Tsai Ming-liang – The Relational Aesthetics Between Video Art and Social Culture

管博闻
（四川传媒学院，四川 成都 611745）

Abstract; Things in society are always connected and influenced by certain relationships under which aesthetics arise, meaning that, “life is an aesthetic, ritualized, shaped form” (Bourriaud, 2002: 107). The same notion can be used to describe the relationship between social culture and contemporary art. The society affects artists, artists create artworks to represent and reflect on this, and finally, their artworks pass this thinking on to the art audience to reflect on. This essay aims to analyse the relational aesthetics in video-art as defined by the curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud. The video-art of Taiwanese filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang is used as a concrete example to discuss the way in which art is a form of sociocultural mediation.

Key word: Relational; Aesthetics; Video Art; Social Culture


一、Artists reflecting society

Artists are the unique cultural intermediaries of society. Artists encode their own observations of social politics, struggles and conflicts between social levels in new ways, such that artwork always arises in a social and political context (Inglis, 2005). Bourriaud is interested in art that takes, “the field of human interaction as its theoretical horizon and its social context, rather than advocating an independent and private symbolic space” (Bourriaud, 2002: 14).

Malaysian-born Tsai Ming-liang?began his career as a theatrical producer, screenwriter, and television director in British Hong Kong in the 80s. Because of the Chinese contemporary art presented diversification in the 1990s, the use of media materials began to enrich, and the exhibition scene began to change, art galleries, museums, exhibition venues began to be gradually used by contemporary artists. He has extended video works to the mainstream medium, also into the group of the first Chinese avant-garde artists, using video art to express ideas.

二、Artworks as social interstices

Art is the artist’s sustenance, expression and sociocultural appeal. In other words, art is a manifestation of social contradictions. Artists’ ideas on culture and other issues are transmitted through works of art and, therefore, artworks are regarded as bridges between artists and sociocultural communication, that is to say, works of art exist in the gap between the two (Bourriaud, 2002). Artists are aware of such a barrier and use artwork to encourage communication, which happens in an unusual communication zone (Bourriaud, 2002). In the process of building this relationship, the artist, “needs an ability to break the canon, apparently starting with the canon of daily life, and this ability, acquired through the interaction of art and life experience, is a series of breakthroughs in established norms” (Acord, 2015).

Tsai’s video-art can be used to further explain the discovery, creation, and presentation of this interstice. Moonlight on the River is a 2004 video-installation art by Tsai and his team, combining the elements of: video, 49 old chairs, coffee and oil paintings. The theme is reminiscence. Tsai uses these nostalgic elements (The smell of coffee and the old Taiwan chairs in the exhibition area). A piece of art that constitutes a "world of relationships" or a gap between societies can, “to the extent possible, reconcile the alienation and oblivion brought about by intervals” (Bourriaud, 2002: 16). The moving image in this installation is the short film Moonlight on the River, a record of the effect of global warming caused by pollution and the phenomenon of dry rivers it causes. The video itself does not have a unique narrative or editing technique, it mostly consists of the gentle movement of the stream and two dogs slowly
moving across it to the other side (Figure3). Tsai uses the tactile and sensory to strengthen the visual and to bring to the audience a full range of perception. The artist closely links the environmental space and image to build the audience’s perception of a particular social interstice (Bourriaud, 2002). The video-installation encounter is perceived in a particular space. Obviously, if this interval aesthetical relationship needs to be explicitly received, the installation environment is very important (Tan, 2008), so without the presence of installation space, it can be difficult to decipher the true meaning and value of the moving-image content.

Tsai concentrated his memories of the old things and the fast-paced current life in this video installation art. Moonlight on the River shows a disappearing world, and the moving image of the two chasing dogs on the banks of the river at dawn is the only thing that can be focused by the audience at the moment, while the moonlight on the river can be interpreted as a symptom of a powerless world. The viewer, as an individual of the soul who is outside the compressed space can find the value of the existence of old memories. Through this video art, Tsai wants to express the loss of contemporary society, an experience that is created in a strange zone and exists in an uncertain form, which is in order to represent a consciousness of aspires to be awakened (Bordeleau, 2013). Although this creative way brings a seemingly calm video and atmosphere, the audience will receive a disturbing emotion. Tsai applies all the elements together to express his thoughts about the past and the present, and to create an irrational emotional environment with simple materials. This pursuit stems from Tsai’s ingrained interest in emotional attachment (Bordeleau, 2013). In relational aesthetics, Bourriaud (2002) proposed how art can successfully relaunch modern emancipation projects. And how do art push people to redefine cultural connotation? Tsai, with his artistic practice, uses the reversal of time to promote people’s emotion to keep moving on, in this way to let the audience re-perceive the social culture. Meanwhile, it completes the mission that the works of art need to be a symbolic role in the social culture, and represents a social interstice in addition to materiality (Bourriaud, 2002). Video-art is designed by the artist to organize effectively according to their own reflection, forming a complete dialogue only when in-situ, when the audience interprets the relationship between the setting, context, image and themselves (Tan, 2008).

三. Instant Communication with audiences

When the social interstice is expressed in an artistic way, the final step is to pass it on to viewers. The relational aesthetics without the receiver is incomplete. Especially for video art, viewers don’t exist independently, but part of a work of art.

In Tsai’s video installation artworks, the It’s a Dream is able to highlight the characteristics of the instant community. In Tsai’s 23-minute exhibition version of It’s a Dream, chairs have been removed from an old cinema in Malaysia, then be positioned in the exhibition space allowing visitors to sit down and experience something of Tsai’s memory of old Malaysia. Posters and film release schedules are posted at the entrance. Set up like a cinema show, tickets are taken and the audience waits in line to enter the exhibition hall and sit down, the lights are dimmed, and the film is projected on a white wall. The woman in the video ate a string of pear and peacefully pass it to a row of men sitting behind her, but she did not look back at him.

In modern society, there are many movie theaters which bear the memories and cultures of the past facing demolition. Through this scene reproduction, Tsai wants to convey to his audience that people’s way of life has changed, but few people are aware of its changed. This information waits in the installation’s space for the visitor to perceive and receive. In this process, the creators expect the visitor to complete the final step in the production of the artwork, to be perceived and communicated.

四. Conclusion

Tsai’s artworks allow audiences to complete a conversation. His creative process, in the gallery context, is the construction of relational aesthetics and the reflection of social issues. He conducts his own artistic practice in a radical blueprint for the future, allowing memory and hope to communicate and affect each other in his work (Bordeleau, 2013). In order for his society reflection smoothly mediating the spectators, motivating participants to receive and process information by using a variety of art materials and forms. Tsai’s artistic concept and process correspond to the relational aesthetics of Bourriaud. Relational aesthetics reflect the artists’ observation of human society and culture. This means artworks are coded as representations of social interstices. If the artistic encounter is mediated successfully, communication will occur in the zone of viewing the work, which also known as the instant community. It is precisely because video-art possesses the characteristic of interactivity, is
影视艺术 2021-07

（上接第90页）multi-media in nature and is designed to challenge the viewer, that it opens up the space for communication and reflection to occur. Through the analysis of relational aesthetics, art and artists are important transmitters and mediators of sociocultural ideas, in the realm of video-art in particular.

References: