

Peng Feng

ON WORKS AND WORKINGS OF ART:
A PERSPECTIVE FROM COMPARATIVE AESTHETICS

Abstract

The ontology of artworks tells us that a work of art, for example, a painting, cannot be identified as either physical or mental object. By the same token, this paper argues the working of art or artistic labor cannot be identified as either physical or mental labor. However, the works and workings of art are regarded as either physical or mental in the prevailing aesthetic theory. The main reason is that classical Western metaphysics is bifurcated. However, traditional Chinese division of ontological categories is not a bifurcation but a trifurcation, which consists of *dao*道, *xiang*象, and *qi*器. This tripartite distinction avoids substantivism, while at the same time providing a framework that encompasses both the objective and the subjective face of the art work, by means of a dynamic exchange between the two poles. This paper shifts our perspective from classical Western metaphysics to traditional Chinese metaphysics and sets up a dialogue between Chinese and Western aesthetics. The ontological status of works and workings of art is neither physical nor mental, but the “betweenness” of the two.

The ontology of art, or more precisely the ontology of artworks, is a hot topic in contemporary aesthetics. Its central question, as conceived by Amie Thomasson, is this: “what sort of entities are works of art? Are they physical objects, ideal kinds, imaginary entities, or something else?”¹ The question is not easy to answer. The diverse and even incompatible answers put us in a quandary. In this essay, I try to answer this question from a perspective drawn from traditional Chinese aesthetics. Further, I will clarify the characteristics of workings of art based on my position about the ontological status of works of art. My question is: what kinds of labor are workings of art? Are they physical or mental, creative or mechanical, enjoying or suffering? Although art includes various artforms, such as dance, music, drama, sculpture, painting, photography, film, and so on, in this essay I will focus on painting as an exemplary case.

¹ Thomasson 2004: 78.

1. *Xiang* and ontology of artworks

A work of art, such as a painting, can be reduced to neither a physical nor a spiritual object. Therefore, it seems to be difficult to locate its ontological status within the bifurcation characteristic of traditional Western metaphysics, according to which entities are divided into mind-independent physical objects on the one hand, and mental objects on the other hand. As Comasson points out:

[T]o accommodate paintings, sculptures, and the like, we must give up the simple bifurcation between mind-independent and mind-internal entities, and acknowledge the existence of entities that depend in different ways on both the physical world and human intentionality.²

However, if we shift our perspective from classical Western metaphysics to traditional Chinese metaphysics, the ontology of artworks seems less problematic. The Chinese division of ontological categories is not a bifurcation but a trifurcation, which consists of *dao* 道, *xiang* 象, and *qi* 器. Furthermore, this tripartite distinction is at once a way of avoiding substantivism and at the same time provides a framework for encompassing both the objective and the subjective face of the art work, by means of a three-way relationship. According to classical Western bifurcation, we can say, roughly, that *dao* is similar to the abstract or mental object, and *qi*, the concrete or physical object. This bifurcation leaves no room for *xiang*, which seems to be a “third entity” existing between the physical and the mental, but its main function is to create a dynamic exchange between the two poles and to ease the confrontation between them.

What is *xiang*? According to Pang Pu’s interpretation, “*xiang* can be divided into two kinds: objective *xiang* and subjective *xiang*”.³ Roughly speaking, objective *xiang* means “phenomenon” and subjective *xiang*, “representation”. Therefore, *xiang* cannot be interpreted as simply “image”. As François Jullien points out, “the same Chinese term, *xiang*, means both ‘image’ and ‘phenomenon’”.⁴ Jullien further states that, “Chinese thought, then, never entirely separates the fact of coming about (as phenomenon) from that of reproducing (as image).”⁵ Since *xiang* can be both subjective and objective, Pang Pu locates *xiang* between *dao* and *qi*. He writes, “‘what is beyond form is called *dao*, and what is beneath form is called *qi*.’ In addition of *dao* and *qi*, there is *xiang*, that is ‘what is within the appearing of form.’”⁶ Since *xiang* is located in between *dao* and *qi*, it is neither

² Comasson 2004: 89.

³ Pang 1995: 230.

⁴ Jullien 2009: 227.

⁵ Jullien 2009: 228.

⁶ Pang 1995: 231.

dao nor *qi*. On the one hand, *dao* itself is invisible. *Dao* appears within *xiang*. In this sense, *xiang* is the manifestation of *dao*. On the other hand, *qi* has its fixed or concrete *xing* 形 (form), which *xiang* lacks. *Xiang* appears vividly and changes constantly but does not crystallize into *qi*, which is equipped with, or connected to, a fixed or concrete *xing*.

Within the trifurcation of *dao-xiang-qi*, the ontological status of artworks can be appropriately clarified. The status of artworks is neither *dao* nor *qi* but *xiang*. As Pang Pu points out, “*xiang* is the soul of poetry’s ‘image-thinking’”.⁷

2. Betweenness

Since the ontological status of artworks is *xiang* that is located in between *dao* and *qi*, Chinese artists strive to capture the “betweenness” (*xiang*) rather than the poles (*dao* or *qi*). Jullien highlights that Chinese artists take the “betweenness” or *xiang* as their object by saying that:

Painters and poets in China do not paint things to show them better, and, by displaying them before our eyes, to bring forth their presence. Rather, they paint them between “there is” and “there is not,” present-absent, half-light, half-dark, at once light-at once dark.⁸

In order to manifest the “betweenness” or *xiang*, Chinese painters prefer to depict things in transition between presence and absence – an object displaying the character of betweenness. At the beginning of his book *The Great Image Has No Form*, Jullien quotes Qian Wenshi’s remarks on landscape painting. Jullien interprets Qian’s remarks as follows:

Rather than figure states that are distinct—in both senses, sharp and in opposition, rain / fair weather—the Chinese painter paints modification. He grasps the world beyond its distinctive features and in its essential transition. Each aspect implies the other, even when they are mutually exclusive, and one is discreetly at work even as the other is still on display. Behind the curtain of rain sweeping the horizon, one already senses, by the breaking light, that the inclement weather is going to lift. In the same way, fair weather soon sends out a few precursory signs that it will be clouding over.⁹

In short, the Chinese painter prefers to depict a landscape in a transitional state, for example, in transition between fair weather and rain. Such a landscape displays the character of betweenness.

⁷ Pang 1995: 235.

⁸ Jullien 2009: 4.

⁹ Jullien 2009: 1-2.

However, Jullien faces difficulties when he talks indiscriminately about the painted object and the painting/depiction itself. According to Jullien, a landscape in its transition between fair weather and rain is itself *xiang*. It is between *dao* and *qi*, presence and absence. If this is the case, then there would be no need for an artist to paint it, since the object of the painting would itself already be a work of art. Furthermore, such a painting, being a depiction of *xiang* in this way, could be described through the terms of imitation or beautification that are more readily associated with Western art theory. Although we may talk about rivers and mountains as if they were pictures or images, this is not actually the case. The ontological distinction between a landscape itself and a landscape painting is of crucial importance. No contemporary aesthetician can ignore the distinction. As Nelson Goodman points out, “A Constable painting of Marlborough Castle is more like any other picture than it is like the Castle, yet it represents the Castle and not another picture—not even the closest copy”.¹⁰ Ontologically, paintings and castles belong to different kinds of thing. Their ontological status must not be confused. Although some painting techniques and styles, such as *trompe l’oeil* and hyper-naturalistic painting, can be mistaken for the objects they represent, this experience is, after all, an illusion. The fact that two objects can give us the same visual experience does not guarantee that they are of the same kind.

Even if we ignore the distinction at an ontological level, adopting a naïve realism and equating a painting directly with the thing it depicts, paintings and things are not the same. This is a common mistake in Western art theory. The fact that two objects can give us the same visual experience does not guarantee that they are of the same kind.

very different from that of Jullien. It is the former, not the latter, that has been taken as the mainstream view of traditional Chinese aesthetics of painting.

3. Twofoldness

Relating closely to the idea of “betweenness” is the theory of “twofoldness” that Richard Wollheim and others have been developing since the 1970s. In Wollheim’s twofoldness hypothesis, two elements are distinguished: the object and the medium of painting. Wollheim writes:

at the seeing appropriate to representations permits simultaneous attention to what is represented and to the representation, to the object and to the medium, and therefore instantiates seeing-in rather than seeing-as, follows from a stronger thesis which is true of representations. The stronger thesis is that, if I look at a representation as a representation, then it is not just permitted to, but required of, me that I attend simultaneously to object and medium.¹²

In Wollheim’s writing, “object” means the subject-matter of a painting, and “medium” refers to its physical marks. For example, the object of Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* are the sunflowers themselves, whilst the medium are the pigments that have been used to create the painting.

However, Wollheim never articulated how twofoldness works. Based on his body-mind relationship hypothesis, Michael Polanyi tries to clarify its mechanism.¹³ According to Polanyi, our awareness of an object can be distinguished into focal awareness and subsidiary awareness. These are functions of mind and body, respectively. Twofoldness comes from the cooperation between our mind’s focal awareness of the object and body’s subsidiary awareness of the medium. Aesthetic appreciation of painting involves the cooperation between body and mind.

4. Art working as mental labor

If artworks can be classified as between spiritual and material object, can art workings, by the same token, be classified as between mental and physical labor? Historically, the classification of art workings has varied from time to time and from theory to theory. Art workings can be classified as either physical or mental labor. According to Paul Kristeller’s research, the arts in the Middle Ages were divided into two groups: the seven liberal arts and the seven mechanical arts.

¹² Wollheim 1980: 142.

¹³ Polanyi 1970: 655-669.

the Modern System of the Arts (or Fine Arts) were not grouped together but divided into those two groups. Music and poetry were belonged to the liberal arts, while painting, sculpture, architecture, drama, and so on were classified as mechanical arts.¹⁴ Generally speaking, people labored with their minds in the liberal arts, whilst in the mechanical arts they did so with their bodies. Because the artforms that today make up the Fine Arts were classified in the Middle Ages as belonging to both liberal and mechanical arts, it is not easy to determine from this classification whether art workings are physical or mental labor.

However, the trend in the development of art workings seem to be from physical labor to mental one. In Croce-Collingwoodian aesthetics, art is conceived to be nothing but the intuition, imagination, or expression that only takes place in the artist's mind. Collingwood writes:

A work of art need not be what we should call a real thing. It may be what we call an imaginary thing. A disturbance, or a nuisance, or a navy, or the like, is not created at all until it is created as a thing having its place in the real world. But a work of art may be completely created when it has been created as a thing whose only place is in the artist's mind.¹⁵

Nevertheless, in Croce-Collingwoodian aesthetics, the significance of physical production of art is not completely denied. A work of art need not be physical, yet physical production is needed to the expression and communication of the imaginative experience. With a painting, for example, Collingwood argues:

What has been asserted is not that the painting is a work of art, which would be as much as to say that the artist's aesthetic activity is identified with painting it; but that its production is somehow necessarily connected with the aesthetic activity, that is, with the creation of the imaginative experience which is the work of art.¹⁶

What I am now asking is not, as Collingwood conceives, "whether, on our theory, there must indeed be such a connection", but how this connection happens. I shall return to this question later. To the extent that Collingwood acknowledges the connection between physical and mental labor in art working, he is far less extreme than contemporary conceptual artists in emphasis on the mental performance. As Sol LeWitt asserts:

¹⁴ Kristeller 1952: 507-508.

¹⁵ Collingwood 1958: 130.

¹⁶ Collingwood 1958: 305.

In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair.¹⁷

is “conceptual turn” in contemporary art is strongly supported by Arthur Danto’s philosophy of art. Danto argues that “[t]o see something as art requires something the eye cannot de[s]cry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld”.¹⁸ Based on this insight, Danto declares, after Hegel, that art has reached its end. According to Danto, contemporary art, such as Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box*, “only raised the question,” i.e. the question of discernibility. However, “it lacked the power to rise to an answer” and so “philosophy was needed”.¹⁹ In this sense, art can be said to turn into philosophy. Interestingly, Danto admits that the indiscernibility problem raised by art can be solved in the mode of Chan Buddhism, of which Danto regards as philosophy rather than religion. Danto recounts one paragraph of the *yulu* (recorded conversations) of Qingyuan in his writing several times:

Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters. But now that I have got the very substance I am at rest. For it is just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters.²⁰

If art is identified with philosophy, especially with Chan Buddhism, then art is evaporated as an atmosphere of theory, and art workings, accordingly, become a kind of mental labor, i.e., the meditation of Chan Buddhism. As Elisabeth Schellekens points out, the conceptual turn in contemporary art “not only affects the ontology of the conceptual artwork but also profoundly alters the role of the artist by casting her in the role of thinker rather than object-maker”.²¹

5. The revival of physical labor

Like Collingwood, Harold Rauschenberg is against equating painting and artifact. However, Rauschenberg takes a completely different direction in developing his view of art. According to Collingwood, the art proper is only an

¹⁷ LeWitt 1967: 80.

¹⁸ Danto 1964: 580.

¹⁹ Danto 1988: 134.

²⁰ Danto 1964: 579.

²¹ Schellekens 2017: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/conceptual-art/#ArtIde>.

imaginative experience in the artist's mind, while in Rauschenberg's view, it is an action or event that cannot be totally controlled by the artist's consciousness.

is action or event is primarily physical rather than mental. In "The American Action Painters", Harold Rosenberg writes:

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act – rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign,

And second, everyone is an actor, including the buyer herself, and there is no reason for the buyer to buy only the painter-as-actor.

Mikel Dufrenne's phenomenology of aesthetic experience can partly eliminate our doubts about Rosenberg's action theory. Dufrenne asserts, "the painting is not before his [the painter's] eyes, but in his hands".²⁶ The action is crucial to painting, because it manifests the aesthetic depth of both subject and object. The poles of subject and object bifurcated in the real world can reach their reconciliation in the sensuous element in painting. Dufrenne argues that "the sensuous is an act common both to the sensing being and to what is sensed".²⁷ Without the action, the physical labor, the painter cannot reach this aesthetic depth, i.e., the sensuous, in which the reconciliation of subject and object can be achieved. The purpose of painting is neither to represent the external world nor to express the internal one but reveal the aesthetic depth shared by both the external and the internal. Dufrenne calls this depth "pre-real" or "Nature". He argues:

is pre-real, inasmuch as it does not attain the level of the real and is not negated by determinations constituting it, is an archi-real or, if one prefers, a surreal... It is the pre-real that is pregnant with the possible, that expresses a possible world. Lacking expression—incapable of producing aesthetic experience—are the objects that do not call upon us to grasp them as pre-real, that will never be anything but real.²⁸

According to Dufrenne, the pre-real is more real than the real at least in the phenomenological sense. The pre-real touches the original of the world, which Dufrenne called "Nature". The pre-real and Nature are a special real that breeds the possibilities of the real world. Dufrenne argues:

It is a real that is the basis of everything given, founded within it. This real is the hearth of all possibilities; it is Nature as *poesis*. So we can say [...] that painting is a workshop in which primary processes exhibit themselves, but if these processes are in effect unassignable to any particular subject, it is because they are the very movement of appearing, and must be attributed to Nature. Of this Nature, since it is prior to man – it produces him – man has no idea: as soon as he is there, and he is always there, Nature becomes world. But in this experience of the pre-real, in which he almost returns to the moment of his birth, man can sense that ground sustaining him. Nature is a kind of pre-pre-real, and the possible worlds evoked by the expressivity of the pre-real attest to its depth and power; they give us a sense of Nature, and thereby cause us to discover the exterior world, since this world is the visible, that is, the face that Nature assumes when man is there to see. Thus the appearing of the painting to some extent mimics the appearing of Nature, the advent of being to appearing.²⁹

²⁶ Dufrenne 1987: 148.

²⁷ Dufrenne (1953) tr en. 1973: 48.

²⁸ Dufrenne 1987:144.

²⁹ Dufrenne 1987:145.

For painting, the key is neither representation nor expression, but the very object of representation and expression, i.e., the depth of the subject and the world. According to Dufrenne, painting, in a sense like philosophy, aims to reveal the truth of the world that is not the real but the possible. The real realizes the possible and at the same time hides the possible. Painting cannot reveal the possible, the pre-real, or Nature by way of mimicking the real or expressing an imaginative experience. It is only through the action of painters that the aesthetic depth of both subject and object becomes visible from the invisible.

Because painting is an action, it has an advantage over philosophy in revealing the pre-real. Action, unlike thinking, is not bound by the knowledge or preconceptions in hand and therefore can lead to the experience of astonishment that philosophy lacks. John Cogan argues:

There is an experience in which it is possible for us to come to the world with no knowledge or preconceptions in hand; it is the experience of astonishment. The “knowing” we have in this experience stands in stark contrast to the “knowing” we have in our everyday lives, where we come to the world with theory and “knowledge” in hand, our minds already made up before we ever engage the world. However, in the experience of astonishment, our everyday “knowing,” when compared to the “knowing” that we experience in astonishment, is shown up as a pale epistemological imposter and is reduced to mere opinion by comparison.³⁰

Dufrenne’s aesthetic experience is similar to this experience of astonishment. It comes from action rather than from imagination or thinking. The action of painters is different from the action of ordinary people in that the former touches the pre-real whilst the latter stays in the real. The reason buyers buy the painter-as-actor is because the painter makes the aesthetic depth visible to us from the invisible.

6. *The reconciliation of physical and mental labor*

Since traditional Chinese metaphysics prefers trifurcation to bifurcation, dynamic exchange to fixed opposition, physical and mental labor in art are not either-or. They can coexist without conflict. In “Remarks of Painting Bamboo,” Zheng Xie (1693-1766) writes:

During my stay in a riverside inn in a pleasant autumn, I got up one morning and walked out to see a bamboo grove. I found it wreathed with mist, filled with dew and shadows. The whole atmosphere was coating among the branches and leaves. As I was there contemplating on it, an inner drive to paint was stirred up and thus activated within my mind. As usual the bamboo inside the mind was not the same as it was inside

³⁰ Cogan 2006: <https://iep.utm.edu/phen-red/>.

the eyes. When I grinded the ink and prepared the paper. When the brush touched the paper, I made changes quickly, and so the bamboo drawn out by the hand was not the same as it was inside the mind.³¹

Zheng identifies three kinds of bamboo, namely, bamboo-inside-the-eyes, bamboo-inside-the-mind, and bamboo-inside-the-hand. Painting is thought as neither imagination nor action but the cooperation between observation, conception, and action. Painting should reach a balance of the three.

Comparing with Western painting, Chinese painting especially emphasizes the aesthetic property of writing. To learn painting, one must learn its language, i.e. the brush-and-ink. As Shen Zongqian (1736-1820) writes:

The beginner must first ask on seeing a work whether this is a [good] brush-stroke or not, and whether it is [controlled] ink-work or not. If it is not, it is not a "painting" even with the best composition. If it is, then it does not matter whether it is heavy or thin, or has many strokes or few. For this mastery of brush and ink has this marvelous power to make interesting lines that are alive, even without much experience of [the depicted objects]. [If it is not a good brush-and-ink,] even if one has travelled and seen a great deal and read a great deal, it does not matter to painting!³²

Chinese painters emphasize writing (brush-stroke) because it is only through writing the meaning can be expressed. What needs to be emphasized is that the meaning is shared by the painter and the painted object, which is somehow close to Dufrenne's idea that the aesthetic depth is the common ground of both subject and object. As Zhu Yunming (1461-1527) writes:

What is difficult to painting is not representing the shape but grasping the meaning. If one grasp the meaning and express it, the things can be represented on a small piece of silk. It is not so hard at all! Someone says, "Plants and trees are heartless, how can they have meaning?" This man doesn't know that everything between heaven and earth has its meaning of living. The Nature's creation is too mysterious, strong, and expansive to be described.³³

When Roger Fry talks about the aesthetic pleasure derived from the calligraphic line, he seems to emphasize that the line can manifest the subject aspect of the meaning. Fry writes:

The calligraphic line is the record of a gesture, and is, in fact, so pure and complete a record of that gesture that we can follow it with the same kind of pleasure as we follow

³¹ Zheng 1986: 1173.

³² Shen 1967: 163. The English translation is modified by the author.

³³ Zhu 1985: 1072.

the movements of a dancer. It tends more than any other quality of design to express the temperamental and subjective aspect of the idea...³⁴

However, when Wang Lü (1332-1391) argues the relation between shape and meaning, the object aspect is emphasized as well. Wang writes:

Although painting is the representation of shape, the emphasis is on the expression of meaning. If the meaning is insufficient, one may say that a painting is not even representational. Nevertheless, meaning exists in form; if one discards the shape, where can one find the meaning? Thus, one who realizes the shape has a painting in which the shape is filled with meaning. What kind of representation is possible if one loses the shape of things?³⁵

The subject and object aspect of meaning cannot be separated in Walter Benjamin's interpretation of *xieyi*. According to Benjamin, there is an antinomy between literature and painting, thought and image. However, Chinese painting seems to find a resolution to this antinomy. By means of *xieyi*, "painting of ideas (*peinture d'idée*)," Chinese painter "signifies thinking by way of resemblance" and finds the "image-thought (*image-pensée*)." There is not a resemblance but a multitude of resemblances that are always in motion and change.

These virtual resemblances, which are expressed through each paintbrush stroke, form a mirror in which thought is reflected in this atmosphere of resemblance or resonance. In fact, these resemblances are not mutually exclusive; they become entangled and constitute a whole that necessitates thought, just like the breeze necessitates a veil of gauze.³⁶

Although Benjamin's writing is a little obscure and the mechanism of *xieyi* (writing meaning) is not clarified, we are persuaded by him to believe that the un-exhibited meaning is somehow exhibited as image thought the cursive writing.

The aesthetic merits of calligraphic line are not only derived from its expression of "the temperamental and subjective aspect of the idea" as Fry indicates, but also from the multitude of resemblances through which the internal meaning of painted objects is exhibited.

Painting, and by extension every form of art, is the cooperation of body and mind. Therefore, the working of art cannot be split into physical labor and mental labor. On the contrary, it is through art that the otherwise divided types of labor can be united again. Chinese aestheticians appreciate the *xieyi* painting because it can bring both body and mind into play.

³⁴ Fry 1919: 62.

³⁵ Wang 1993: 61. The English translation is modified by the author.

³⁶ Benjamin 2018: 190.

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