

The Confusion and Frustration of the Concept of Contemporary Western Art

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Abstract: *Considering the actual situation, under the continuous development of contemporary Western art, its methods of definition have undergone significant changes, making art increasingly indefinable. Consequently, the concept of contemporary Western art has become fraught with confusion and frustration. This paper aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of this confusion and frustration surrounding the concept of contemporary Western art, hoping to assist related work.*

Keywords: *Western, Contemporary Art, Confusion and Frustration, Definition*

1. Introduction

A deep analysis of the ways to define art reveals that under traditional methods, "essentialism" is the main logic used to define art, such as from traditional "representation theory" to "expression theory." However, from the perspective of "anti-essentialism," art often resists being defined, leading to the gradual indefinability of art under essentialist logic. Against this background, the concept of contemporary Western art has encountered confusion and frustration.

2. Art Has Become Indefinable

(1) From an anti-essentialist perspective, the concepts of art reproduction and art as emotional expression in contemporary Western art have failed to define art successfully. Under these views, artworks are often difficult to separate effectively from other things, and some undisputed works are excluded from the realm of art [1]. In the mid-20th century, influenced by Wittgenstein, some artists proposed many views on the definition of art. These views share the common feature of trying to prove that art cannot be defined, and this view has long occupied a central position. Wittgenstein's followers believe that the primary reason for the indefinability of art lies in the definers' misuse of the method, always hoping to define art from the perspective of its intrinsic essence rather than through relational methods. Those who deny the definition of art argue that there is an inherent contradiction between art and definition because the essence of art is innovation. In practical terms, skepticism about defining art is quite similar to anti-essentialism. According to thinkers like Kennick, art cannot be defined. The art theory system needs to face the facts present in art, such as the theory striving to find universal characteristics in artworks. However, given the wide variety of artworks, finding universal characteristics is often futile, and the proposed characteristics are usually quite hollow. Weitz argued that in the first half of the 20th century, the central concern of the art world was how to define art, but none of these attempts could truly define art. In response, Weitz proposed theories such as the open concept and family resemblance, arguing against the possibility of genuinely defining art. Separately, Weitz suggested that the concept of art is significantly open. The updating and iteration of art examples lead to the emergence of new art forms and movements, requiring professional art critics to judge the need to expand the concept of art in the future. In this process, some aestheticians may choose to abandon certain conditions, but to ensure the rational use of the concept, necessary and sufficient conditions cannot be discarded. From an artistic perspective, the usage conditions are very diverse because artists can always conceive and create new examples in artistic activities. For instance, the development requirements for aestheticians are to close or expand old concepts or construct entirely new concepts [2]. Hence, art is highly expansive and inherently adventurous. Changes and creativity in art lead to a lack of clear logical attributes. The concept of family resemblance suggests that a thorough examination and deep understanding of art reveal that art has no attributes, only overlapping similarities. Clarifying the concept of art does not point to the essence of art but to recognizing and describing things called art. Additionally, some scholars believe that the fragmentation of art leads to its division into multiple art circles by different artists, critics, and

appreciators. Moving through these circles reveals no consistent core about what art is, with a severe lack of consensus. This results in no universal concept of art, only concepts specific to each art circle.

(2) Anti-essentialism is a core force against defining art, manifesting in two main aspects from an inductive reasoning perspective: first, attempts to define art have gradually ended in failure, and future attempts may also fail; second, the failure of definitions in philosophy implies that definitions in the art world will also fail [3]. Additionally, in contemporary society, another argument against defining art is that the concept of art itself is significantly fragmented, lacking concrete elements for definition. Thus, it can be seen that art has become indefinable.

3. Reasons Why Contemporary Art Cannot Be Defined

(1) During the development of Western contemporary art, renowned artists have argued that true works of art disrupt established categories and break free from the constraints of critics' perceptions. This necessitates critics to continually expand their categories. However, even after such expansion, there remains a noticeable inadequacy. Furthermore, the emergence of new artworks often requires simultaneous efforts to overturn and expand. Some have also proposed the challenge of transforming concepts into specific boundaries that encompass various entities relevant to the concept. It becomes evident that while specific entities related to the concept can be clearly identified, there is considerable doubt about whether entities on the boundary should be included in the concept. When considering entities located in the marginal area, a thorough exploration is needed on how to enhance the clarity of boundaries [4]. However, even with such efforts, concepts tend to undergo some degree of change, resulting in either an increase or decrease in the number of entities included in the concept compared to before. In practical terms, the core of the concept is fixed by traditional language, while the boundaries exhibit significant flexibility and relative ambiguity, making them highly susceptible to change. These changes are not merely linguistic games; rather, they reflect a population in society that regards ready-made products as artworks, engaging in a particularly serious endeavor. In other words, such individuals are actively contributing to the expansion and re-creation of artistic concepts. Conversely, those who do not consider the aforementioned items as artworks are more focused on protecting existing boundaries of art and are willing to confront attempts to alter these boundaries. This constitutes a dispute over the concept of art and can also be viewed as a dispute concerning the boundaries of artistic concepts.

(2) The concept of Western contemporary art is characterized by significant uncertainty, which is deeply rooted in philosophical and aesthetic foundations such as deconstructionist philosophy, uncertainty theory, consumption theory, and the idea of the worship of symbols [5]. Contemporary philosopher and aesthete Jacques Derrida, in works like "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," "Of Grammatology," and "Speech and Phenomena," consistently adhered to the notion of decentering. He opposed traditional Western philosophical concepts and argued that works themselves possess excellent dissemination capabilities and can be effectively distributed. Furthermore, he opposed metaphysical logocentrism by problematizing and fragmenting ontological concepts, deconstructing structuralist linguistics, and suggesting that present speech would dissolve and be replaced by speech encompassing both presence and absence. Deconstruction thus dissolves the dual structures within specific texts. In this context, his ideas of inverting speech and text order highlight the dynamic nature of language and the intrinsic qualities of phrases. Additionally, Derrida's rejection of any central meaning leads to changes in the notion of a center.

(3) In Derrida's hermeneutic view, works are always open, and the reader's process of reading a work is a creative act, resulting in interpretations that are largely unfinished and uncertain. This differential movement is directly represented by the term "différance." In Western contemporary art, *différance* does not necessitate the assumption of an essence or a perfect existence, nor does it rely on any principle. This term effectively distinguishes the arbitrariness of the signifier and the signified, challenging the theoretical foundation of structuralism. As the signifier evolves, the appearance of the signified is delayed. "Dissemination," a fundamental capability of language, allows for the decomposition of texts, showcasing their fragmentation and looseness, thus verifying the completeness of texts. Furthermore, Derrida's method of examining intertextual relationships suggests that the meaning of language signs in a text is highlighted through comparison with other signs and their significant association with other texts [6]. Practically, a work itself has no boundaries, and texts can deconstruct each other in the process of mutual dissemination. Regarding the essence of meaning, Derrida maintained skepticism and subjectivity, boldly and profoundly exposing the issues and contradictions in contemporary Western philosophy and linguistics. Therefore, he was not merely a skeptic; his main goal was to further validate the relativity and dynamism of truth.

(4) During the postmodern era, as social order and philosophical thought trends became increasingly uncertain, the worldview without a worldview emerged as a primary expression of postmodern philosophy. In this context, a renowned socio-economist stated in "Postmodernity and Its Discontents" that the current world is filled with uncertainty, which grants people more freedom but also impacts their sense of security, making it increasingly difficult to predict various phenomena. This is the issue brought about by freedom and postmodernity. Practically, this economist scientifically summarized the dimensions of uncertainty in postmodernity as follows: (1) The new world is disordered. As political goals and risks become clearer, the visible structures and logic of the world are increasingly lacking; (2) Non-regularity becomes more apparent and gradually becomes a significant driving force in the process of polarization, despite being influenced by the welfare state and global capital distribution institutions; 3. The non-deterministic and plastic nature of the world is reinforced. In contemporary society, the foundational meaning and significance of the world have gradually lost some of their meaning in the development process, and its inspirational and pragmatic power has also gradually disappeared. Additionally, modernity coexists with people, who all hope for continuous positive development. Postmodern life can be characterized by two main types of personalities: tourists and vagabonds. The former are heroes produced in the postmodern context, while the latter are victims. Both are continually moving, but for different reasons. Currently, tourists move mainly because home lacks appeal, causing them to leave voluntarily, whereas vagabonds are forced by circumstances to leave their homes, having no other choice. In postmodern life, people are constantly on the move, a movement that manifests in various aspects such as thoughts and bodies. Whether this movement is present or future, voluntary or forced, remains uncertain.

(5) Additionally, another philosopher and sociologist conducted an in-depth analysis of contemporary social and cultural phenomena and presented his findings and critiques of capitalism in writing. For instance, "Symbolic Exchange and Death" is considered a significant representative in postmodern theory and cultural studies. "The Consumer Society" book uses consumption as a starting point to discuss society. In practice, "The Consumer Society" uses political economy methods to critically analyze the current state of consumer society, directly pointing to the postmodern society under mass media. In "Seduction," the author aimed to deepen the paradigm of negation by using the paradigm of seduction. In this context, he wanted to differentiate his essential differences from postmodern discourse. Subsequently, in "Simulacra and Simulation," he deeply explored the logic between simulacra and simulation. Additionally, he creatively described the emergence of illusions. For example, during the Renaissance, capitalism developed rapidly, with imitation being the foundation of simulacra, and imitation and obedience to nature representing a simple duality, also known as the law of natural value. In the industrial era, simulacra essentially referred to production, where the natural prototype was no longer the basis for human production and processing activities. Things not found in nature began to be produced on a large scale, directly affecting the natural order, and the dominance of commodity value became increasingly evident, leading people to lose their sense of direction amidst material production [7]. Later, the simulacrum society emerged, where codes became the main force controlling society. During this period, origins and purposes underwent subversive changes. In this era, people no longer had direct contact with the external world, constructing it mainly through simulation. In this world, there were no clear objects or references, and a world of structural value under self-production emerged. However, individuals in society found it difficult to perceive these changes.

4. New Trends in Western Contemporary Art

Taking a practical perspective, with the development of modern society and the continuous advancement of science and technology, fast-paced production methods have become increasingly common in various fields, and the art field is no exception. Art tools have evolved along with the expansion of computer accessibility, leading to a continuous increase in the speed of art production. However, this has also brought certain impacts on the development of contemporary art, such as challenges in ensuring the quality of artworks. Against this backdrop, the "Slow Art" contemporary art exhibition held by a certain Swedish art museum represents a new trend in Western contemporary art. The main characteristic of this trend is the ability to obtain materials from nature, utilizing traditional crafts and methods, thereby slowing down the pace of art creation and achieving the beneficial effects of quality and innovation through slowness. In essence, slow art creation is an inheritance and development of the 19th-century Arts and Crafts Movement by contemporary society.

First, slow art, primarily through traditional creation methods based on traditional craft processes, fully expresses the artists' opposition to mechanically fast art. This concept is quite similar to the art philosophy proposed by the 19th-century British art theorist John Ruskin. In "Slow Art," artists can

engage in artistic creation using traditional art methods and tools, such as the meticulous patterns created on linen by Parsi Vilima and Susie Sterlingberg through the effective application of traditional embroidery techniques. Slow art undoubtedly inherits traditional art forms and, from the perspective of slow art theory, fully expresses that the essence of human handmade creation is the foundation of art, while mechanized art creation and production modes only turn artworks into everyday consumer goods. It is evident that slow art highly values traditional art forms like craftsmanship and seeks to fully highlight the deep-seated value inherent in art through the reasonable application of traditional methods.

However, compared to the 19th-century Arts and Crafts Movement, the new trends in Western contemporary art are more diverse in terms of creative styles and methods. Secondly, slow art itself is an innovative development within the concept of Western contemporary art, specifically reflected in the extensive use of "natural elements" in artworks. Some artists, under the influence of slow art, directly use natural materials in their works to provide viewers with a stronger aesthetic experience of nature. These works primarily reflect nature, such as in the "Plant Atlas," where dried flower petals from nature are pieced together to create decorative flat plant images. As a new trend within the concept of Western contemporary art, slow art possesses a certain uniqueness. It can scientifically innovate while reasonably drawing on the ideas of the Arts and Crafts Movement, bringing the concept of "slowness" to the forefront and encouraging people to slow down, reflect on their own and society's future development directions, thereby achieving the positive effect of promoting the green and sustainable development of Western contemporary art concepts[8].

5. Conclusion

In summary, the inherent uncertainties in contemporary philosophy and aesthetics are direct factors contributing to the perplexity and frustration surrounding the concept of Western contemporary art. Against this backdrop, the synthesis of various definitions such as functionalism, institutionalism, and historicity has resulted in numerous hybrid definitions. This perplexity and frustration have led to a more diversified definition of contemporary art, enhancing its openness and gradually becoming a dynamic developmental trend of contemporary art concepts. This dynamism is what makes Western contemporary art so captivating. Therefore, we need to view the confusion and frustration surrounding the concept of Western contemporary art from a developmental perspective, analyzing it from multiple angles to summarize its allure. Furthermore, it is essential to explore the reasons why Western contemporary art cannot be strictly defined, thereby clarifying its conceptual boundaries. Through in-depth research into the confusion and frustration of Western contemporary art concepts, we can promote the continuous and healthy development of the art field, laying a foundation for enhancing the artistic standards of our society.

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