

## **PCAD Final Project Part 3: Final documentation**

Title:

**Are we looking at the paintings? Or just the frames?**

By

Chan Tak Him                      54817390

King San Samuel, Suen 54043539

Video Documentation:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocWm0j0CKWY&feature=youtu.be>

## **Artist Statement:**

Human is irrational. Yet, we commonly believe that we are rational. When it comes to the art world or classical paintings, things become more interesting. How do we perceive art? What makes us believe that certain art pieces are more valuable than others? Is it mainly depending on the aesthetics of the artwork? Or social and cultural background plays a more important role in generating the value of an art piece?

“Are we looking at the paintings? Or just the frames?” is an art project that tries to challenge art perception of the general public. In order to achieve our purpose, a fake art exhibition was held during 21/4 – 23/4. In this project, 6 landscape paintings were randomly selected from a bunch of wasted paintings of an art school. Different groups of people were invited. Yet, a new background story for the paintings has been composed. These paintings were claimed to be found in Yorkshire, Britain and they were painted in the 18th century. Visitors were ignorance about the truth.

Treasuring unwanted paintings, enjoying the background story (which is a lie) and the grand atmosphere seems very stupid to most. We are laughing at the participants because we know the truth. Yet, we are the participants in most cases.

Value of art is a debatable and unsolvable topic. It is no longer simply related to aesthetic. Historical values and social judgements play significant roles in deciding the value of an art piece. Although the paintings in this art exhibition are considered rubbish by their creators, the frame is set up by us. We have made up a romantic background story for these paintings. New meanings and elements are given to these paintings. Although all these new elements are lies, visitors without any art knowledge have no way to disprove it within a short amount of time. It is unfair to consider participants as stupid because art perception itself is irrational.

## **Work Process:**

### **Preparation work:**

In early April, we have already come up with the idea of making an artwork on art perception. Numerous ideas have been proposed and discussed. Setting up a fake art exhibition was one of the best ideas we both agreed with. Him is also a collector of unwanted paintings. Based on the resources we possessed and feasibility, we decided to implement our plan.

6<sup>th</sup> floor of Creative Media Centre at City University was booked for setting up the exhibition. 6 landscape paintings were chosen from a bunch of unwanted students' paintings (Him's collection). In mid-April, we ordered suitable frames for these paintings. Leaflet and poster were designed as well (See last 2 pages). The paintings were claimed to be found in Yorkshire, Britain and they were valuable paintings from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We started to advertise the art exhibition a week before the official starting date (21/4). Social media was also used to recruit participants.

On 20/4, we started setting up the exhibition. The majority of time was used for hanging and adjusting the position of the paintings. Decoration and spotlight were installed as well. We finished setting up on the same day.

### **Running the exhibition:**

The exhibition lasted for three days. Visitors were mainly random travelers on the first and second day (21/4 and 22/4) as those two days were Easter holidays. On the third day (23/4), however, the majority of visitors were professors and SCM students.

Apart from recording their behavior and actions when they were viewing the paintings, interviews were conducted. Participants are required to answer two questions:

1. Are these paintings similar to your imagination of Britain?
2. How are these paintings differ from the ordinary paintings you have seen before?

They are allowed to express their personal opinion on the paintings as well.

Interesting footages were collected. Most visitors were unable to tell that the art exhibition was a set up only. Only a visitor and a professor questioned the value of those paintings. The same professor was able to reveal the truth as well which was quite surprising. Overall, the result was very satisfying.

### **Revealing the truth:**

Starting from 24/4, we have put up an artist statement next to the exhibition. The content of the artist statement is exactly the same as the artist statement shown above. We have talked to some participants as well. Most of them were embarrassed and refused to provide further opinions. That's why we decided not to document any part of the revealing process.

## **Methodology:**

### **Details of the paintings**

They were drawn by art students

They were considered as too common by the fine-art teachers

They were criticized as possessing no meaning but pure aesthetic

### **Decoration and setup:**

The main purpose for setting up a nice exhibition was to give visitors an illusion that, "This is a grand exhibition. Paintings here must worth a lot." With the splendid lightings, beautiful frames and nice student helpers(us), the exhibition was no difference from other art gallery.

The no-photo signs were icing on the cake. People usually consider something as valuable (will be further discussed in the theoretical part) when they are not allowed to take any photos. This is a long-existed stereotype. The whole exhibition looked much more solemn thanks to those signs.

## **Why it is interesting:**

This artwork may be considered as a prank, a practical joke or a social experiment. Yet, it is also an art which consists of multiple self-reflection. The main focus of this project is to discuss our perception of art instead of mocking the participants.

When people were participating in the art exhibition, we may consider them as falling into a trap created by us as curators. As mentioned, paintings in this art exhibition were unwanted paintings thrown away by art students. Treasuring unwanted paintings, enjoying the background story (which was a lie) and immersing in the grand atmosphere seems very stupid to most. We laugh at the participants because we know the truth. Yet, we are the participants in most cases.

Historical values and social judgements play significant roles in deciding the value of an art piece. We can hardly judge a painting without any background knowledge. Even if we do, we will not be certain about our opinion. For instance, no artist would stand out publicly and claim Mona Lisa as a trashy painting (even if they truly believe so) because it has long been considered as a masterpiece. It is socially approved. Louvre Museum, Paris, Leonardo da Vinci can be considered as the frame of the painting. Yet, they are the backgrounds that were deeply embedded in the painting as well. Although the paintings in this art exhibition were considered rubbish by their creators, the frame was set up by us. A romantic background story for these paintings had been composed. New meanings and elements were given to these paintings. Despite the fact that these new elements were fake, visitors without any formal training had no way to disprove it within a short amount of time. This project is interesting not only in terms of its structure but also the underlying reflection on art perception.

## **Who has said or done similar things:**

### **Video:**

A video episode about the value of art:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Q0RjnWyYiw> (Condition)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Q0RjnWyYiw> (Rarity)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Q0RjnWyYiw> (Provenance)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRenlUbdgpl> (Historical Importance)

The episode about historical importance and rarity are particularly relatable to our project. The new background story of the paintings was composed based on the contents of these episodes. How to convince people that the paintings are valuable remains one of the biggest challenges in this project.

### **Other similar projects:**

SNEAKING MY CRAPPY PAINTING INTO AN ART GALLERY!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWG3BuRiFBQ>

Using the art gallery as a support background story/ frame and boost up the value of its own worthless painting.

Glasses Left on Floor Mistaken for Museum Exhibit

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUX-o\\_GgACk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUX-o_GgACk)

Serving McDonalds to food experts?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Qa6QXBxxWw>

## Theories that are applicable to this art:

### Value of art:

In the previous section, we emphasized a lot on the value of art. We have discussed how the setup, the decorations or even the no-photo signs played an essential role in increasing the value of the paintings. Yet, what is the value in art? Are we simply talking about money? Art critics have always been interested in such discussions. Numerous books have been written on this topic. Although there is no solid conclusion, different ideas and perspectives are worth referencing.

*“Within the philosophy of art, the anti-utilitarian discourse rests on a binary logic, which exemplifies two different and opposing meanings of the word "value", First of all it is understood as "that quality of a thing according to which it is thought as being more or less desirable, useful and important". This is the broadly utilitarian or instrumental meaning of the term. Here the value of art is always related to specific purposes or uses, which lie outside the realm of art or aesthetic experience. Secondly, "value" is understood as "that which is desirable or worthy of esteem for its own sake; thing or quality having intrinsic worth". This is the purely aesthetic or intrinsic meaning of the term. Here the value of art is always related to intrinsic criteria, which lie within the realm of aesthetic values, conceived as a separate category of values Irreducible to other values” (Klamer, 1996)*

Early philosopher proposed two methods of judging “value”. The first one is based on usefulness and instrumental meaning while the second one is based on aesthetic and intrinsic value. We commonly believe that the value of art is always related to the later one. Seldom do people discuss the usefulness of art. In another word, the only measurement for visitors to identify the value of the paintings are aesthetic and intrinsic value. There is no doubt that the paintings chosen for this exhibition possess basic aesthetic. Yet, intrinsic value is a complicated and problematic concept as it is “contaminated” by a lot of surrounding factors. In my opinion, even aesthetic is not a stand-alone concept.

A more persuasive understanding on art value (which was also mentioned in Klammer's book) is by Barbara Herrnstein Smith, an American literary critic:

*"The recurrent impulse and effort to define aesthetic value by contradistinction to all other nameable sources of interest or forms of value - hedonic, practical, sentimental, ornamental, historical, ideological, and so forth - is, in effect, to define it out of existence; for when all such utilities, interests, and other particular sources of value have been subtracted, nothing remains. Or, to put this in other terms: the 'essential value' of an artwork consists of everything from which it is usually distinguished"* (Smith, 1988)

For Smith, she disagreed that the value of art can be classified into small categories. She argued that art may even possess instrumental functions as it is an essential part of human civilization. Therefore, the value of art is everything one can digest in a given instance. Applying this theory into our project, the resources for players to judge the value of the paintings are the fake background story, the surrounding explanations from the student helpers (our explanations), their own knowledge, and their first impression on the paintings. Apart from professor or art expert (which possess a rich amount of art knowledge), ordinary visitors could gain a limited amount of reliable resources to judge the paintings in this exhibition. Based on the fake information given, they can hardly speak something meaningful but to praise the paintings without much reasoning. It was also predictable that none, but a few visitors would truly appreciate the paintings.

### **Inductive reasoning and inductive inferences:**

Inductive reasoning is a type of reasoning we often use in our daily life. We tend to generalize the known cases and infer that information about the unknown ones. For instance, every cat we have seen had four legs. Therefore, we believe that all cats must have four legs. Yet, this is not necessarily the truth. Some cats have only three legs or two legs. In that sense, we considered it as an inductive inference (Henderson, 2019). This is also known as confirmation bias.

Inductive inference is deeply embedded in our mind. Famous philosopher, David Hume proposed the following:



*“Nature will always maintain her rights, and prevail in the end over any abstract reasoning whatsoever. Though we should conclude, for instance, as in the foregoing section, that, in all reasonings from experience, there is a step taken by the mind, which is not supported by any argument or process of the understanding; there is no danger, that these reasonings, on which almost all knowledge depends, will ever be affected by such a discovery.” (Hume, 1756)*

Hume’s purpose is to demonstrate that inductive reasoning is part of human nature. Perhaps it is a necessary evil in humanity’s evolution. It is only a problem at the level of philosophical reflection or philosophical discussion. In this project, however, inductive inference had played a significant role in tricking the audiences’ minds.

The art exhibition was set in the Creative Media Centre of City University, which is traditionally an ideal place for art galleries. Moreover, decorations such as fences, and warning signs are presented. Student helpers can be found as well. When visitors were coming to the art exhibition, they couldn’t help but relate this exhibition to all the other exhibitions they have seen before. When fences and no-photo signs are both presences, one may consider what he is seeing as valuable based on his/her own experiences. This is part of the reason why the fake art exhibition can be run successfully.

## **Conclusion**

Again, the purpose of this project is not to mock particular participants because they couldn’t realize that the art exhibition was a fake setup. In fact, this project hopes to reflect on our art perception. The underlying question remains as: what is the value of art and how do we perceive art?

## References:

HendersonLeah. (2019). The Problem of Induction. Metaphysics Research Lab,  
Stanford University.

HumeDavid. (1756). Essays and treatises on several subjects. University of Oxford

.

KlamerArjo. (1996). The Value of Culture. Amsterdam University Press.

SmithHerrnsteinBarbara. (1988). Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for  
Critical Theory. Harvard University Press.

**Poster:**

ART EXHIBITION



# The Yorkshire

inspired by William Turner

21/4 - 23/4 (10:00 - 19:00)

City University Creative Media Center 6/F

## Leaflet:



創意媒體學院很榮幸能夠與香港文化發展及藝術中心合作，舉辦一連三日的藝術展覽。這次展覽命名為《延伸自威廉·特納的約克郡》，以自然風景畫為主題。

著名英國浪漫主義風景畫家，威廉·特納在年輕時曾經多次到約克郡旅遊，並在當地結識不少好友，傳授了不少風景畫及油彩的知識給當地人。當地人在威廉特納過世後，成立了威廉特納藝術學校，以紀念威廉特納對約克郡藝術的貢獻。雖然威廉特納藝術學校最終由於資金問題停止營運，但該校早期的學生卻畫下了不少有著濃厚威廉特納影子的風景畫。此次畫展展出的，都是有幸在英國約克郡被尋回，學者們相信是威廉特納藝術學校的學生所繪的風景畫。

The Creative Media Center is cooperating with the Hong Kong Arts Development and Culture Center (HKADCC), to organize an art exhibition. The gallery will be named, "The Yorkshire inspired by William Turner". Landscape painting is featured in this art exhibition.

William Turner was a famous British romantic landscape painter. When he was young, he often traveled to Yorkshire for sightseeing and inspiration. He met numerous friends in Yorkshire and taught the locals about art and painting. When William Turner passed away, the people of Yorkshire established the William Turner Art Academy to commemorate his contribution to Yorkshire art. Although the art academy eventually ceased to operate due to funding problems, the early students of the school painted numerous landscape paintings which imitated the style of William Turner. The paintings exhibited in this exhibition are paintings that were found in Yorkshire. Scholars commonly believe that these paintings were painted by students from the William Turner Art Academy in the 18th century.

## The Yorkshire inspired by William Turner

21/4 - 23/4 (10:00 - 19:00)

City University Creative Media Center 6/F