

Provision of "Isms" and Spontaneous Art: From the Development of Art History

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Abstract: This paper explores the development of art from early cave paintings to modern Provisionism and spontaneous art, analyzing how art, as a significant form of human cultural expression, has continuously evolved with changes in society and technology. As time progresses, the definition and boundaries of art are no longer fixed but have expanded along with the shifting roles of artists. The rise of Provisionism indicates that artists are no longer merely creators of works but designers of audience experiences, with the meaning of artworks further extended and enriched through audience participation. At the same time, spontaneous art blurs the line between art and everyday life, suggesting that ordinary actions and improvisations can be considered art in the right context. This paper also discusses how these emerging art forms challenge traditional art concepts and provide new perspectives for the future development of art.

Keywords: Provisionism; Spontaneous Art; Art Evolution; Audience Participation; Art Boundaries; Digital Art; Social Interaction.

1. Introduction

From the prehistoric cave paintings of early humans to Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* in the 20th century, the forms and concepts of art have undergone significant transformations. In the first section of Chapter 1, I present a broad, official overview of the history of art from prehistory to contemporary times, with Duchamp marking a major turning point. In the second section of Chapter 1, I discuss the changes in the social position of artists and their shifting roles within society.

In Chapter 2, I introduce the term "Provisionism," which emphasizes that artists now offer experiences or opportunities for interaction through their works, rather than merely creating objects or showcasing techniques. The rise of Provisionism reflects the shift in the role of artists, from being creators to providers of experiences.

In the second section of Chapter 2, I explain the concept of "spontaneous art," a term that has not been widely discussed but is inherently present in everyday life. This includes content creators on social media, practitioners in society, and others who produce works that have not been officially recognized by art institutions nor self-identified as art. Can these everyday actions also be considered art?

2. The Evolution of Art and the Role of Contemporary Artists

2.1. A Brief Analysis of Artistic Expression: From Prehistoric Humans to Duchamp's Fountain

The evolution of art mirrors human history, reflecting changes in society, culture, and technology. From prehistoric cave paintings to modern avant-garde works, art has taken on a multitude of forms and styles, embodying different methods of human expression and communication. Prehistoric art, dating back between 10,000 and 30,000 years, emerged during a time when human society was matriarchal. At that time, people had no concept of art purely for aesthetic

purposes; their art was utilitarian and often tied to magical practices. They painted their bodies and adorned themselves to approach a sense of mystery or to connect with supernatural forces.

"As for primitive tribes, art was often associated with the belief that images had magical powers. To this day, some primitive tribes that still use stone tools draw animals on rocks for the purpose of performing magic." (1).

One of the most representative forms from that era is cave painting. Cave murals primarily depicted animals and plants from the natural world, focusing on animals like deer, horses, lions, and bison, often alongside hunting scenes. These artworks not only demonstrate early humans' artistic talent but also reflect their lifestyle and beliefs. For example, the cave paintings in Lascaux, France, and Altamira, Spain, showcase humans' detailed observations of their environment and their reverence for hunting and nature.

As civilization developed, art became an important tool for symbolizing power, religious beliefs, and memorializing history. Greek sculptures and Roman architecture stand as key achievements from this period. Ancient Greek sculpture is particularly renowned for its meticulous portrayal of the human form and the pursuit of ideal beauty.

"It went through the Geometric Period, the Archaic Period, the Classical Period, and the Hellenistic Period." (2).

The Classical Period was the pinnacle of Greek art, during which artists pursued perfect proportions and form. Notable Greek sculptors like Phidias and Polykleitos created masterpieces such as *Discobolus* (The Discus Thrower) and *Nike of Samothrace* (Victory). These sculptures exemplify not only the Greeks' superior craftsmanship but also their pursuit of human potential and ideal beauty.

By the end of the 5th century AD, Greece was in decline, and sculpture entered its Late Classical phase. For instance, Praxiteles' *Aphrodite of Knidos* was the first sculpture to fully depict the nude female form, showcasing both femininity and the Greek reverence for female deities. The work reflected a new focus on realism and emotional expression. In works like *Laocoön and His Sons*, the complex dynamics and painful expressions vividly capture intense human emotion and

tension.

Around this time, the Roman Empire in Europe was crumbling, leading to frequent wars among nations, kingdoms, and tribes. Trade diminished, populations fell, and poverty and disease became widespread—this was the Middle Ages. Due to the harsh realities of life, people increasingly relied on spirituality for support. Christianity became the dominant force, not only as a religious belief but also controlling education, politics, and art. The church became the center of society, and nearly all social activities and cultural production revolved around religion. Consequently, medieval art was deeply religious, serving the church by communicating Christian doctrines and stories.

Despite the focus on religious themes, this period saw the emergence of great artists. Giotto di Bondone introduced perspective and naturalistic details into painting, making figures more lifelike and emotional. His works, such as *The Life of St. Francis* and the frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel, showcase his mastery of emotion and narrative. Duccio di Buoninsegna's *Maestà* was a grand altarpiece for Siena Cathedral, using detailed composition and fine color to depict the lives of the Virgin Mary and Christ. Simone Martini's *Annunciation*, with its elegant lines and decorative details, became a hallmark of Gothic art.

In art history, Giotto is often called "the last painter of the Middle Ages," as he continued the religious themes and symbolism of medieval art. At the same time, his innovations in technique laid the foundation for the Renaissance.

"Giotto's reputation was so high that the people of Florence took great pride in him and longed for this famous artist to design the spire of their cathedral." (3).

Giotto's career unfolded in cities like Florence and Padua. His frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel are divided into three main themes: the life of the Virgin Mary, the life of Christ, and *The Last Judgment*. These frescoes demonstrate his use of perspective and naturalism. His *Life of St. Francis* portrays scenes from the saint's life, while *Madonna and Child* depicts the intimate relationship between Mary and the infant Jesus, expressing warmth and closeness.

The Renaissance, meaning "rebirth," refers to the great cultural, artistic, scientific, and intellectual transformation in Europe between the 14th and early 17th centuries. This period marked the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern world, with humanism at its core, emphasizing individual value and potential.

Italian artists unearthed and embraced ancient Greek statues, reviving the Greeks' admiration for the beauty of the human form. They studied these sculptures to learn principles of anatomy and aesthetics. However, during the Renaissance, there was still some societal hesitation about nudity. While artists used live models extensively, many individuals only agreed to be depicted as mythological figures, thus preserving the sacred and idealized beauty of the works while avoiding direct exposure to reality.

Subsequent movements, like Baroque with its dynamic complexity, Rococo with its elegance and decorative style, Neoclassicism with its return to rationality and order, Romanticism focusing on individual emotion and nature, and Realism aiming to depict everyday life, all contributed to the evolving styles and philosophies of art.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Impressionist painters like Claude Monet challenged traditional fine-detail painting and composition by capturing the fleeting effects of light and color. His *Impression, Sunrise* not only named the

movement but also reflected Impressionism's focus on the unique qualities of natural light. Impressionist painters often worked outdoors, using short, quick brushstrokes to capture the effects of light and shadow.

Following this came movements like Cubism, co-founded by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, which deconstructed and reassembled objects into geometric shapes, breaking the rules of single perspective. In France, Surrealism, led by André Breton and inspired by Freudian psychology, sought to explore the depths of the unconscious through dreams and fantasies.

Finally, Duchamp. By placing a simple urinal in an art gallery, Duchamp gave it new meaning, challenging traditional art concepts and pioneering Conceptual Art. His *Fountain*, a readymade, transformed an everyday object into a work of art by changing its context and conceptual framework.

"His *Fountain*, his *The Large Glass*, and even his little joke—painting a mustache on the Mona Lisa—are milestones in modern art that have completely changed the concept of art in the modern world. As an artist, he belongs to no particular school, but many modern movements claim him as their predecessor. In today's rapidly changing world of styles and trends, Duchamp remains an inexhaustible source of inspiration for Western artists, and his notes on creation are considered one of the most difficult 'scriptures' of this century, translated into English, German, Spanish, Japanese, and Swedish. As an artist, Duchamp did not create a new aesthetic style, but he effortlessly revealed beauty in the most ordinary and subtle places: in the atmosphere he breathed, in his witty expressions, in his graceful movements, in the simple fact of living—a fact that everyone shares." (4).

Thus, Duchamp's work is not purely about aesthetics or form but about his ideas, concepts, and even his very identity.

2.2. A Brief Analysis of the Social Role of Artists Throughout History

Throughout history, art has played a variety of roles, from symbols of ancient civilizations to tools for modern innovation and challenge. As a result, the status and role of artists have evolved significantly over time.

In ancient Rome, artists primarily engaged in decorative and functional art, such as mosaics, sculptures, and architecture. Although their works were admired, most artists were still considered craftsmen and held relatively low social status. Artistic creation was often viewed as part of religious rituals, and the names of artists were rarely recorded. In contrast, in ancient Greece, artists began to gain more personal recognition. Greek sculptors and architects, such as Phidias, were seen as respected professionals, and their works served not only religious purposes but also public and private decoration. However, some Greek philosophers did not highly value artists' creations or expressions.

"Artists are merely imitators of physical objects, which themselves are imitations of ideals. In our ideal state, artists cannot enjoy the highest honors because they lack the capacity to grasp truth." (5).

Thus, in ancient times, artists were mainly artisans serving the powers of religion and authority, with little personal fame. They practiced their talents within this structured framework.

The Renaissance brought intellectual liberation, and with the humanist movement's influence on culture and the arts, the role of artists began to change. There was an increasing focus on human expression and emotional release, with a

growing secular trend. Artists shifted their focus to human subjects, moving away from the solemnity of religious myths. During this period, the social status of artists significantly increased. They were even regarded as geniuses and creators, not just craftsmen.

In the Baroque (17th century) and Rococo (18th century) periods, artists continued to enjoy high social standing, particularly in European courts and churches. Their works were often used to display power and wealth. Artists of this period relied on the patronage of nobility and the wealthy, creating grand architecture, paintings, and decorative arts.

By the 20th century, with the advent of modern art, the status of artists underwent a fundamental transformation. Artists constantly challenged traditional forms and concepts, and numerous new art movements emerged, such as Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism. By this time, the role of artists extended beyond mere creators of beauty to becoming advocates of social and political change. Today, artists' cultural influence, especially in shaping public thought, often seems greater than that of philosophers. Philosophers' influence is typically concentrated in academic circles, contributing to deep thinking and theoretical innovation. They propose new perspectives and theories, driving progress in scholarly discourse. However, artists can quickly evoke emotional resonance with audiences through direct visual and emotional expression. Visual art transcends language and cultural barriers, making it immediate and accessible.

In addition, contemporary artists are increasingly influential politically. Through their work, they express political views, critique social injustices, and advocate for social reform. Claire Bishop also argues that art holds significant political potential, particularly through participatory art. By engaging audiences in participation and interaction, artists can break traditional art forms and viewer relationships, creating new public spaces and modes of social interaction. This form of art aims to promote social change and democratization, encouraging public awareness and action on social and political issues. He stated:

“Since the 1990s, critics and curators have generally accepted the idea that participatory art is the ultimate political art: by encouraging audience participation, artists can foster new, liberating social relationships.” (6)

Thus, contemporary artists are not only creators of beauty but also drivers of social and political change, as well as practitioners and disseminators of ideas.

However, artists do not always receive accolades, especially contemporary ones. Due to their use of non-traditional materials and forms to express complex ideas, their works are often criticized for being abstract, difficult to understand, or controversial. Some contemporary artists are criticized for their radical forms of expression and political stances. It can be said that contemporary artists face not only public skepticism and challenges from other artists but also disdain from traditional painters. The advantage of traditional easel painting lies in its potential for privacy—since there is limited audience engagement, public approval is only part of the equation. In contrast, concept-driven contemporary art must engage with the public; otherwise, its significance is largely lost, particularly in popular contemporary works. Thus, when a painter creates a work that is considered bad by the public, the worst they may receive is criticism of their painting's ugliness. However, when a contemporary artist faces a similar situation, they are often confronted with dual accusations, such as lacking aesthetic value and wasting

societal resources.

3. The Transformation of Artists' Identities and the Boundaries of Audience Participation

3.1. Provisionism and the Shift Toward the Audience: From Mere Creators to Providers of Experiences and Contexts

With the development of contemporary art, the rise of Provisionism and audience interaction has led to a reevaluation of the artist's identity. Provisionism emphasizes that artists are no longer simply creators of objects or displays of skill; rather, they offer experiences and opportunities for interaction. By providing these forms of engagement, artists break down traditional boundaries of art. The meaning of the artwork is no longer solely determined by the artist but is co-created through the audience's reactions and participation. Popular art forms today, such as performance art, interactive installation art, participatory art, social practice art, digital art, and virtual reality, all fall within this framework.

Performance art offers a unique experience by presenting live actions from the artist and immediate reactions from the audience, fostering interaction and participation. Performance art emphasizes immediacy and presence, with the artwork existing in a specific time and space, often making it unrepeatable. This immediacy creates a strong sense of immersion. For example, in Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0*, she anesthetized her body while remaining mentally conscious, standing in the middle of a room with 72 objects placed on a table nearby. The audience was invited to use the objects on her as they wished. As the performance unfolded, the audience's behavior grew increasingly extreme, escalating from mild interactions to acts of violence—some even cut her skin and pointed a loaded gun at her. This piece explored the boundaries of human nature, violence, and the audience's response to a lack of constraints.

Interactive installation art, by employing technology and physical setups, creates spaces where audiences can actively engage with the artwork. This art form challenges the static display of traditional art by immersing the audience, making them part of the artwork itself, and enhancing the depth and scope of their experience. For example, Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirror Rooms* use mirrors and lights to create an immersive space where the audience can walk through and interact, experiencing an endless visual and psychological extension. Similarly, James Turrell's *Roden Crater* allows viewers to experience the interaction of light and space, evoking a powerful connection with nature. Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* simulates natural environments, providing viewers with a deeply immersive experience that prompts reflections on humanity's relationship with nature.

In participatory and social practice art, artists provide a framework and platform for the audience to join in, co-creating the meaning and experience of the artwork. Artists guide the audience on how to participate, ensuring that the process is meaningful and produces the intended effects. Audience engagement becomes an even more critical element in these forms of art, with their active participation shaping the artwork. Claire Bishop highlights the core role of audience interaction in participatory art, noting that the value and meaning of the artwork are realized through this interaction.

“The audience's participation is not just part of the work but

the core of it. In this way, art becomes not just the creation of material forms but a platform for social and political dialogue." (7).

An example of this is Antony Gormley's *Field*, which provided materials and guidance for community members to create clay sculptures. The final work was a massive installation, demonstrating the power of collective creation and community cohesion. Another example is Vik Muniz's *Waste Land*, where the artist collaborated with waste pickers in Rio de Janeiro, providing materials and a platform to transform discarded objects into large-scale artworks.

In summary, the essence of Provisionism lies in the word "provide." Performance artists offer a unique experience through live actions and immediate audience reactions. Interactive installation artists, through the use of technology and setups, create spaces where the audience can engage. Participatory artists offer frameworks for audience involvement, while social practice artists collaborate with communities to provide opportunities for addressing social issues or promoting social change.

3.2. Spontaneous Art: Everyday Actions by Non-Artists

Just as Duchamp once brought everyday objects into the realm of art, can daily actions or videos created by others be similarly accepted as art?

In the context of contemporary art, spontaneous art refers to unplanned and unscripted artistic behaviors that arise naturally in daily life, whether by individuals or groups. This form of art does not typically rely on traditional artistic techniques or materials but instead uses improvisation, environmental interaction, and emotional expression. Street performances, graffiti, impromptu concerts, and social media videos are all forms of spontaneous art. Often, these works come from people who do not consider themselves artists—such as video bloggers—who capture moments that may be aesthetically engaging, though their intent is not necessarily to create art, as they lack formal training in theory or aesthetics.

On December 20, 2022, Bilibili video blogger J Shen, a non-artist, released a 5-minute video titled *Experiencing a Blind Person's Day: I Can't Imagine This is Their Entire Life*. In the video, J Shen spends a day living like a blind person, sharing his deep understanding and empathy for the challenges faced by the visually impaired. His experience not only allowed him to feel the struggles of blind individuals but also increased public awareness about this group's life circumstances. Viewers, by watching and engaging with the video, indirectly participated in J Shen's experience. This interaction enabled viewers to become active participants rather than passive observers—they could share their thoughts and reactions through comments and social sharing.

On September 12, 2023, another Bilibili video blogger, Wu Muliang, posted a 2-minute video titled *I Took Funeral Portraits for the Elderly in My Village*. The video documents his experience photographing the elderly in a remote mountain village in Shanxi, China, for their funeral portraits—a significant tradition in Chinese culture. Wu Muliang's project not only honored individual lives but also preserved cultural heritage. His video sparked public interest and awareness of the elderly in rural China, inspiring others to take action. Many volunteers and organizations were motivated to plan similar projects, helping more elderly individuals in need. Wu's project not only increased respect

and attention toward the elderly but also encouraged others to engage in public service.

Another example is a 6-minute video released by the Bilibili video blogger Er Housheng from Northern Shaanxi. The video, titled *Cooking Stir-Fried Pork for the Elderly, Grandma Bursts Into Tears*, captures his return to his hometown to personally cook a meal for the village elders. This simple act of cooking held deeper significance, reflecting emotional expression and the preservation of cultural traditions. The cooking process in the video became a way to express affection for his hometown and family. The scenes and dialogue in the video are filled with warmth and authenticity, especially when the grandmother starts crying upon seeing Er Housheng cook. This genuine emotion is transmitted through the camera, resonating with viewers. Through this interaction, Er Housheng established an emotional connection with his audience, turning viewers not only into spectators but into participants who shared in the emotional journey. This strengthened the social impact of the video.

However, these forms of spontaneous art are more often moral than aesthetic. Whether it is J Shen's work *Experiencing a Blind Person's Day* or Wu Muliang's *I Took Funeral Portraits for the Elderly in My Village*, spontaneous art typically focuses more on moral significance than on pure aesthetic value. These types of spontaneous projects prioritize social practice and community engagement while often overlooking the aesthetic complexity and creative expression expected in traditional art. As a result, spontaneous art tends to lack the aesthetic depth that many people associate with fine art. For many, a work of art should not only have profound social meaning but also offer a unique and pleasing sensory experience. Spontaneous art, with its emphasis on immediacy and participation, often lacks the careful composition, technique, and aesthetic pursuit necessary to captivate a broader audience.

In summary, while spontaneous art holds unique value in promoting social interaction and personal expression, its aesthetic shortcomings limit its acceptance and influence within the broader art world. The difference between non-artists and professional artists may lie in their approach—while non-artists focus on social interaction and improvisation, artists also strive to enhance the aesthetic quality of their works. By doing so, they can create broader resonance and garner recognition from a wider audience.

4. Conclusion

By exploring the evolution of the artist's identity and the changing boundaries of audience participation in contemporary art, the rise of Provisionism reflects a significant shift in the role of artists, from creators of objects to providers of experiences and opportunities for interaction. Through performance art, interactive installations, and participatory art, the audience has moved from passive spectators to active co-creators of meaning. This transformation challenges traditional concepts of authorship and highlights the increasingly collaborative nature of art. Additionally, the exploration of spontaneous art underscores the growing presence of everyday actions and non-artist contributions in the realm of artistic expression. While spontaneous art emphasizes immediacy, social interaction, and emotional expression, it often faces criticism for its lack of aesthetic depth and formal artistry. Yet, despite these critiques, spontaneous art holds unique value in fostering

personal connections, raising awareness of social issues, and engaging with broader communities. As the boundaries of art continue to blur, both artists and non-artists alike are contributing to an ever-expanding landscape where meaning is co-created and artistic expression takes on many forms. The future of art lies not only in its ability to challenge aesthetic norms but also in its capacity to engage with and respond to the social, political, and cultural dynamics of our time.

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