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Artistic constitution and viewer experience: An experience-centred framework for contemporary art

Tong Bowei^{1,*}

ABSTRACT

Contemporary art theory has long been divided over the conditions under which art can be said to come into being, oscillating between formal completion, institutional recognition, and viewer experience. As contemporary art increasingly enters public contexts and exerts tangible effects in the real world, accounts that rely solely on formal, institutional, or historical criteria have proven insufficient for explaining artistic practice. Through a comparative examination of major theoretical approaches—from mimesis, expression, and formalism to institutional, historical, and anti-essentialist accounts—alongside a number of persistently contested cases, this article identifies their shared limitations in explaining how art establishes a stable relation with viewer experience.

It argues that artistic constitution depends not simply on whether a work is completed or institutionally recognised, but on whether, in a concrete situation, it is able to establish an experiential relation through which viewers can perceive its relevance. In this sense, viewer response is not treated as a retrospective evaluation, but as a key analytical element for examining whether and how art is constituted and sustained in reality.

Keywords: Artistic constitution, viewer experience, contemporary art theory, experiential relevance.

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1. Introduction

A longstanding question in art theory concerns the conditions under which a work of art can be said to come into being: does art become constituted at the moment of its formal completion, or only through the act of being perceived and experienced by an audience? While this question has accompanied theoretical debates since their inception, it has acquired renewed urgency in contemporary artistic practice. This article advances the claim that artistic constitution cannot be accounted for solely by formal completion, institutional recognition, or historical classification, but depends on whether a work, in a specific situation, establishes an experientially perceivable address

* Corresponding Author.

¹ Independent Researcher, Heilongjiang, China. Email: tongbowei@yeah.net

toward particular viewers, allowing them to experience the work as bearing relevance. When a work is understood, exhibited, and discussed, yet fails to form a stable experiential relation with viewers in actual viewing situations, its experiential constitution remains indeterminate.

Around this problem, existing theories have developed along separate explanatory paths. Mimetic, expressive, and formalist accounts tend to internalise the conditions of artistic constitution within relations of representation, expressive completion, or formal structure. Institutional and historical definitions, by contrast, emphasise whether an object is recognised within the artworld or situated within an established tradition, while anti-essentialist positions reject the specification of any single constitutive criterion. Although these approaches retain explanatory force within their respective frameworks, they often struggle to account for why certain works may be conceptually intelligible and institutionally validated, yet fail to generate sustained and determinate meaning in concrete viewing experience.

This article does not seek to redefine art, nor does it offer a normative adjudication of artistic value. Instead, it restricts its analytical focus to a more specific problem: once art has been acknowledged as such at the theoretical or institutional level, what factors continue to determine whether it can achieve concrete and enduring constitution within viewer experience. Existing discussions largely lack an analytical approach capable of traversing divergent theoretical positions while treating actual viewer experience as the site of examination, with debates frequently remaining at the level of conceptual clarification or theoretical opposition.

In response, this study combines close engagement with key theoretical texts—from classical accounts of mimesis to contemporary debates—with the analysis of a set of persistently contested cases, including Duchamp's *Fountain*, Picasso's *Guernica*, the '85 New Wave movement in China, Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*, and the Rising Dragon fireworks incident. The selection of materials is deliberately limited in order to concentrate on the experiential conditions under which art becomes constituted or fails to do so in specific situations. The analysis focuses on the forms of viewer response that continue to determine whether a work, once understood and displayed, can generate clear and sustained meaning in lived experience.

The article makes three contributions. Theoretically, it distinguishes artistic constitution at the institutional or conceptual level from constitution at the experiential level, and advances an explanatory path centred on experiential address. Methodologically, it offers a comparative framework that enables divergent theories of art to be assessed in relation to a shared problem rather than as isolated positions. Practically, the proposed approach provides critical, curatorial, and cross-cultural research with an operational perspective for analysing how art may relate to real-world experience without collapsing into audience appeasement, while clarifying its boundaries and constraints in contemporary practice.

2. Methodology

This study undertakes an analytical inquiry into how art is constituted at the level of experience within concrete situations. Rather than examining the distribution, frequency, or institutional recognition of artworks, it focuses on the structural mechanisms through which art acquires—or fails to acquire—experiential meaning in practice. Formulated at the level of mechanism, the study asks whether, when an object is already recognised as art within institutional or discursive contexts, viewers in concrete viewing situations experience the work as bearing relevance to their own situation.

To address this problem, the study adopts a qualitative and historically informed analytical approach. Qualitative analysis is employed to conduct close and comparative readings of theoretical texts and case materials, with particular attention to whether viewers are able to enter the work in concrete situations, the level at which their responses primarily operate, and whether the work forms a determinate experiential address. Historical contextualisation is employed to examine how these experiential elements appear and shift across different theoretical traditions and artistic practices, thereby clarifying why related questions continue to generate controversy in contemporary art contexts. Together, these two methods serve the construction of the analytical framework: the former clarifies the sequence of analytical judgments, while the latter provides contextual grounds for assessing their applicability across different situations.

In terms of research orientation, the study is analytical rather than evaluative or normative. Its purpose is not to judge the aesthetic merit of individual works, nor to issue prescriptive claims about what art ought to be. Instead, it seeks to clarify the structural conditions under which art is able to function as a meaningful practice in concrete contexts. The study does not aim at aesthetic evaluation or normative adjudication, but at producing mechanism-based explanations that remain open to discussion and verification.

The selection of research materials follows a multi-source comparative strategy. Materials are drawn from three categories. First, core theoretical texts in art theory are examined in order to articulate representative structures of disagreement concerning the viewer, experience, and the conditions of artistic constitution. Second, a set of persistently contested cases is analysed to observe recurring tensions and points of failure across different types of practice. Third, historical documents and related scholarship associated with these cases are consulted to reconstruct institutional contexts, transmission processes, and the formation of controversies. The scope of materials is limited by the requirement that all analyses be traceable to explicit textual or contextual evidence, ensuring that analytical claims can be reconstructed through identifiable chains of argument.

The analytical procedure applies a unified four-step sequence across cases: (1) institutional or discursive treatment as art; (2) entry into concrete viewing situations; (3) responses that remain at recognition or understanding; and (4) the formation of an experientially effective address through which situational relevance becomes accessible to viewers. Using the same sequence, results are recorded and compared to identify recurrent mechanisms and typical breakdown points across practices.

The output of this methodology is not an evaluative conclusion about individual cases, but a reusable set of mechanism-based explanations. Through the repeated application and comparison of the same analytical steps across diverse materials, the explanatory force of the framework lies in its capacity to cover divergent theoretical positions and multiple practical contexts, and it provides a discussable and verifiable analytical basis for the arguments developed in the subsequent sections.

3. Literature review

3.1 The role of the viewer in the constitution of art

Debates over the role of the viewer in the constitution of art do not hinge on whether audiences matter in some general sense, but on a more precise question: whether viewer response is a necessary condition for art to come into being, and if so, what kind of condition this response represents. Across art theory, three representative positions can be identified. These positions differ in whether they treat viewer involvement as constitutive, supplementary, or theoretically dispensable, and in whether such involvement is understood as experiential, normative, or excluded altogether. The central issue is whether art must be actually experienced in order to be constituted, and what role viewer response plays in that constitution.

The first position holds that art is completed in experience rather than at the moment of production. Within this framework, the viewer's role is not an external add-on but an internal condition of artistic occurrence. Art is understood as something that happens through communication, transmission, or experiential uptake, rather than as a self-sufficient artefact.

Tolstoy's expressive theory exemplifies this position by defining art as the successful transmission of feeling from artist to audience. On this view, artistic activity begins with the intentional expression of emotion, but it becomes art only when that emotion is actually apprehended and re-experienced by others (Tolstoy, 1897/1995, p. 38).

Similarly, Dewey locates the completion of art not in the finished object but in lived experience. A work, he argues, acquires aesthetic significance only insofar as it becomes "an experience" for someone; without perceptual engagement, what remains is merely a physical object (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. 4).

Contemporary experiential accounts further develop this position by challenging rigid separations between artwork and audience. Berleant rejects the subject-object dichotomy in favour of an ecological conception of aesthetic experience, in which art emerges from a relational structure constituted in concrete situations (Berleant, 1970, pp. 51–52). Related work in evolutionary and ritual

theory similarly supports the view that artistic practices depend on shared experiential participation (Dissanayake, 1992, p. 67). These theories provide a clear account of how art is completed in experience, but tend to presuppose that once experience occurs, art is thereby constituted, offering limited resources for analysing cases in which experience fails to emerge or cannot be sustained.

A second position shifts the criterion of artistic constitution away from actual viewer response toward modes of treatment, understanding, or normative placement. What matters here is not whether response has occurred, but whether an object is situated within a framework in which response is regarded as appropriate or intelligible.

Beardsley's account of aesthetic attitude exemplifies this orientation by emphasising a normative mode of attention rather than experiential outcome (Beardsley, 1958, p. 62). Levinson similarly grounds artistic status in intended historical reception, defining art in terms of how objects are meant to be regarded within an ongoing practice (Levinson, 1990, pp. 6–7).

Danto relocates this logic to the level of interpretation, distinguishing artworks from ordinary objects by their placement within an art-historical discourse (Danto, 1981, p. 125). Dickie's institutional theory further formalises this move by locating artistic status in authorised acts of conferral rather than in actual appreciation (Dickie, 1974, pp. 37–38). Taken together, these approaches account for the institutional and normative conditions under which objects are treated as art, but do not treat actual experiential uptake in concrete viewing situations as their central concern.

A third position explicitly excludes viewer response from the conditions of artistic constitution. Rather than treating audience experience as necessary or normatively relevant, these theories locate the basis of art in internal structural, expressive, or formal conditions.

In the classical traditions of mimesis and poetics, neither Plato nor Aristotle treats audience response as constitutive of art. Artistic status is assessed in terms of representational relation and internal structure rather than reception (Plato, 1994, pp. 348–349; Aristotle, 1996, pp. xix–xx).

Expressivist theories further internalise this criterion by identifying art with the completion of expression itself (Croce, 1909/1964, p. 8; Collingwood, 1981, pp. 300–301). Formalist and symbolic theories similarly ground artistic status in formal relations or symbolic structures rather than viewer response (Bell, 1914/1958, p. 19; Greenberg, 1965/1982, p. 5; Langer, 1942/1959, p. 222). More recent functional, historical, and anti-essentialist accounts likewise reject any single experiential condition—including viewer response—as necessary for artistic constitution (Davies, 2016, p. 195; Carroll, 2010, p. 51; Weitz, 1956, p. 33).

These divergent positions indicate that the central disagreement is not whether viewers matter, but whether art must be actually experienced in order to be constituted, and whether works that satisfy institutional, structural, or expressive conditions may nevertheless fail to achieve experiential establishment. This unresolved issue provides the theoretical point of departure for the analytical framework and case discussions that follow.

4. An experience-centred analytical framework

To avoid conflating an artwork's institutional attribution, conceptual classification, or theoretical positioning with its actual constitution in practice, this article articulates an analytical framework for examining whether and how art is constituted in experiential terms. The framework does not redefine art, nor does it introduce normative criteria for artistic validity. Rather, it formalises the evaluative logic already operating throughout the analysis, making explicit the distinctions between different levels at which artistic constitution may be claimed, and clarifying the conditions under which such constitution emerges or fails in concrete viewing situations.

The framework consists of four analytically distinct but logically successive steps, each corresponding to a single diagnostic question.

The first step asks whether the object has been treated as art at the institutional or discursive level. This concerns whether the work has entered the domain of artistic practice through exhibition contexts, critical discourse, or institutional recognition, without presupposing that it has been experientially encountered in actual viewing situations.

The second step examines whether the work is in fact experienced in a specific context. The focus here is on whether the work is entered and undergone in concrete viewing conditions, rather than merely understood, interpreted, or discussed as an object of knowledge.

The third step differentiates between types of viewer response by asking whether the response remains at the level of understanding or recognition. This step identifies responses primarily characterised by conceptual grasp, intention recognition, or interpretive agreement, and distinguishes them from responses that involve an experiential orientation extending beyond cognitive identification.

The fourth step asks whether, in a given context, the work enables viewers to experience a directional relation between the work and its situation of encounter, such that relevance becomes experientially accessible and a sustained orientation of meaning can emerge in viewing.

Within this framework, viewer response counts as constitutive only when two minimal conditions are met. First, the work must be experientially entered in a concrete context, rather than remaining an object of abstract recognition. Second, that experience must give rise to an experientially accessible relation of direction or relevance in that context, rather than stopping at understanding, identification, or attitudinal acceptance. Affective reactions, subjective preferences, or momentary sensations do not in themselves constitute experiential constitution unless they are organised, within a specific context, into a sustained experiential relation that can be situationally traced.

Accordingly, the distinction between constitutive response and interpretive recognition lies not in intensity of reaction or correctness of interpretation, but in experiential structure. Constitutive response requires that, in the viewing situation, the work is experienced as bearing a directional relation to a concrete condition, concern, or circumstance, such that relevance becomes experientially accessible and retrospectively intelligible within that context. Interpretive recognition, by contrast, may successfully identify what a work signifies, expresses, or intends, without necessarily generating such an experiential relation.

5. Discussion

5.1 Institutional recognition does not entail experiential constitution

This section examines a potential disjunction between the first and second steps of the analytical framework: whether an object that is treated as art at an institutional or discursive level has necessarily been entered and experienced by viewers in concrete situations.

Approaches grounded in modes of treatment or aesthetic attitude argue that the constitution of art does not depend on whether viewers have already formed experiential responses. What matters, on this view, is whether an object is positioned within a context in which it is regarded, interpreted, or approached as art. In such accounts, judgments of artistic constitution occur primarily at the conceptual, institutional, or contextual level, without requiring that a work be actually entered and experienced in concrete viewing situations.

From the perspective of the analytical framework, these approaches effectively account for the first step—how an object comes to be treated as art within institutional or discursive contexts—but do not address the second, which concerns whether the work is actually entered by viewers and gives rise to experience in concrete situations. An object may be displayed, understood, or discussed as art, yet its constitution may remain at the level of recognition rather than taking effect at the level of lived experience.

This disjunction is particularly evident in canonical cases. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) presents no intrinsic difficulty of conceptual understanding; the central controversy did not concern whether the gesture was intelligible, but whether the object ought to be treated as art and admitted into the exhibition context. In this sense, *Fountain* was not initially entered by viewers as a work to be experienced in situ, but was rejected and excluded from display (Camfield, 1989, p. 27). Its subsequent artistic status was established primarily through textual debate, photographic circulation, and institutional incorporation, rather than through experiential uptake in the original viewing context (Camfield, 1989, pp. 30–31; de Duve, 2019, pp. 26–27).

This case is not introduced in order to adjudicate whether *Fountain* is art, but to test the explanatory capacity of the framework in distinguishing institutional constitution from experiential

constitution. Even when an object is conceptually identifiable and institutionally recognised, its constitution in an experiential sense still depends on whether it is actually entered by viewers in concrete situations and forms a relation with their experience. Recognition, understanding, or conceptual grasp alone does not guarantee a transition from the first analytical step to the second.

Accordingly, theories that rely on modes of treatment or aesthetic attitude successfully explain how art is recognised as art, but remain limited in their capacity to account for whether and how art becomes experientially constituted in actual viewing situations. It is precisely this limitation that the analytical framework seeks to isolate and examine.

5.2 Failed experiential entry and the limits of experiential constitution

Under the analytical framework developed above, this section examines, through different types of cases, whether art can still be constituted at the experiential level when viewers do not truly enter the work or when their response is markedly weakened, and it clarifies the applicability of this judgment across different practical situations. The first two cases primarily test Step 2—whether a work is actually undergone in concrete situations and yields experiential occurrence—while the final case corresponds to Step 4 and serves to examine the boundary of the framework when artistic practice triggers unavoidable real-world consequences.

In practices oriented toward conceptual innovation and linguistic experimentation, a work may secure artistic standing within institutions and theoretical discourse while its experiential constitution remains unstable. The '85 New Wave movement in modern Chinese art exemplifies this structural feature. Although the movement's emphasis on conceptual innovation and linguistic experimentation generated extensive academic discussion, its reliance on avant-garde positions and discursive confrontation also limited its accessibility within broader public experience. As Gao Minglu has observed, the deliberate distancing from traditional norms and public understanding subjected the movement to sustained institutional and social pressure, culminating in a structural turning point around 1987–1988 that marked the dissolution of the movement as a collective avant-garde formation (Gao, 2011, pp. 27, 136–138). In this case, the analysis primarily concerns Step 2: institutional or discursive constitution does not in itself guarantee a stable experiential occurrence in concrete viewing situations.

Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* (1987–1991) intensifies this problem. By constructing a system of pseudo-characters that appear readable yet resist interpretation, the work deliberately disables mechanisms of reading and correction, thereby making it difficult for viewers to form sustained viewing experience in the course of engagement. The controversy it provoked in the Chinese context did not stem from a failure of artistic legitimacy, but from a rupture between cognitive expectation and established aesthetic experience (Fraser & Li, 2020, pp. vii–ix, 133, 145–146). This case shows that, where no direct real-world responsibility is at stake, viewer confusion, refusal, or distance does not function as a negative condition that invalidates art; its analytical function remains at the level of Step 2, namely the problem of experiential entry.

By contrast, when artistic practice produces direct effects in the real world through its implementation, the framework must move to the boundary specified by Step 4. The 2025 Rising Dragon fireworks project represents this shift. Implemented under specific environmental conditions, the project triggered public concern regarding potential risk and prompted intervention by governance institutions. As the controversy unfolded, the case indicates a boundary condition: the analysis can no longer remain confined to experiential constitution alone, because the work's implementation is discussed under material constraints and public oversight (Lau & Zheng, 2025; Zou, 2025; Zhang, 2025).

The framework's role here is diagnostic: it marks the point at which experiential constitution intersects with externally imposed constraints (Step 4). It does not adjudicate moral, legal, or regulatory responsibility, which belongs to other normative and institutional mechanisms.

Notably, even in such cases, the artwork itself is rarely denied artistic status. It may continue to be documented, discussed, and incorporated into contemporary art discourse. What the case reveals is not a problem of artistic legitimacy, but the applicability boundary of the framework: when artistic practice generates unavoidable real-world consequences, viewer response is no longer merely a mode of understanding or acceptance, but becomes a factor that must be included when assessing whether art has formed experiential conditions of constitution in a concrete situation.

5.3 Understanding and response: Conditions of experiential orientation

The foregoing analysis suggests that when a work has already been recognised as art at the institutional or historical level and has been encountered by viewers in concrete situations, the decisive issue is not whether it is merely understood, but whether, in the act of viewing, it establishes an experiential relation that addresses a specific situation. A work may be conceptually intelligible or formally articulate, yet still fail to sustain its presence in lived reality if it does not generate an experiential sense of relevance—if it is not experienced as bearing on a particular condition or demand.

At the experiential level, understanding alone is therefore insufficient. To understand a work—to grasp what it presents or intends—marks only the recognition of content. From an anti-essentialist perspective, no single condition, including understanding, emotional impact, or aesthetic attitude, can function as a universal criterion of art (Weitz, 1956, p. 33). Within the present framework, the question is not whether understanding has occurred, but whether the work, in viewing, forms a determinate experiential orientation toward a concrete situation.

This distinction becomes particularly clear in the case of *Guernica* (1937). As Chipp and his collaborators have noted, the painting did not arise from the declaration of an abstract political doctrine, but from Picasso's response to the destruction of civilians during the bombing of a specific town. Picasso regarded the mural as an attempt to articulate and respond to a concrete historical problem rather than to issue a general ideological statement (Chipp, Selz, & Taylor, 1968, pp. 459, 487). In this sense, the work exemplifies the framework's fourth analytical step: whether a work, in a given context, is experienced as addressing an unavoidable reality, such that viewer response no longer remains at the level of formal comprehension but enters an experiential relation.

Seen in this way, the constitutive significance of viewer response at the experiential level does not depend on the intensity or emotional quality of that response, but on whether the work establishes a clear relation of orientation between response, situation, and experiential demand. The issue examined here is not a normative principle of artistic creation, but the applicability of the framework in assessing whether art is constituted at the experiential level through the formation of such directed relations.

6. Conclusion

This article has addressed a central question in contemporary art theory: how art can be said to come into being in reality, rather than at the level of institutional, conceptual, or historical attribution alone. Its core theoretical intervention lies in distinguishing these forms of attribution from the question of whether a work, in a concrete viewing situation, establishes a determinate experiential relation with viewers. The article does not propose a new definition of art, but reframes the problem of artistic constitution from "what art is" to "how art comes to be constituted within lived experience," thereby providing a shared analytical plane on which different theoretical approaches can be compared and examined.

The scope of this framework is deliberately limited. It does not claim to offer a single standard applicable to all artistic practices. Its primary relevance concerns contemporary art that enters public contexts and interacts with concrete social and material conditions. Within this scope, the persistence or failure of artistic constitution at the experiential level depends on whether a work, in a given situation, establishes an experientially accessible relation of relevance. This judgment is not a normative or evaluative verdict, but an analytical perspective intended to clarify how the meaning of art is generated, sustained, or destabilised in practice. Future research may further examine how such experiential relevance is constituted under different cultural and institutional conditions, and how artistic practices can respond to reality while maintaining critical tension.

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Conflict of interest

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