

# The Changes in The Aesthetic Thoughts of Chinese Artists in Shanghai Biennale during The COVID-19 Period

Huan Zhou

Sultan Idris Education University, Fakulti Seni, Komputeran dan Industri Kreatif, CO 35900, Malaysia

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**Abstract:** The global COVID-19 pandemic has left an indelible mark on all aspects of human existence, including the realm of art and aesthetics. This study delves into the dynamic shifts in aesthetic thoughts among Chinese artists participating in the prestigious Shanghai Biennale during the COVID-19 period. Through a comprehensive analysis of artworks, themes, and creative approaches, this research illuminates the profound transformations that have taken place in the artistic landscape.

**Keywords:** Aesthetic Thoughts; Shanghai Biennale; The COVID-19 Period.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background

In December 2019, the epidemic gradually broke out in China. The COVID-19 has resulted in the cancellation or postponement of numerous art events, including art fairs, exhibitions, and auctions. These events are crucial for artists, galleries, and collectors to showcase and sell artworks. The loss of these opportunities has disrupted the normal flow of the art market and resulted in financial losses for stakeholders. With uncertainties surrounding the global economy and financial markets, many collectors have become more cautious in their purchasing decisions. This decline in demand has affected galleries, artists, and auction houses, leading to decreased revenue and financial difficulties [1].

With limited access to physical art spaces and materials during lockdowns and social distancing measures, Chinese artists experimented with new mediums and techniques. Some turned to digital art, mixed media, or found objects, while others explored traditional art forms in innovative ways. The limitations imposed by the pandemic pushed artists to think creatively and adapt their artistic practices. Artists have turned to mediums such as drawing, painting, photography, and mixed media that can be done with limited resources. Some artists have focused on documenting and archiving their experiences during the pandemic. They create visual journals, diaries, or time-based artworks that capture the personal and collective narratives of this period. These projects serve as a historical record and a means of processing and reflecting on the challenges and emotions associated with the pandemic [2].

Aesthetic thoughts encompass a range of perspectives, including formalism, symbolism, expressionism, phenomenology, postmodernism, and many more. These thoughts help shape our understanding and appreciation of art and contribute to ongoing debates and discussions about its significance and value in society. Aesthetic thoughts provide a framework for analyzing and interpreting artworks, as well as for exploring the broader philosophical and cultural implications of artistic practices [3].

The COVID-19 pandemic, as a global crisis, has had a significant impact on various aspects of society, including the realm of aesthetics and artistic expression. Artists, creators, and cultural institutions have been compelled to adapt, reflect,

and respond to the shifting realities brought about by the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a reevaluation and evolution of aesthetic thoughts among artists and creators.

### 1.2. Research Object

This article investigates the changes in aesthetic thoughts before and after the COVID-19, within the varieties of representations that illustrate the components of Shanghai Biennale.

### 1.3. Research Significance

This research delves into the evolving landscape of artistic expression and aesthetic ideology in the face of a global crisis, specifically examining the context of the Shanghai Biennale. The significance of this study lies in its ability to provide a nuanced understanding of how aesthetic thoughts have changed among Chinese artists participating in the Shanghai Biennale during the COVID-19 period. By exploring this theme, the research contributes to the broader discourse on art, culture, and society, offering valuable insights into the transformative power of artistic expression in times of uncertainty.

## 2. Organization of the Text

### 2.1. Shanghai Biennale before the COVID-19

The theme of the 12th Shanghai Biennale is "Yubu". The exhibition lasted from November 10, 2018 until March 10, 2019. "Yubu" is said to be the mysterious pace created by Xia Yu in ancient times, and it is the Chinese title of the twelfth Shanghai Biennale. The main strategy exhibitor Midine believes that this dynamic gait metaphor shows the value of art works in the complex era and the inspiration given to people. He talked: "This concept also implies that although art works convey various anxiety, they are also full of endless creativity, desire, and concepts. This shows the way of contemporary art and cultural confrontation. Out of our vision and effort to convert emotional into a new life. "The English title" PROGRESS "of the exhibition is a word created by American poet E.E. Cummings in 1931 in poetry experiments. By deconstructing and bonding the words "Progress" and "regress", Camisl criticized the Western Enlightenment

narrative that adheres to progressive, and metaphorized Contradiction and anxiety [4].

The 12th Shanghai Biennale offers a multidimensional perspective on the complexities and contradictions inherent in the theme of 'Proregeress'. It embraces the aesthetic idea of contrasting elements and paradoxical relationships. Artists juxtapose images of advancement and decline, modernity and tradition, order and chaos, highlighting the tension between opposing forces. This contrast prompts viewers to question the dichotomies and challenges conventional notions of progress. Through juxtaposition and visual contradictions, the artworks highlight the complex relationship between these two concepts, challenging the notion of linear advancement and questioning the potential drawbacks and unintended consequences of progress [5].

The 11th Shanghai Biennale "Why not ask again? Debate, Counterargument, Story" is a thought-provoking and intellectually stimulating showcase of artworks that invite viewers to question, engage, and reflect. Centered around the themes of debate, counterargument, and storytelling, the exhibition encourages visitors to challenge existing narratives, explore diverse perspectives, and consider alternative viewpoints. Through a range of artistic mediums and approaches, the exhibition prompts us to reexamine our assumptions and embrace the power of critical thinking. At the core of this exhibition is the idea that art can be a catalyst for dialogue and discourse. It emphasizes the importance of engaging in meaningful conversations and actively participating in the exchange of ideas. Each artwork presents its own narrative, provoking viewers to question their own beliefs and biases. By inviting us to consider counterarguments and alternative stories, the exhibition aims to foster a more inclusive and open-minded society [6].

The 11th Shanghai Biennale showcases some aesthetic ideas. These ideas revolve around engaging with diverse perspectives, questioning established narratives, promoting critical thinking, and embracing the power of storytelling. One of the key aesthetic ideas explored in this exhibition is the notion of contradiction and tension [6]. The artworks often juxtapose contrasting ideas, challenging viewers to navigate the complexities of opposing viewpoints. Through this tension, the exhibition highlights the dynamic nature of debates and the potential for growth and enlightenment that arises from engaging with different perspectives.

## 2.2. Shanghai Biennale during the COVID-19

The 13th Shanghai Biennale is a major international art exhibition that took place in Shanghai, China, from November 2020 to June 2021. The exhibition was organized by the Shanghai Biennale Foundation and curated by a team of international curators, including Andrés Jaque, Marina Otero Verzier, You Mi, and Lu Zhang. The theme of the 13th Shanghai Biennale was "Bodies of Water," which explored the relationships between humans, nature, and technology. The exhibition included works by over 70 artists and collectives from around the world, and was held across three venues in Shanghai: The Power Station of Art, the Ming Contemporary Art Museum, and the Shanghai Port International Cruise Terminal [7].

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought forth an unprecedented disruption to our lives, compelling us to reevaluate our relationship with the world around us. In response to these challenging times, the art exhibition "The Body of Water" emerges as a thought-provoking exploration

of the intricate connections between humans, nature, and technology. By delving into these themes, the exhibition offers a unique perspective on the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on our collective consciousness. "The Body of Water" exhibition invites viewers to reflect on the profound interconnectedness of humanity with the natural world. The pandemic has reminded us of our vulnerability and dependence on nature's delicate balance. Through various artistic mediums, the exhibition highlights the intricate web of life and emphasizes the need for a harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and technology. It encourages us to reassess our role as custodians of the Earth and to strive for sustainable coexistence [8].

In the 2020 Shanghai Biennale "Water body" in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, several aesthetic ideas are expressed. These ideas delve into the intricate connections between humanity, nature, and technology, particularly in light of the challenges and changes brought about by the global health crisis. The artworks emphasize the concept of harmonious coexistence between humans, nature, and technology. They explore the interplay and interdependence of these elements, seeking to find a balance that respects and preserves the natural world while harnessing the benefits of technological advancements [8].

In the Shanghai Biennale's "The Body of Water" during the COVID-19 pandemic offers a profound and thought-provoking response to the global crisis. The metaphorical and symbolic significance of the "water body" serves as a poignant reflection of the pandemic's impact on human society, culture, and artistic expression. This concept encapsulates a series of transformative ideas and serves as a lens through which we can understand the evolving aesthetic thoughts in the wake of the epidemic. The pandemic brought about unprecedented changes, forcing societies worldwide to adapt and navigate through uncharted waters. The "water body" as an aesthetic concept mirrors the fluidity and adaptability required during challenging times. It symbolizes the ability to flow, reshape, and find new pathways, resonating with humanity's collective effort to adapt and survive amidst uncertainty.

Water, as a fundamental element of life, highlights interconnectedness. In the context of the pandemic, the "water body" emphasizes the interconnected nature of global challenges and the need for unity in response. Just as water connects diverse landscapes, the concept reflects the interconnectedness of cultures, societies, and artistic expressions in the face of a shared crisis. The "water body" metaphorically captures the ebb and flow of emotions experienced during the pandemic. Just as water can be calm, turbulent, or serene, human emotions have similarly fluctuated. The artistic exploration of the "water body" in the Biennale's works encapsulates this emotional spectrum, offering a cathartic space for both artists and viewers to navigate and express their feelings. Water is a symbol of transformation and renewal, often associated with cleansing and rebirth. In the context of the pandemic, the "water body" aesthetic reflects the potential for renewal and transformation in the aftermath of crisis. It suggests that even amidst adversity, new ideas, collaborations, and artistic expressions can emerge, fostering a sense of hope and renewal.

The 13th Shanghai Biennale specifically delves into the interplay between biology and technology. The "water body" concept embodies the fusion of these seemingly disparate elements, mirroring the fusion of the organic and the

technological. This fusion is particularly relevant during the pandemic, as technology played a crucial role in enabling connectivity, communication, and artistic expression in a physically distanced world.

The artworks exhibited at the Shanghai Biennale during the pandemic delved into the intricate dance between biology and technology. Artists navigated the terrains of genetic modification, bioengineering, and digital interconnectedness to portray a world in which these domains seamlessly intersect. This exploration highlighted the mutual dependence and potential for harmony between humanity and technology, reframing the narrative from one of dystopia to that of a harmonious coexistence [8].

"The Body of Water" theme also reflected a deep-rooted yearning for unity and adaptability. The pandemic had starkly illustrated the interconnectedness of global challenges, and artists responded by envisioning a world that thrives on collaboration and adaptability. The aesthetic thoughts expressed in the artworks mirrored a call for collective action, echoing the need for a unified approach to confront shared predicaments [9].

### **2.3. The Change of Aesthetic Thought during the COVID-19**

In the years leading up to the pandemic, the Shanghai Biennale unveiled "Yubu" and "Why not ask again? Debate, Counterargument, Story" exhibitions, encapsulating the multifaceted dimensions of contemporary Chinese aesthetic thoughts. "Yubu" ventured into the paradoxes of societal advancements and regressions, artistically probing the intricate relationship between technological leaps and potential drawbacks. On the other hand, "Why not ask again? Debate, Counterargument, Story" delved into the existential realms, inviting introspection and contemplation of the fundamental questions that define human identity and existence. As the world grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Shanghai Biennale unveiled "The Body of Water," a poignant response to the unprecedented global crisis. This exhibition wove together the intricate threads of biology and technology, illustrating their symbiotic coexistence. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, "The Body of Water" underscored themes of resilience, adaptability, and unity, where humanity and technology converge to find innovative solutions.

#### **2.3.1. Themes and Concepts**

The Shanghai Biennale before the epidemic often explored themes of progress, regression, and societal questioning. Artworks and exhibitions delved into complex issues related to cultural identity, urbanization, and historical narratives. The "Yubu" and "Why not ask again? Debate, Counterargument, Story" exhibitions were emblematic of this focus on critical introspection and socio-cultural inquiry. In the aftermath of the pandemic, the Shanghai Biennale shifted its thematic emphasis. The "Body of Water" exhibition during the COVID-19 period took a new direction, centering on the intersections of biology, technology, and nature. This thematic shift reflects a response to the pandemic's impact on humanity's relationship with the environment and scientific advancements.

#### **2.3.2. Aesthetic Language and Expression**

Pre-epidemic aesthetic thoughts often showcased a diverse range of artistic languages and expressions. Artists employed a variety of techniques, materials, and styles to convey their

messages. The aesthetic language was characterized by its multi-faceted nature, allowing for a rich tapestry of artistic interpretations. The post-epidemic aesthetic language witnessed a fusion of biology and technology. Artists began incorporating scientific concepts and digital elements into their creations, reflecting the era's heightened reliance on technology and the growing fascination with biological processes.

#### **2.3.3. Narratives and Symbolism**

Artworks before the epidemic frequently drew upon historical narratives, cultural symbols, and socio-political commentary. Artists aimed to engage viewers in thought-provoking dialogues about societal structures, inequality, and identity. Post-epidemic narratives shifted towards explorations of human connection, resilience, and adaptation. The "Body of Water" theme encouraged reflections on interconnectedness, vulnerability, and the interplay between human beings and the natural world.

#### **2.3.4. Response to Global Context**

Pre-epidemic aesthetic thoughts were shaped by contemporary global issues but often rooted in localized narratives. The focus was on dissecting local challenges within a global context. The post-epidemic aesthetic thoughts demonstrate a heightened awareness of global interconnectedness. Artists began to incorporate global health, technological advancements, and environmental concerns into their works, reflecting the pandemic's far-reaching impact.

## **3. Conclusion**

The aesthetic thoughts expressed at the Shanghai Biennale before and after the epidemic have undergone notable shifts, reflecting the changing social, cultural, and global landscape brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. These differences are evident in various aspects of the artworks, themes, and creative approaches presented at the Biennale. The transformation of the Shanghai Biennale exhibitions from "Yubu" and "Why not ask again? Debate, Counterargument, Story" to "The Body of Water" paints a vivid portrait of the shifting tides in aesthetic thoughts. The pandemic ushered in a new era of artistic exploration, inviting artists and audiences alike to engage with the harmonious coexistence of biology and technology. Shanghai Biennale during the epidemic offers a multifaceted and profound response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It serves as a metaphorical bridge between nature and technology, unity and diversity, adaptation and transformation. This concept embodies the essence of contemporary aesthetic thoughts, reflecting the resilience, adaptability, and interconnectedness of humanity and art in the face of unprecedented challenges.

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