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The Role of Art Audience in the Changing Times: From Passive Acceptance to Participation

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Abstract. In the history of art, the viewer has never been a mere component, but not only does he appreciate paintings, but also plays an active role in interpreting and experiencing the art. The role of being an audience is not isolated as that of more or less watching without participating in conversation and creative exposition to express the sense of the art and significance that it holds across various cultural and historical backgrounds. Changes in the forms of art production and distribution have also been experienced over time as the society, culture, science and technology keep developing. Thus, the position of the audience has also altered. In the modern society, there has been eroded dividing lines between the artists and the audiences, as the audience take more than one role as creator, curator, and critic. This change is informed by the rising level of participation in art; no more are the audiences passive consumers but they are having a greater role in the creating and spreading of art. Hence the functions of the art audience are more dynamic and multi-dimensional.

Keywords: Art history, audience role, art experience, cultural intersection

1. Introduction

This paper examines the shifting status of the art viewers. Social development and advancement in technology have transformed the shapes and modes of distribution of works and the audience identities no longer exist in a fixed manner but are dynamic and multifaceted. This research is highly significant in terms of the role of the audience in art communication and can offer the discovery of the new vision of interactivity and inclusiveness in art communication. This paper centers on three points namely, audience identity change, diversity and interactivity. The benefits of the literature analysis to locate and read the pertinent information and literature include that it can structurally arrange the available research outputs and assess the fluctuating tendencies of the audience roles, which can help to accomplish a profound research [1]. This proposed study aims at uncovering the ever-evolving nature of the audience identities in various art settings and how they facilitate the spread and advancement of art. To meet this objective, a number of case studies are gathered together, and in-depth interpretations are carried out in this study.

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2. The role of the mobile audience: from classical to modern art

2.1. Audience in classical art: passive receivers

In the classical art, the viewer was typically the passive recipient and would neither contribute to nor transform the art as well [2]. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle gave a theoretical perspective about the place of the audience during the classical period. He observed that the audience experienced a ritual of emotional purification by watching drama and particularly by watching tragedy. Such purification was regarded as the moral and emotional indoctrination, where the audience, with the help of the plot of the play, dumped their emotions and learned moral lessons.

This passive position does not only exist in theater alone; it exists in classical painting and sculpture. Viewers are directed in the eye and emotional reaction to the work by artists using consummation and the elements of light, shadow, and perspective, which enables them to perceive the piece of work or piece of art in a certain angle and emotional context. To illustrate, the Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci captures the attention of the viewer using perspective, composition, light and shadow, and making him experience the religious story which is embodied by the painting using the perspective shown by the viewer. Although this experience may not appear to be commonplace, it can be interpreted differently. Emotional reactions and interpretation of the same work might not be the same among different viewers, depending with the backgrounds and the experiences they have in life. Thus, even in the setting of the passive viewer experience, the works of art may cause divergent feelings and understanding.

2.2. The audience in modern art: from passive to active

The cultural scenario in Western society was dramatically altered by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century as the industrial revolution promoted the rapidness of the development and the rate of urbanization and increased focus on personalism as the core values of Western culture. In this respect, artists started to experiment with new forms and subject matter in art. The aesthetic traditions and conceptual systems which were the long time governors of traditional art started to be challenged by many. Instead of keeping the classical tradition where the viewers were passive necrologous, artists tried to recreate the dualism between the artwork and viewers, making the viewers to stop as passive receivers and become more of an active participant instead.

A typical illustration of such change is in Duchamp *Fountain*. In this piece Duchamp introduced a typical urinal as a piece of art by putting the urinal into the exhibition room. Duchamp shifted the focus towards the conceptual aspect of the work by openly defying the conventional accent of craftsmanship and fancy beauty. The introduction of the so-called readymade object transformed substantially the interpretative structure of art setting a new paradigm of art. Through this, the viewers were forced to rethink not just the definition of art itself, but their own position in the mechanism of experiencing and interpreting works of art, as well.

Zang Xue also extends this view in *The Integration of Art Appreciation and Art Communication in the Digital Age*. The author claims that the modern art can tend to create the particular atmosphere of place that can help the viewers to approach works of art on a more intimate experience level. In this kind of context, the viewers no longer remain as observers, rather they engage in the artistic experience as an irreplaceable part of it [3]. This point of view points to the fact that contemporary artistic practice is increasingly becoming less tied to the traditional final mode of artistic communication and the meaning of the artwork can be concealed in the interaction of the viewer working to interpret that meaning.

It was a change that was strongly connected to the social and cultural environment that existed at that moment. The wave of modernism and the challenge to the traditional ideas made the artists reject

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the idea to present a predetermined meaning and make the audience bring their own vision of the art experience.

As an example, *Guernica* by Picasso. Since the entire picture is not a detailed image and a clear narrative framework, but rather comprised of a series of open symbols, including crying women, injured animals and dismembered bodies [4] as a pair of anti-war paintings bringing the image of the bombing of the town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. The viewer is challenged by these complicating parts and symbols and must integrate them with his or her feelings and interpretations to bring the picture to some meaning, and to recognize themselves in the picture. Besides that, the huge picture of the painting, the powerful imagery, also enhances the illusionary aspect of the participant, the viewer is indirectly engaged in the emotional whirlwind the work creates and at the same time, provides their own version of the interpretation in the appreciation of the work and makes a dialogue in deeper levels of thought and involvement.

This experience of passive reception has transformed to active interpretation and has extended the artistic expression forms and transformed the purpose of artistic creation. It gives the audience a more versatile and varied role and the interaction between the piece of art work and the audience is more fluid and interactive [5].

2.3. Audience role mobility and socio-cultural contexts

The social and cultural change goes hand in hand with the changing role of the audience. As the industrial revolution was established and the urbanization process was speeded up, social structure became better organized and varied and the propagation of the individualistic ideas shifted the perception of the correlation of self and other people. The audience ceased to be a monolithic unit but rather it was composed of individuals attaining different backgrounds, knowledge, and expectations. Indicatively, following the World War I several works of art started to mirror social upheavals and the condition of the individual, a situation that derived the interpretations of the audience more heterogeneous and more customized. Another viewpoint that is put forward by Bohn is the fact that time in the modern art world is fluid in nature meaning that art is not just a transmission as well as a relationship between the past and future, but it is also a reality on its own that engages with the audience in the present.

Such diversity of audiences has created the need on the part of artists to incorporate various forms of expression in their productions to attract and satisfy the demands of various audiences. This two way relationship also facilitates the portable nature of roles of the audience. Art is not only a service of the elite anymore but of more groups of the population. Such openness enables roles of the audience to demonstrate their greater diversity in other socio-cultural contexts. As an illustration, works created by cultural awakening movements of feminists and Afro-descendants have enhanced the purpose and significance of aesthetic artworks besides diversifying the roles and meanings of audiences.

3. Reinventing technology and media: the role of the audience in contemporary art

3.1. Diversified participation due to technological advances

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the high pace of the development of digital technologies has radically transformed the experience and perception of art [6]. Such technologies like Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) and other types of digital media not only have increased the technical future opportunities of artists but have also introduced new possibilities in which viewers can now interact with artistic works in immersive and interactive ways [7]. With virtual reality spaces, such as those created in the VR, the viewers can access virtual spaces that have been created using computer programs, and can directly engage with artworks by manipulating them. This

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kind of interaction is not limited to visual and auditory which can up to include aspects of body motion, spatial navigation, and even tactile response hence making the whole experience of art quite rich [8].

Comparing the new media art with conventional art forms, the role of the audience in this case is more active and multi-faceted. Instead of viewing the work through an external perspective, the viewers can practically engage into the artwork, as a part of the experiential process [9]. Some installation works designed to be interactive, such as ask the audience to affect or otherwise modify the visual or structural display of the work with their actions or decisions. Such a participation does not only enrich the involvement of the viewer in the artwork but also provides the audience with many entry points into the artwork, presenting them with individualized and varied ways of experiencing it [10].

3.2. Reconfiguration of the role of the audience by the communication media

The new media has also posed a major threat to traditional means of art communication. New media art is richer and more participatory with the use of digital technologies to have viewers actively take part in the artistic process and the traditional divide between the arts and the audience is eradicated. Under this model, viewers no longer remain spectators of information that art is being presented with; rather, by engaging the work, the viewers add new tones of meaning and value to the piece of art. As an example, in some of the virtual reality virtual arts exhibitions, the viewer selection may have an impact on the manner of presenting and interpreting the piece. These interactive tools redefine the participation of the viewer in the entire artistic experience where the spectators gain access to being participants that can contribute to shaping the artistical process.

In his discourse on the eventual destiny of the art, Roberts observes that the evolution of the art market, as well as its globalization, has occurred during a long time and that the art pieces created in various cultural environments will be interpreted differently. Such variations of perception also affect the ways in which viewers approach art. In as much as new technologies seem to be in a position to provide the viewers more opportunities to engage in the activities, they also come with new forms of restraints. Viewer behaviors and choices tend to be organized according to structures which were predetermined by the author and entrenched in programming systems. In that regard, technological systems become some sort of invisible discipline, which dictate the actions and reactions of the audience with coded forms. Therefore, although audiences might seem to have increased mobility and diversity of their engagement, its experience is usually within the scope that is established by the artist.

4. The significance of audience role mobility

4.1. Diversity and cultural intermingling

The relocation of the audience roles is expansively important in art. To begin, this mobility signifies flexibility of works of art within the globalization and cultural pluralism. Their approaches to the interpretation of the same artwork are diverse due to differences in cultural backgrounds, knowledge structures, and personal experiences of the audience. Indicatively, in this case, having the same installation but in disparate countries, the audience can react in totally different cultures thus depicting the influence of cultural background on the artistic interpretation.

Secondly, the case of Chinese ink painting can be used to illustrate that the emergence of digital platforms has greatly increased the circulation of ink painting all around the world. The traditional form of art has now been able to reach out to audiences of various cultural backgrounds through the online media. These variations of cross-cultural distribution open the mind of the viewers and enhance their aesthetic values. This in addition to enhancing the cultural and artistic value of the works per se to a greater level and of increasing intercultural understanding. Through mediation between the

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dissimilar cultural backgrounds, digital circulation provides the new energy to the working process of art and extends the possibilities of the art of the day even further.

4.2. Art market and audience expectations

The diversification of audiences is one of the factors that have over the years had a significant implication on the evolution of the art market [11]. The art market must adapt to changing needs and expectations of the audience, as the ways of viewing art as well as consuming culture keep becoming more and more widespread [12]. Here the diverse needs and interests of the audiences have become a significant factor which drives experimentation and innovation in the artistic practice. This means that the artists may have to venture into new processes to attract various audiences and address their various demands [13]. The processes of the market, as well as the necessity to maintain the free character of artistic expression influence the production of art as Eda and Okan suggest in their study. Thus, nowadays artists have to cope with the problem of having to strike the balance between the market and artistic freedom. As the art market has been increasingly commercialized, there is a risk that the artists experience an increasing pressure to meet the preferences of the audience and reception by the market as the art piece is created, which might in turn impact the critical and independent nature of artistic practice. In this case, creators need to find a middle ground between innovativeness and the necessity in the market- trying to discover new artistic opportunities without losing the substantial relationship with their audiences. It is this tension that makes the production of art in the modern era quite difficult and free of opportunities at the same time.

5. Conclusion

This paper explores the transformation of the role of the audience in the process of artistic development and analyzes the reshaping of the role of the audience in contemporary art by technology and media. In classical art, the audience was mainly a passive recipient. Entering the period of modern art, the role of the audience has undergone significant changes. The audience transformed from passive observers to active interpreters. Art is no longer unilaterally defined by the creator, and its meaning is diversified through audience participation. In Contemporary art, digital technology further enhances audience interaction.

This paper examines the far-reaching impact of the shifting role of the audience on art creation, dissemination and market structures. Technological advances have significantly increased audience participation and driven innovation and change in the art market. Future research should further explore the impact of technology on audience autonomy and cross-cultural art communication, as well as explore new modes of audience interaction and market mechanisms.

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