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The Tendency of Abstraction in Contemporary Artistic Creation

Jin Mei

Abstract

This text attempts to explore the process of abstraction in contemporary Western art, analyzing the essence of how art achieves abstraction and illustrating that art should reflect its creative vitality and its infinite potential in the process of abstraction. Art should not continue to perpetuate rigid creative patterns; it must find its path of infinite renewal in its innovation.

Key Words

Abstract, abstract art, transcendence, contemporary art, innovation

When contemporary art embarked on its innovative path in the early twentieth century, it sought to challenge traditional art and break free from its frameworks. From the very beginning, it resorted to abstraction, attempting to completely dismantle the fundamental creative model of traditional art that was satisfied with formal expression. Since ancient times, artistic creation has regarded the image or figurative form, composed of the two basic elements of shape and color, as a necessary component of artistic works. Despite the continuous evolution of traditional art from ancient Greece through ancient Rome to Classicism, it ultimately failed to transcend the expressive forms of figurative and visualization; some aestheticians even claimed that the cognitive model of artistic creation could only be figurative thinking. Consequently, both aesthetics and art theory emphasize the distinction between artistic thinking and scientific thinking, as if the differences between the two are insurmountable, seemingly determining the future of human cultural creation and development, along with the characteristics of its various types of products, once and for all.

However, contemporary art has demonstrated its strong vitality in critiquing traditional art and pioneering new artistic horizons since the creation of abstract images. Despite the continuous criticism from traditional art and various discourses that remain at the level of traditional art regarding the anti-aesthetic or anti-art nature of abstract creation, the abstract creation methods

of contemporary art have achieved increasingly brilliant results, resulting in a gratifying scene in the art field of the twenty-first century and opening up broad prospects for future artistic creation. Therefore, it is necessary to appropriately summarize the experiences of abstract creation in contemporary art to further explore the path of future development in contemporary art.

1. The Initial Attempts of Modern Art towards Abstraction

As mentioned above, the creative path of contemporary art is developed through a dual effort of critiquing traditional art and expanding new horizons, and the aforementioned dual creative direction of contemporary art is first tested in the creative experiment of abstraction.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the development of modern social and cultural processes, art itself reached its limits. Since the eighteenth century, modern society has undergone the Industrial Revolution, the Scientific Revolution, the Technological Revolution, and the Social Revolution, and art has also faced breakthroughs. In the mid-nineteenth century, in the most sensitive fields of literature and art, a group of literary figures, artists, and thinkers with avant-garde ideas emerged, who were first dissatisfied with the classical creation model and

attempted to break through the thinking and creation patterns that had gradually become rigid after nearly two thousand years of development.

The Modernist movement in literature (*Lamodernité*) advocated by Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) in France directly propelled the revolutionary wave of the entire literary and artistic enterprise. This marks a historical turning point from Classicism and Romanticism to modernity and the nascent modernity in nineteenth century, and from the very beginning French literature displayed its vibrant yet contradictory character of uncertainty. The coexistence and interweaving of different styles and tones made the French literary scene of that time a splendid and vibrant realm of free creation; literary masters emerged in succession, and genius stars gathered. Thus, Paris became a convergence of various creative schools where inspiration intersected and passions ignited.

Baudelaire and others were not satisfied with the slogan of pure formal creation; they endowed art with a higher and more mysterious mission than merely seeking pure beauty, determined to transcend the mundane temporal and spatial frameworks of art and guide it towards the unknowable realm beyond language and moral kingdoms. Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) cleverly combines imagery with symbolism, standing out artistically, challenging traditional thoughts and aesthetic viewpoints, marking the transition of modern poetry from symbolism to surrealism, and becoming one of the earliest enlighteners of contemporary art's move towards abstraction.

In a certain sense, it can be said that the modernity that began with Baudelaire is a transitional culture filled with modernity and post-modernity, as well as the theoretical preparation and earliest enlighteners of abstract art, serving as the prophetic signal for the first wave of abstract art in the early twentieth century.

Modern culture, which emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, far exceeded the scope of literature from the very beginning. It first spread to the neighboring realm of literature, namely the arts. In the fine arts, French Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and various forms of Cubism, Nabi, and Fauvism appeared in different European countries. In 1907, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* marked an experiment in an abstract aesthetic form, attempting to establish a sense of simultaneity in time. "In this painting, there is no true vanishing point; rather, many facial expressions and body shapes are represented from multiple viewpoints simultaneously. The way you observe them is the way they exist."¹ They can all be considered as the vanguard of abstract art, pioneers in the declaration of war on

traditional art by abstract art.

2. The Development Process of Abstract Art

The abstract creation of contemporary art cannot be simply understood through the traditional meaning of abstraction. Strictly speaking, the abstraction referred to in abstract art is no longer the concept that stands in opposition to image as described by traditional theory, but rather signifies a departure from the definitions of artistic images in traditional art. It liberates art from the constraints of traditional artistic rules and the dominance of traditional morals and aesthetic principles, transforming it into a fundamental mode of the existence of life itself and becoming the basic form through which the creative power of artistic life is expressed.

Therefore, the abstract creation of contemporary art refers, on one hand, to the creative models of artists who self-identify as Abstractionists, and on the other hand, broadly refers to all original new inventions and new models used in contemporary art to oppose traditional artistic creation.

The process of contemporary art moving towards abstract creation has undergone a duration of nearly a century. We can divide the process of contemporary art's trajectory and the exploration of abstract creation into four historical stages. The first stage is from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, which encompasses the period from Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Symbolism to Dadaism, Cubism, and Surrealism; abstract art is merely one of the most prominent branches among them, and it is a typical challenge to traditional art. The second stage spans from the 1930s to the 1950s (including the period of World War II), during which contemporary art, in the process of abstraction, formed a more mature form and achieved more significant results. The third stage is from the 1960s to the late 1970s, where the abstraction of contemporary art completely broke away from the confines of traditional art, declaring the priority of art in human spiritual creation and its potential for infinite transcendence through the models of anti-art and anti-aesthetics. The fourth stage is the development of contemporary abstract art after the 1980s, during which contemporary art no longer concerns itself with any traditional taboos, exploring various possibilities in diverse forms and thereby establishing art's leading role in the entire socio-cultural domain and the reconstruction of human culture.

In the first phase, the earliest explorers of abstract art were represented by Fauvism, led by Henri Matisse, along with a group of avant-garde artists inspired

by their approximate abstract creations, including Pre-Cubist Georges Braque, André Derain, Raoul Dufy, and Maurice de Vlaminck. They sought to systematically dismantle the traditional rules of color techniques in art, deliberately using crude colors in a graffiti-like manner, naming their art after the provocative and stimulating concept of wild beasts, thereby declaring their determination to break away from traditional art. Matisse's works *The Window* and *The Yellow Curtain*, created in Collioure near the Spanish border in southwestern France, employed unconventional color arrangements and are regarded as the first historically significant abstract paintings.

It was under the inspiration of the Fauvism movement that Wassily Kandinsky began to create his first series of abstract paintings. Kandinsky was deeply influenced by music, believing that any form of art could reference music, abstracting the colors used in painting to express the color echoes stirred within the depths of the human soul by distinguishing between sound and time.

Therefore, contemporary abstract art is indeed qualified to be regarded as a paradigm of artistic creation, as its abstract creative patterns truly strike at the core of traditional art, which attempts to change the conventional view of art as imitation of reality, thereby also striving to transcend the traditional realm of sensory perception in art.

The abstract art formed by artists such as Kandinsky and Pieter Cornelis Mondrian (1872-1944) aimed to break free from the imitative nature of traditional art, specifically expressing an objectless state and focusing on the abstract objects of no space within the inner self. They believed that geometric shapes like circles, squares, and triangles possess abstract and generalized qualities; thus, colors without shapes can also abstractly represent visible reality itself. Consequently, under the influence of Kandinsky and others, the first group of abstract artists emerged in the early twentieth century. Although they employed different methods and were referred to as non-figurative art, non-objective art, or non-representational art, they all consistently moved towards abstract creation, achieving a milestone victory.

In the second phase, most of the abstract artists originally from Germany migrated to the United States and other European countries, allowing abstract art to thrive in vast areas outside of Germany. For example, the Bauhaus abstract movement, originally advocated by Walter Gropius in Weimar, moved to Dessau in 1925 and closed in 1932. The *Entartete Kunst* organized by the Bauhaus in 1937 successfully showcased the works of all artistic factions persecuted by the Nazis. As a result, the United States and France, particularly Paris,

became the centers of abstract artistic creation.

During this period, Sophie Tauber and Jean Arp collaboratively created outstanding abstract works using organic geometric shapes in painting and sculpture. Sophie Tauber actively participated in the activities of the Cercle Carré group, which focused on non-figurative art, and established the Constructivist magazine *Plastique* in Paris during the 1930s. Jean Arp broke away from Surrealism in 1931, founded the Abstraction-Creation group, and created the magazine *Transition*.

Abstract artists engaged in free creation also gathered in London, where they organized the *Exhibition of Abstract and Concrete Art* in 1935, curated by Nicolette Gray, which included participants such as Mondrian, Joan Miro, Barbara Hepworth, and Ben Nicholson.

During this period New York, in the United States, became a hub for contemporary art, and abstract art flourished here. The United States thus formed its own unique school: Abstract Expressionism, represented by Mark Tobey, Helen Frankenthaler, and Sam Francis.

The fourth phase after the 1980s saw abstract art achieving even more remarkable results. The ideas of postmodernism facilitated the comprehensive development of abstract creation.

The works of the outstanding American abstract artist Barnett Newman (1905-1970) are of exemplary significance. In his 1966 piece *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Black*, he skillfully purifies and vibrates color.

During the late twentieth century to the early twenty-first century, abstract painting was greatly influenced by Newman, moving towards diversification and variety, with almost no unified standards or consensus remaining. In other words, in the process of abstraction, everything is feasible, everything is uncertain, everything is possible and to be created, everything is to be completed and is ongoing.

This situation does not inspire pessimism; on the contrary, it is precisely uncertainty that provides hope, opens up free avenues for artistic creation, and offers the broadest possible prospects for the creation of art.

3. The Necessity and Possibility of Transcending Abstraction

Since ancient Greece, art has been regarded as a lower form of human creation. Therefore, the initial purpose of contemporary art breaking the framework of traditional art was not to abstract for the sake of abstraction, but to allow art to transcend the constraints of traditional art

in the process of moving towards abstraction, aiming to achieve as much infinite transcendence in artistic creation as possible. Thus, moving towards abstraction is merely the first step in art's implementation of infinite transcendence; it can only serve as the starting point for contemporary art to achieve a complete revolution, rather than the true purpose of contemporary art in realizing free creation. Consequently, the process of abstraction in contemporary art can only be a phased step towards complete transcendence.

Additionally, the abstraction of contemporary art is not merely satisfied with the activity of artistic creation itself, but rather expresses the infinite creative capacity of artistic life and the life of the artist, along with the desire and will for infinite transcendence. To quote Nietzsche, the initial thinker who enlightened contemporary art: "Only art, and indeed only art, is the great force of life! Art is the great potential force of life, guiding the great power of existence, and is the great driving force of life. Art is the only powerful counterforce that conquers all things that negate life, and is the strongest force against Christianity, Buddhism, and nihilism."²

Therefore, the rise of abstract art in the early twentieth century in the field of art was not merely an artistic revolutionary event, but a universal event of historical significance for all humanity. It was a declaration of war against human culture itself, a declaration of war against traditional morals, and a mobilization order against traditional order.

As early as 1913, when Cubism sought to break free from the constraints of traditional art in pursuit of pure art, the renowned French poet Guillaume Apollinaire stated: "This is a new structure of painting created without borrowing any factors from the visual realm, entirely generated by the artist themselves... It is a pure art."³ Apollinaire thus referred to the abstract art of Robert and Sonia Delaunay as Orphism, to invoke the mystique of the ancient Greek cult of Orpheus to express the almost mystical nature of this new art's creative vitality. At that time, the newly emerging abstract painting emphasized the intrinsic infinite possibilities of a single color itself. They believed that the colors and related rules used in traditional painting could only constrain the artist's creativity, which arises from the heart and from life itself.

Therefore, the emergence of abstract art is merely a pursuit to create artistic objects independently by the artist, beyond traditional art, particularly outside the external visual objects. This characteristic of abstract art precisely reflects the nature of human cultural creation, which embodies the dissatisfaction of individuals with

their existence, the infinite need for transcendence over the external world and the inner world, and demonstrates humanity's perpetual desire and ability to transcend itself and the world.

It is precisely because the process of abstraction expresses the creative vitality of the artist and the art itself, embodying art as a testament to humanity's infinite capacity for transcendence, that the tendency towards abstraction in contemporary art will never remain at its current level, nor will it be satisfied with existing achievements. This also determines that contemporary abstract art possesses the nature of continuous creation, constant breakthroughs, and perpetual transcendence.

The creation process of Western abstract painting is quite complex and characterized by diversity and multiplicity. Moreover, the process of creation and its principles are always unstable and exploratory, and cannot be generalized. To illustrate the infinite possibilities and necessity of transcending abstract art, let us tentatively categorize the abstract art created thus far as follows.

The first category is represented by artists like the Dutch painter Mondrian, who emigrated to the United States and created abstract art based on the principles of displacement, exchange, or purification, starting from a reverence for nature. In this regard, Mondrian stated, "Nature is perfect, but man does not need to express perfect nature through art." The abstract style is an imperfect representation of the perfect nature of art. Mondrian's abstract paintings have had a profound influence on France. Consequently, after World War II, a group of French artists developed an *Ecole de la peinture non*—figurative based on Mondrian's principles.

The second category is represented by Kandinsky, advocating for the utilization of the artist's imagination and sensitivity to express the passionate and poetic natural sentiments within the soul in art, conveying beautiful melodies in painting. Therefore, this category of abstract painting is also referred to as the "Expressionist of abstract or poetic melodies."

The third category is the creation based on geometric forms, reflecting a creative outcome that is very close to mathematical thinking. "If the geometric space is a framework imposed on each representation we consider, then it is impossible to dismantle this framework to imagine the images, and we cannot change our geometry in the slightest. However, this is not the case; geometry is merely a summary of the rules that govern these images in succession."⁴ This is similar to the styles of the earliest Russian abstract painters such as Michel

Larionov (1881-1964) and Kasimir Malevitch (1879-1935), as well as some members of the Cubist movement and the Néo-Plasticisme movement.

Abstraction has been and will continue to be an important avenue for contemporary art to expand its horizons and explore new territories. However, the infinite pursuit of innovation in contemporary art itself inevitably leads it to continually transcend all boundaries, including those established by its own past experiences. In the process of moving towards abstraction, it repeatedly attempts not to remain at the original level of abstraction, but rather to explore new modes of abstraction while endlessly seeking new realms beyond abstraction. Therefore, in the face of a new era and the infinitely vast new creative landscape, contemporary art has every reason to further contemplate and attempt to transcend abstract creation based on the previously established vision of abstract creation.

The important mission of contemporary art is to break through the various forms, rules, and techniques of traditional art, fully utilizing the outstanding achievements of contemporary science and technology as well as the latest culture. It focuses on expressing the tension between visibility and invisibility, fundamentally transforming the imitative nature of traditional art and its formal framework. It aims to manifest the profound experiences of the artist's inner life, accumulated over time, regarding the world and life itself, through visual images that lie between the visible and the invisible. This allows the exhibited artworks to serve as an extended platform of the artist's own artistic life and as a medium for a vibrant dialogue between the artist and the viewer. It creates a dynamic space for the potential revival of future worlds and various possible *lives-renaissance*, enabling the works to participate in the process of artistic creation and the reconstruction of cultural life. In turn, it provides precious opportunities for self-reflection and renewal of life for both the artist and the art viewer. Ultimately, it positions artistic creation as a significant force in promoting the reconstruction of the world and culture, serving as a foundational condition for art to engage in eternal aesthetic critique of itself.⁵

Therefore, contemporary artworks often do not confine themselves to the forms of visible and tangible spaces, nor do they settle for visible color differences and various image schemas. They also do not tolerate the reduction of art to objects of aesthetics or taste, but rather regard them merely as means of expression, as venues for the artist's life, and as necessary tools for the artist's participation in transforming the world. They repeatedly choose and grasp the better possibilities

between figurative and abstract images, highlighting the mysterious structure of the artist's ever-changing, passionate, and desire-filled inner world, as well as its elusive innovative tendencies, while also revealing the inherent invisible nature of the world and the universe itself.

Contemporary art attempts to showcase the intervention and involvement of art itself in the contemporary world through its creation, fully expressing the artist's desire and appeal for transcendence in their creative life, which embraces and pursues endless aesthetic ideals. At the same time, it stirs in the viewer an impulse towards the creation of life in front of each artwork. In this way, art is not merely an object of appreciation, but an important means for humanity to reconstruct world culture.

Therefore, true contemporary art works are always unfinished, and they can even be formless and without imagery, serving as a repeatable starting point for further updates and refinements in creation. Thus, contemporary artists cannot allow their creative activities to be confined to the works that are presented.

The artwork before the viewer thus naturally becomes a question; it poses questions to the artist as well as to the art observer, while also transforming the posed questions into expandable pending cases, serving as potential inspirations for future creation. In this way, art is drawn into the eternal flow of vibrant dialogue between the artist and the art observer, becoming a captivating space for their imaginative exploration of the future, as well as a channel through which the world itself continuously renews its tension-filled cycles between the present, past, and future.

Art thus becomes a vibrant arena for passionate dialogue among various individuals and between people and the world, as well as a romantic space for the invisible presence of the past and future, manifested through the repetition of presence at varying paces and improvised performances.

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Editor: Yao Xiao

ENDNOTES

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論現當代藝術創作的抽象化傾向

金妹

摘要: 本文試圖結合西方現當代藝術探索抽象化的進程, 分析藝術實現抽象化的本質, 說明藝術理應在其自身進行抽象化的過程中, 體現藝術的生命創造性質及其無限性和可性。藝術不應該繼續延續僵化的創造模式, 必須在其創新中找到自己無限更新的出路。

關鍵詞: 抽象; 抽象藝術; 超越; 當代藝術; 創新