things are difficult.[1] Therefore, when artists create works of art, they often just follow an inexplicable feeling in action, and rational thinking often comes to a secondary position.

The seemingly limited role of theory on artistic creation makes many creators neglect the accumulation of theoretical knowledge, let alone think about the eternal problems such as the definition of art. But for art critics, educators, and historians, this issue remains vital. Because it involves how we judge whether a work is art, and how we understand and interpret the work of art, so as to guide the audience to appreciate the art correctly. Without that thinking, one can imagine how confused the people will be when Duchamp delivers his store-bought male urinals to the American Independent Artists Exhibition. Without that, no one would be willing to collect the feces for \$25,000 when Manzoni canned it and labeled it *Artist's Shit*.

It is precisely because for thousands of years, many artists and ideologues have been constantly thinking about the definition of art, and the meaning of art is constantly advancing with the times, so when we face new artistic forms and new artistic concepts, we will not be at a loss, and art can continue to develop. Therefore, the definition of art as an eternal proposition, which is worth constantly exploring and constantly thinking about.

### 1. The aesthetic nature of art

Just as food can satisfy people's appetite, and bed can meet people's rest needs, art can also meet people's needs. Kant believes, it's a need for pleasure unrelated to personal desire, that is, the need for aesthetics. The characteristic of personal desire is that it must possess or consume the object of desire to be realized, while aesthetic appreciation is not. When we are appreciating an painting or listening to music, we do not need to possess the painting or the music to get an aesthetic experience, and the painting and the music are not consumed by our appreciation. The object of this demand is therefore a pleasure unrelated to personal desires, a feeling acquired by the appreciation of the things that initiate pleasure.

The pleasure may be beautiful, such as the beautiful image of *The fairy of the Xiangjiang River* has come to the north bank of the Xiangjiang River, and I have been eagerly looking forward to her for a long time in *The Nine Songs*, and Tao Yuanming's detached realm of *I am drunk to sleep and you may go, bring me some instruments tomorrow if you will*, are all pure beauty that can not benefit the viewer, but can be pleasant.

The pleasure may be lofty, such as Wang Changling's poem, *The armor has been damaged after so many battles, but I will not return until we break the city of Loulan*, and Li Bai's sigh of *The road in Shu province are too rugged, even more rugged than the road to the heaven*, is the great power of aesthetic object that inspired us want to go beyond self, and to gain the lofty sense.

The pleasure may be tragedy, such as the *Oedipus king* tried whatever he can do but still inevitably killed his father and married his mother. The author made the good people or things destroyed in front of our eyes, and also let us feel the inevitable destruction, this is the charm of tragedy.

The pleasure may be comedy, such as the clumsy Puck in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the author let us see a sharp contrast between the purposes and actions of the characters.

The pleasure may be ugly, such as the withered body of Rodin's sculpture *The Old Whores*, or the messy lines of Picasso's *Guernica*, which bring us a negative aesthetic experience.

The pleasure may also be absurd, such as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Eugene Ionesco's *Bald Girls*, which make us feel the nothingness and meaninglessness of life.

The pleasure may be some kind of thinking, such as Brecht used to express social philosophy in his drama, thus trigger the audience's thinking and social evolution, so he advocated to use alienation and strangeness effect to avoid emotional involvement, and make the audience to keep sober thinking while they were appreciating.

But more often, the pleasure is unspeakable and cannot be categorized. After all, beauty is a subjective and abstract existence. As a symbol, language has its specific meaning, so the subjective feelings cannot be described in language at many times.

In addition, although the aesthetic experience can be divided into the eight kinds we've talked about, but for the subject of aesthetic is human, and people's judgment of beauty is so subjective that can be easily influenced by life experience, emotional fluctuations, aesthetic cultivation, personal position and other factors. Therefore, even in the face of the same style of art works, appreciation activities will be different because of different aesthetic subjects.

## 2. Human's subjective initiative

Now we know that art is pleasure, even if the pleasure is unspeakable and difficult to categorize. But are all pleasure things art? Undoubtedly, The answer is no. Wang Hongjian believes that the pleasure of art is the pleasure of things produced by the aesthetic understanding of the creative subject, 'according to the law of beauty' and created for the purpose of beauty. [2] That is to say, art must be created by human beings, which must contain the role of human subjective initiative.

Is there no beauty in the natural scenery? Of course there is. The magnificent scenery of Huangshan mountain is more beautiful than artificial carving, but it is not art. The deterrence and shock of the tsunami is far more shocking than sitting in front of the screen and watching disaster movies, but it is not art. In the view of Taoism, the beauty of the great sound and the invisible thing is far from the ingenuity of human beings, but without people's subjective initiative, they cannot be called as art.

In art works, people's subjective initiative is reflected in refining and processing of nature and life. As we all know, that art comes from life. The colors and lines used in art creation are derived from nature. The most important element for actors and actresses is careful observation of life as the source of creation. It is because it fully reflects the whole picture of society in the 19th century France that Balzac's *Human Comedy* can be inherited for a century. It is because of the unyielding will of the people on both sides of the Yellow River during the Anti-Japanese War that Xian Xinghai and Guang Weiran's *Yellow River Chorus* are passed down to today. Art which based without nature and life is just like water without a source, it cannot be appreciated by the audience. But art comes not only from life, but also above life. If there is only a true reflection, but no refining and processing, then the power of this beauty is also limited. Such as Li Longyun's drama *Small Well Alley*, although truly reproduced the daily life of Beijing people in 20's century, but it just simply picked the five representative period to show in the drama. As an audience, I can't see the link between each period in the story, and the characters are also lack of typicality, eventually led to the loose story structure and commonplace in characters. The lack of artistic techniques of refining and processing can only make the art work become ubiquitous — although it truly reflects nature and life itself, it lacks the power of beauty that can impress people.

In addition, people's subjective initiative can also give the art an artistic conception, and build a vivid situation in the art works to achieve fascinating effects. For example, Tao Yuanming described in his poem *Drinking, Picking chrysanthemum under the eastern hedge*, leisurely see the South mountain, has attracted countless scholars for thousands of years. At the end of the poem, Tao Yuanming wrote, There is a true meaning, and I've forgot how to tell it. The artistic conception is fully shown, but he cannot say anything, which can be described as the highest level of white space.

## 3. Technology and theory

Now we know that art is a kind of things created by people to bring people to aesthetic experience. But even for the purpose of beauty, according to the law of beauty, not everyone can create art works that bring people aesthetic experience. Such as vases and water cups that produced by machines in the factory, although it has to concern about the beautiful appearance, but it is can hardly to be called as art, and we wonders where is the key to this?

We can try to infer from our daily life experience. In life, in addition to music, poetry, painting, sculpture, dance and other art disciplines and categories, there are many terms labeled as art, such as language art, management art, war art and

so on. All these, whether artistic or not, it is undeniable that they require a certain degree of technology. Several children get together to play housing games, it can hardly be defined as management art. Grab a pinch of tea, throw it into the boiling water, there is no tea art. Since it is called a kind of art, technology is usually an important factor.

However, we will have another question. When Duchamp sent his shop-bought male urinals to the American Independent Artists Exhibition, it didn't seem to be any profound skill. Similarly, when Marina Abramovich anesthetized herself on stage, giving audience props like roses, daggers, crossbows, pistols, and saying that the audience can do anything to herself, it's hard to say how much technology is in it. So, what makes them have a place in the history of art? Arthur Danto considered it theory.

According to Arthur Danto, a common thing can evolve into art after the interpretation and recognition made by art theory, which is exactly the difference between Duchamp's *The Spring* and other urinals in stores. They may seem almost different in appearance, but *The Spring* has been reinterpreted by Duchamp and recognized by the American Independent Artists Exhibition, so it can become a work of art. Marina Abramovich, on the other hand, inspired the audience and herself to ponder- -what serious consequences if all power was given to the public? This expression of ideas is enough to support the performance in art history.

#### 4. The intention of the creator

Now we know that art is created by people, can bring people aesthetic experience, and needs a certain degree of technical or theoretical support. But that raises another problem. At the beginning of their birth in history, many arts also had a certain degree of attainments, but they were not considered art at that time. They are produced out of some practical and utilitarian need, although they contain beautiful qualities, they are not considered art. For example, the embryonic forms of art, music, dance, drama and other art categories were all appeared in the witchcraft ceremony of the primitive society. Because at that time, people used to create models by painting, singing and dancing, mimicry and many other ways. They believed that controlling the models can help them controlling the objects represented by the models. Nowadays, this kind of custom and ceremony are still exist in some original tribes in Indonesia, Australia, and Latin America. But witchcraft does not like technology, and one day people will completely lose confidence in it. When witchcraft is no longer regarded as a practical solution to problems, and left only a form of beauty for people to appreciate, art is formally created. The question is, how to identify the behaviors and objects of beauty that have been produced before this time?

According to Wang Hongjian, it must be a thing created for the purpose of beauty. Then the behaviors and objects of beauty born in the witchcraft rituals of the primitive society cannot be identified as art, because they were all produced for practical and utilitarian purposes. But many historical relics can also bring aesthetic experience to today's audience, why can't them be judged as art but for the motivation of the creator?

When Bali was discovered at the beginning of the last century, all the Europeans were shocked. In addition to the beautiful natural scenery, they also found that everyone on the island was good at singing, dancing and doing art. Everyone regard the Bali people as artists except themselves. Like most of the residents of the primitive tribes, the Bali people have preserved many primitive sacrifices and rituals. Those behaviors that seem to us as artistic creation, and, in their eyes, are only a part of productive activities. But this did not prevent their sacrificial products from being sold to Europe as art, or to prevent their dancers from appearing at the Paris Exposition 1920. In our daily life, there is no lack of our labeled "art" or "art" behavior, but their main role is not to meet people's aesthetic needs. Language is for the needs of communication, cooking is for the needs of living, tea is for the need of thirst, management is for the harmony and stability of the team, but they could be called as "language art", "cooking art", "tea art" and "management art" in some specific situations. In other words, these behaviors, while happening, release a certain non-utilitarian force that is different from what they originally were. This power is captured by the admirer and produces aesthetic experience, so, although their original role is not aesthetic, they are still could be called as art. It seems that in our actual habits, what is the purpose of the creator does not affect our judgment of art works, and the aimless purpose plays a more important role.

To sum up, I believe that art is an activity or work created by people and that can bring aesthetic experience to people. It needs a certain degree of technology or theory as support, although not necessarily created for the purpose of beauty, but in line with the rule of aesthetic.

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