The Transformation of Appropriation in Contemporary Art

Dai Xiaoling, Kan Qing*

School of Fine Arts, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China

Email address: daixiaoling970116@outlook.com (Dai Xiaoling), Kanqing777@qq.com (Kan Qing)

*Corresponding author Kan Qing

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Abstract: Appropriation is one of the most commonly used techniques in contemporary art. It can be seen in various art forms, such as painting, sculpture, photography, video. Due to the emergence of appropriation, artists have great opportunity to lend fresh perspectives to pre-existing objects and images and can embody new sentiments in their creations. Since Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades were introduced to the art world, they have influenced considerable changes to the appropriation over the past 100 years. The first section of this study is to analyse the current situation of appropriation in contemporary art by comparing two ready-mades from Marcel Duchamp and Maurizio Cattelan. In the second section, the focus will be on the aesthetic transformation of appropriation encompasses ready-mades, signs and phenomena. Due to significant transformations, appropriation is not confined to artistic creations, and it can be seen in the production of popular culture. The last section of this study will investigate the influence of appropriation on popular culture by taking popular brand Supreme as an example. Addressing this transformation will enable a comprehensive understanding of how to use appropriation appropriately, helping creators to make full use of its merits, thus producing more emotional and meaningful work. This paper enable the author to reach the conclusion that excessive and inappropriate appropriation produces flawed work and can cultivate a misunderstanding of both the original and the appropriated work.

Keywords: Appropriation, Contemporary Art, Transformation, Popular Culture

1. Introduction

With the emergence of a large number of associated practices, appropriation has become a heated and controversial topic in the art world. Appropriation refers to ‘the practice of artists using pre-existing objects or images in their art with little transformation of the original.’ [1] In the process of appropriation, artists attempt to challenge beliefs as to what constitutes art history and how it should be recorded. When original works or ready-made products are separated from their established representative form and metaphor, they offer more possibilities for various artistic creations. In the context of postmodernism, almost everything can be appropriated into other creations. The artists or creators who lack original concepts are bound to produce works of repetitive appropriation. The aim of this paper is to examine the development of appropriation in the creation of artworks and popular culture by analysing well-known works of appropriation and to examine the influence of this increasingly popular art technique.

2. Appropriation in Contemporary Art

Marcel Duchamp was a pioneer of appropriation throughout art history. His Fountain questions the accepted artistic conceptions in a subversive form, demonstrating the critical value of the urinal. As a result of such a pioneering practice, a great variety of art techniques gradually emerged and reshaped the discourse of art from a rebellious standpoint. After Duchamp directly initiated appropriating ready-made products, appropriation gradually evolved into an important visual creative technique in contemporary art in a global cultural context.

A number of decades later, artist Maurizio Cattelan's work Comedian featured a banana taped to a wall and sold for $120,000 [2] at Art Basel Beach on December 5 2019, receiving significant public attention. However, this banana was nothing but a common item widely available at fruit market. Unexpectedly, the banana was eaten by the artist David Datuna two days later and he considered himself to be a hungry artist. Can this banana, directly borrowed from
everyday life, be regarded as a work of art? If the answer is ‘yes’, can we call all works of appropriation works of art?

What we have to admit is that *Fountain* was moved to the art gallery over 100 years ago and was criticised and discarded by most artists and critics at that time. The creator of this work Maurizio Cattelan once said, ‘We share genuine respect toward what preceded us, and at the same time, we are staunch supporters of the idea that the copy is the original. We found ourselves halfway, where iconography meets icons, and where celebrated originals become timeless icons through a simple act of repetition and propagation.’[3] He believed that copies also have original values. Although appropriation works are created from different contexts and the meaning carried by the original works may be changed or even distorted, this does not affect the feelings and emotion they convey.

The rise of modernism promoted the development of appropriation, bringing also some negative aspects. In France, the 1990s brought considerable upheavals in the art world, with controversial aesthetic standards, concepts, forms, and so on. When it comes to contemporary art, Arthur C. Danto writes, ‘contemporary has come to designate something more than simply the art of the present moment.’[4] From his standpoint, contemporary art ‘designates less a period than what happens after there are no more periods in some master narrative of art, and less a style of making art than a style of using styles.’[5] In this sense, contemporary art presents a gap, visible in modern art, representing the ambiguity of aesthetic attitude and art form. Because of the openness and diversity brought about by contemporary art, appropriation is used unscrupulously by both artists and the public.

The aforementioned practices of appropriating ready-mades into artworks invites the question whether art is entitled to use everyday objects by adopting postmodern artistic technique and appropriation. Currently, a great variety of appropriation works have become prevalent and controversial in contemporary art. For example, one of the most controversial works by artist Jeff Koons, *Rabbit* was sold for more than $91 million[6] in 2019, setting a new record for a living artist and a record year. Even if many appropriation works have achieved financial success, it does not necessarily mean that they should be considered as artworks.

There is no doubt that the appearance of appropriation encourages artists to innovatively shift conventional artistic paradigms. However, the excessive acts of appropriation and considerable financial returns gained by well-known artists are likely to lead to the misunderstanding that art is entitled to use everything and that anything can be appropriated into artistic works. Too many applications of appropriation in artistic creations may put the essence of art and the function of artists at risk.

3. The Aesthetic Transformation of Appropriation

Marcel Duchamp made a place for himself in the appropriation movement. His ready-mades, such as *Fountain*, *Bicycle Wheel* break the patterns of the received aesthetic paradigm and lay a solid foundation for the transformation of appropriation. Under the influence of social mechanisms, appropriation is not limited to ready-mades, and it tends to be symbolic and phenomenological and presents new artistic values in the act of continuous deconstruction and reconstruction, which paves the way for the innovative development and exploration of contemporary art.

The creation of *Fountain* brings about a situation where the line between ready-made products and works of art has been blurred, and the originality of artistic creation has been questioned. But such striking practice also encourages the full development of appropriation and enriches the meaning of ready-made products. Art theorist Thierry de Duve once commented on *Fountain*, saying that it ‘illustrates the undecidability, the openness, and the indeterminacy of the concept of art, or even its entrenchment in solipsism or its expansion into universal tautology.’[7] The urinal was got rid of its own physical functionality, destroying the noble and elegant aesthetic perception of long-held artistic concepts. Such question and accompanying anger from the public and critics may encourage artists to perceive the existence of the unnoticed aspects of ordinary objects and tap into their inner powerful inner emotions, thus creating new forms and concepts for ready-made products.

Not all works of appropriation can be viewed as artworks. The difference between them is that artworks can produce a short period of silence for artists’ and visitors’ thoughts and can also promote the innovation of appropriation in response to pre-existing forms and concepts. To be specific, the difference between ready-made products and artworks is not in their physical properties, but in their hidden concepts. As an art technique, appropriation can motivate artists to excavate the ignored aspects of ready-made products and everyday objects.

Since the emergence of modern art, appropriation has become detached from the physical attributes of ready-made products and has gradually created its own discourse, evolving into a sign. Duchamp's actions made the urinal famous, and it became unique to Duchamp's artistic sign. Actually, the meaning of the urinal remains irreplaceable. The reason that *Fountain* can be considered as a sign is that it is indifferent and without aesthetic emotion. When asked about the choice of ready-mades, Duchamp argues that, ‘You have to approach something with indifference, as if you had no aesthetic emotion. The choice of ready-mades is always based on visual indifference and, at the same time, on the total absence of good or bad taste.’[8] For his perspective, when artists abandon their own fixed ideas and the sacredness and authority of art and treat all surrounding objects with equality or even with awe, they may discover the stillness and uniqueness of ready-made products.

Sign is an important topic in the field of semiotics. There are contradictory and supplementary concepts defined by Hegel, Peirce, Saussure, and other authors. For Saussure, the sign was not a specific thing, but a mental representation of a specific thing. Similarly, Roland Barthes used the example of
boundaries are unclear, even ambiguous, and so is its the phenomenology is of great significance. His concepts of the appropriation.

There are many works that contribute to the development of appropriation, such as Cindy Sherman’s Untitled Film Stills, Richard Prince’s re-photography of advertisements, and Sherrie Levine’s After Walker Evans. There is no doubt that these remarkable works challenge the concept of originality and also place appropriation as a controversial and polarised concept. If viewers focus too much on representative forms, they are likely to believe that any kind of copy can be referred to as appropriation, thus becoming a work of art and, while the meaning and connotation that artists want to express by means of appropriation is ignored.

Since the boundary between art and life has become blurred, the wider acceptance of works of appropriation means that they are gradually becoming less confined to the role of a sign and, in turn, becoming sought-after phenomena. The appropriation of classic works has become a norm across eras, representing the different styles of each period in the context of classical works. These practices have become an unconscious phenomenon in the evolution of art history. It is noteworthy that the concept of the phenomenon is at the core of Martin Heidegger’s research. One of his theories suggests that phenomena is associated with the truth. He writes, ‘Specific phenomena are layered around “truth” insofar as knowing is achieved in the manner of articulating what is known, in putting what is known into a proposition, and insofar as this proposition is communicable and requires some comprehension for communication.’[10] Many works of appropriation are created to show respect for and the novelty of original works. However, their meaning is blurred, meaning that their forms exceed the expression of truth, and this is the reason that so many works of appropriation have emerged.

There is no doubt that this artistic phenomenon encourages artists to reflect on classical works. The appropriation of historical paintings by photographer Cindy Sherman displays a unique perspective. The luxurious clothing and perfect bodies depicted in the original paintings were replaced with worn clothes, artificial limbs and wigs. In addition, the dignified and elegant characters were disfigured and converted into the opposite sex. All of these motifs were used to satirise a historically male-dominated society. Appropriation from a different era may trigger excavation into the unnoticed layers of works of art in the process of continually denying classical works.

An issue that should not ignore is that once an artistic technique becomes a popular art phenomenon, it is easy to ignore the ontology of art, and appropriation should not become a shield for the lack of originality and meaning of artworks. Martin Heidegger’s interpretation of artistic phenomenology is of great significance. His concepts of the origin of art are the most creative judgment on artistic phenomena. Heidegger said that ‘The origin of the work of art—that is, the origin of both the creators and the preservers, which is to say of a people’s historical existence—is art.’[11] Once an artistic technique becomes a phenomenon, it has achieved widespread acceptance from artists and the public. But, as artists focus more energy into exploring the origins of art, it becomes more likely that they will produce high-quality works of appropriation. The reason that many works of appropriation are indistinguishable from the next is that artists focus too much on forms of representation, rather than on the origin of an artwork.

4. The Crisis Between Appropriation and Popular Culture

Since the 1990s, consumer culture has gradually spread into the fields of art and culture, triggering the transformation and reconstruction of the aesthetic values and standards of contemporary art. So, appropriation has also been widely applied to popular culture. American critic Douglas Crimp discussed the status of appropriation: ‘For appropriation, pastiche, quotation—these methods can now be seen to extended to virtually every aspect of our culture, from the most cynically calculated products of the fashion and entertainment industries to the most committed critical activities of artists.’[12] As a product of widespread cultural phenomena and activities in contemporary society, popular culture represents the ideologies and mindsets of the public and the press of a given time by means of the medium. One definition of popular culture is that, ‘Popular culture is the set of practices, beliefs, and objects that embody the most broadly shared meanings of a social system. It includes media objects, entertainment and leisure, fashion and trends, and linguistic conventions, among other things.’[13] Due to its openness, popular culture provides favourable conditions for the public to actively participate in the production and development of art and culture. The universality of popular culture and the popularisation of art open a space for the mixture of culture and commerce and the reestablishment of aesthetic values and standards of contemporary art. Due to the strong association of popular culture and daily life, the influence and impact of appropriation requires attention and research.

In 2018, a video named Everything can be Supreme was broadcast over one billion times on Tik Tok and Weibo (Chinese social media applications), making it the most popular video of the year. The scenes presented in this video and the brand Supreme display striking contrasts. The video shows people riding pigs, a news presenter doing a sexual dance in fashionable clothes, another person wearing The Monkey King (a character in classical Chinese work of literature Journey to the West) mask hung around his neck as he continuously shakes his body. In the video, the Supreme logo was appropriated, in terms of both its font and colour. In addition, the background music in this video is an
appropriation from the well-known anti-war song Zombie, released by Irish band the Cranberries in 1994. In order to cater to the visual effects of the video, the melody and rhythm were adapted, and the original message of resisting war and striving for peace disappeared instantly.

This game of appropriation involves the coercion of commerce, media, and the public. Supreme’s strong brand image is linked closely to this phenomenon. First of all, the Supreme’s logo (white text on a red background) is not original and is borrowed from the work I Buy So I Am Here by artist Barbara Kruger. Secondly, as a popular brand, Supreme has cooperated with internationally well-known brands such as LV, Nike, Vans, etc. The novelty and exclusivity of its marketing strategies have lead to the increasing popularity and dominant role in youth and popular culture. Interestingly, the products Supreme sells range from clothing, bags and suitcases to daily necessities, including some unexpected products, such as red-clay bricks, money guns and even coffins. Even though the brand’s prices are considerably higher than the average market price, they sell out quickly, once released. Finally, Supreme stimulates discourse in response to social, cultural, and political issues, enabling it to gain attention and popularity in a short space of time.

The increasingly close relationship between appropriation and commerce is likely to cause a situation where appropriation becomes an industrial product in the context of consumer culture. Just as Jean Baudrillard pointed out, ‘pop regards itself as homogeneous with this immanent order of signs: homogeneous with their industrial, mass production and hence with the artificial, manufactured character of the whole environment, homogeneous with the spatial saturation and simultaneous culturalized abstraction of this new order of things.’[14] From his standpoint, the essence of pop culture is a plethora of signs, which induce public indulgence in a world created by advertising and industry.

The context of the postmodern society affects the creation of popular culture. According to postmodern theorist Frederick Jameson, copy, repetition, reconstruction constitute the internal order of consumer-culture production. [5]

under the influence of postmodernism, finally forming a culture without depth. It is a situation where aesthetic creations are formed by the combination of consumption and popular culture. This is likely to cause the misconception that appropriation can act as an artistic overcoat with a sanctifying function. Original works can be conceptualised, and aestheticism and appropriation can be adopted endlessly. Baudrillard suggests that, ‘The majority of contemporary art has attempted to do precisely that by confiscating banality waste and mediocrity as values and ideologies. These countless installations and performances are merely compromising with the state of things, and with all the past forms of art history. Raising originality, banality and nullity to the level of values or even to perverse aesthetic pleasure.’[15] The positive presented by appropriation is the ability to learn from well-known artworks, ensuring, however, that artistic creations are not limited to this process. The excessive usage of appropriation in artistic creation makes the process of creation indifferent and banal.

5. Conclusion

The emergence of appropriation is inseparable from art history and contemporary society, and it covers an increasingly broad spectrum. The reason that many appropriation are viewed as classics is due to their core concept. Appropriation is a commonly used art technique, and it should not be viewed as a shortcut to creating meaningful works of art. There should be no doubt that it triggers deep reflection on pre-existing objects, images and artworks, and the excavation of works’ connotations and meanings. Regardless of form, and that includes ready-mades, signs, and phenomena, the essential value of appropriation is its capacity to aid the exploration of existing art’s deeper meanings and connotations, rather than its ability to facilitate the repetitive and endless indulgence in appropriating existing works.

References

[5] Ibid.

