

# Duchamp's Influences on Chinese Modern Artists—the Example of Huang Yongping

Heyan Wang<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Capital Normal University High School, Beijing, China, 100089

\*Corresponding author. Email: wangheyang2022@163.com

## ABSTRACT

As the pioneer of experimental art in the 20th century and the representative of Dadaism and surrealism, Duchamp plays a very important role in the development of art. His influence is all over the world, and Huang Yongping is one of his followers in China. There are traces of Duchamp in many of Huang Yongping's works. This paper will analyze Duchamp's influence on Huang Yongping's artworks from three aspects: the dissolving of artistic significance, the challenge to artistic tradition and the application of randomness. By comparing Duchamp and Huang Yongping's works, we can have a clear cognition of how western and eastern artists employ the same concepts in different ways and how does Dadaism fit into different cultures.

**Keywords:** modern art, Dadaism, Duchamp, Huang Yongping, contemporary art

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Chinese avant-garde art movement began in the mid-1980s. This movement is the result of the influence of the western modern art movement. At the beginning of the 1980s, Chinese artists began trying modernist abstract painting, but this caused great controversy. Abstract paintings in China at that time led to the fierce confrontation among conservatives. However, with the continuous development of Chinese people's cognition of art, people re that even the abstract painting was no longer radical. This was mainly because of the exhibition held by the American artist Robert Rauschenberg in the China Art Museum in 1985, which suddenly attracted the attention of Chinese avant-garde artists. Then, Chinese artists soon found that Rauschenberg was influenced by another western artist, Marcel Duchamp, to a great extent.

Marcel Duchamp is one of the most famous artists in the European art history. He once led a group of artists to set off a "Dadaism movement" after World War I. Later, in 1917, Duchamp named a man's urinal from a store "Fountain" and anonymously sent it to the American independent artist exhibition as a work of art. This shocking action at that time has now become a milestone event in the history of modern art, and also has a profound impact on the art development and artists all over the world [1].

Huang Yongping, just like some other Chinese artists, began learning about Duchamp since Rauschenberg's exhibition. Then, he became the admirer of Duchamp. Huang Yongping was inspired by Duchamp and produced some of the first and most influential works of Chinese experimental art. Prior to this, the form of art for Chinese artists was still confined to painting and sculpture, yet Huang Yongping broke this rule. He also established "Xiamen Dada", an avant-garde art organization in China, in 1986. To some extent, "Xiamen Dada" can be seen as a Chinese version of Dadaism, which is somewhat similar to but actually different from Western Dadaism [2]. Huang Yongping claimed that he was not fond of pain or sublimity, but rather admired emptiness and profanity. He also attempted to make non-art an art form and tried to rebel against the entire art system. Even though most of his works were created in 1900s, they are still pioneering and deserve further study today. Based on Duchamp and Huang Yongping's works, this paper focuses on how Duchamp influenced Huang Yongping in the process of creating artworks.

## 2. ANALYSIS ON THE INFLUENCES OF DUCHAMP

### 2.1. Dissolving the meaning of art

The first characteristic of "Fountain" is that it dissolves the meaning of art. The work of art becomes an

object of nothingness, no longer existing as a meaningful thing. If “Fountain” was simply a urinal, it would naturally have its utility and functionality. But when it was used as a work of art, this utility and functionality was thus taken away by Duchamp: it could no longer be used as a urinal [3]. However, at that moment, the meaning and use of this urinal, which Duchamp commandeered as a work of art, still remained blank. This is because at that time, for audiences, academic artists, and even progressive art organizations (such as the Society of Independent Artists of America), the urinal was still outside the range of art—it could not be seen as an artwork in people’s minds. Thus, the urinal had been put in an awkward position, as it could neither be used as a living tool as it used to be, nor could enter the category of artwork. It became an object that existed in meaninglessness. The strange thing is that its “meaninglessness” was later given meaning. In other words, a new meaning was constructed for this “meaningless” artwork. In fact, the meaning of this urinal as an artwork lies in its emptiness and profanity. It is the first work of art to become famous for its meaninglessness and thus be recognized as a real work of art.

Huang Yongping’s work “ ‘A History of Chinese Painting’ and ‘A Brief History of Modern Western Art’ washed in the washing machine for two minutes” is undoubtedly influenced by Duchamp. “A Brief History of Chinese Painting” and “A Brief History of Modern Western Art” are two popular art history books (in fact, they are used as textbooks for art students in China), and Huang Yongping put both of them in the washing machine for two minutes until they are churned into powder. We can clearly see some traces of Duchamp in this work. First of all, like Duchamp, Huang Yongping chose objects with primitive meaning or function (books) as the subject of the artwork. For these two books, their functions lied in teaching and researching—this is their first level of their meaning. Their second level of meaning lied in their own symbolic nature, as they carried and symbolized the history of eastern and western art, and even the history of eastern and western culture on a larger scale. Therefore, based on two levels of meanings, these books were functional in themselves, just like Duchamp’s urinal. However, by putting two books in the washing machine, the machine removed the initial meaning of the book. If Duchamp dissolved the meaning of the urinal by taking it out of its original context and thus making it uncategorizable and undefinable, Huang Yongping took different approaches to dissolve the meaning. First, he employed an automatic machine to cleanse the two books in a destructive manner, in order to deprive them of their usefulness. The result was obvious: the two books falled apart, could no longer be read, and could no longer even be called books. The second way to deconstruct their symbolic meaning was the juxtaposition of these two books. In the context

of China’s 1980s, the relationship between Eastern and Western art and culture was widely discussed, and there were a great deal of conflicts lied between them—people often argued over which of the two was superior. Huang Yongping’s work is a response to this cultural debate: he wanted to convey the idea that the debate between eastern and western culture and art is meaningless. As two books are stirred in the washing machine, their chaotic fusion dissolves their respective symbolic meanings. Thus, they have become a pile of waste paper together, instead of representing Eastern and Western cultures. This work also reflects a strong cultural nihilism.

## **2.2. Challenging the Tradition of Art**

The second characteristic of “Fountain” is that it challenges the traditional perception of art, overturning the previous posture of art as arrogant and elite, and allowing art to relate to everyday life. In the traditional conception of art, art and “beauty” are often intrinsically linked. On the other hand, the traditional concept of Western art was based on a theory of imitation and expression, which meant that art is either a reproduction of reality or a way to convey a spirit and emotion. The artwork was created by the artist through a certain technique, the artist was in a way a “craftsman”, and art was “he skill required to produce a certain object” [4]. Because the complicated skills involved in the creation of artworks , artworks was previously more or less an object of admiration, to be treasured and preserved - like a luxury item. However, Duchamp’s “Fountain” was a reversal of such a traditional concept of art. If a urinal can be considered a work of art, it means that a broom, a bowl, or a table can also be a work of art. The form of art is not limited to sculpture and painting anymore; Duchamp’s work opens the door to the ready-made. The boundary between art and life was thus broken. Art was no longer at a strong distance from people. Duchamp always believe that art does not have to always be well preserved and protected by the cover of glass, but can be touched, used, or even damaged; art need not be above life, need not be aesthetic, need not imitate the scenes of life: it can just be a part of life.

Duchamp’s point deeply inspired Huang Yongping. Before Huang Yongping, the concept of artwork in China was also limited. The turning point is that in 1987, Huang Yongping and several other artists were approved to hold an exhibition at the Fujian Provincial Art Museum, but before the exhibition, they suddenly changed their plans. They did a crazy thing. Huang Yongping and several other artists moved various materials and waste from outside the museum into the exhibition space. Afterwards, Huang Yongping titled the exhibition as “An Exhibition of Events that Happened in the Fujian Provincial Art Exhibition Hall”. He also said, “what we want to attack is not the audience, but the visitors’

perception of art” [5]. In this way, on the one hand, he challenges the traditional forms of artworks, in addition to sculptures and paintings, Huang Yongping treats “waste and basic materials” as artworks and “events” as an exhibition; on the other hand, Huang Yongping makes a fierce rebellion against the traditional art system. In the public perception, art museums and galleries were meant to reflect a refined artistic sensibility. To some extent, they were elitist. However, Huang Yongping wanted to show the audience that art museums do not have to be noble and sacred place, and it could also be dirty and messy. Like Duchamp, Huang Yongping believes that artworks do not need to be deliberately exhibited and become an object of admiration, but he goes one step further than Duchamp: while Duchamp sees art as a part of life, Huang Yongping believes that art can even be below the life. It can be the part that people scorn the most : it can be not only “not beautiful”, but even “ugly”. At this point, it is clear that Huang Yongping is completely free from the traditional concept of “art as a representation of beauty”.

### **2.3. Preference for artistic randomness**

Duchamp’s third distinctive feature is his use of randomness. The urinal is something he saw by chance while shopping, and his intentional emphasis on randomness can be shown in his another artwork “*The Termination of Three Standards*”. As if in an experiment, Duchamp allowed three one-meter-long threads, one after the other, to fall naturally onto a one-meter-square canvas painted Prussian blue. The thread was light, soft, and not fixed into a certain shape. After the hand released, due to the difference between the initial speed of each thread, the slight effect of the air on the flow, the angle of landing caused by the difference in friction, etc., each thread landed with different arcs and shapes, although each thread seemed to land from the same place, using the same technique, after the same path. Their final shapes on the blue cloth were decided by those potential uncontrollable factors, which could be seen as symbols of randomness [6]. Duchamp’s choice of using the thread as the object of his experiments is very wise, because the thread can reflect to the greatest extent the influence of uncontrollable external things on it, thus magnifying the randomness of the process. In addition, Duchamp cut the canvas along the trajectory of the thread to make three separate stencils, and said that each thread represented a new unit of measurement. He titled this work “*The Termination of Three Standards*”, expressing his mockery and provocation of the scientific measurements, such as the French unit of length, a legal unit of length inscribed on a platinum rod promulgated by the French government. He stood in an opposite angle with French government, preferring randomness to precise standards and strictly enforced processes.

Huang Yongping is influenced by Duchamp, who has always used randomness to challenge those rational ideas. Comparing with other Chinese artists, Huang Yongping’s identity is relatively unique: he is often a chosen, invited artist, and many of his works are like proposition compositions in examinations [7]. Because the requirements of his artworks are all set by others, he knows nothing about the work he is about to complete until the moment he “turns over the paper and see the proposition”, indicating that he creates his work entirely by chance. One example is the work “Kearny Street” that Huang Yongping completed in San Francisco in 1995. He did not know that he was going to finish such a work on Kearny Street beforehand, but when he was invited to make an artwork in this street, he tried his best to make a work that was relevant to the inviter’s proposition. He learned that Kearny Street is a street in Chinatown, which is related to the Chinese Exclusion Act in the 19th century. Therefore, he bought 350 turtles to crawl on the street since turtles happened to be caricatures of Chinese people during the Exclusion of Chinese. He had never before think about anything he would create about turtles, about Chinese exclusion, or about Kearny Street in any detail. He is just an artist who likes randomness and this preference can be shown by the fact that he is always waiting for unknown challenges. He never attempts to anticipate those upcoming tasks, he just calmly waits for them to intrude into his life by chance.

However, Huang Yongping and Duchamp’s ways of using randomness are fundamentally different. One could say that Huang Yongping’s randomness is reflected in the birth of his works. Those works are the products of chance, and their existence represents randomness itself. On the contrary, Duchamp’s randomness is embodied in the process of creating his works. Unlike Huang Yongping’s works, which are always born unexpectedly, full of uncertainty and unknowns even for their creators —Duchamp’s works are the result of his own conception, of his own subjective will. Duchamp just likes to treat his works as experiments, in which he embodies randomness. He does not interfere, plan, or participate too much with the procedures of creating works, and just lets them develop and form naturally with some uncontrollable external factors. In this regard, Huang Yongping is much more rigorous than Duchamp in terms of the creative process.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

In addition to dissolving the meaning of art, challenging tradition and the preference for randomness, Huang Yongping also understood Duchamp with Chinese philosophy. For example, Duchamp’s Deconstruction of meaning is very close to Chinese Zen thought. They are all committed to nothingness. In this way, Huang Yongping wonderfully connects Duchamp’s artistic concepts with Chinese classical philosophy.

Similarly, Duchamp's emphasis on randomness makes Huang Yongping turn to another Chinese classic, the book of changes. Before learning about Duchamp, Huang Yongping had known these ancient Chinese ideological classics. However, it is through Duchamp that he began combining his artistic creation with these ancient thoughts. These ancient thoughts later became Huang Yongping's important methodology, but this change was triggered by Duchamp, a western artist [8]. This is a miracle.

In any case, Duchamp has such a great influence on Huang Yongping that Huang even named his creative group "Xiamen dada" from the beginning, which is a tribute to Duchamp. It can be said that without Duchamp and Huang Yongping's artworks influenced by him, China's art in the 1980s would be greatly inferior.

### **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

This paper is independently completed by Heyan Wang.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

First of all, I would like to thank Professor Hughes for his great help. He not only gave me a lot of professional knowledge about modern art, but also inspired my interest in Dada. To some extent, he contributed to my further study of Dada and the birth of the theme of this paper. Secondly, I want to thank my parents. In the process of writing my thesis, I encountered some difficulties and felt annoyed. It was

their encouragement that made me adjust my mentality and keep thinking calmly.

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