

MULTIPLE IDENTITIES OF BORDERLINE CASES IN ART

Jean Lin

ABSTRACT

When the borderline cases of art occur in non-art categories, the debate of artistic status arises not only with regard to the individual cases but also with regard to the category to which they belong. The identity of the individual case tends to be defined in connection to the category it belongs to. It tends to formulate that, if the individual case is art, then the entire category is also art, and if the category is not art, then the individual case is also not art. Such a view inevitably hampers the artistic status of works arising from the non-art categories. This article argues that the individual cases and their belonging categories need not be strictly interlocking and that they could possess multiple identities depending on the context that they are present. Thus the point shifts from whether the case is or is not art in its absolute sense to 'when' is it art.

KEYWORDS

Borderline of Art, Ikebana, Molecular Gastronomy, Non-Western Art, Applied Art, Artistic Identity

INTRODUCTION

The central view of this article is that individual cases and their belonging categories need not be strictly interlocking upon debating their artistic status. It will argue that the borderline cases occurring outside of the art institution could possess both identities of art and non-art, depending on the context or institution they are present.

While similar claims have already been made, for example, in the discourse of readymade¹, the scope of this article will especially focus on applied arts and non-Western arts. The situation is different between objects such as snow shovels and instances belonging to applied arts such as cuisine. For example, it is unlikely that snow shovels get mistaken as artwork or that people so frequently want to call them art in everyday situations. On the other hand, cuisines are often compared with art and are commonly called art. This is because the categorical notion of snow shovel and art are contextually distant, while that of cuisine and art is close. Accordingly, it seems relatively easy for people to separate the identity of the snow shovel in the museum and the snow shovel in a garage, while cuisine people are tempted to interlock the identities of the cuisine in a museum and the cuisine in a restaurant.

Many applied and non-Western arts after the avant-garde movement attained a higher level of resemblance to art (the fine art of the West), making it extremely difficult to distinguish them. Concurrently, the problem of interlocking identities of category and the individual case is becoming more pronounced. Thus, it is necessary to reconfirm that individual cases can have multiple identities. Perhaps this situation also applies to people today, whose cultural identities are becoming more complex and fluid than ever. In light of such a situation, this article considers molecular gastronomy and avant-garde ikebana to explore the conditions under which multiple identities arise, in association with how people could have multiple cultural identities.

1. BORDERLINE CASES OF ART BELONGING TO NON-ART CATEGORY

1.1 CUISINE AND IKEBANA

The artistic status of food has long been denied in the long history since Plato until recently. Multiple views support the stance, such as that taste and smell are inferior to sight and hearing, that food as the object of physical desire cannot be the object of beauty, and that cuisine is no more than a technique and not an art.² It was not

until the 1990s that the tendency to defend the artistic status of food/cuisine emerged. For example, Elizabeth Telfer states that cuisine can be a “minor art form.”³ Carolyn Korsmeyer points out that food can perform the symbolic function the way art does.⁴ However, they still concluded that food and cuisine cannot be fine art or art in the full sense.

Ikebana is one of the traditional Japanese *geido* that is on par with tea ceremony and martial arts. While the term often translates to ‘art,’ there is a significant difference compared to the notion of art in the West. It is a discipline centered on training, morality, and manner. The weight is on attaining the established technique or style particular to each school. The practice is connected to daily life and thus can be practically functional. And importantly, it has an identity rooted in the traditional Japanese culture. With these backgrounds, ikebana does not correspond to the notion of art in the West, such as not serving practical functions, connecting to the historical context of Western art, or being included in the art institution.⁵

1.2 MOLECULAR GASTRONOMY AND AVANT-GARDE IKEBANA

The debate on the artistic status of food and cuisine was progressed further by molecular gastronomy, the new cooking movement that attracted attention in the 1990s. It employs innovative technology to modify ingredients into unexpected tastes and forms. It is also unique in its concept and presentation. For example, British chef Heston Blumenthal served the dish *Sound of the Sea*, which instructs the diners to eat the seafood dish while listening to the ‘sound of the sea’ on an iPod in a shell. Molecular gastronomy contains many elements familiar to contemporary art, such as multi-sensory experiences, emotional and thought-stimulating concepts, deconstruction and reconstruction of tradition, and emphasis on innovation. Such characteristics have been the evidence to support the artistic status of cuisine. Jean-Paul Jouary considers cuisine as art by pointing out how molecular gastronomy succeeds in creating the intellectual ‘distance’ necessary for aesthetic appreciation by presenting food in an unfamiliar form. He also mentions how Adrià has been invited to Documenta 12 as an artist and asserts that molecular gastronomy has fulfilled the institutional definition of art.⁶

For ikebana, the wave of innovation came in the early to mid-20th century, when the avant-garde climate of art in the West influenced many aesthetic practices in Japan. The new ikebana that appeared mainly in the early 1950s emphasizes creativity over

tradition. The movement was called *zen-ei* (avant-garde) ikebana and became a social phenomenon that attracted the public. The works created by the promoters of the avant-garde ikebana were much like the works of fine art as they were in the form of collage, sculpture, performance, and installation. It is not surprising that this new style of ikebana got criticized by many ikebana schools that value tradition. It was also not welcomed by the fine art community in Japan, which viewed it as the outdated practice of geido, apart from the notion of fine art newly imported from the West. For such reasons, many Japanese art critics at the time denied that avant-garde ikebana is art.⁷

2. INTERLOCKING IDENTITIES OF CATEGORIES AND INDIVIDUALS

As can be seen, the interlocking of identity may occur between category and individual work or creator, as well as between upper category and lower category. By interlocking the identity of category and individual, one can argue that ‘if the individual case is art, then the entire category is also art’ or ‘if the category is not art, then the individual case is also not art.’ I will call this the *identity interlocking argument*. There are two major problems with such a way of argument. First, the validity of the argument is questionable as it could be used to support two opposing positions. For example, one can argue that molecular gastronomy and avant-garde ikebana are not art because they belong to non-art categories such as cuisine and ikebana, while another can also argue that cuisine and ikebana are art because molecular gastronomy and avant-garde ikebana are art. Second, such an argument overlooks the fact that the identities of the individual cases and their belonging categories are not the same. In the following, I will argue that the identity of the category and the individuals belonging to the category should be considered separately.

2.1 IDENTITY OF CATEGORY

The identity of a category is a set of attribution conditions. There are two ways that category A is category B. The first is that category A and category B have the same set of attribution conditions. Another is that category B has all the attribution conditions of category A. In the former case, it can be said that category A and category B are identical. In the latter case, it can be said that category B contains category A; in other words, A and B are in the relationship of subset and superset.

The conventionally or typically recognized conditions that separate art from non-art includes not having a practical function as its primary purpose, not a work that primarily appeals to lower senses such as taste and smell, sharing the same history or institution as art, and so on. Some conditions for cuisine and ikebana conflict with one or more of these conditions of art, so they are neither identical nor contained in art. Therefore, if the identity of the entire category should apply to the identity of the individual cases belonging to the category, the individual cases having roots in non-art categories such as cuisine and ikebana are not art unless the attribution conditions of these categories are to be modified.

2.2 IDENTITY OF INDIVIDUALS

On the other hand, the identity of an individual case should be distinguished from the identity of a category. First, when an individual case belongs to a category, it means that the case can satisfy the category's set of attribution conditions. Next, we must recognize that the individual cases may satisfy the attribution conditions of more than one category. Individual works can belong to multiple categories, for example, just as individuals who belong to the same group can also belong to several different groups. Third, just as an individual can have as many identities as there are groups to which an individual belongs, each creative work can have as many identities as there are categories to which it belongs. That is, even if category A cannot be category B, individual case X belonging to category A can also belong to category B, meaning that case X can have the identities of both categories A and B. Therefore, even if the category does not qualify as art, it does not follow that the individual case belonging to it also does not qualify as art. In the same way, even if the individual case qualifies as art, it does not follow that the entire category it belongs to also qualifies as art.⁸

3. CONDITIONS FOR HAVING MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

3.1 TYPES OF CULTURAL IDENTITIES

If one meets the condition of attribution, one belongs to the category. However, the problem of who determines the condition of attribution and how such judgment occurs complicates the discourse. Under what circumstances, then, is it possible to have multiple identities? We can get a hint to consider this question by examining the different levels of one's cultural identity.

When one makes a judgment about own cultural identity, it is often the culture that one feels deeply connected to in some way, such as ethnic background, the place where one grew up, or the place of birth. For example, someone from a Japanese family who grew up in the U.S. may recognize oneself as both Japanese and American. The judgment of cultural identity depends on self-identification, or how one recognizes own cultural background. This type of identity is *subjective identity*.

The situation could be different at the level of *objective identity*. Since Japanese law does not allow multiple nationalities, one cannot be both a Japanese and an American citizen in principle. Thus, in such a case, nationality can only be either one. By following the set of conditions for nationality stated in laws, any third person can objectively judge one's nationality.

The judgment for relatively objective identity has certain objectivity to the extent of the norms shared within the particular group or community. For example, while any Asian-looking person might be recognized as a cultural insider of Asian culture in Western communities, the Chinese are recognized as cultural outsiders in Japan, and the Japanese are recognized as cultural outsiders in Korea. This signifies that one's identity as an insider or outsider of culture is relative to the cultural background of the community one is being judged.

3.2 TYPES OF ARTISTIC IDENTITIES

As shown, one's identity can occur at the subjective, objective, and relatively objective levels. Now, let's consider when the artistic identity may occur for the creative works. X is art when it is recognized to fulfill the attribution conditions of art. This could occur at two different levels.

First, the artistic identity of a creative work X may occur at the subjective level. This is when the individual appreciator recognizes the ability of X to fulfill the attribution conditions of art and therefore appreciates X as art. It is associable with the aesthetic attitude theory or artification theory, often discussed in environmental or everyday aesthetics. At this level, anything could be whenever the individual appreciator subjectively recognizes so.

Second, X may also attain artistic identity at the relatively objective level when it is recognized as art by a group of appreciators who share particular norms. Such relatively objective artistic identity can be related to the conventional definitions of art. While there are views that art is universal and objective, the expanding notion of artistic value today suggests that there are

values with access limited to a particular community. Therefore, it is hard to believe that there is an objective identity of art in a way comparable to the nationality mentioned above, for example.

CONCLUSION

The above consideration reveals that the borderline cases of art like molecular gastronomy and avant-garde ikebana may attain artistic identity at the subjective and relatively objective level. On the other hand, it is reasonable to place more weight on relatively objective identity since subjective identity can be attained by any object so long as the individual appreciator recognizes the object as art. Accordingly, it is inferable that the borderline case of art belonging to the non-art category attains artistic identity when presented within the art institution. Thus, molecular gastronomy and avant-garde ikebana are art when present within the art institution. However, it does not follow that this would make the entire category of cuisine or ikebana also art since the individual cases can possess multiple identities, and the identity of the category and individual cases need not be interlocking.

- 1 Such as Thierry de Duve, "The Story of Fountain: Hard Facts and Soft Speculation," *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 57–58 (2019): 10–47. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7146/nja.v28i57-58.114857>.
- 2 Elizabeth Telfer, *Food for Thought: Philosophy of Food* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Kevin Sweeney, *The Aesthetics of Food: The Philosophy Debate About What We Eat and Drink* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017).
- 3 Elizabeth Telfer, *Food for Thought*, 58.
- 4 Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*.
- 5 MIZUTANI Takashi 三頭谷鷹史, *Zen'ei ikebana no jidai : fukuganteki bijutsuron = avant-garde ikebana* 前衛いけばなの時代—複眼的美術論 (Tokyo : Bigaku Shuppan 美学出版, 2003); FURUKAWA Hisashi 古川久, "Geido 芸道" in *Bigakujiten* 美学事典, edited by Takeuchi Toshio 竹内敏雄, enlarged ed. (Kobundo 弘文堂, 1974), 487.
- 6 Jean-Paul Jouary, *Ferran Adria and elBulli: The Art, The Philosophy, The Gastronomy* (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd, 2013).
- 7 MIZUTANI Takashi 三頭谷鷹史, *Zen'ei ikebana no jidai : fukuganteki bijutsuron = avant-garde ikebana* 前衛いけばなの時代—複眼的美術論 (Tokyo : Bigaku Shuppan 美学出版, 2003).
- 8 This point is also mentioned by Nelson Goodman, "When is Art?," in *Ways of Worldmaking* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1978), chap. IV.