

The Death and Rebirth of Art: The Demystification of Contemporary Artistic Concepts Triggered by Duchamp

Yiying Ding^{1*}

¹ Academy of Fine Arts of South China Normal University, Guangzhou, China

Email Address

790923513@qq.com (Yiying Ding)

*Correspondence: 790923513@qq.com

Received: 26 June 2025; Accepted: 15 July 2025; Published: 29 August 2025

Abstract:

As we all know, contemporary art grows up in opposition to tradition. After Duchamp, art is no longer only a material visual object or a simple show of skill; rather, it turns into a carrier of ideas and concepts. This turning point announces the “death” of art, for the old rules of beauty and technique are broken, yet it also proclaims a new birth: art now becomes an open conceptual space without fixed form, where the artist’s creativity, thinking power, and social participation stand in the center. A further look at Duchamp’s enlightenment to later art shows that art is no longer the mere reproduction of beauty. On the contrary, it serves as the presentation of self-consciousness, a sharp instrument for cultural criticism, and even a bridge for social dialogue.

Keywords:

Contemporary Art, Critical Discourse, Anti-traditional Art

1. The Decline of Elite Culture

Looking up the entry for “elite culture” in *Cihai*, we can see its basic idea clearly: “A cultural form that is created, held in hand and spread by the few outstanding members of society, meant to mirror their value judgement, aesthetic taste and social duty. Works of this kind include music, dance, opera and painting that carry deep themes and complicated skills, and the very ability to master or appreciate them becomes a sign of personal taste and cultivation.” Greenberg, in his essay *Avant-Garde Art and Vulgar Culture*, sets avant-garde art side by side with vulgar art and points out the social gap between the two. He says that avant-garde art is always prepared for “a powerful, therefore well-educated minority”, while vulgar culture is aimed at “an exploited and poverty-stricken, and thus ignorant, masses of the people”. To put it another way, avant-garde art belongs to the elite stratum; only people with cultural equipment can carry out abstract reflection and gain the joy of thinking. By contrast, uneducated peasants, limited by their own conditions and by state control, simply have no spare time or no need to taste the reflective pleasure of high art. Duchamp’s artistic view steps onto the stage exactly at the moment when elite culture

begins to go downhill. From his rebellious attitude and resistant practice, contemporary art takes its first breath.

1.1. The Rebound of Mass Culture: Genealogies of Contemporary Art Thought

The very first-time popular culture triggered serious scholarly quarrel was inside the Frankfurt School. As Marcuse points out in *One Dimensional Man*, once capitalism reaches maturity in the atmosphere of large-scale industry and scientific progress, society gradually changes into a fully administered arena where both technological and economic logic run every aspect of life. Under such circumstances, the cultural-production machine controlled by capital covers cinema, radio, music and books, and nowadays also web entertainment and commercial advertisements. This so-called culture industry turns popular taste into ready-made commodities, carefully polished by technique so as to erode people's critical thinking and independent awareness. Therefore, the old authority enjoyed by the elite becomes less convincing. It is not difficult to find that the stress on pleasure and instant satisfaction makes the artistic boundary rather vague, and contemporary artists often go to mass culture for inspiration, borrowing catchy images, symbols and topics familiar to ordinary viewers. Andy Warhol, widely regarded as a sign of Pop Art, deliberately broke the wall between art, daily routine, business and consumer culture. In *Campbell's Soup Cans*, the strategy of repetition, duplication and commodification digs into the deep problems of consumer society. Richard Hamilton's collage *What Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing* shows the tie between modern family life and commercialized culture and at the same time reveals the very core of mass culture. Consequently, contemporary art is no longer a simple opposition between high culture and low culture; the traditional border of artistic value is shattered, challenging the old idea of art for beauty. Structuralist theory holds that every social and cultural phenomenon can be unfolded by looking at its hidden structure, and that art, language and sign all grow from such underlying systems. Influenced by structuralism as well as poststructuralism, artists shift their concern from pure form or skill to the languages, symbols and ideologies behind culture. Standing like a giant at the crossroads, Marcel Duchamp shows the future path of contemporary art, turning the artwork from one single closed form into an open, pluralistic space for interpretation.

1.2. The Game between Daily Goods and Fine Art: The Impact of Contemporary Creation on Tradition

Growing up in the rather barren twentieth century, Duchamp and the friends around him felt tired of the repeated taste that filled the salons. Such boredom shook the old ideas of what art should be and what beauty should look like. They hoped to push art forward, jump out of the old cage, and search for fresh forms as well as new viewpoints. In 1913, Duchamp put forward the readymade, a sharp game between daily goods and fine art. Daily goods are usually taken as low and useful only, standing opposite to the purity and loftiness expected from art. Duchamp once said, "I have not stepped into the Louvre for twenty years." This simple sentence shows clearly his rebellious mood toward classical art and its aesthetic law. The Louvre, known to all as a top-class museum, keeps countless traditional masterpieces. Yet Duchamp felt that the clear borders and written rules of that tradition held back free creation and invention. By means of his own works and thoughts, he tried to question and renew the limit of art, letting popular culture come boldly into the public sight. He

was no longer chasing surface beauty in an old style, but turned his eyes to the power of concept, idea and mind.

In the year 1917, Duchamp made his very famous piece *Fountain*. It is actually one ceramic urinal turned upside down, signed “R. Mutt”, and he used this fake name to send the work to an exhibition in New York. The moment it showed up, it stirred great waves and pushed people to ask: what on earth is modern art? A glance at his later Readymades helps clarify the intention behind *Fountain*. In this series, everyday utensils such as a bicycle wheel, a washbasin, or an empty bottle are exhibited exactly as they are, lifted from their normal use and placed inside the gallery space, where they receive a fresh identity and meaning. Through this shift, the once-mundane objects become works for aesthetic contemplation, standing face to face with the glittering, elaborate masterpieces that crowded the halls of the day. Duchamp thus raises a central challenge to modern art: what makes art art? And in the end, how wide is the gap between an ordinary thing and an artwork?



Figure 1. Duchamp, *Fountain*

Another prank which enjoys the same fame as *Fountain* is the several pieces named *Mona Lisa with a Mustache* that he produced after he returned to France in 1919. On the color copy of Leonardo da Vinci's world-famous *Mona Lisa*, Duchamp simply added a big moustache and beard under the lady's face; people cannot help wondering at once because her mysterious smile vanished and the whole picture turned queer and even a little absurd. Such an action makes the viewer think: why must an artwork stay inside a museum and accept the spotlight of nobility, while an old everyday object has no chance to become art? At the same time, his work, or more precisely the thinking that drives it, set off a lively conversation about the limits of art, the line between an artwork and an ordinary thing, and the very value and meaning that we attach to artistic practice. It foregrounded the weight of concept, asked what allows something to qualify as art, and challenged inherited aesthetic habits; instead of seeing art as a realm floating above life, Duchamp reminded us of its close tie with real experience and pushed against the idea that art exists as an isolated and transcendent entity.

2. After Duchamp: The Death and Un-packing of Contemporary Art

2.1. Duchamp the Rebel and His View of Art

Duchamp, widely regarded as the most influential contemporary artist to have worked in the United States, is very often called a great rebel. His whole life moved side by side with Dadaism, Surrealism, Cubism, and later Conceptual Art; he was always standing in the front row, guiding art forward. If we ask what his artistic belief is, no single word can cover the whole picture. Only rebellion, shifting from stage to

stage, seems able to catch its spirit. Because he was born into a well-off family, Duchamp had more leisure to devote to his own cause. In his brief artistic autobiography, he admits quite plainly, “I have been rather lucky. In fact, I have never worked for a living. From the economic angle, to labor merely in order to survive looks a little foolish to me. I hope that one day, people can live without being forced to work. Owing to my luck, I stayed dry even in the rain.” With such a firm material base, he naturally felt entitled to explain the whole art world in his own terms. It is not difficult to find that the judgment “post-modern art is, in essence, conceptual art” first took clear shape in his experiments, and after Duchamp contemporary art entered a road of plural and diversified growth. As has been mentioned, Duchamp put forward the idea of the Ready-made, bringing small everyday objects – for example a bottle rack, a urinal and so on – into the territory of art and giving them brand-new meaning. His famous work *Fountain* is nothing more than an ordinary porcelain urinal, signed “R. Mutt.” By such a gesture he questioned the traditional standards of art-making, challenged the definition of art itself, and made quite a few fellow artists feel angry or embarrassed. This behavior, apparently crazy to many eyes, nevertheless opened up an entirely new space for ready-mades in the art arena. What deserves to be mentioned is that his actions are at the same time tightly and loosely connected with the birth and later expansion of many subsequent schools. He once said, “I am not interested in the work itself, I am only interested in the idea behind it.” Just as his biographer Alice Goldfarb Marquis observes, the most puzzling and attractive part is that the importance of his works comes not from beauty but from the negation of beauty, not from clear meaning but from ambiguity, not from abundance but from scarcity, not from what is fully expressed but from what cannot be expressed, not from straightforward presentation but from profound obscurity. This remark uncovers the core feature of Duchampian art. He paid little attention to conventional aesthetic value or technical brilliance; what he cared about was whether a piece could push the viewer to think and to enter philosophical self-reflection. Thus, Duchamp transformed art from a clearly shaped, lovely object into a conceptual carrier filled with question marks and possibilities. The former value of art had already been worn away, and art history was stepping into a brand-new period.

2.2. The Diversification of Artworks and Art Forms

After Duchamp, art steps into a really colorful era. Many people may think the variety comes from some mysterious inner change, yet in fact it mainly follows the switch of media. From the Renaissance to the end of the nineteenth century, almost all mainstream Western works belong to what Chinese scholars often call “imitative and representational art,” which tries to copy nature, human images and classical models. The Renaissance period (late fourteenth to early seventeenth century) is widely regarded as a watershed in Western art history. At that time artists paid great attention to naturalism, hoping to catch the beauty and truth of the outside world. They studied human anatomy very hard and tried their best to draw each tiny detail of figures, landscapes and still life so that the painting looks like the real one in front of our eyes. Famous masters such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael all spent huge energy on the muscles and postures of the human body, making their works full of vitality and close to reality. When history moved to the Baroque period (early seventeenth to mid eighteenth century), the style became more dramatic and delicate. Baroque painters loved strong light–dark contrast, rich movement and intense feeling. For instance, Caravaggio’s *The Calling of Saint Matthew* makes use of powerful chiaroscuro to push the plot to a climax. Later, the Rococo style of the eighteenth

century kept the decorative flavor of Baroque but stressed lightness, grace and sweet romance, often seen in court interiors and gentle portraits. After Romanticism, however, Realism returned to the topic of “reflecting nature,” yet this time the focus shifted to social reality, common people and everyday scenes. Gustave Courbet and his companions painted peasants and workers instead of imaginary heroes from legends, highlighting real labor and real life. Only with the rise of Modernism did radical experiments finally break the long-standing habit of beauty through imitation. Early modern artists no longer felt obliged to record the world faithfully. They were far more interested in form, color and structure, in short, in abstraction. Picasso, Matisse and Kandinsky drove this momentum through relentless trial and error, opening the door to cubism, fauvism and non-objective art. Today the expansion goes well beyond painting or sculpture. Installation, performance, digital production and socially engaged practice all stand on the stage. Since Arthur Danto put forward the idea of the end of art, such practices have often been read as a self-confirmation of aesthetics itself, proving that art can discuss any question once restricted to philosophy or everyday life. A vivid example is *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* by Paul Cummins and Tom Piper (Figure 2). Created for the centenary of World War I, the piece set 888246 ceramic red poppies around the Tower of London, each poppy marking one soldier from Britain and its colonies who fell in the conflict. Gradually the flowers filled the old moat and the nearby grass, producing an overwhelming red tide. The poppy, familiar to British remembrance culture, here turns into a concrete sea of sacrifice. Viewers standing on the parapet are confronted with the sheer scale of loss. Many report a mixture of sorrow, respect and an urgent wish for peace. The installation touched a national nerve. Crowds queued for hours, some leaving handwritten notes, others simply gazing in silence. Public emotion intertwined with historical reflection. The work therefore functions as more than a memorial; it becomes an arena where art, memory and civic conscience meet. By contrasting ordinary clay flowers with the gravity of wartime death, the artists dissolve the old boundary between artwork and daily object. In the end, what emerges is not a rigid split between art and life but their mutual release, showing how aesthetic experience can illuminate common reality while everyday materials gain fresh cultural value.



Figure 2. Paul Cummin and Tom Piper, “Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red”.

2.3. Art Criticism and the Diversification of Artists

Art criticism may be viewed as a kind of abstract thinking that grows out of artistic practice itself. It fills the blank spaces that pure philosophy can hardly reach, and its depth is richer than philosophy is able or even willing to hold. After Duchamp appeared on the stage of art history, the so-called modernist grand narrative quietly stepped aside and fresh stories started to emerge. Before the arrival of modernism, most critics worked inside a rather fixed cultural framework and accepted standards. They paid close attention to an artwork’s form, technique, style and to the way it

mirrored nature or society. With the rise of modernism in the twentieth century, both art criticism and artistic production changed from the bottom up. The old ideas of beauty and representation were no longer taken for granted. An age of plurality, decentralization and free expression came into being, so art started to stretch out almost without limit. During the Renaissance as well as the later Neoclassical period, critics usually judged skill and formal beauty through symmetry, proportion and the play of light and shade. In the Baroque period they valued drama and strong feeling, asking how technique could carry complicated emotions and historical events. After modernism, the critical role itself shifted. Critics moved from checking technical skill and surface beauty to exploring concept, background, historical setting and social meaning. Today they are not only interested in whether a piece is beautiful. They try to read the thought and philosophy hidden inside, and to see how the artist speaks with his or her time, society and culture. It is not difficult to find that Duchamp's ready-mades questioned the traditional idea of art. He cared little about copying technique or form; what mattered were the concept and the thinking behind the object. In my opinion this exactly proves the saying that the pluralistic art world of today decides the ideal artist must also be a pluralist. Traditional critics used to look mainly at aesthetic value and craftsmanship, yet in the post-Duchamp era more and more attention is paid to concept and meaning. For example, Clement Greenberg still argued for the purity of modern art, and he mostly judged that purity on a formal level. Later critics, however, turn their eyes to ideology, social background and political significance. What calls for special attention is that this new focus does not abandon form; it simply puts form and idea into a larger conversation, one that continues to widen the field of art and the language of criticism.

3. Conclusions

Duchamp's works and artistic concepts not only shattered the borders of classical art but also signaled a profound turning point in the history of art. It can be seen that, in his practice, art is no longer a pure material show or simple pursuit of beauty; instead, it becomes a carrier of thinking, of concept, and of social criticism. Taking Fountain as one typical ready-made, he seriously questioned and even overturned the traditional idea of artistic creation, insisting that the real center of art does not lie in skill, structure, or prettiness, but in the thought and meaning hidden inside the piece. By means of this overturning method, Duchamp opened what we may call the double proposition of art's death and life: the death of established forms and at the same time the birth of a brand new and vigorous artistic existence.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- [1] Clement Greenberg; Shen Yubing, trans. *Avant-garde and Kitsch*. Guangxi: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2002.

- [2] Herbert Marcuse. *One-Dimensional Man*. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 1989.
- [3] Marcel Duchamp; Pierre Cabanne. *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*. Beijing: CITIC Press, 2023.
- [4] Alice Goldfarb Marquis. *Marcel Duchamp: Eros, C'Est LA Vie: A Biography*. New York: Whitston Pub Co Inc, 1981: 203.
- [5] Arthur, C. Danto. *Encounters and Reflections*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990: 9.
- [6] Arthur, C. Danto; Wang Chunchen, trans. *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Jiangsu: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2007: 125.
- [7] Wang, Z.Q. An Aesthetic Analysis of Duchamp's Artistic Practice—Further Discussion on Kant's Aesthetics Encountering Postmodern Art. *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art*, 2024, 44(03), 121-130.
- [8] Jin, Y.C. From “Representation” to “Manifestation”: On the Mediated Transformation of Temporal Consciousness in Contemporary Art. *China Literature and Art Criticism*, 2022, 08, 81-93. DOI: 10.19324/j.cnki.zgwypl.2022.08.009.
- [9] Sun, L. In What Sense Is Social Critical Theory Inferior to Liberation Doctrine—Taking the “Textual Inter-reading” of Foucault and Marcuse as an Example. *Fujian Tribune (The Humanities & Social Sciences)*, 2022, 04, 102-111.
- [10] Xiao, W.S. Conceptual Art and Its Critique. *Literature & Art Studies*, 2022, 03, 5-18.
- [11] Fu, S.C. The “End of Art” Theory and the “Philosophical” Turn of Avant-garde Art. *Social Science Front*, 2019, 01, 254-259.
- [12] Wang, X.N. The One-Dimensional Politics of Advanced Capitalist Society—Reading Herbert Marcuse's “One-Dimensional Man”. *Ideological & Political Course Teaching*, 2017, 06, 95-96.
- [13] Wang, N.M. The Formation of Neo-Marxism and Clement Greenberg's Critique of Aesthetic Ideology. *Art Research*, 2016, 04, 49-55. DOI: 10.13318/j.cnki.msyj.2016.04.021.
- [14] Shen, Y.B. Art Theory and Criticism After Greenberg. *Journal of Zhejiang University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 2010, 40(02), 59-67.



© 2025 by the author(s); licensee International Technology and Science Publications (ITS), this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)