

Artistic License and Buddhist Aesthetics

By Liu Yunchang

ABSTRACT

A widely controversial artistic performance was conducted in 2001 in China. The plot was as follows: an "artist" patronized a prostitute and had sex with her. The prostitute later was pregnant. After three months, the "artist" let her abort the fetus, steam-cooked the fetus, and ate it.

It brought about fierce debates in China on the relationship between art and morality. The public, artists, professionals proclaimed contrasting views, causing a great deal of confusion. Even the critics, who were supposed to lead the masses and media's viewpoints, failed to provide satisfactory guidance.

The relationship of art and morality is an important and significant topic in the history of art. When art "reached" such a stage where eating a three-months-old fetus, purposefully, was claimed a "piece of art," the situation is serious. There are similar cases of this sort of performance, both in the east and the west. The predicament is: "Should art be orientated by morality?" and "What is real art?" We are compelled to answer these questions.

In this paper, I try to adopt Buddhist philosophy to analyze morality issues, the origin of aesthetic value in art and the nature of the dispute between them.

Artistic License

A Chinese Performance Artist, Zhu Yu (朱昱 1970-present), conducted a widely controversial performance on 17 Oct 2001, in Shanghai 3th Art Festival. The plot of the play was that he patronized a prostitute and as a result she was pregnant. After three months, he made her abort the fetus, then steam-cooked the fetus, and ate it. The whole process was shot in a series of photos and was claimed to be a "piece of art."

On Jan. 2, 2002, the British TV station, Channel 4, televised this "astonishing art event", and a female member of the British parliament said she was totally shocked about it.¹

It brought about heated arguments and discussion not only in China, but also in other places where many were appalled by this series of photos. Most of the public, artists and critics condemned its violence, cruelty and illegal action. People who supported it mostly were so-called "artists." Taking some other similar cases into consideration in that year in China, some critics pointed out: "The theme of Performance Art in 2001 was indulged in the pleasure of blood, sex, corpse, and violence."²

This artist response of the artist was as follows:

I am always confused by the question: why man cannot eat another man? Which religion has any doctrine to ban this? Which country's law has a rule to prohibit this?

The only thing that does not allow us to do so is morality. And what is morality? The morality is simply something that can be changed randomly according to the needs of humans in history. So this leads to my two statements: first, that cannibalism is a kind of behavior which is out of the restriction of religion and morality if it does not offend any laws; second, it is the right time now for me to declare to the world that my intention of doing this is to challenge the moral concept which claims humans cannot eat another human's body by exhibition the eating an infant's body.³

The real purpose behind this performance remains doubtful. It definitely, however, is an extreme and unusual case of such kind of art. But, as already mentioned, it is not an isolated case. Many "artists" from different countries have made similar performances. Some critics pointed out that this type of art performance has existed for several decades in western countries, and its origin is much earlier.⁴ In fact, as we know, the disputes about the inter-relationships among art, religion, morality and law took place very frequently and resulted in much confusion in many fields in history.

What I am concerned about very much is why and how "art" has come to the stage that cannibalism is deliberately promoted by eating a fetus. General public's confusion was about the question "What is real art?" as called "artists" consider such astonishing cruel action as "artwork!" It is serious because it is not an isolated case both in the east and the west. Cannibalism happened mostly under such circumstances in human history when people lacked food and the human body is the only source of food available due to famine, war, natural disasters and so on; it was also practiced by primitive people who are considered to be uncivilized human beings.⁵ The following basic questions come to my mind: Where does the aesthetic value of artwork come from? Is there an inseparable, inherent connection between art and morality?

Factors of Art

Generally, art is considered to be:

"The conscious production or arrangement of sounds, colors, forms, movements, or other elements in a manner that affects the sense of beauty, specifically the production of the beautiful in a graphic or plastic medium," or "High quality of conception or execution, as found in works of beauty, aesthetic value."⁶

There are two main elements in this definition of art:

- 1. Art is the product of the effort of the human mind;**
- 2. The sense of beauty and the aesthetic value are the basic values of art.**

According to Buddhism, it is only the mind that leads us to oral and bodily action. Buddhism has developed its widely, deeply and profoundly understanding of the nature of human beings' existence. It is said that three characteristics of human beings namely intelligence, benevolence, and fortitude make them superior to other living beings.⁷ All three are qualities of the human mind. But at the same time, Buddhism also recognizes that the human mind can also be tainted by delusion, hatred and desires. No other sentient being seem to have both these noble and base characteristics.

According to Buddhism, everything in the cosmos is interdependent. It is the core theory and one of the most important aspects of the Buddhist view of the world. Thought, speech and behavior are also interdependent and arise from our mind. In this sense, all artworks are manifestations of different states of the human mind.

Mind consists of four main aggregates or levels: feeling, perception, volition and consciousness. It seems that all these different levels of mind play different roles in making artworks. For instance, perception and inspiration may be more crucial in stimulating the creation of a piece of artwork. Feeling and imagination are the essential factors for artistic creation. Volition and consciousness are more significant when we produce and finish artwork. The aesthetic value of a piece of artwork, however, may not relate to any one factor. The beauty and aesthetic value are more likely to be associated with the contents or characteristics of the mind. For example, the mind which is sensitive to rhythmic sound may produce a song and the mind which is sensitive to color may be suitable for painting. A grieving heart produces a slow and sad music while a delighted mood or happy feeling make the music joyful and brisk.

Buddhism holds the view that there are wholesome and unwholesome states of the mind. Buddhism starts with the analysis of the human mind and ends with its purification. Delusion, hatred, and greed are unwholesome states of the mind. Wisdom, compassion etc are wholesome states of the mind. Morality has the function to harmonize a single person's mind and action with other people's interests, with the interests of the environment we live in, and the community or society. The moral dimension of an action is determined by the mind.

To begin with, we can conclude that only the wholesome mental states, mainly composed of wisdom and compassion, contribute to the beauty or aesthetic value of art, because such states of mind are open, harmonious, and tolerant. Art reflecting these mind qualities can be shared by others. On the contrary, the unwholesome mind is defensive, selfish, closed, discriminatory and conflictive. Art which features these mental qualities may not be subject to others' appreciation.

Secondly, any piece of artwork comprises two parts, namely: content and form. As earlier stated, only the wholesome mind states could introduce beauty or aesthetic value to a work of art. Wholesome mind states, however, do not create by themselves beauty or aesthetic value. Visiting a patient in a hospital is done with a wholesome state of mind but it not a piece of art. Conscious combination of beauty with form is what produces a work of art.

Aestheticians widely accept that beauty or aesthetic value of art has the characteristics of being soft, regular, rhythmic, symmetric, harmonious, and delicate and so forth. Beauty or aesthetic value derives from the union of suitable forms with wholesome mind states.

Basically, one side of human nature is towards the good, truth and beauty, which creates art. The belief that human beings inherently have such a nature is quite Buddhistic. It is also asserted by other religions and spiritual tradition. Yet, the dark side of human nature sometimes is more prominently present in human community. Here and there, art seems to be a victim of the dark side of human nature.

Buddhism has a very deep understanding of the Human mind and counts centuries of experience in analyzing human events in relation to psychological and emotional factors. Buddhism asserts that the human mind is dominated by an extremely strong image of self-ego. It is in the root of human nature. It is in this sense, I would claim that in the history of art, many artists were unable to find their way out of spiritual confusion because of their egoistic nature. At the same time, artists in general are a group of people who are more sensitive about their demand for spiritual freedom and liberation. The conflict leads to psychological disorder resulting, sometimes, in suicide and personal harm. Their extreme and unbalanced personality, often, prevents them from understanding the true nature of human beings. They do not recognize how their attachment to self-ego affects them. Their sensitivity to image, voice, sound and language enables them produce works of art but without conveying through them the beauty of the cosmos. Lacking a foundation of spiritual seeking, not only artists but also some scientists and philosophers are lost in confusion and struggle to escape out of delusion.

Buddhism, among the world religions, is emphatic in claiming that all human mental creation as well as every phenomenon is a delusion. That is to say that even the beauty of a work of art is sort of delusion of the mind. It needs to be stressed here that Buddhism does not encourage any form of indulgence in sensual pleasure such as listening to music and singing, watching dancing and comic scenes, and such other forms of entertainment, if someone seriously practices the Buddhist way (See the seventh of the Eight and Ten Precepts). It can be concluded that if beauty is the product of a self-ego-oriented mind and works of art respond to individual and personal feelings, morality is the process of regulation and guidance, which deals with the artist's relationship with society, because a conflict between aesthetic value and moral norms is inevitable.

Compared with other types of entertainment, Performance Art is usually presented as an exhibition or a show. Performance Art tend to be different from other types of art because it is more -

- a. *Theme-propelled or theme-focused* in that they reflect strong-willed intentions of an artistic keen to attract the attention and response of the public; and
- b. *Social or public in character* as opposed to private actions in private spaces (even though some may be conducted privately due to some reasons: for example, being legally disallowed or morally unacceptable but still intended for public attention).

As mentioned above, the real purpose of performance under scrutiny in this paper is not explicitly stated by the author. The artist did say, "Nobody has said that we cannot eat a fetus; I just escaped from the gap between morality and law."⁸

If the artist's intentions were wholesome what was the need for "an escape from the gap between morality and law?" The artist also admitted that "If violence is the purpose, this is the end."⁹ Some critics have pointed out that "some of our performance artists are just like the artists in western countries, claiming that their endeavor is only for the sake of art, but they didn't create a piece of artwork seriously to express their own feelings. On the contrary, they advertise themselves and try to

attract the public's attention just for fame and money."¹⁰ There have been other extremely shocking performance art events such as shedding blood, burning IC number on the back of the body, planting grass on the shoulder, pouring human's fat into a river, and vivisectioning the beating heart of a pig etc.¹¹ Even though it cannot be deduced that those artists are violent persons or they have violent intentions, their shows are no doubt violent and anti-human. It is hard to regard them as aesthetic works of art. So, we can be almost sure that the purpose of producing them is far from being wholesome. From the Buddhist point of view, there is no doubt that the art performance under discussion is extremely unwholesome, as morally indefensible are the following:

- a. Improper sexual behavior, paying and having sex with a prostitute;
- b. Making her pregnant but the purpose is not having a child to bring up but to abuse its life;
- c. Killing a living fetus, which has a consciousness – an act that is both immoral and illegal and devoid of conscience; and
- d. Eating a fetus, which is his own child yet to be born.

We actually cannot see any signs of what we call beauty or aesthetic value in this particular case. In this case, it is true that

“When beauty is limited to persons and things, greed and pride are the lots of those who possess them...On the other hand, those, who have set unlimited values on their coveted objects of beauty but are not fortunate enough to possess them, will need great strength and courage to resist their feelings of jealousy and enmity towards those who have the good fortune to possess them.”¹²

Between Artist and Art Interpreter

The artist defended his performance by saying,

“It is simply like having dinner when I ate the fetus.” “It is only a sort of carbohydrate thing from the perspective of chemistry.” “I always care about human nature and divinity. When I put on these photos with the photo of Jesus Christ in my room, I found that nothing useful about Jesus' sacrifice, because human beings are still so evil. Is there any other way for me to express this attitude? No, this (eating fetus) is the only way to express my idea. Maybe there are other ways, but I think if it doesn't have a strong impact on our community, it cannot stimulate us and that is not an effective way.”¹³

Some critics supported his opinion in that “the artist's purpose is to stimulate people to think about human nature and morality.”¹⁴ So his performance needed to be supported as it was piece of art, they said. The artist defended his reasons boldly. Critics supported this “artist” plausibly. The general publics condemned the performance severely. Why were their viewpoints are so divided?

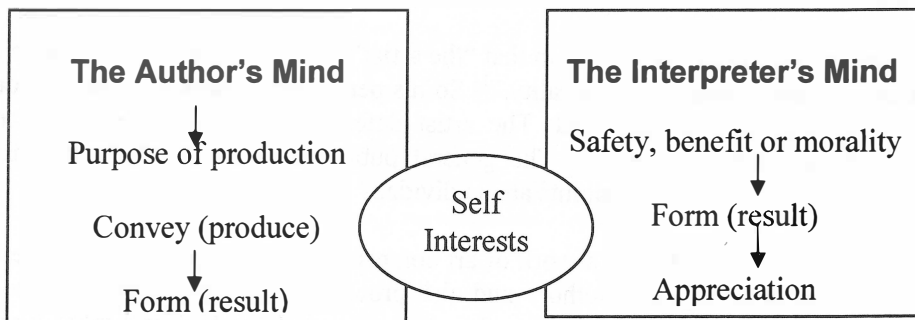
The process of producing a work of art comprises two main parts: the process of creation (conducted by the author) and the process of interpretation (by the art interpreter). We discussed above how the creator's mind worked and what kind of forms adopted in producing a work of art would affect the meaning and aesthetic value of a piece of art. In the same way, in the process of interpretation, an interpreter

appreciates the meaning and aesthetic value of art also through their mind. Mind still is the most important factor in the process of art appreciation. But the starting point and direction between author's mind and the interpreter's mind are different. With the instinctual function of self-centered ego, we trust, satisfy, defend and protect ourselves while projecting our mind to outside objects. This is the primary reason for all kinds of disputes, quarrels, and conflicts. The Buddhist analysis of the mind provides a very effective tool to understand the contrasting disputes brought about by this particular Performance Art event.

When outside things come to our attention, we promptly consider whether it is safe and beneficial or not. Only after we confirm they are safe and beneficial, we take interest and make corresponding judgment. A well-known example in aesthetic theory is that people can appreciate the painting of a tiger because they know it is only a drawing and would not hurt them. This principle applies to the appreciation of any piece of art. Safety and benefit are subconscious considerations, which precede an art interpreter's appreciation of art.

Let us go back to the beginning of our story. Because the Performance Art is a public exhibition of action, the elements of author's individual aesthetic sense and the elements of morality come into play instantly. As criteria of judging an action or behavior, norms of morality are more readily applied. So the chances or possibilities created for such a performance to face challenges from upholders of morality are very great. In my opinion, morality may be the first criterion for the interpreters to evaluate this kind of art. The artistic meaning or aesthetic value of the performance may come to the interpreter's mind only later.

But for this artist, Zhu Yu, no matter what state of mind he was in when he performed, the initial intention apparently was to place his creation before the public without the least consideration of moral consequence or artistic and aesthetic value. He was simply exercising his subjective view of an artist's license to shock, stimulate or enliven his audience. So, if we compare these two different subjective approaches to a work of art by the artist and the art interpreter respectively, we do discover two different mind-sets involved in the production of art, on the one hand, and the interpretation of art, on the other. The two different mind-sets can be illustrated as follows:



Both start with each party's own interests. Egoism – or less strongly, individuality – is the only reason why so many arguments, disagreements and conflicts arose in this case among artists, publishers, interpreters and critics.

Conclusion

The Buddhist philosophical and psychological analysis of the human mind provides us with an effective tool

- to give another explanation besides the position of morality in art and the origin of beauty or aesthetic value of art, and
- to understand how the disputes among artists, interpreters, critics and the public arise.

Although the questions raised are actually quite complicated and need interdisciplinary study requiring a great deal of explanation, I believe that we could benefit a lot from the Buddhist exploration of the working of the human mind. At least, in this particular case, I have been assisted by my understanding of Buddhist philosophy to develop a clearer attitude towards this highly controversial public event.

Notes

¹ BBC World Service, “中國前衛藝術在英引爭議 (the Controversy about Chinese Modern Art in Britain),” [BBC CHINESE.com](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/chinese/news/newsid2615000/26157112.stm), 17 Mar 2005 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/chinese/news/newsid2615000/26157112.stm>>.

² “2001 年的行为艺术沉醉于血腥、色情、尸体和暴虐的快感之中，对伤害的迷恋成为一段时间以来行为艺术的主题。” See Lifang 李舫, “行为艺术年里说说行为与艺术(Some Comments in the Year of Performance Art),” www.artsbird.com, 17 Mar. 2005 <<http://www.artsbird.com/ch/news/artsnews1.php?thisid=6142>>.

³ “一个问题一直困扰着我们——那就是人为什么不可以食人？有哪一个民族的宗教在教义中规定了不可以食人？又有哪个国家的法律有不可食人的条文？只有道德，而道德是什么呢？道德无非是人类发展中根据自身所谓人性需要可以随意改变的东西。从此可以得出两个结论：只要是用非犯罪手段的食人行为是完全不受人类社会宗教、法律的约束的；现在是我向全世界公开说明自己的观点、自己的意图并拿我自己的食人行为来对抗关于不可食人的人类道德观念的时候。” See “中国前卫艺术的穷途末路 (The End of Chinese Modern Art),” www.cnarts.net 中国艺术品网, 1 Jan. 2001 <[www.cnarts.net, artreview/artindows/Chineseartwork](http://www.cnarts.net/artreview/artindows/Chineseartwork)>.

⁴ Lifang 李舫, “Behavior and Art 行为与艺术,” www.people.com.cn 人民日报社人民网, 15 Feb 2001 <<http://www.people.com.cn/GB/paper464/4750/519528.html>>.

⁵ “a. 作为食物（营养）补充 (as a source of food or nutrition). b. 作为危急时（饥馑、战争、灾难等）食物补充 (emergency food sources: famine, war, disaster). c. 作为日常食物补给 (a daily food source). d. 作为美食 (as a delicious food). e. 作为宗教祭礼和仪式的象征 (a symbol of ritual). f. 基于憎恨或基于爱情 (because of the hatred and love mood). g. 医疗行为（人体作为药品或药材） (as a source of medicine). h. 猎奇事件 (seeking novelty).” See “comments about the situations when cannibalism happened in the history,” <http://www.ursky.com> 天空网, 海阔天空论坛, 6 Mar 2001 <<http://www.ursky.com>, <http://bbs.ursky.com/cgi-bin/post.cgi?action=copyl&forum81&topic=1131&postn>>.

⁶ “Art,” <http://www.yourdictionary.com>, and “Aesthetics.” [Encyclopædia Britannica](http://www.encyclopedia.com), 2005 Encyclopædia Britannica Online, 18 Mar. 2005 <<http://www.search.eb.com/eb/>>

[article?tocId=9106009>](#).

⁷ Yin-Shun, 成佛之道 (*Cheng fo zhi dao*, The Way to Buddhahood), Wing H. Yeung, trans., (Taiwan: Wisdom Publications, 1998), 48.

⁸ “我利用道德和法律之间的空间，从事这方面的表演。” Lianhe Zaobao, International news, 31 Dec. 2002 <[www.zaobao.com](#)>.

⁹ “如果以暴力为目的，这个行为可以说确已走到头了。” Yang Ruichun 杨瑞春，“行为艺术：病态大全(Performance Art: Morbid Art),” <[http://www.sd-design.com/new_page_13.htm](#)>.

¹⁰ “我们的行为艺术家与西方的行为艺术家一样，常常标榜自己是搞纯艺术的苦行僧，似乎与金钱无关。但是他们却不是关在房屋里自我发泄，自我消遣，而是到处张罗宣传，招徕观众，以引起注意，达到名利双收的目的。” See “Performance Art: More Difficult to Understand (行为艺术：越来越看不懂),” [www.ChinaVisual.com](#), 18 Mar 2002 <[www.ChinaVisual.com / homepage/art/pioneer/views comments/contents](#)>.

¹¹ “行为艺术在某种程度上充满血腥、变态、暴力、色情、虐待和白虐的味道，继割肉、放血、玩尸体、食人肉、向河水里倾倒人油之后，某些行为艺术家将行为艺术的表达方式推向极端，于是一些充满了暴力和变态的行为开始以艺术的面目登堂入室，如切割自身放血、火焰背肉、在手臂上种花、将自己的皮肤‘移植’在猪身上等自戕行为，公然展出连体婴尸、吃死婴等耸人听闻的暴虐行为。” See Lifang 李舫，“行为艺术年里说说行为与艺术(Some Comments in the Year of Performance Art),” [www.artsbird.com](#), 17 Mar. 2005 <[http://www.artsbird.com/ch/news/artsnews1.php?thisid=6142](#)>.

¹² Dhammavihari, “Buddhism and Beauty,” in “BuddhaNet BBS”, the Buddhist Bulletin Board, Buddha Dhamma Meditation Assoc., 18 Mar. 2005 <[http://departments.colgate.edu/greatreligions/pages/buddhanet/genbuddhism/dv/beauty.txt](#)>.

¹³ “那就是很普通的一顿晚饭”。“从化学的角度来看，那不就是碳水化合物吗”。“朱昱自称是一个基督徒，他称自己一直在关注人性和神性的问题，而当自己的这张照片和基督受难的照片放在一起时，他发现基督的行为是无效的，因为人类还是这么恶，有没有其他的手段？没有，这可能是表达我想法的唯一途径，通过别的方式也许也能传达，但我认为如果没有强的冲击力，不能刺激人的思考，就是无效传达。” Yang Ruichun 杨瑞春，“行为艺术：病态大全(Performance Art: Morbid Art),” <[http://www.sd-design.com/new_page_13.htm](#)>.

¹⁴ “这段引言至少说明：一，他首先确认‘食人’是一种‘恶’；二，他赞成‘人类还这么恶’；三，基督善行未能改变这种‘恶’；四，他‘食人’的目的不是为充饥，也不是为品味‘美食’，而是想通过‘强的冲击力’的有效手段，刺激人的思考。思考什么？思考人性，思考道德，思考人的‘恶行’何以恶到如此程度，思考如何改变人的‘恶行’。” See Jia Fangzhou 贾方舟，“善意的‘艺术’与血腥的‘美食’ (Compassionate ‘Art’ and Bloody ‘Cate’),” 中国艺术视窗 (*Chinese art windows*), 14 Aug. 2001 <[www.cnartw.com/homepage/academic forum](#)>.

Bibliography

- Walpola Rahula 1971 *What the Buddha Taugh.*, (B.P.S.), Kandy
- Premasiri P.D. 1990 'Ethics' (Article), Colombo
- Wickramasinghe Martin 1964 *Buddhism and Culture.* Colombo
- Dhirasekera J 1980 *Buddhism and Beauty*, Bodhi Leaves, (B.P.S.) Kandy
- Kariyawasam A.G.. S. 1968 'Beauty' (Article), Colombo
- Kalupahana David 1976 *Buddhist Philosophy*, University of Hawaii (Honolulu)
- Dharmasiri Gunapala 1986 *Fundamentals of Buddhist Ethics*, Buddhist Research Society (Singapore)
- Butr-Indr Siddhi 1979 *The Social Philosophy of Buddhism*, Mahamakut University (Bangkok)
- Qi Zhixiang *Buddhist Aesthetics*,
<http://www.jcedu.org/fjwh/meixue/03.htm>.
 《<佛教美学导论>论：在反美中建构美学》, 戒幢佛学教育网
- Jingkong *The Revival of Cultural and Religion.* 《文化复兴与宗教》, 净空法师, 戒幢佛学教育网。
- 中国古典研究会主编 1994 *The Relationship between Literature and Buddhism*, China Classical Literature Association, Taibei, Xuesheng Book House, 1994. 《文学与佛学关系》, , 台北, 学生书局
- Sun Changwu 1988 *Buddhism and Chinese Literature*, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1998. 《佛教与中国文学》, 孙昌武著, 上海人民出版社