

Review Emerging Art Forms from Danto's Artistic Theories--Use John Cage's 4'33" as An Example

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Abstract: After the 20th century, many different art forms emerged, such as performance and installation art. Some of these new art forms are so baffling and incomprehensible that even art critics consider them not art but sensationalism by their creators. The essay seeks to justify the authenticity of emerging art forms and proceeds onto the necessary conditions to become art in Arthur Danto's art theory. The essay then examines John Cage's 4'33" with Danto's theory. The essay concludes that John Cage's 4'33" is an art form that provides an analytical model for judging contemporary emerging artistic creations.

Keywords: John Cage, Danto's artistic theories, art forms

1. Introduction

The definition of art has been explored for a long time, but it has not been settled. After the 20th century, due to the diversified development of art, the expression form of art progressively deviated from people's previous cognition, and the conventional definition of art seems inadequate to explain these "unprecedented" artistic creations. In this paper, the author compares Danto's art theory with John Cage's 4'33" and concludes that the seemingly absurd and unruly modern art forms can still be recognized as art, which provides feasible solutions and methods to comprehend modern art.

2. Literature Review

In different historical periods, many philosophers and art scholars have sought to define art. According to the "imitation" theory of the ancient Greek naturalist philosopher Democritus and the famous Ancient Greek thinker Aristotle, the relationship between art and reality is imitation and being imitated. In modern times, Diderot put forward the theory of "beauty in relation" based on materialism. Kant analyzed beauty from the four categories of quality, quantity, relation, and mode in the logical category list based on subjective idealism and formalism.

At the beginning of the 19th century, when the ideological trend of "art of beauty" had not faded, Hegel put forward the prediction of "the end of art" under the tone of subjective idealism. Hegel's book, *Aesthetics*, translated by Zhu Guangqian in 2018, states: "The spirit develops in the direction of infinite freedom, and eventually breaks through the limited art, giving way to religion or philosophy, and the history of art ends" [1]. In the 20th century, Author Danto inherited Hegel's conclusion of the end of art, but in his view, "the end of art" is not the "death" of art but the end of

"the art of expressing beauty". In his paper *Art World*, Danto borrowed the theory of the "art world" and put forward a scheme to define art. Later, in the *Evolution of Ordinary Things*, he analyzed the comparison between art and pure things with examples. Danto first proposed the necessary conditions for how artworks acquire the identity of art. In addition, Danto once again expressed his views on art more frankly in another crucial philosophical work of art, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*, 2003 --- 'Good art is not necessarily beautiful' [2]. In this book, he discusses the relationship between beauty and art and denies that beauty is the only condition of art. However, the emergence of every new thing is always accompanied by controversy, and Danto's theory is also unavoidably identified by some scholars as anti-aesthetic. For example, in 2021, Li Chaojin and Pan Daozheng commented in *Arthur Danto's Anti-aesthetics and His Criticism of Ugliness*, "Danto's anti-aesthetic as the logic of postmodern art has gone to the extreme" [3].

To sum up, the current traditional definition of art can no longer cope with the embarrassment of emerging art practice. At this time, art needs to be reinterpreted to accommodate all art forms. Therefore, Author Danto's art theory will likely provide us with a new way of thinking. Through an in-depth exploration of Danto's theory of the necessary conditions for ordinary objects to become works of art, this paper analyzes practical cases by applying this theory to practice and shows the potential of filling the gap in applying this theory at home and abroad.

3. Theoretical Framework

In the 20th century, after Hegel, Arthur Danto reiterated and deepened the end of art theory. In Danto's opinion, the end of art was not the death of art but the end of art in a particular historical period. He not only inherited and explained the end of art theory in detail but also explored the transmission from discussing "what is art" to reflecting aesthetics, trying to remove the necessary connection between beauty and art. In addition, he also found out the essential characteristics of art by comparing art with objects things, in order to seek the necessary condition of being art. It can be concluded as the following two points:

It should correspond to the theory of the art world. Explicitly speaking, artistic theory and artistic and historical atmosphere make a thing become an artwork. It can express its meanings. Danto explained in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* that interpretation is the key to elevating an object to the status of art. If we stop interpreting, art will turn back into a tangible object and degenerate into "the city of the world" [4].

4. Methodology

This paper selects four representative aesthetic works of Danto: *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, *The Abuse of Beauty*, and *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* as the basis of research and analyses Danto's artistic theory of the necessary conditions for becoming art. It adapts the deductive analysis method and uses John Cage's 4'33" to verify the theory, which provides an analytical model for us to distinguish the current emerging art forms.

John Cage's 4'33" lasts 4 minutes and 33 seconds and has three movements. Each movement does not have a single note but "tacet" tips. Some think it is not music at all. Some think it is theoretical music amplifying the rules of rest, and some even think 4'33" as a mockery of traditional music. 4'33" is a controversial work from the 20th century to the present; It is very different from what people have known about music in the past. Thus, the author chose representative artistic creation as an analysis case and demonstrated the necessary conditions for becoming an artist.

5. Discussion

"Art is the art of beauty, beauty is the beauty of art" refers to the idea that art is a work created to realize aesthetic value, which dominated the development of Western art until the 19th century [5]. At the end of the 19th century, various avant-garde schools emerged, such as cubism, Dadaism, expressionism, etc. Artists of different schools frequently subvert people's previous perceptions of art uniquely creatively. For example, French artist Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) 's "Fountain", shown in 1917, was an ordinary urinal for men bought from a shop and was recognized by 500 art judges around the world as having the most significant impact on art history.

Another example is the sculpture Brillo Box exhibited by American pop artist Andy Warhol (1928-1987) in 1964. The boxes used to form the whole work were made by hand with wooden boards, painted with white paint on the surface, and then printed in red and blue. The exciting thing is that these boxes, seemingly indistinguishable from the brillo soap boxes in the supermarket, sold for \$840,000 at the Phillips Contemporary Art Auction in November 2009. These artists set off an artistic rebellion against traditional beauty. They not only break the boundary between life and art in their creations but also abandon the function of art to bring people "aesthetic pleasure", and even directly use ready-made objects in those creations. Facing the situation in which the traditional concept of art has lost its ability to explain art, how to redefine art has become the focus of discussion.

19th-century artists and their works showed us that "art is not necessarily beautiful" [2]. Danto argued that the difference between a work of art and its ordinary counterpart in life is unrecognizable to the naked eye (e.g., Duchamp's Fountain). Therefore, we cannot judge the essence of an object by its external features. Danto's theory broke the necessary relationship between beauty and art, so it was considered by some scholars to be anti-aesthetician. They said, "Danto's anti-aesthetic as the logic of Postmodern art has gone to the extreme" [3]. However, this assumption is too biased. When analyzing the relationship between beauty and art, Danto thought that beauty is not the patent of art, but it does not mean that art is "ugly" or "beautiful art" is not art. In order to try to find a "new art" definition used to explain more things that cannot be identified from the outside, Dan's theory of essence claim to look for connections within things. We can think of it as a search for the beauty of the inner meaning of things: "I mean that when I grasp their thoughts, I understand that their aesthetic beauty lies within their meaning" [6]. Only when beauty is not the only condition of art can more art forms be included in art.

What is art when it is free from the shackles of beauty? In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Danto answers this question: the necessary condition of being art: aboutness and meaning. First, "Aboutness" can be understood as an implicit relationship between creation and something or as the content of an artwork in traditional art theory. It can be a concrete object, an event, or even a state, including physical and abstract things. In his book, Danto analyzes Brillo Boxes as follows: Physically, they are packaging boxes made of wood panels painted but are actually "about" commercial art in the 1960s. In addition, Danto uses nine examples of red squares in his book to illustrate the second condition --- "to express some meaning". Different creators have given these nine canvases of the same size and texture and painted different meanings. For example, the first is "Red Square", a scene of Moscow, and the second is a religious painting entitled "Nirvana", and so on. Canvases that are indistinguishable in appearance become different works of art because of different meanings, which is the second necessary condition of Danto -- an object must contain particular meanings if it wants to become a work of art.

Meanwhile, if we dig deeper, the "meaning" can be divided into two levels: the first one is objective things, that is, the surface meaning shown by appearance, which can be understood as what we see, hear, or intuitively feel. In Duchamp's Fountain, for example, the urinal we see is the

representation. The second one is symbolic things. Duchamp's Fountain mainly symbolizes the artist's mockery of aesthetics and challenge to traditional art.

In these two meanings, the symbolic objects are the key to making something a work of art, and "interpretation" plays a crucial role in the transformation process from the first meaning to the second. Danto points out in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, "The key to elevating an 'ordinary thing' to the status of art noumenon lies in interpretation, and once we stop interpreting, art will change back to a material entity and fall back to an object of ordinary life" [4]. "There is no art in the world unless something is constructed as art by interpretation" [7]. That means that interpretation acts as a screening mechanism. Artistic creation was singled out and placed in another category of special cultural status, named "art". At the same time, interpretation is also a process that endows the work with meaning. Through interpretation, symbolic objects go beyond what is presented and become works of art.

Therefore, through the in-depth analysis of John Cage's "4 '33", the practice of Arthur Danto's art theory is realized, which provides an analytical model for us to distinguish whether the current emerging art form is art.

Before analyzing this work by John Cage, we first need to know the definition of music, and here is a quote from the 2007 edition of *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* explaining the word music, "music, art concerned with combining vocal or instrumental sounds for beauty of form or emotional expression, usually according to cultural standards of rhythm, melody, and, in most Western music, harmony" [8].

First, music's expression needs a carrier, a voice, or an instrument. Secondly, it should follow specific rules and forms. Finally, music is the art of expressing emotional beauty. However, in 1952, John Cage's "4 Minutes 33 seconds" was performed for the first time, and people's understanding of the art of music changed. The music is divided into three movements, and there is no single note in the score, only one word, "Tacet." The performer stood up for four and 33 seconds to finish the performance. The performance of this piece immediately caused an uproar in the art field of the whole West and the whole world, and people seriously doubted whether John Cage was taking art seriously. Why would a hugely influential artist create a piece of music so tricky for the world to understand? Is it art?

Inspired by the thoughts expressed by Cage in the talk music record, it can be concluded that four '33 "meets the condition of relevance and is about art. Secondly, "4 '33" can be understood as the "unrecognizable thing" in Danto's theory, that is, "objective things." Meanwhile, Cage's interpretation in the interview conforms to "expressing a certain meaning" in Danto's art theory (the thing presented transforms into the thing symbolized, and the symbolic thing surpasses the thing presented and finally realizes art). An analysis of 4'33" by Cage from the perspective of the traditional definition of musical art leads to the following conclusions. First, it does not have a human voice or an instrument as a carrier. Second, it does not follow rules or patterns. (From Cage's intention, all sounds, such as the audience's breathing and the wind outside the window, are music, and these sounds are random and irreproducible.) Thus, from this perspective, the work "4'33" is not music, at least not the kind of music we are accustomed to. However, as John Cage says in his book on music, "People listen to music with a minimal idea of 'something' as the basis to understand sound, and this can lead to misunderstandings about the work. Only by taking 'nothing' as the basis for understanding music can the possibilities of the world emerge when listening to it" [9]. It is this "nothingness" that Cage refers to that allows us to hear the wind outside the window, the chatter of the audience and the heartbeat of each individual during the performance. These ever-changing and irreproducible sounds of life of the world liberate the audience from the role of objects and make them part of the music. Inspired by the ideas expressed in Cage's talk about music, it can be confirmed that the work "4'33" fulfills the condition of relevance that it is about art. Inspired by the

thoughts expressed by Cage in the talk music record, first of all, it can be concluded that four '33 "meets the condition of relevance and is about art. Secondly, four '33" can be understood as the "unrecognizable thing" in Danto's theory, that is, "objective things".

Meanwhile, Cage's interpretation in the interview conforms to "expressing a certain meaning" in Danto's art theory (the thing presented transforms into the thing symbolized, and the symbolic thing surpasses the thing presented and finally realizes art. More crucially, Danto once mentioned: "A form of life is something to be experienced rather than merely known. For art to work in the form of life, there must be a very complex system of meaning in which it works, and belonging to another form of life means that one can only grasp the meaning of art from an earlier period by reconstructing the relevant system of meaning as we do" [10]. Forms of life such as the wind or the beating of the human heart are the beauty that we experience all the time but ignore. With 4'33", Cage brings these natural sounds to our attention, inviting us to be a part of them, to experience the meaning of another form of life, a reconfiguration of musical understanding, and a way to see through the "nothing" to our "something." Such perception is a reconstructive understanding of music but also a way to see our "have" through our "have not," teaching us to listen to our inner voice and to hear the beauty of the whole sound world around us, which is the meaning of music that 4'33" really wants to convey.

Analyzing John Cage's work in the light of Danto's theory, we see the ability of interpretation to turn stones into gold, and we also feel the real meaning of "interpretation," which is not only to let us understand the author's intention but also to evoke our inner response through interpretation. Is "4'33" art? The answer is yes.

Danto's philosophical theory of art breathes new life into art and brings excellent inspiration to contemporary people to learn and understand the creations of contemporary art. Art is not just an aesthetic presentation to people. When we face art creations, we should more often exert our rationality as human beings to discover the true meaning conveyed in art.

6. Conclusion

When traditional art theories fail to explain emerging art forms, does it mean the end of art? Danto gave a positive answer through his theory of the end of art, "art is not finished". The end is not the end but a historical stage in redefining art. Danto's theory provides rationality and necessity for emerging art forms in the 20th century. Meanwhile, it provides feasible schemes and ideas to understand and identify contemporary artworks.

In addition, Danto broke the link between beauty and art. Beauty is no longer a necessary characteristic of defining art. Instead, he put forward the necessary conditions from an object thing to an artwork-- the artist's interpretation, which emphasizes the context behind the work and affirms that the artist's interpretation plays a decisive role in the construction of identifying the artwork. This undoubtedly gives artists an ideal space for creation and imagination. Finally, Danto's theory of art philosophy has greatly inspired contemporary people to learn and understand the creation of contemporary art. Art is not only presented to people aesthetically. When faced with artistic creation, we should give full play to our rationality as human beings and discover the significant factors conveyed behind the art.

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