

From “Rational Reflection” to “Art Reflection”: Contemporary Aesthetic Significance of the “1985” Art Thought Trend

WANG Renjie^{[a],[b],*}

^[a] School of Fine Arts, Southwest University, Chong Qing, China.

^[b] Faculty of Education, Southwest University, Chong Qing, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

This paper mainly discusses the contemporary aesthetic significance of Chinese “1985” thought trend. This paper holds that the tendencies of “philosophy”, “life stream” and “formalization” constitute the three major ideological tendencies of the “1985” art thought trend. Although the three aesthetic tendencies represent different understandings and pursuits to aesthetic connotation and aesthetic value within the artist groups during that period, they all originate in the rational ideologies of aesthetic subjects. Guided by rational consciousness and rational spirit, aesthetic subjects and creative practices of the aesthetic subjects have entered into an essentially new state, that is, the state of “how art serves people”. Therefore, influenced by the “1985” art thought trend, Chinese contemporary art has developed from “reflective art” to the new state of “art reflection”.

Key words: “1985” art thought trend; Rational spirit; Art creation

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INTRODUCTION

The “1985” art thought trend generates from various arts activities conducted by more than one hundred arts groups all around China. Although the advocacies, purposes and behaviors of these art groups vary, generally speaking,

they display three major aesthetic tendencies. This paper does not intend to enumerate the art groups and art activities in the “1985” art thought trend, but would like to reveal the rational spirit contained in the ideological streams of “1985” art thought trend, and reveal the new state of “art reflection” formed under the influence of rational spirit.

1. RATIONAL AESTHETIC TENDENCY OF THE “1985” ART THOUGHT TREND

The first aesthetic tendency of “1985” art thought trend is toward philosophy. The aesthetic tendency of philosophy consists of two major aspects. This is due to the reflection of rigid ideology and the spirit of pursuing “rationality” developed by some young artists by reading philosophy books of the East and West. A direct consequence of this tendency is reflected in the creation of graphic expression and ideology, that a large number of artists began to learn the Western surrealism and metaphysical painting styles and advocated “rational painting”.

The second tendency is the life stream. Unlike the former, the aesthetic tendency of life stream tends to be concentrated on intuition, unconsciousness, will and performance of human inner state. On one hand, it shows a rebellion of the arts in “Cultural Revolution” which repressed personality, on the other hand it supports the artistic view of “self-expression” in the 1980s. Artists supporting this tendency learnt the art style of Western expressionist painting, which has more localized aesthetic connotation compared with the art works of philosophical tendency.

The third aesthetic trend is formalization. The core of the aesthetic tendency of formalization lies in expression of art language, and objecting to expressions of all other themes other than art language. This tendency originate due to two reasons, one is the criticism to “theme determinism”, the other is the view of “emphasizing

independence of formal beauty". Some artists at that time believed that the nature of art creation is art language, and theme merely acts as a prerequisite for its existence. It should be noted that the aesthetic tendency of formalization is directed to the imitation of Western modern art.

The above three aesthetic tendencies have become the three major ideologies of "1985" art thought trend. Although the three tendencies represent different understandings and pursuits to aesthetic connotation and aesthetic value within artistic groups in the new period, they all reflect the artists' pursuits of art modernization and diversification. These ideologies actually stem from the advocacy of science and democracy in the May 4th Movement, and are the reflective thoughts of anti-tradition, anti-politics and anti-bureaucracy to the "ultra-leftist" art and traditional aesthetic standard in "Cultural Revolution".... (Zheng, 2002, p.32). All reflections are intended to recover and promote the status and value of art.

This paper holds that the aesthetic tendency of philosophy is the most significant, because it reflects a qualitative change in artists' spirits for a long time. From the perspective of historical development, a large number of painting activities are intended to reflect on and criticize the preceding era, but these criticisms are made from political level and are affiliated to group consciousness, to a large extent do not really touch the rational level. Secondly, the aesthetic tendency of philosophy corresponds to the spirit of aesthetic subject, its real value lies in guiding the inner movement and conversion of the artists in the "1985 period" by rationality. These inner movement and conversion are essentially different from the previous period.

The term of "rationality" is not defined in an absolute sense, which can not only be explained in philosophy, but also be explained in phenomenon and transcendence. Kapoor said, "The tradition of rationalism is the tradition of criticism" (Basanquet, 1997, p.309). Due to specific historical background and historical cultural psychology of the "1985 period", the concept of rationality to the artists in this period refers to criticism and introspection. From a historical point of view, three cultural waves since modern China are actually the continuation of rational enlightenment movement. The "1985" art thought trend has been also affected by rationality. In this sense, no matter it is the aesthetic tendency of philosophy, life stream or formalization, it has been formed based on rationality. Affected by the "aesthetic wave", a large number of artists in the "1985" period widely read Western classical and modern philosophies, and reached self-improvement on spirits under the influences of Kant, Nietzsche and Bergson, etc. On the one hand, they began to think about universe, history and society, on the other hand, they also thought about themselves for creative practices. Rationality, therefore,

produces two effects. One is to achieve aesthetic cultivation by rational self-improvement, and the other is to carry out creative practices by rational self-improvement. This means that aesthetic subject and creative practice of aesthetic subject have entered into a state of essential significance, namely "how art serves people". This indicates that the artists in the "1985" period and their creative practices unprecedentedly returned to the nature of art - "reflective art" became "reflection of art."

Therefore, "reflection of art" benefits from the rational consciousness and rational spirit of aesthetic subject. In other words, rational consciousness and rational spirit of aesthetic subject act as the premise of "reflection of art". We have discussed the formation of "reflection of art", and then we will discuss the evolution of "reflection of art".

2. PROCESS OF "REFLECTION OF ART"

To talk about "reflection of art", we must first briefly review the process of fine art since 1979. 1979 of "The Stars" is an important and lucky year when the motivations guided by naive enthusiasm to pursue new thoughts were similar to that of 1985, only in a difference of the effect degree. This is associated with people's spiritual strength's correlation to their consciousness to art, that is, people's self-emancipation has not yet reached the state to put forward a higher demand on the consciousness to art; On the contrary, it can be said that people's self-consciousness to art has not yet been accumulated to such a profound degree that can strongly promote human liberation, so that new art exactly acts as the embodiment of this spiritual progress. Even so, that blooming vitality has reached a splendid state. Innocent pursuit and daring creation have announced a brilliant prospect.

The vitality of art in 1979 is mainly reflected in art creations. The significant sign of 1985 is to launch a profound change in art criticism theories. The suddenly rising discussions about new methodologies can be recognized as to take the severe pressures by art creation to be the momentum forward, and this change can only be realized through profound introspection. In addition to the advantages of theory and view, there is a more profound advantage of age. In a slow-paced country, the correlation time probability between life course and social spiritual phenomenon change takes approximately 30 years. This is a historical progressive rhythm based on ancient natural laws. The progress of modern society is bound to break this slow rhythm. In the context of contemporary art, especially in the realm of theory, even in accordance with that kind of ancient natural laws, there should be a group of people with new vital force to show their superiority in the rational creation.

The reflection of art in 1985 is mainly reflected in three aspects. The first is the discussions about the "new methodology" in the field of criticism theory, which tried

to clean up in art norms and guidelines. The second is the discussions about the creation theory based on “cultural root-seeking” and new explorations of creations. These also stem from the pressure caused by the impacts of foreign art thoughts, under which the traditional aesthetic appreciation hidden deeply in human psyche became awakened, and tried to find the possibility of advanced development and unique demonstration in the world. The third is the initial breakthrough of art concept, which tried to rebuild the aesthetic system, rebuild the interdependence among world essence, art essence and society essence, and make art entered a new phase which fundamentally fits the theme of times.

Introspection of art is to consciously and comprehensively put itself as an object of contemplation, which is a separation of art’s self-awareness from art’s reality. Therefore, they exhibit a common feature of transcending their own mindsets. In the history of thought, when human self-consciousness gets independent in diverse reality, it means the beginning of modern philosophy revolution. Similarly, when art can witness its own existence, it also indicates that art has gained a development of transcendence out of the original way of thinking. Objectification of existence takes awakened consciousness as the foundation, which has a considerable accumulation process. The development of fine art in the new period shows that despite of all difficulties and setbacks, fine art will always return to its own existence. The growth of the new performances of art since 1979 indicates that aesthetic consciousness has transformed from the possession of objects to its own. When fine art completed this transformation, criticism began to pursue the principal value status of art and art criticism. The discussion wave of methodology should not only generate personality of creation and personal creation, but also should generate personality of criticism and personal criticism. If we say that art creation should achieve a transcendence to the object of creation, then art criticism should also achieve a transcendence to the object of criticism. This is where the significance of “1985” art thought trend is embodied.

However, this is just a beginning to “1985” art thought trend. As time goes by, its significance will become increasingly clearer. As Marx said: “Even from a historical point of view, the liberation of theory... also has a special practical significance just as the previous revolution started from the minds of monks, the current revolution starts from the minds of philosophers” (Marx, 2012, p.101). To China at that time, art creation and art theory belong to this philosophy. Of course it will eventually hand over the lifted banner of time spirit to the real principal artists and principal art critics.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the articles holds that the contemporary aesthetic significance of “1985” art thought trend are: Firstly, under the influence of rational spirit, fine art movement presents the aesthetic tendencies of “philosophy”, “life stream” and “formalization”; Secondly, on the one hand rational spirit promotes the artists in the “1985” period to constantly reach self-cultivation on aesthetics, on the other hand it generates creation practices on the base of proactive rationality; Thirdly, the creation thinking based on rationality makes Chinese contemporary art return to the essential significance of “how art serves people”, which is a historic introspection of art and constitutes a transcendence of Chinese contemporary art to its own mindset.

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