

Knowledge Anxiety of Contemporary 'Elites'

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Inspirations for this piece flooded in when I was watching a space documentary. The narrator, calm and emotionless, explains how the Sun will reach the end of its life when its nuclear fuel storage exhausts. The star will only last 5 billion years in the universe; by then, it will also be the end of the Earth. This means everything built by humans with sweat and tears will eventually be annihilated, even descendants of the great Elon Musk cannot escape from this deadly fate. I looked at the pile of 'artistic trash' sitting in my studio, which will also vanish without leaving a trace in this world, I knew that it was going to be another day of emotional turbulence.

I joked with my friends a while ago that it is not easy for artists to survive in 2023. Pressured by the reality, there are many more skills we have to acquire —wall painting, cable-laying, wall repairing, wall drilling, design, photo-editing, socializing, writing, not to mention 'being philosophy-savvy' and 'mastering the art of bluffing' —we must be all-mighty not to be eliminated.

Once an enthusiast of philosophy and elite culture, I started to refrain myself from using academic references in my works, even without myself knowing. Books on my shelf have become an 'original sin'.

Among the 'sins,' Sisyphus is undoubtedly a favourite figure among intellectuals. I was exceptionally moved when I first heard about Sisyphus and his story; I always find enlightening moments like this alluring. Sisyphus, a diligent figure in ancient Greek mythology, was condemned by God and made to push a boulder up a mountain day after day, trapped by his fate as an unfree man. It is fair enough to say he is hardworking. Having a strong stomach? Fair enough. Courageous? Also fair enough! The myth of Sisyphus can be framed in hundreds if not thousands of implications and city metaphors. If there is a ranking of the most widely-quoted allusions in the cultural sector (and among the 'hipsters'), I believe Sisyphus will top the list for years, defeating Haruki Murakami's work and *Le Petit Prince*. I started questioning the elite culture after I heard the word 'Sisyphus' from culturists, artists and singers countless times. They distorted those references to the narratives of their lives, which has no relevance to Sisyphus; instead it is a kind of brutal interpretation and placement. The truth is, it is a kind of shameless appropriation, 'this is the only story that I know so I might as well use this in my narrative.' This 'one Sisyphus fits all' pandemic made me more critical of the elite culture. A few years ago, I had an admission interview. That is the last straw for the collapse of my enthusiasm towards elite culture. When I mentioned that I was reading an ancient Greek poetry collection titled *Early Greek Elegists* by Cecil Maurice Bowra (1938), the interviewer nodded vigorously before I hardly finished my sentence, as if I was immediately given a place in the school. At that moment,

nauseousness welled up in my stomach as I felt disrespected and betrayed because you can have 'something' just because of another 'something'. By chance, I gained access to a cheat code, a hidden lingua franca. I started to doubt the elite culture because of this incident. I seemed to have fathomed out a transaction mechanism of some sort. Since then, I have chosen to keep a distance with haute knowledge and remind myself to approach it with a critical eye.

Empowerment of Contemporary Art

Mit dem Rücken zur Kunst: Die neuen Statussymbole der Macht (Turning Away from Art: The New Status Symbols of Power) by the German art historian and cultural scientist Wolfgang Ullrich offers a comprehensive and persuasive argument of how contemporary art forms feed elitists (or pundits) with power and superciliousness. Ullrich suggests that the social symbolism of contemporary art can be described as a 'new weapon', classifying art directly as 'armaments'. Contemporary artworks have been a representation of high culture. Modernism's intervention has added multiple layers of social symbolism onto art. These encompass moral righteousness, political correctness, brightness, and prominence, thereby shaping numerous well-educated 'intellectuals.' The power of contemporary art lies in its ability to expose the entirety of human nature; it gathers desires, driving artists to madness, souls to lose themselves, and people to incessantly pour money into it. Art narrates the beauty of humanity and visuals, as well as our sins. It defines who deserves

acclamation and who are the 'uncultured'. Just as weapons can cost lives, art might just deliver a fatal blow that shatters our self-worth. As such, what holds the greatest power if not art?

'So, in a slightly exaggerated sense, we might even consider modern art as a new weapon displayed among the armoury of defensive and intimidating techniques. It stands prominently in a continuous row of chambers within the castle; visitors must enter these rooms to transform themselves from adversaries into supplicants. In the past, such a situation usually demanded an immeasurable, unparalleled luxury and grandeur. However, even in this context, art has been put to use. Despite being packaged within a courtly culture and dedicated to the ideal of universal beauty, art doesn't differ significantly in its symbolic status from that of other identities. It is unlikely to suddenly induce feelings of alienation or evoke cultural inferiority complexes. Instead, it tends to stir admiration and envy, particularly among those unable to afford such opulence, mercilessly laying bare their own hardships and poverty.'

—Wolfgang Illrich (2000),

*Mit dem Rücken zur Kunst: Die neuen Statussymbole der Macht
(Turning Away from Art: The New Status Symbols of Power)*

Ullrich mentions that contemporary art has achieved 'an unprecedented success'. Throughout history, it is rare to find a symbol that exerts influence and power in multiple aspects as extensive as contemporary art. In the eyes of Ullrich, art is also a cognitive language of 'reverse control'. When the audience fails to comprehend and resonate with an artwork, they would not blame the

work, nor they would leave in disappointment; instead, they would think that they lack the ability and knowledge to conquer the tower of art. Interestingly, many artists strive to conform to the image of an artist. They desire to be looked up to; they desire to be recognized as a true 'artist'. Art academies usually follow the practices and theories developed by predecessors. In such a way, countless academies become shepherds that herd students into the barn. The sheep should cause no trouble and fill the canvas with paint as they are told. If you put too much paint, you are 'arrogant'; if you put too little, you are untalented. When I first started learning visual arts, one of my teachers pointed at me and said to the class, 'No one is a genius here. No one will be. Don't think too highly of yourself and do things differently.' This statement might not be aggressive but definitely insulting. It has also created a massive trauma for me. Since then, I have been forced into a one-sided relationship with art, feeling estranged and disgusted. It is said that contemporary art enjoys more freedom and fewer limitations. As days go by, I figured out that contemporary art also seems to have its own set of rules: 'imitation'. From a list of significant historical figures, select a couple of names that we find interesting. Do some study, make the findings juicy. Throw in some philosophies and books that you fail to wrap your head around into the presentation. In this way, at the end of the day, we shall survive again. What doesn't kill us, makes us stronger. I was a troublemaking sheep; a sheep that imitated the greats; a sheep that enjoyed showing off my knowledge. However, the more I behaved

like this, the stronger that I felt I did not belong to this barn. I have never dreamed of becoming a genius. I just wanted to deviate slightly from academism but at the same time I was 'anxious' about acquiring knowledge. If I do not read enough of the classics required by the academy, there is no way I can become an artist.

'[...] Perhaps Dewey had already identified a new form of academicism back then, where many artists strived to conform to a positive artistic image. They became a new kind of imitation, trying hard to mimic the characteristics of modern art as accurately as possible. For instance, it was clear that students in art academies often worried about whether what they were doing or planning could be considered art. Consequently, it seemed as if mastering the language of an art form became an obvious goal within the academic curriculum: anyone who could present elements of artistic concepts in an easily recognizable way could be seen as an artist.'

—Wolfgang Illrich (2000),

*Mit dem Rücken zur Kunst: Die neuen Statussymbole der Macht
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'Knowledge Anxiety' of Theorists and Opinion Givers

'Knowledge anxiety' is a contemporary disease. In the era of big data, society has developed an unlimited appetite for new information and knowledge. People never feel confident enough about their competitiveness; their desire for catching up with 'knowledge' is making them anxious. 'Knowledge' is such an interesting word. It is more than something that can be obtained by working hard

but also a currency and an identity, probably more versatile than cryptocurrencies. 'Knowledge' is a lingua franca superior to money as it can be used for disguise or manipulation. Artists are one of the groups that has to make deals with 'knowledge'. It is highly relevant to the stimulations artists receive and the creations they make. The 'elite culture' is what artists have most frequent contact with—opera, classical music, academic papers, haute knowledge...—and polished repeatedly by elites across all fields. As an artist fearful of being isolated and lagging behind, I long for building a connection with the elite culture. Terry Eagleton proposes the notion of 'culture acknowledges no hierarchies'; however, it is not the case in reality. 'Culture' has already divided society into different classes and categories. The barrier to entry of each class is explicit. It is as obvious as the price tags on music and art classes, the more you can afford, the more elite you are. This is why we feel content and proud whenever we shout 'fine art! fine art!'

American minimalist artist Donald Judd gives his own understanding and redefinition of visual art in a commentary (published on 13th December, 1986). If Judd's ideas are used to answer how an artist should look at artistic creations, the discussion will look no different than the age-old mundane debate on 'what is art?' 'What is something?' is a metaphysical question. It demands the answerer to explain the universal values and social significance reflected in the examined subject. However, definitions derived from such

discussions have no other function than facilitating those in power to classify our society. Judd, on the contrary, gives a wake-up call by proposing critical rhetorical questions that provokes reflections. He also makes an interesting statement: *'Visual arts should be visual.'* Why would he emphasise the fact that visual arts are 'visual'? Does it imply that culturists who engage in arts just to make a living also existed back in the days? It is hard to tell whether Judd's statement is disruptive in today's world because it is merely reiterating the nature of visual arts. However, this statement still appears to be provocative in this day and age. It seems that when the civilised society becomes well-developed, people start to reinterpret the already-understood, established theories and natures over and over again, transforming simple 'this-or-that's into dozens of thick theory books. At the end of the day, they are still responding to the same conventional cliché of 'what is something'. In the piece *'More Conversation from Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp'* and *Thoughts on the Values We Pursue in Creation'* I wrote for an online magazine a while ago, I point out that 'blue curtains' is a common disease among modern men. We assume jargons carry deeper meanings and find it unbelievable if it is not, as if culturists must embed implications into everything they do. Judd steps up to warn the art scene by giving it a succinct diagnosis. Interestingly, his article does not target the general public; rather, it suggests artists to focus on what they should do and stop appropriating confusing viewpoints and historical references to fancy up their work. Judd was an art critic before he became an artist

himself. He published multiple censorious articles in a row that put the 'pestilences' in the art, cultural management and architectural circles under fire. If this article was published online in the 21st century, it would only become another negligible whiny post despite how powerful and critical his words are.

Artists are the embodiment of theorists and advocates. In *'Thinking with Exhibitions, Thinking with People?'*, curator and University of London professor Simon Sheikh points out that in the context of contemporary art, curators are more than theorists. They effectively connect the realm of art and ideas through the embodiment of philosophical elements, and present hybrid standpoints. Building upon Sheikh's view, I believe that the role of an artist has expanded in the contemporary world. It has moved beyond 'spreading', 'highlighting' and 'announcing' ideas. There is a ubiquitous phenomenon observed in contemporary artists, which I have concerns raising: the abusive use of academic references out of 'knowledge anxiety'. Artworks are infused with social issues, theories, mythologies and classic literature, whether or not those references are relevant; such abuses are then justified with lines of 'inspired by's. Kao Chien-Hui, renowned art history and contemporary art culture critic; and Nanfang Shuo, Taiwanese author, poet and critic, published a dialogue titled *'Drought and Flood: Crisis of the Production of Contemporary Art Knowledge'*. The dialogue commented on the problems in contemporary art and

present-day artistic writings. Nanfang Shuo provides a short but powerful diagnosis for the phenomenon of 'narrative (interpretation) overflow' found in the contemporary art scene,

'...No matter in which era, "art" should be "transcending". It should be able to go beyond reality, radiating energy that elevates or soothes the human race. Juxtaposition, appropriation, re-presentation and duplication are forms and means irrelevant to artistic spirit and ideas. One of the causes of narrative overflow is the deliberate placement of philosophies and aesthetics into the narratives of these art production means.'

Knowledge anxiety is commonly manifested as the 'juxtaposition, appropriation, re-presentation and duplication' of theories, which allow artists to privatise the knowledge and turn it into their own, brand-new theories.

'Material exchange is one of the natures of art. There is no need to deny such nature. The function of a narrative is to persuade. The most needed narrative in non-material art forms is nothing but to persuade someone "this is art".' We bring in different theories into our persuasion because we are afraid of being an outcast; of not being understood; of exposing the fact that we are not as knowledgeable as we seem. I was an enthusiast of elite cultures, hoping to fit into that artist character shaped by society. Although I reckoned myself having no stakes in the vast artistic world, I got lost in the elegance and otherworldliness brought by art. I studied philosophy and all

kinds of theories hard and looked up to world-famous masterminds—all because I thought that was a 'necessity in art'. I must have a good grasp of these things and use them in my art. If I understand them, my artworks can definitely become academically abundant. However, this is a typical slippery slope. How could I mistakenly believe that my artworks would be 'qualified' just because I understood a couple of established theories! 'I am well-read; I talk about Kant all the time; I have learnt *Les Misérables* by heart—I know art better than you!' The desire to persuade others is a present-day pandemic that needs to be reflected on. Kao Chien-Hui and Nanfang Shuo call for more reflections on why to persuade, who to persuade, along with the purpose and results of persuasion. Some artists fill their 'intellectual emptiness' with the words of others, taking advantage of the 'cheating formula' by 'juxtaposition, appropriation, re-presentation and duplication'. I deeply believe that 'good art' is not made with academic references of the ancient greats, just as this article does not have to quote on Nietzsche's 'God is dead' to mock the malpractices of contemporary art.

'Status Anxiety' of the Contemporary Generation

'Over the past fifty years, the perplexity surrounding art has shifted dramatically. Initially associated with witchcraft, illusion, and deception, contemporary art has undergone a transformation in its purpose. The major challenge in contemporary art is not about debating its form and content; it's more about coping with the restless, competitive environment within the art world, pressured by the swift pace of

modernization and contemporaneity... [] ...In the 1990s, the art world coined the phrase "the king's new clothes." This expression highlighted how the authorities in art adorned perplexing new art with theory, much like dressing up an empty tin can with a label, granting it validation.'

—Kao Chien-Hui (高千惠) (2006),

Rebellion in Silhouette: The New Myth of the Contemporary Artist

It is worth investigating the anxiety about knowledge and the environment that creates it. Artists are sensitive to their surroundings because of the restlessness they feel about their status and their reasons of existence. Same as artificial intelligence, contemporary art has evolved into something that can shape a person into a righteous man who benefits the world, manifesting the greatness of humanity; however, it can also become a devil that sucks our souls. Art is slowly contaminated by such devilish energy, and artists who are low-profile and devote themselves purely to their work start to feel uncomfortable about this sugar-coated influence. Unfortunately, it is too late to do anything and the art scene is only a small circle—there is no choice but to go with the flow and submit themselves to the hellish devil. Status anxiety also relates to self-love. Art mirrors the problems that exist in the art world and ourselves, and we are the only ones who can solve these problems we created. Artists easily suffer from status anxiety, self-doubt and self-devaluation. They even suppress and mould themselves into that 'artist character'.

As an artist, I am also a patient of 'status anxiety'. I have an immensely dangerous 'hobby' of observing and contemplating the universe. I was even told by a fortune teller during palm-reading, 'You are an overthinker. You feel depressed easily.' Vulnerable to depression is one of the symptoms of 'status anxiety,' fair and square. Fortunately, I was born in an ordinary family, in ordinary times so I could produce whiny articles one after another. British philosopher Alain de Botton believes that human beings experience 'rage and impotent despair' when they are ignored by others:

'The attentions of others matter to us because we are afflicted by a congenital uncertainty as to our own value, as a result of which affliction we tend to allow others' appraisals to play a determining role in how we see ourselves. [...] And if they avoid our gaze when we enter a room or look impatient after we have revealed our occupation, we may fall into feelings of self-doubt and worthlessness.'

I would like to take the scope of discussion beyond art. It is once mentioned in a religious publication that 'there are only two emotions: love and fear.' All other feelings we experience in life can be traced back to happiness and fear, the most primitive forms of emotions. If knowledge anxiety is a pandemic among academics, then status anxiety is the pandemic among all adults. Imagine young adults enter the workplace right after graduating from college. All of a

sudden, they become entry-level office workers who receive a salary of less than 20,000 dollars, with 5% of it mandatorily contributed to the MPF (Monetary Provident Fund). They clock in punctually but there is no guarantee that they can clock out on time; and they worry about being gossiped; and they may not like their job; and they may be exhausted to meet anyone after work. For artists, if they want to 'compete' with others in the circle, they can only learn from the environment and successful stories around them. We are afraid of going against conformity so we developed the mentality of 'doing what others are doing'. Out of fear, we have to move higher up the ladder; we try our very best to be in disguise but our souls are crushed into pieces along the way. The most obvious symptom of status anxiety is low self-worth. Adults are children longing for love. We seek recognition from our parents whenever we do something that we thought would make them proud. When we do not get any response, we start to doubt ourselves, even thinking that I am a disgrace to the world. 'I am a miserable existence eliminated by society.

In *Status Anxiety*, Botton reviews the history of elite culture. In ancient times, servants were taught since birth that their social status was low. They accepted this fate and would never dream of becoming a master. Therefore, they were less stressed than modern people. However, we are in an era that

believes 'everyone can make it' so modern education teaches us ordinary people to climb up the social ladder. This belief makes losers of the 'survivorship bias' suffer. Botton also quotes from the book *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958) by British sociologist and politician Michael Young to prove that elitism has already spread to every corner of modern people's way of thinking. Young thinks that the belief of 'everyone can make it' completely rules out the possibility for the ordinary to fail. In the past, servants served their masters unconditionally. It was normal for a servant not to chase after social success and wealth. While in modern society, there is no longer a master to back us up. 'I am the only one held accountable for my poverty and lack of achievements. The ordinary can no longer play dumb. Their failure is completely their fault and responsibility, and has nothing to do with the government.

This discussion may be slightly politically incorrect in 2023 but it points out the difficulties of living as an ordinary person. Comparing your status to that of others still embeds deeply in human DNA because our workplace and ideological systems have not completely accepted the idea that one can be ordinary; together with the coercive encouragement of 'everyone can make it', our society is in fact not going anywhere. Society seems to have become more open but it is not really the case. Consider a present-day ordinary person who learns about different 'survivors' from textbooks. They

would still think that if they reject the rat race and lie flat, they would be abandoned more quickly by the world. However, there is no guarantee that their efforts will turn into fruits. This is how we created millions if not billions of status anxiety patients in society. By the same token, the art scene, in reality, is not as ideal as what is taught in academies. When artists are faced with this brutal truth, as thinkers and observers of society, it becomes inevitable for them to suffer from extreme status anxiety.

Before Our Spring...

Greed, knowledge, superiority. There are no other things more powerful than these in sabotaging a person. Artists should be more alert to these three things as they are at the forefront of fighting against them. However, debates and discussions alone could not eliminate anxiety. They only accelerate and amplify self-sabotaging. Artists raise a lot of questions for the world, as well as for others; yet, they seem to pay no attention to their motivations and inner self. In Hong Kong, artists and culturists are often misunderstood as having 'stronger souls' so that they are assigned by the Creator to the most unhappy, hard-to-survive city, doing things 'without economic benefits'. Society loves 'reasoning knowledge with knowledge' or 'reasoning the ordinary with the celebrated'. Those arguments are infused with an abundance of theories

and academic insights, which is also an interesting feature of elitism. This article presents rather critical viewpoints. Some may see them as contradictory, thinking that I have taken the moral high ground, criticising and appreciating knowledge at the same time. I once struggled if I should write down what I read, studied and contemplated but I summoned the courage to mock myself with all these honest words. Contemporary art has opened Pandora's box for the modern world. New inventions, new concepts and new trends overwhelm us. We are forced to follow the mainstream which has the authority and those who go astray will only be marginalised. Contemporary society is entangled in a psychological debate, which has created one victim after another. Despite the sweat and suffering art and artists have been through, their images will always remain elegant and otherworldly. Once and again, they will be claimed by the 'elites' and polished with numerous theories and journal articles written by their descendants. It is prime time for us 'contemporary artists' to escape from this vicious cycle of learning, misunderstanding and anxiousness, and reflect on our tendency of being attracted to and sabotaged by knowledge. Let us stay focused on the nature of creation and bring our spring back again.

Work citation

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