

The Particularities of Participatory Art against Chinese Rural Construction Context Compared with the West——Lyrical Humanistic Care

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Abstract: To redefine the empowerment of art and local culture by combining them together in the process of rural construction in China. Participatory art and interventional art both emphasize art and community, problem-oriented and realistic participation, cooperation, dialogue and negotiation through the whole development of postmodernist art. In the special context of the combination, collision and experiment between postmodernist art and the process of rural construction in China, and the combination of Chinese local culture with participatory art, art works have implied more humanistic care, which is closely related to the empowerment of artists and art in the context of Chinese local culture. Compared with the confrontational, reflective and critical participatory art in the United States and Europe, Chinese participatory art is more like a lyrical, guided and caring artistic practice. Therefore, in the context of Chinese rural construction, Chinese participatory art presents special art forms and artistic expressions, and the art empowerment is not only faced with the review of the development of art, but also tested by community and realistic context.

Keywords: Rural Construction in an Artistic Form, Participatory Art, Art Education, Humanistic Care

1. Introduction

Combining art and society and countryside fits into the self-logic of art development, the demands of building a better life for people in the new times put forward by the 19th Congress, which is also the result brought by the co-development of art and time. By integrating art with society, countryside and cooperating with local people, citizens and villagers are transformed into the subjects of artistic creation. Moreover, the subjectivity of art rural construction, art creation and folk culture will be redefined and sorted out. To explore and expand the boundaries of art by combining art with social realities and integrating art with communities and countryside realizes the transformation from “white box” to public areas, from cities to villages, from artists’ original creation to public communities and issues. Therefore, the overall work of Chinese participatory art in this grand context reflects a kind of humanistic care. Different from the resistant and critical art shown in participatory art of western post-modern era, Chinese participatory art is represented in the form of cooperation, dialogue and communication.

2. Participatory art in the critical context of the west

Social participatory art marks an important link in the art history, which has greatly promoted the development of art history. The way of participatory art creation has changed from the traditional and static form to the conceptual and three-dimensional one, and its artistic characteristics emphasize the relations of dialogue, discussion, co-creation, performance and even confrontation between works and the local places, works and audiences, works and communities. The western participatory art pays more attention on the criticizing and exploring the sociality and race, and the overall art form focuses more on the core of critical thinking. The expression form of this art is related to the western philosophy of art and the building of modern thinking. Because the concept of art intervening into society is actually an important part of western avant-garde art, the essence of which is the relationship between art and society, as well as the problem that modern art has always had to deal with. The process of from the secularization of religious art during the Renaissance to court art, and then to modern art is an epitome of collectivization to individuation. In this process, the function of art has been changing, from religious to secularization, to humanity, and then to collectivity and publicity. One way of presenting social participatory art is performance art and dramatic performance, which dissolves the boundary between the audience and the

artwork and makes the audience become creators of the work. One of the most classic works is “The Battle of Orgreave” created by artist Jeremy Deller in 2001, which reproduces a violent confrontation between nearly 5,000 miners and 8,000 police in Orgreave, England in 1984. Artist Deller brought together 800 historical actors and 200 miners who had experienced this historical event to reproduce the violence in Orgreave after rehearsals and he intends to re-shoot it into a documentary. Empathy is of high value in this type of project because it facilitates communication and builds empathic relationships with others. The whole special historical event is restored through strong dramatic and conflicting expression techniques, which will never be reflected in Chinese participatory art due to Chinese unique history and culture. Influenced by its own history, culture and educational tradition, Chinese people tend to emphasize “unity” rather than “opposition”, “generalization” rather than “analysis”, “specific” rather than “abstract”. [1] In Chinese traditional culture, the importance of reflective thinking is not fully emphasized. In the harmonious society that is always pursued by traditional Chinese culture, people pay more attention to the harmony and commonness between people.

3. The characteristics of combining Chinese art with communities and countryside——humanistic care

From the 1980s, China’s modern art started to pay more attention to social realities, while the involvement of art into communities and villages is an important milestone of Chinese contemporary art. From Jiao Xingtao’s “Yangdeng Art Cooperative” created in Yangdeng, Guizhou province, to Jin Le’s “Shijiazhi Art Museum” created in Tianshui, Gansu Province, to Liu Zhaofeng’s “The Birth and Demise of the Rural Construction” created in Guiyang, Guizhou province, to Wang Tianxiang’s Liuyin Plan made in Liuyin, Chongqing. There are numerous participatory art projects with rural construction as background. Those involved in the art creating in communities and villages all villagers, architects, artists and education workers, cultural industry practitioners and related social organizations and groups. With localization and participation as the core concepts of creation, basing on the rural culture creativity, respecting the country’s historical and cultural context, to build and intervene different public spaces and stimulate local villagers’ cultural consciousness to combine public art with the scene of the countryside organically, and by showing the individual and collective practicing methods and unique paths to experience today’s local lands. These artistic practices based on different backgrounds, methods and strategies are changing people’s understanding of the countryside, revealing a different and vibrant place [2]. Participatory art in the context of Chinese rural construction records local realistic samples of today’s rural public art through local creation, literature exhibition, academic discussion, media communication and other channels. In the contemporary boom of rural construction participated by many disciplines, rural public art is unique of its own ideals, creativity and diversified ways of intervention.

Although the concept of participatory art has gradually matured since the birth of modern art in the West, under the context of Chinese rural construction, participatory art presents a characteristic different from the antagonistic and critical participatory art form in the West, which is humanistic concern. While intervening art in communities and villages in China, the concept of art is similar to that of western countries, both of which involve cooperation and dialogue between communities, villagers, activities, sites and within the scope of aesthetics. Since participatory art has strong social characteristics, communities, villagers and on-site feedback are also important test criteria for the effectiveness of art participation in society, and the two form a dialectical relationship of mutual promoting. Western contemporary art attaches great importance to political and problem orientation, which is also the inherent requirements and logic of the development of western art and the enlightenment of philosophical thinking. The macro background of participatory art in China is guided by the policy and guidance direction of rural revitalization, art rural construction and art aesthetic education. Participatory art in the whole community and countryside almost abandons the western elitist and class-based artistic intervention. At the same time, western art also emphasizes the contradiction and discussing of problems. There are ideas that make people reflect behind the forms of conflicts and sharp works. Even though some works are colored with humanistic care, they are still covered behind the drama, conflict and criticism. The 2018 Turner Prize was described by the director of Tate Britain as the most politicized one in history, with gender politics, post-colonial identity, alienation and violence being the central concerns of the artists or groups nominated for the prize in 2018. [3] One of the most famous works is Legal-Political Architecture, which investigated the timing of Israeli police’s attacking on Bedouin villages in 2017. The team members took 95 videos on the ground in the Negev Desert to present their views and evidence through real footage and digital modeling.

Similarly, Chinese teams and artists who conduct researches and sort out and present social problems in society show more lyrical humanistic care under the guidance of China’s macro policy of art rural

construction and rural revitalization. In the workshop of “New Countryside and People” organized by Modelling Art Institute of Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts in 2021, teachers, graduate students, young artists of Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts went Beibei district, Nanchuan district, Youyang district, Huxi street, Gaoxing district of Chongqing, Yangdeng, Guizhou, Xiazhuang, Sichuan to conduct researches and make comprehensive in-depth art creations and art aesthetics. Through cooperation, dialogue and negotiation, the subjectivity of local communities in participatory art is reorganized. Take the Chongqing-Nanchuan workshop in the “New Countryside and People” as an example, the participants in Nanchuan group include graduate students majoring in pure art, design, sociology, anthropology and art theory, Christian Celi, president of Dresden Academy of Art in Germany, Feng Lu and Shi Tao, associate professors of Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. In Nanchuan district, contemporary village community research is taken as the main body, and the proposal of art participation in the countryside is the lubricant of social change and reconstruction background. The research on contemporary village communities is based on artists’ study on the cultural status of Lixiang Lake and interviews with local residents, oriented towards local characteristics, realistic conditions and local customs, and takes the participation of art groups and local residents as the method. The project includes historical research, field research, in-depth discussion with the masses, joint creation, researching reports, work output and etc. Through combining art and place, the teachers and students of the workshop try to find out the traditional and contemporary living conditions that are constantly integrated in “contemporary villages”. The nostalgia for the tradition, life inertia and the embracing of contemporary living status quo are show through art researches.

In the Nanchuan workshop of “New Countryside and People”, the whole team conducted deep research into farmland, families and schools as in groups, and kept recording and understanding through conversations and dialogues. Wang Jiajia, a young artist among them, recorded 12 families of the elderly left behind in her video works, who sit in front of their own large dining table, and are surrounded by scattered chairs that represent family reunion. She constantly asked the elderly about their ideal happy life. She placed those photos in the exhibition hall, beside each of which is an MP3, which recorded her dialogues with the elderly about their ideal life. At the beginning, the elderly expressed that they were satisfied with their life. However, as the topic went deeper and deeper, the elderly began to reveal their inner-minds, showing concern and love for their children. The contrast between the dialogues in early and later periods is obvious. The seemingly plain works reflect the most touching emotions in the world. However, with the mutual understanding deepening, we will find that the kindness, calmness and sincerity of these left-behind elderly people are also constantly healing the whole team of creators. With the continuous progress of urbanization, young people are faced with greater economic pressure in the post-epidemic era. Perhaps it is due to such a background that the sincerity and calmness of left-behind elderly people in the community can bring some comfort and care to these young people. In this context, participatory art conveys a lyrical humanistic concern, which is not hierarchical and of no guidance, but natural in the moment. In the context of Chinese art rural construction, the lyrical humanistic care presented by participatory art refers to exchanges, dialogues and equality, which are important criterion for the effectiveness of Chinese participatory art.

4. Humanistic care reflected in the visual art by integrating art into countryside and communities

Take “Instant Skylines”, an art project by Hong Kong artist Wong Kwok-choy as an example. He invited the residents of Hong Kong to build their own miniature skyscrapers out of scrap wood. The project is open to all, which means indefiniteness can be created. In the end, participants are invited to sprinkle dirt on their building, plant seeds, and let the grass grow naturally in a few weeks. This intervention art discusses the power relations, control and autonomy in building cities, empowering those ordinary citizens whose voices are not heard in the development of west Kowloon and urban architectural environment to participate in and take actions, and to trigger the thinking of the participants in a warm and emotional way. Although the beginning is a scene set by the artist, however, with the advancement of the project, the work (or rather the process) is constantly changing so that the work constitutes an open field of thought and artistic actions. It can be argued that this is a project that enables participants’ presence. [4] The “presence” not only refers to physical presence on the scene, but also the expression of the subjects’ ideas and concepts at that time and place. In Huang Guocai’s art project, citizens can directly feel the temperature conveyed by the works through participation and cooperation, and citizens can better integrate into the artistic creation. Participatory art in the community emphasizes the warmth of urban memory and temperature in the face of consumerism. However, it is a different concept in rural art, because the general impression of the social identity of “villagers” is often about backwardness and ignorance. It is due to this impression that art is applied to present the subjectivity consciousness of the villagers in the process of art intervening in the countryside. The theme of artistic creation can be returned

to the villagers themselves and their consciousness can be strengthened through the process of completing the creation jointly with the artists, completing the creation independently according to the villagers' own understanding or by the villagers in group. In this context, the intervention of art in the countryside breaks the traditional impression or presupposition of villagers and improves their subjective consciousness.

In the context of Chinese participatory art dependent on important national strategies and policies, the theme and consciousness of local people are sorted out by integrating art in communities and villages and making dialogues, cooperation and negotiation with communities and villagers. The lyrical humanistic care presented in participatory art in the Chinese context is bidirectional, which not only presents concerns for community and local problems in participatory art, but also cures the pressure of consumerism and other pressures faced by art teams themselves. Art is integrated with community and countryside, which constantly pays attention to the community, combs the relationship of people. Art cares community and the countryside by itself, and becomes the lubricant of people in country revitalization, one important way amid the background of the rural revitalization and a new method for care and healing.

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