

# The Multidimensional Interpretation of Contemporary Art as an Organism

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## Abstract

The concept of contemporary art does not emphasize the boundary between art and non-art. It will constantly include non-art objects into the category of art. Contemporary art has thoughts and souls. It focuses on human psychology, society, history and other broad fields. Contemporary artists are often people who are rich in philosophical thinking. They should learn to observe the world in depth and express their thoughts on the world with their works. Since the 20th century, with the awakening of People's self-consciousness and political consciousness, artists' exploration and application of body symbols constantly express their reflection and introspection on society, there is also a change in the way of understanding and constructing one's own identity. The identity issues such as feminism and ethnic minorities have triggered a series of social movements. This article will take the body expression in modern and contemporary art as the incision, and will carry on the research from the following two aspects: 1) taking the body's plasticity, empathy and sociality as the representatives, the paper analyzes the language characteristics behind the body's expression; 2) This paper discusses the body as a critical weapon from the perspective of its discourse power, attitude, power and as a tool of identity construction. And through a number of body-related works of art research, analysis of its expression in the context of modern and contemporary art direction. Is a work of art an "organism"? In order to answer this question, we must first clarify the concept of "organism", which usually refers to living individuals. The Modern Chinese Dictionary simplifies it to "human beings and animals". The more popular definition in psychology is "the organic matter with the ability to adapt to changes in the environment". An interpretation closer to the artistic dimension comes from Aristotle, who believed that "poetry is an organism". Later, Coleridge, an English poet, developed his idea, believing that "the life of a poem originates from the seed of the poet's inspiration, which unconsciously absorbs the components of external substances acting on the human brain, thereby forming an organic entity that unites content and form, thought and emotion, concept and imagery" (Whistler, 2013).

From Coleridge's point of view, it is obvious that the work of art is an "organism", which is born from the artist's inspiration. It is in turn influenced by different kinds of artistic priors and the real world, and is then shaped in the entity. Contemporary art, which we are discussing today, is more "organic" in its "body language".

### Keywords

Contemporary Art, Organism, People's Self-Consciousness, Body Symbols

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## 1. The "Objectified" "Body" in the Age of Industrial Production

Contemporary art is closely related with the Industrial Revolution. Had it not been for the Industrial Revolution that has promoted the world to change greatly, art would not have emerged so completely from tradition and classics. The industrial age brought man into direct confrontation with things. Must man be the master? Has the assembly line turned workers into part of the machinery? In the workshop of the shoe factory, where a female worker is brushing glue onto the soles of hundreds of pairs of shoes every day, the freedom of individual life seems far less important. As a link of the production chain, you don't need to be happy or sad. As long as you lift your hand at the same height, strength and speed every time, you will become an excellent "object", generating value and receiving praise. People are gradually being "objectified".

Therefore, contemporary art naturally finds that the "body" can be objectified. Classical sculpture or easel painting always says, "Lay down your body and let us depict it" (Whistler, 2013). Contemporary art has discovered that everything can be used as an object, and the "body" is no exception. The "body" used to exist as an object of artistic expression, an "object" that was obviously placed in front of the artist's eyes to express. No matter what kind of noble lady or homosexual lover the Mona Lisa was, she must have sat in front of Leonardo da Vinci's eyes. Prior to contemporary art, the "body" was always limited to itself. The artist could express it as much as he wished, but never allowed it to speak for itself.

In contemporary art, the first thing to be sacrificed is the "body". The artist is no longer a spectator and no longer limited to projecting what he sees and feels with artistic methods. Art begins to present itself. Boyce locked himself in a room, covered his body with honey and gold leaf, put on shoes made of different materials on his left and right feet, and explained the painting to a dead rabbit held in his arms. This classic image is like a lightning bolt in the history of contemporary art, as the artist no longer hides the "body" behind his works. The "body" itself becomes the most important subject of art. The dead rabbit and the painting obviously do not interact with each other, but Boyce uses himself as a "medium" to build a bridge between the two. This "body", with its rich and in-

triguing meanings, becomes the greatest tension of the work *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (as shown in **Figure 1**).

In contemporary art, the “body” is seldom absent. Its expressive power is unrivaled by any other substance. Once the “body” is used as an element of expression, it will inevitably display gender quality, especially in artistic expressions involving “feminism”, where the “physicality” itself is more prominent. The reason for this is that there is no element of expression more powerful than the shackled and damaged “body” of women in the male discourse system. Contemporary female artist He Chengyao, for instance, has made a series of works, such as *Mother and Me*, *Ninety-Nine Stitches* and *Witness* (as shown in **Figure 2**), which show women’s childbirth and the survival of female babies in the family planning era. The photographs make people uncomfortable. The “body” itself is strongly gendered in its discourse and always makes people tense with a sense of being damaged. The artist He Chengyao’s own birth is a fitting footnote to the work. Because her mother insisted on giving birth to the baby girl out of wedlock, she was fired and suffered from severe mental illness. He Chengyao was fortunate, because many baby girls in the field during her time did not have a chance of being born or surviving due to their gender.

The combination of the artist’s personal encounter and the memory of the times makes this group of “bodies” accurately express the survival difficulties encountered by some women in the 1980s. The marvelous thing about this group of works is that “the daughter’s body” is the narrator, while the silent “mother’s body” is displayed behind it. When the body language can speak, it strives for the opportunity to be heard. Women’s autonomy over the body has already changed.

When the “body” is objectified, its freedom is greatly enhanced, from an object expressed in single latitude to a subject that can speak and display itself. The most crucial thing is that the “body” begins to construct its own “spatial field”.



**Figure 1.** *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* by Boyce.



**Figure 2.** *Witness* by He Chengyao.

## 2. The “Spatial Field” of the “Body” in Contemporary Art

First of all, as for the level of art creation and art appreciation, when an artist completes a work and displays it, is the artist himself “absent” or “present”? In the traditional art field, it is more inclined to the former. When the viewer stands in front of *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*, he or she will easily be impressed by the wordless beauty of the landscape. In this physical and mental environment, the author hides himself behind the canvas. There is no need to establish a mechanism of communication with the creator. The artist, the work and the audience are two related, and there is no need for dialog. However, the artist’s presence is inevitable in contemporary art.

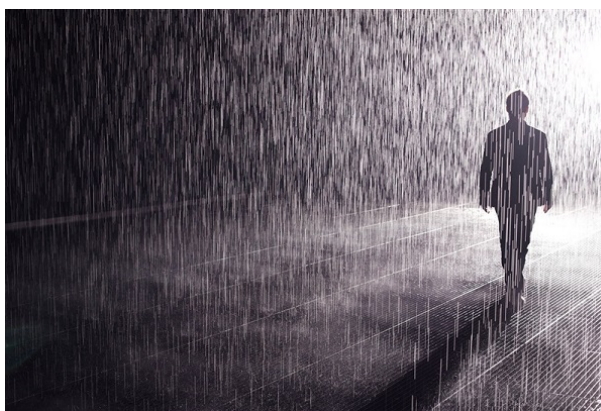
One of the reasons for this is that the “interactivity” of contemporary art has become very crucial. The most representative one is the solo retrospective exhibition of Serbian artist Marina Abramović, named *The Artist is Here*. On the second floor of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, she sat on a bench in a long robe, being expressionless. The audience constantly looked at her with curiosity, as she sat quietly for a cumulative total of about 700 hours. Many viewers said they felt the pressure of a wordless confrontation at this art exhibition that maximizes patience and tedium. Without the “presence” of the artist, this typical work would be completely disorganized and meaningless. The “presence” of the “body” constructs an immediate “space-time” that the viewer needs to experience and enter, then the work of art becomes art and takes on meaning (Whistler, 2013).

“Body perception” has become an important dimension of contemporary art aesthetics. Art aesthetics has evolved from being based purely on visual activities to a comprehensive experience that requires the mobilization of all the senses. We are forced to borrow the body’s overall perception to experience the work of art. When we enter a contemporary art pavilion, the comprehensive use of sound, color, light, and electricity highlights the “space”. If you walk into the Bund Art

Museum to enjoy “rain” (as shown in **Figure 3**), raindrops are falling under the disorienting lights. There is no real mist to wet your hairs when you are walking through it.

In Merleau-Ponty’s view, the body’s peculiarity lies in the fact that “it can be seen”, so that the perceptual system can play a real role in the art space. Contemporary art attaches more importance to the sense of presence for the viewer, namely, how to be there in order to better perceive and understand it. And the audience’s “presence” begins with the theatricalization of art, for instance, installation art. How the work is displayed is more important than the work itself in terms of its formal significance, or it is an integral part of the work. Artists and exhibitors greatly expand the spatial field of the works, so public space becomes the tentacles of the extension of the works and the exhibition space becomes a brand-new field. When the audience walks into the exhibition hall, their “body” itself begins to interact with the works, and the works are “re-created” by the audience.

Shen Kuiyi once held an exhibition of paintings called *No Room for the Body* (as shown in **Figure 4**), in which the application of technological means allowed the flow of ink to interact naturally with the audience. The ink on the canvas was shaped as you moved along, and the 12-meter giant work changed in real time with the number of people and the speed of their footsteps. None of the moments were frozen and identical. All the spectators walking by are no longer spectators, and their figures are already paintbrushes. Art penetrates the confines of space and truly unites creation and appreciation.



**Figure 3.** *Rain Room.*



**Figure 4.** *No Room for the Body.*

From the passive viewing to the actual participation, the different dimension of the “body” is actually a philosophical proposition—how to truly turn to the subjectivity of human beings? Traditional art emphasizes the creation itself, and the concept of “viewing” is not so valued. However, as the study of subjectivity in philosophy focuses more and more on the will of the individual, the role of the subject’s behavior in creation and in viewing becomes more and more prominent. The field of view of art research begins to focus on both creation and viewing, and “viewing” even begins to determine whether a work of art can be called art or not.

John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* once wrote, “Man sees only what he looks at, and looking is an act of choice.” Therefore, the acceptance of art is more of an active behavior, and the “body of art” placed in a specific field has life. Contemporary art without attention is different from the classical works that have been dusted in the ashes of history, and it is the audience’s choice that shapes it and gives it form. At the level of accepting aesthetics, the emergence of an “aesthetic community” of art is quite intriguing.

### **3. The “Aesthetic Community” Implied in Contemporary Art**

Personality is the flag of contemporary art. Artists invariably seek to be “unique” and “break with the old” so as to become the center of attention in the wide angle of art. However, the presentation of “aesthetic community” in contemporary art has blurred the boundaries between the individual and the public, the private and the public. Rancière put forward the concept of “aesthetic community” in *The Aesthetic Unconsciousness*, in which the common sensibility of the community is remodeled in a form of artistic expression, making the artwork a sensual experimental space for the community.

First of all, is art an open space? Art is a “meaningful form” both from the point of view of creation and accepting aesthetics. It is so-called “meaningful” because it cannot leave the “a priori” of cultural aesthetic spirit. Starting from Kant, he believed that “beauty is the purposeful form of an object”. Aesthetic judgment must have the form of the a priori, and the affirmation of the beauty of art comes from the general approval of the aesthetic individual, which is based on the common sense of mankind to realize. Therefore, the spatiality of art must have a base point, which is the “aesthetic a priori” concerning this art form.

With this “aesthetic a priori,” individuals with the same type of aesthetic experience will gather to form an “aesthetic community,” especially in contemporary art, where the “circle” is more visible. In particular, the “circle” of contemporary art is a more visible “community”. Regardless of the independence and individuality of contemporary art, the circle of contemporary art is very prominent. Some artists question why the beauty of art needs to be recognized by a certain group or circle. Because without specific “aesthetic community”, the life of contemporary art is also hollowed out when the audience is missing. Especially when contemporary art is combined with capital, the manipulation of cap-

ital will purposely create a field to guide the art viewers into this field, and the expression of view and feeling will make the artwork itself be haloed.

Behind the “aesthetic community”, there is another influence factor, namely, the political community, or the “power community”. Due to the close connection between contemporary art and politics is too, whether it is “political discourse expression” or “anti-political demands”, all of them are not free from “politics”. The most fundamental reason is that since the 20th century, the influence of politics on the whole human society has been too powerful. The devastation brought by the two world wars has become the muse of many contemporary artists, such as Kiefer, whose anti-war tendency is extremely obvious in his works. Another dimension of political influence on art is “globalization”. Physical borders still exist, but world trade and cultural exchanges have broken down ideological boundaries, and globalization has brought about a fusion of cultural aesthetics in art. In particular, the two distinct cultural branches of China and the West, with obvious differences in their origins, have echoed each other in contemporary art. No matter which kind of popular art trend in the West, it always affects China later or even at the same time. If we simply attribute this to the domestic artists’ poor imitation, it is very biased. Globalization has brought about political influence and cultural fusion has already become a new kind of “aesthetic community”, which affects the creation and dissemination of contemporary art.

This “aesthetic community” constitutes a kind of “common sensibility” in the form of artistic expression. The similarity in material, the echo in form, and the common sense in artistic feeling have brought about the same frequency resonance of different borders in contemporary art, such as Kiefer’s later realization and application of “emptiness” in oriental culture. The “emptiness” he believes in is more similar to the so-called “emptiness” of Taoism, (as shown in **Figure 5**) which can give birth to all things and is a full realm of emptiness, with far-reaching aesthetic conception.



**Figure 5.** Kiefer’s *In the Beginning*.

#### 4. The Fragility and Changeability of Contemporary Art

As an “aesthetic community”, any art has a certain degree of stability, but contemporary art has always been characterized by its “fragmentation” with turbulence and change. Firstly, contemporary art is updated too quickly. When each art category appears first, it always denies the “tradition” in a radical way. Even if there is some inheritance, it is customary to “keep it hidden”. That’s why Kiefer said, “the artist is a constant loser, and he never gets what he wants.” Contemporary art no longer conforms to the rules, with all kinds of extremely exaggerated attempts to cross boundaries. From the perspective of the artistic lineage, it is characterized by a kind of “self-destructive impulse”.

Secondly, “fragmentation” manifests itself in the ability of contemporary artworks to be used in different contexts. Going back to the “physicality” we talked about at the beginning, the “body” as an art medium has its own fragility and changeability. Therefore, when artists use the body language as an “instrument”, it starts to become “alienated”, “objectified” and “illusionized” (as shown in **Figure 6**). So spoofing has become a frequently used technique in contemporary art. “Fragmentation” means that the “elemental nature” is emphasized and highlighted, such as Yayoi Kusama’s (as shown in **Figure 7**) “polka dots”, which are constantly repeated and shifted to form a style. Hoffman’s big yellow duck and giant octopus are exaggerated childish imagery. The repeated use of elements in different contexts de-emphasizes the overall beauty of the work, allowing the artist’s personal style to take shape.

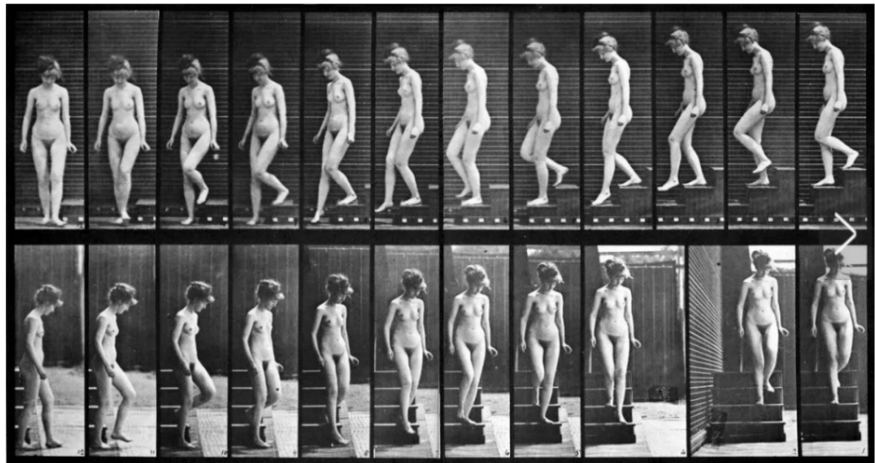
Thirdly, the “fragility” of contemporary art lies in the paradoxical relationship between art and commerce. Contemporary art is spontaneous and natural in the creation stage, but the commercialization of the dissemination process is very obvious. There is a certain contrast between the artist’s treatment of the artwork and the art acceptance mechanism’s treatment of the artwork. (Schlegel, 2001) In the process of commercial value influencing the dissemination of contemporary art, contemporary art does present a nature with strong industrial production. Bernard Stiegler argues that art creation can be produced, reproduced and trained (as shown in **Figure 8**). Art has begun to be industrialized, and artistic creation has become synonymous with the “creative economy.” In the face of a huge consumer base, the artist is no longer superior. Lost in the artifacts of the industrial assembly line, the works of art themselves are in jeopardy.



**Figure 6.** The “unusual forms” in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*.



**Figure 7.** Yayoi Kusama, *Queen of Polka Dots*.



**Figure 8.** *Nude Descending a Staircase* by Muybridge.

In summary, the above four analyses are my personal interpretation of contemporary art as an “organism”, from the “objectified” body language, to the highly participatory spatial field, to the analysis of the causes of the “aesthetic community”, and to the unique temperament of contemporary art. The “organism” is still in the process of evolution (Wheeler, 2009). We are looking forward to seeing what kind of innovation the arrival of the new intelligent era will bring to art.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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