A Study on the Relationship Between Medium and Art

Thought After the Turn and Crossover of Medium

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Abstract—**Medium attracts more attention in contemporary art thanks to its continuous crossover. Throughout the long art history, traditional artists tend to focus on various art media in conventional art genres. Contemporary artists, however, seek more diversified media from everyday life and it is therefore necessary to rethink the relationship between media and art and that between art and life. Faced with the views of "the end of art" and "the death of painting", it is significant to ponder on the creation and development of art in the future from the point of medium.**

Keywords—media; art; life; boundary

I. INTRODUCTION

The French artist Marcel Duchamp produced the work *Fountain* in 1917, a porcelain urinal, which triggered an unprecedentedly heated debate and many intellectual enquiries such as "what is art" and "what is the future of art" were then discussed in both art and philosophy fields. This event indicated that the art media were no longer bounded by those of traditional art genres. For example, the materials for conceptual art drew on directly from readymade or found objects in life. Readymade art broke the conventional notions of artistic creation since "commonplace" in everyday life could be "transfigured" into works of art, like the American artist Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes.* These everyday objects acted as artists' media and transformed into artwork with artistic mission. Artists broke the traditional notion of art media and therefore had more artistic creation space and more freedom. Their comprehension and choice of media are based on artistic creation, not limited by traditional media.

Artists in contemporary era tend to produce performance art, installation art, conceptual art, multimedia art and they create via diversified media. The first impression left on people by contemporary artistic creation is the turn and crossover of media. It can be seen from the media of artistic creation that those contemporary artists are now fulfilling their mission, which is, focusing on and reflecting the present social environment. The obvious emphasis on art medium attributes to the 19th impressionists who give priority to the lighting and color of paintings.

II. FROM SUBJECTS TO MEDIUM

Impressionists contributed a lot to art history as the American art critic Clement Greenberg pointed out that the significance of Manet was that he argued the key to painting was medium instead of themes. Greenberg also acclaimed the realist artist Gustave Courbet as the first who accentuated the objectivity and materiality of painting in the modern art history. Greenberg said that "whereas one tends to see what is in an Old Master before seeing it as a picture, one sees a Modernist painting as a picture first". [1] Upholding reason, classicists preferred historical and grand subjects and adopted subtle and lifelike brushwork. On the contrary, as one of the representative realist French painters in the 19th century, Courbet opposed the classist notion centering on themes. Rather, he preferred the seen world in everyday life instead of the gods or things that had never seen before and he did not seek perfect representation or verisimilitude in terms of painting techniques. With the progress of society and technology, accompanying the advent of photography and chromatics, impressionists began to consider lighting and colors as media to accentuate the visuality of painting and to ignore the meaning of subjects.

The British critic Roger Fry termed the pictorial art during the final stage of impressionists (1980s-1990s) to the prosperity of modern art (the beginning of 20th century) as "Post-Impressionism". One of its representative artists was "the father of modern painting" Paul Cézanne who advocated authenticity of the picture itself, which was regarded as objectified authenticity. Be it western early paintings about religion or secular society, their themes were the core. Although Cézanne tended to experiment on still life, his painting was not Plato's "shadow's shadow" since there were no real objects representing the reality. He did not aim to create a three-dimensional illusion in the two-dimensional surface, but to ponder over how to develop the authenticity of painting on the canvas based on the picture plane. In another word, his intention was to build a structure that belonged to the picture itself because he deeply believed that picture was an independent thing, just like things in real life. It was fair to say that Cézanne focused on the artistic form of painting and his starting point originated pictorial art itself. Till now, artists changed the focus of painting from the

subjects to media, which opened a door for future media expansion.

Abstract expressionism was proposed by the art critic Robert Coates in 1947. Jackson Pollock and Willem De Kooning focused on men's actions and postures and they argued that painting process was paramount. Their style was therefore termed as "Action Painting". While other painters such as Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Robert Motherwell deployed the color in large fields to express some abstract symbols or figurative work, which was called as "Color Field Painting". Arthur Danto said that abstract expressionists "wished to announce that paintings are paint" in his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981). [2] Put it another way, there were no meanings or themes in their paintings. Rather, artists paid full attention to the media which were once used to serve for themes, such as color, structure and line. The Russian art theorist Wassily Kandinsky held that every painting was a combination of color and graph in his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912). It may be not important for viewers since they paid more attention to themes of paintings. In the contemporary era, however, the pure media have become the core of artistic creation and the objects worthy of exploring by artists. It is fair to say that media stand independently in front of art stage. What's more, the events triggered by artworks were an indispensable part of artworks themselves. Take Jackson Pollock's drip painting for example, it was the canvas dripped with paints and Pollock himself that contributed the birth of *Lavender Mist* (1950). The media employed by artists are now expanding, far beyond the traditional boundary.

III. COMMONPLACE BEING THE MEDIA

Avant-garde artists explored experimental creation from the latter half of the 20th century. The emergence of conceptual art opened a new era of creation by diversified materials. Artistic media were far beyond the limits of traditional art genre and many media drew on directly from everyday life. Arthur Danto put forward the slogan "the end of art" in his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981). The American critic Michael Fried also wrote a book (*Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (1998) on this issue. Those writers noticed the fact that contemporary art had crossed into everyday life to seek more diversified media. Nevertheless, compared with the *Fountain* during the Dada period, the reason for choice of found objects in contemporary era was not to criticize or overthrow the traditional civilizations and aesthetics, but to call people's attention to the media themselves. The two Chinese artists Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi founded an art group called "Pond Society" and they declared in its manifesto that they tried to break the boundary of language and advocate an ambiguous form since it was not the only way to express ideas by painting on the holy easel.

In 1988, the Korean American artist Nam June Paik used today's commonplace television to create an installation work *Wrap Around the World*, shaped like a cake out of 1003 displayers, 14 meters in diameter and 9 meters in height. Television now enters into the digital era and is

accepted by more and more people. The French sociologist Jean Baudrillard gave a case of "Luther's family" in 1971 when he illustrated his theory of simulacra. He argues the truth is that Luther's family is dominated by television. [3] The Luther's family is the incarnation of hyperreality and an ideal American family. The family is the model of simulation stage and meanwhile it is a real family in real life. The boundary between the model of simulation stage and the real world therefore is blurred. What he wants to tell us are that "you are the model" and "you are the information, the society and the event since you are involved". In his view, there are no subject, no focus, no center because media and people are the one. He uses the case of Luther's family to explain his thought of simulation. The cake made of displayers by Nam June Paik makes us think that the familiar everyday objects lure people just like delicious cakes.

The Chinese contemporary artist Xu Bing fabricates the installation work *Phoenix* from industrial waste. The medium and the image phoenix are equally important because only their co-existence can the work expresses fully the artist's thoughts, that is, the relationship between users and laborers. The trilogy *Waste Not, The Wisdom of the Poor* and *Surplus Value* by the Chinese artist Song Dong exhibits people's daily waste, whose purpose is to provoke people's thoughts about those daily objects by displaying them in a simple way or reshaping them. He introduces commonplaces into art and also brings art into daily life. The artist Xu Bing creates a new movie *Dragonfly Eyes* (2016) from over 10,000 hours of preexisting public surveillance footage. He mentions in an interview that "no second in the movie is filmed by us and no actors are arranged by us". [4] The work breaks the boundary between network surveillance footage and film arts. It is the surveillance footage adopted by him that blurs the line between virtuality and reality. The Chinese art critic Peng Feng comments that "all shots are real, not for show and they are used to tell new stories out of coincidence". [5] The British contemporary artist David Hockney introduces new media in daily life and work into arts field. He creates works on smartphones and tablet computers and then posts them online or prints to exhibit. In his view, new media enables people to have more views on things and therefore employing new media to create is one way to expand people's viewing ways.

IV. CONCLUSION

In the 19th century, artists began to pay attention to the media of traditional art and carry out experimental research on pictorial materials. In the 20th century, they tried boldly more diversified media and crossover of media nowadays related directly to daily life. The increasingly various media enable us to rethink the relationship between media and art and that between art and life. The break of boundary between art and life means that artists not only could use everyday objects as their subjects, but also could transform those commonplaces into an artistic language to express their feelings. Everyday objects act as media to artists, like paint to painters and plastic material to sculptors. "Medium turn" in the present aims to call people's attention to medium. Meanwhile, "crossover of medium" is an important feature

of contemporary art development. The break of art medium brings about a new artistic conception and a new horizon and passion for creation. Further, culture, society and life could be reflected from an angle of art in a comprehensive way.

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