

Creative Research on Artistic Reproduction

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Abstract: The academic circle is often negative about artwork reproduction and its products, but in fact reproduction has always followed and influenced the development of art as an undercurrent. This paper identifies three periods of time: the period of promiscuous creation, the period of derogatory reproduction and the period of technological reproduction. It is further argued that contemporary artwork reproduction is the reproduction of creation or the creation of reproduction, breaking the paradox of fate between the two, gaining a new perception of reproduction and an independent quality of authenticity, and acquiring a new meaning of creativity with the value of vitality at the aesthetic, production, dissemination and acceptance levels.

Keywords: Artwork Reproduction, Creation, Creativity, Authenticity

1. Introduction

Reproduction, often entangled with words such as copy, imitation, mimicry, representation, divert, printing, plagiarism, and copycat, generally refers to the practice of copying works with a high degree of similarity based on the original art, replacing the original artwork for economic purposes, copy needs, personal preferences, learning needs, protection, appreciation, and dissemination to meet the needs of specific people. From the “imitation” theory of the origin of art to the theory of art production, from the folk “powder” to the “transfer copy”, art has always had the characteristic of reproduction. However, in the history of art, it is generally accepted that valuable artworks are the product of creation, not reproduction. “We in the western world often take for granted the quality of things, envisioning the relationship between ‘originals’ and ‘reproductions,’ assuming that the former are more legitimate and has higher value. A Rembrandt original is better than a forgery; a Hopper diamond is better than an imitation of a man-made diamond; an engraved sculpture is better than a reproduction turned from a plaster mold; a formally printed and typewritten birth certificate is better than a photocopy.”[1] This has resulted in a theoretical perception that recognizes the quality of artistic creativity and denies the quality of artistic reproduction. But how did this bias in relation to creativity come about? How can the phenomenon and significance of creativity in reproduction be judged.

2. The three section developments of reproduction and creativity merging and dissociating

Scholars in various fields have studied reproduction from more diverse perspectives. They mostly attribute to the advent of the consumer era or the prevalence of consumerism, and focus on the interpretation of contemporary art and “avant-garde” artists based on Benjamin’s mechanical reproduction theory. However, reproduction in general presents different stages of development in the history of art development, and there is a lack of discussion on the relationship with creativity merging and dissociating.

2.1 The period of promiscuous creation

The “imitation” theory of origins gives a genetic basis for artwork reproduction. We have every reason to believe that primitive people had a large number of repetitive imitations, although it is difficult to find identical primitive artworks, but from the excavated pottery, most of the patterns of human, bird, fish and some geometric patterns are decorated with repetitive arrangements, where “repetition” is widespread as the basis of the form of reproduction. Most of the sculptures we know from ancient Greece were reproduced during the Roman period; in the Middle Ages, when religious art dominated, artwork

reproduction was used to propagandize doctrine. Hereon, creation took on a reproductive character, and reproduction took on a creative character. Although the Renaissance saw the emergence of the creative qualities of the artists, even this had the implication of a copying tradition. It can be said that the historical period from primitive art to the Renaissance was one in which reproduction and creation were united in the production of creativity.

2.2 The period of derogatory reproduction

In the 17th century, the Romantic art of sensuality, individuality and freedom refuted the neoclassical precepts and almost programmatic rationalism, and since then Western art theory has shifted towards the promotion of artistic creation and originality. In the 18th and 19th century, classical aestheticians such as Immanuel Kant, Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel changed the rationalist concept of imitation that had been in place since ancient Greece. They laid the foundation for later generations of creative art. Since then, a large number of original works of art have been produced, and “creativity” has become almost synonymous with artworks, occupying an important place in art history. For example, in the 18th century, the debate on reproduction and creation included Younger’s essay “Speculations on the Structure of Authentic Works”, which rejected imitation. Creativity has been established by many theorists as a basic artistic norm to define the boundary between art and non-art, and the reproduction has become its opposite.

2.3 The period of technological reproduction

Modern and contemporary art since the 20th century has doubled down on creation. However, in the context of industrial civilization, manual reproduction shifted to mechanical reproduction, and a large number of reproductions like photography, film and television caused panic and discussion of creativity. The main discussion on the quality of reproduction is Walter Benjamin’s “The Artwork in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. Benjamin used the term “mechanical reproduction” to express the mode of artistic production, aptly reflecting the historical changes caused by modern technological means. He argued that mechanical reproduction deprives their characteristic aura of artwork, and that the existence or non-existence of the aura becomes, in a way, a sign of the existence or non-existence of creativity. Thus, the era of mechanical reproduction broke the long history of the perception of the quality of artistic creativity, implying a change in the traditional concept of art cognition and production behavior, “so that art exists in the form of reproduction and the authority of the original disappears, which breaks the aura of traditional art, liberates the artwork from the specific time and space in which it was produced, makes the display value replaces the value of worship, and lays the material foundation for the popularization of art.” [2]

The art of reproduction did not come to an end with Benjamin; on the contrary, it developed into the reproduction of information technology in a more rapid manner. Technologies such as network transmission and digitization are widely used in the field of art, and the development of artistic reproduction continues to gain new vitality. Although people still care about the originals, everyone has copies, and reproductions have even become the most likely form of survival for art in the present. In addition, art began to go to the masses, and everyone could directly participate in reproducing artworks, bringing the general public closer to the artists. Obviously, artists, researchers and even the general public in this period began to form new perceptions about reproduction.

3. The paradox of the fate of reproduction and creation

Creation emphasizes uniqueness and novelty, which has led to a large number of art works hanging outside the masses, becoming a high “elite art” accessible only to a few groups, and “its symbolic value represents a sense of exclusivity and superiority brought about by absolute rarity and authenticity. It represents a monopoly of culture by the elite.” [3] From this artistic cognition, it seems that reproduction is a kind of helpless expedience, a kind of next best thing, and its existence only causes misunderstanding, distortion, and negation of the original work. The reason for this perception is: first, it is impossible to copy the original work; second, it is not desirable to copy the original work. Many art historians and art theorists have a very negative perception of copying, believing that copying will do great harm. For example, “the best black-and-white reproduction of a Titian, Veronese, or Renoir work can be likened to a careful adaptation of an orchestral score by a piano, while a color reproduction is like a restored orchestra, but in which all the instruments are out of tune.”[4]

In terms of aesthetic value, N. Goodman in “Art and Authenticity” gives an example of the equivalence between copying and creation. “Suppose we have Rembrandt’s painting Lucretia in front of us on the left and a seamless copy of that painting in front of us on the right. Although there are many differences between the two - authorship, age, physical and chemical characteristics, value, etc. -we can’t see any. If someone had moved it while we were sleeping, it would be impossible to distinguish them by the naked eye alone.”[4] Although we can eventually tell the difference through some sort of identification technique, this is clearly beyond the ability of the average audience, demonstrating that reproduction can generate aesthetic value just as much as creation. Moreover, contrary to the previous critique, a copy may be better than the original, and “a Rembrandt copy of a Lastman painting may be much better than the original.”[5] We fully affirm the value of creation, that is, the universality of the work of art, or at least its material form, as unique; at the same time, the expressive power of creation can never be ignored as far as expression is concerned. But then there arises the inescapable problem that there are many new kinds and forms of art works which can no longer be depicted and explained by the concept of creation. For example, there are works of art that are not fixed in form, where the artist uses the fluidity of the medium to embody his or her ideas, and where there is no fixed original essence at all.

It is indisputable that reproduction changes the nature of creation. In fact, if we consider the reproduction of an original work of art as a process that is constantly evolving and emerging with new problematic scenes, with no end in sight, then the positive aspects of reproduction will also be revealed to us. “In other words, different reproductions contain different perceptual elements of the original, and it is a process of sublimation that allows the meaning of the original to deepen continuously by selecting and playing with the perceptual manifestation.”[6] Jacques Derrida understands the relationship between art reproductions and originals, arguing that reproductions are not mere supplements to the original when it is not present, but it is the reproductions that give the object an infinite and tangible life [7]. Reproduction is an interpretation of creation, even if this interpretation is somehow distorted, it is always evolving in the direction of critical openness, and this interpretation will also bring a large number of new perspectives and collisions of views, which are more conducive to the development and re-creation of art. “In reproduction and reproduction, the destructive and the constructive are simultaneous and often find themselves at opposite poles of the exchange. For example, it is an undeniable fact that reproduction diminishes the individuality of the authentic work; however, it is equally undeniable that by issuing the authentic work in large quantities, reproduction in fact serves the authentic work by helping to establish its originality.”[8] One could even argue that the concept of creation is brought about precisely by reproductions.

Moreover, the issue of artistic reproduction involves complex historical and cultural relationships between editions and versions, even as the value of the work depends more on the value added by the reproductions. The different phases of the historical period characterized by the original work and the large number of reproductions characterize the needs of each edition, each of which is infused with the intentions and cultural factors of the subject that constantly emerge in the context. Inevitably, a comparative relationship exists here, that is, between reproduction and creation, in terms of similarities, differences and evolution. It is easy to focus on the authenticity and differences between the two, but what is more important than the inherited relationship between the reproduced version and the created version is its new value, that is, its cultural quality independent of the originality of the creation. Each reproduction is a new version of the creation in a different context, in which the original is inherited, but also modified to adapt to changes. Now we have a new concept of reproduction: on the one hand, by making corrections to the creation (e.g., technical improvements), we can constantly interpret new meanings; on the other hand, their differences should be treated seriously and positively, rather than negatively and demeaningly. Reproduction of the so-called creations does not have to be negative, but can also be positive and affirmative.

4. Creativity explanation and the return of reproduction of meaning

It is obvious that reproduction is creative. To analyze this issue, we need to start from Benjamin’s theory of artistic reproduction. Benjamin’s idea of “spiritual rhythm” invariably contains the idea of comparison, that is, comparing mechanical reproduction and manual reproduction, he believes that the difference between mechanical reproduction and manual reproduction lies in the “hand”, and believes that the craft of making, printmaking, printing and lithography are all “hand” reproduction techniques. He argues that the hand, printmaking, printing, and lithography are all techniques of reproduction by the “hand”; photography, for the first time, frees the “hand” from the artistic function it performs. Benjamin’s view is that what the act of mechanical reproduction and the result lack is “spirituality”, in contrast, the “spirituality” of handmade reproductions has not withered, there is the temperature of the hand, tactile

perception and “spirituality” that mechanical reproduction cannot replace. The “spiritual rhythm” of the handmade copy does not wither, but has the warmth of the hand, the sense of touch, and the “spiritual rhythm” that cannot be replaced by mechanical reproduction. In this regard, Benjamin mentions the “here and now” of handmade reproductions in “Artworks in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, but he also neglects to study the transformation and regeneration of meaning after the change of the “here and now,” i.e., the creative value of artistic reproduction. The “here and now” is a creative value expressed by art reproduction.

Ian Haywood, *Forgery: Art and the Power of Forgery*, uses the examples of Han van Meegeren and Tom Keating to argue that a handmade copy or forgery is “a ‘new’ until it is uncovered creative work” [9] after debunking, “there is no mysterious ‘idea’ or ‘vision’ of the creative process we call creativity.” [9] The creativity of reproduction is not based on the aesthetic judgment of art itself, but is often disturbed by external factors, and the value indicators and sanctions and punishments for reproduction vary from culture to culture and from time to time. Haywood paraphrases David Piper, director of the Ashmole Museum at Oxford University: “The Chinese don’t have such a concept of originality. They see the work in terms of quality and in terms of how the work was completed.” [9] Although this statement is rather one-sided, it does point out the openness we hold to the creativity of reproduction. For example, the “the Night Entertainments of Han Xizai” (An iconographic study on the Night Entertainments of Han Xizai” discusses the nine editions of the illustrated version of “the Night Entertainments of Han Xizai”, “A comparison of the images of the series of illustrated copies of “the Night Entertainments of Han Xizai” shows that the ‘six methods’ of painting, ‘transferring and modeling’, in addition to copying as it is, can also be added or deleted according to the powder, or altered according to the powder.” [10] In response to this issue, no one has overly blamed the Han Xizai Night Banquet picture copy, but instead has been recognized and able to appreciate the changes and value of it. Also, for example, Ding Guanpeng copied the figure part of Zhang Shengwen’s scroll and became the Barbarian King’s Ritual to Buddha; copied the Buddhist part of Zhang Shengwen’s scroll and became the Source of the Dharma World, and later on, there were Li Ming and other Qing Dynasty court painters who copied Ding Guanpeng’s Source of the Dharma World, which all show the characteristics of re-creation in the process of copying by artists. Thus, it can be seen that different forms of reproductions existed in the history of Chinese and Western art, often with creative significance, only the end and recognition of Han van Meegeren and Ding Guanpeng differed.

However, the idea of “the age of handmade reproduction” is no longer appropriate in an art context where copyright awareness is strengthened and creation is paramount. In the current post-copying era, “on the one hand, art is gradually understood as a series of process acts centered on the final presentation of artworks, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between artistic creation and non-artistic daily activities; on the other hand, as artistic elements have infiltrated into the daily life of the general public, the criteria of artistry are to a considerable extent being privatized, and the boundaries between art and non-art continue to dissolve in the mutual crossing of art and everyday life.” [11] He Ming believes that art has “escaped from everyday life”, and he reflects on and re-identifies “art” as the object of the discipline of art anthropology, taking “art in everyday life” as one of the research objects. According to his viewpoint, “art in everyday life” is “art that exists in ordinary life, in a natural state, with obvious characteristics of randomness, individuality, openness, and creativity” [12] This new cognition of art objects facilitates the integration of mainstream art/folk art and handmade art/mechanical art, and facilitates the overall understanding of the complex art categories at present. Although he has not directly studied the issue of art reproduction, reproduction is often integrated into the natural state of “art in everyday life”, or it is difficult to distinguish reproduction from creation, or it is taken for granted. In addition, reproduction in everyday life is now prevalent, and manual reproduction is no longer the mainstream, and it has shown a certain creative value in the context of mechanical and information reproduction. Contemporary artistic reproduction differs from Benjamin’s clear distinction between manual reproduction and mechanical reproduction in terms of the withering of “spirituality”, and changes the rigid boundary between reproduction and creativity.

In reality, the average person has little access to original works of art in their lifetime, even professional artists. Much of what we know about art today comes from the observation and consumption of art reproductions, which are so prevalent around the world that few people question or reflect on this issue. Think back to how we learned about the history of art. In large part through reproductions, where reproduction may construct a search object mistaken for a work of art, when in fact it is merely a grid of discourse that we perceive. The key point is that the distinction between reproduction and creation is not properly clarified, and even points to another issue: whether or how reproductions are distinct from originals is not addressed in art historical discourse either. While creation is the original source of art, reproduction is often the real reality. Because of this, the reproductions we see through books, postcards,

and the Internet are likely to be the only artistic experiences we have. It follows that artistic reproduction of images also gives rise to the desire for creation and creativity. It can also be said that reproduction is not about appropriating art, but about reproducing it, sharing it, and bringing it into the real world of life.

Artistic reproduction is also manifested in the critical questioning of creativity as a normative artistic rule. Scholars of the sociology of art generally consider art as a social practice of production, distribution and consumption that establishes and maintains certain rules and values within the framework of social relations. The rules of the game require that an object must conform to certain creative qualities in order to be considered “art”, and if it does not, for example, by appearing as a copy, it will be sanctioned by the forces of critics, originators, and audiences that try to maintain the established order, i.e., an object becomes “art” thanks to those deep-rooted rules in the cultural system and power structures. Reproduction requires confronting this complex art rule, but it is not a direct refutation or a forceful solution, but rather a superimposition of social relations. As individual works evolve over time, as audiences give feedback, as ideas are revised, and as more copies are made, their social relations change, creating a field of energy. The artistic value of each reproduction contains a certain social component, and as the image “ages”, the energy grows, thus showing a more independent social relationship and energetic meaning. This means that the originality of the single original, the creativity of the artist and other rules are deconstructed and the creativity of the reproductions occurs independently.

Obviously, the rules of creativity are semantically unstable and their behavioral processes are unstable. What we think of as an unaffected and original act of the artist is actually a process of constantly learning from others, imitating others and repeating oneself. The act we call creation does not happen suddenly, but is deeply connected and in dialogue with previously completed intellectual experiences. The artist translates his or her inner thoughts and emotions into an external, communicable artistic language, but artistic language is a shared and reproducible cultural resource, and in a sense, “new” artworks are built on the reproduction of other languages or works. In this way, art is not only a solid, unique, “here and now” creative act and result, but also a result of continuous practice, repetition, reproduction, revision, and re-creation.

Looking further, a work of art or a reproduction gives us the feeling of being confronted with a finished result, the feeling that the author has poured out all his emotions and presented them on top of the surface of the material, producing an object that seems self-contained and seemingly finished. But it is not so. When a work is completed, the artist is able to add many things to its reproduction, creating here a space that is constantly open and under construction. On top of this, new content, new images are constantly being filled in, and it is an unfixd canonical reference that is constantly added to and enriched into new references in this space. Therefore, the art work is in flow due to the act of reproduction, and many people are directly or indirectly involved in the work, which becomes a kind of group behavior and also has a dynamic logic. Moreover, the creative significance of reproduction cannot be limited to the circular repetition of the creative result, but also makes the work less original and more public, and enters into a long and groundless circulation and dissemination, which triggers open and full of potential social relations, cultural mechanisms, and artistic rules.

The practice of art creation is generally considered to be the result of a fragmentary singularity. Reproduction opens up the space in which the work takes place, flowing the original true essence and generating a series of constructive effects. In this space, infinite creative acts, infinite “spiritual rhythms” are superimposed, generating a constant stream of creativity. The artist no longer creates a work with integrity, but becomes an art act that is constantly changing, initiating new conversations, and even actively presenting itself in a way that is insufficient for others to participate in it, constantly improving it. Each reproduction brings a very different point of view, and so artistic creativity is completed in the reproduction. It can be said that reproduction, in the social and historical construction of art, transcends the boundaries of a single material form and artistic rules, reactivating, adding value or returning to a new sense of originality.

Some artists are already aware of the creative signs of reproduction, such as Maurizio Cattelan, who curated the playful “The Artist Is Here” in 2018 to explore the issue of reproduction and originality in art. He argues that creativity is no longer the only criterion sought by artists, and that the act of reproduction breaks down the old boundaries of art and becomes the “new” creativity. This is a contemporary art practice that justifies the value of reproduction, but still treats reproduction and creativity as separate. As the aestheticization of everyday life runs counter to the spirit or identity of mainstream aesthetics, artistic reproduction erases the so-called individual freedom and creative spirit of art and aesthetics. Mainstream artists often scoff at this, but instead, reproduction has been occurring in popular art for a long time and has become the usual form of art in everyday life, and the logic behind mainstream art not learning from art in everyday life is still the rule of art at fault. In fact, artists let reproduction bear new fruits in their creations,

so that reproduction always remains as a vibrant energy; creativity without reproduction cannot emerge; conversely, reproduction without creativity cannot survive. This shows the value of the possibility of adapting reproduction to art. Applying reproduction to art not only allows the flow of ontology but also diversifies the value; it carries aesthetic value but also satisfies multiple needs; it changes the unique properties of the original work without losing the independent life meaning of the reproduction.

Based on the above considerations, a new judgment can be made on the meaning of creativity in art reproduction, which is mainly manifested in the following four levels.

One of them is the aesthetic level. Reproduction makes the criterion of art's authenticity no longer applicable, and gives a variety of existence to the perception of art's original authenticity, different from the multiple examinations of a single aesthetic object, but the multiple examinations of multiple aesthetic objects, giving rise to countless interpretations. Here, the originality of art ontology becomes difficult to grasp or irrelevant, because reproduction makes it a concept, and the essence of ontology no longer exists singularly and independently.

Reproduction somehow erases the boundary between the original conventions of art and creativity, and places certain new creations within this original established structure, which prevents new artistic materials from breaking out of the original pattern without any foundation and innovating without any root. This is not only expressed in the plural form of reproduction of "mimicry", but also involves the inner emotional threshold of art, completing the artist's repeated experience of image creation of a work, consolidation and re-experience of emotions, and thus forming a motivation and self-care that is closer to the aesthetic quality and satisfying the needs of the audience.

Second, the production level. Due to reproduction, on the one hand, the artist's production skills become more sophisticated, skilled and convenient, forming a set of fixed production methods; on the other hand, it directly brings economic benefits and has the basis for the development of market-oriented production. The application of reproduction technology makes artistic production more efficient and makes it easier to meet the needs of consumers.

Third, the communication level. Reproduction opens the work to the viewer and highlights its "display value", but it does not have no "worship value"; on the contrary, it realizes, adds value to, and circulates aesthetic and ontological values at the level of dissemination, giving the work a realistic vitality, while It creates many other social functions.

Fourth, the reception level. Consumers of art in everyday life are not exclusively valued on the basis of creativity, which has shaken the long-standing presupposition that aesthetic experience is the core of art appreciation, and it is obviously wrong to equate reproductions with purely original works of art, which should have other meanings beyond aesthetic purposes, such as practical, transactional, political, economic, historical, and cultural. Even in everyday cases, the value of other meaningful points outweighs the aesthetic value.

5. Conclusion

In summary, art reproduction is not a fixed set of actions but an evolving path of development that will grow as long as there are artists who continue to engage in it. "Start copying what you like, copy copy copy copy and copy again, copy until you find yourself at the end." [13] The reproduction of art is already a new "second creation", and the new content is different from the one it emulates, not as a continuation of the artistic life of the artist but as a reconstruction of the art of a new era. Of course, we have to be aware of the complexities and difficulties in the application of reproduction. The core problem comes from the identity and reawakening of reproduction, which is not a return to the era of manual reproduction, but a reclaiming, discovery, empowerment, and emphasis on the artistic creativity of technical reproduction. Therefore, when reproduction has creative vitality and then intermingles with the artist's usual creative behavior, it may change the aesthetic rules and value standards of art, revealing both the audience's right to speak and the author's centrality, allowing reproduction to produce more functions, meanings and values.

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