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**Propagating Art and Elections'
Propaganda:
The Chair and the Signature: Realizing
Danto's Dream**

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Introduction:

As an artist, I consider thinking of a new artwork—a project before its realization— as a dream that should be achieved. Both of the philosopher's dream and the artist's dream, in this case, are almost for the 'same' artwork. The second dream is intended to be a realization of the first one by appropriation. It is noticeable that this relationship is reflected on the divisions of this article. It is divided into three parts under these titles: 1- Preparation for the dream: the artistic project; 2-Realizing the dream: details of the project; 3- Interpretation of the dream: comments on the project.

Preparation for the dream: The artistic project

The idea of this project came across my mind for the first time around May 2001 that was after the dismissing of the Nation's Assembly. The media in Jordan, at the time, started to discuss the matter. The main subject was the upcoming elections and the local and international political factors that will affect it. Afterward, taking into consideration the status of art in Jordan, I make a connection between propagating art and the election propaganda. Reading Danto's book "Philosophizing Art" especially the chapter titled "The Seat of the Soul" which discusses the chair as a symbol loaded with meanings motivated me to continue working on the project.¹ Thinking of realizing this project as an activist art made me consider new ways and strategies such as popular media, public installations, and happenings to name some. I found that this project needs to be well ordered and planned to attract volunteers and public in general for involvement in it. This basic step constitutes part of this work since the whole process by itself in this kind of projects is the most important as long as the participatory aspect is concerned more than the visual or materialistic product.²

The Subject matter

I pretended in the project the role of a candidate for the elections of the 14th Assembly of the Representatives which was taking place on 06/17/2003.³ The play opened for me the way to proceed in the project through the context of the elections in terms of its

procedures and propaganda. The work criticizes mainly some political and artistic concepts. However, I considered it an opportunity to propagate art: the art practice in Jordan by putting forward some names of Jordanian artists, art in general, and the new forms of art as exemplified by the project itself. This is when the cultural aspects were almost absent from the candidates' programs and slogans. The other thing the project aims at is to discuss and show how art can play a better role in the life of people. The political and artistic aspects of the project are working together since they affect each other. Many people in both sides (politicians and artists) are not aware of this relationship between art and politics, and the project can pose questions concerning art in politics or vice versa.

The preparation

There are procedures and steps to be taken while preparing for the core activities of the project. Hereupon these procedures:

A form filled in and proceeded to the Deanship of Scientific Research at Yarmouk University for funding the project. After some communications and a meeting with the committee of this deanship the fund was secured. We make the deal even though they consider the art project as an experiment for the search which will follow it. This understanding is different from my point of view in which I consider the project itself is the most important and the book is another state of it.

A letter was sent to the president of the school to have a permission to work freely in campus and to receive technical help whenever needed. An application forwarded to the governor of Irbid for approval of the project since some parts of it will be taking place in public spaces and in the streets of the city.⁴ The governor issued his approval by a letter putting some limitations which sound like the frame of ethics that any candidate should work his or her propagation within.⁵ Other letters were sent to some elementary schools to arrange for drawing sessions with chair as subject matter, and to the administration of a public park which has center for cultural activities for the children to arrange some chair games for them. Then I started with volunteers on putting down schedule covering the period 6/06-06/16/2003. We held meeting 06/2/2003 with the volunteers to explain the steps of the project and to discuss questions and suggestions related to it. I designed the printed materials and the banners and made agreement with print shop to take the job of making the copies and to be ready on 06/6/2003. I hired a professional camera man to picture the films and document the activities under my supervision. I designed a simple questionnaire to attract people to the events. Some of the questions are: what is the most important slogan among those found in the streets of the school? Dose art need propagation? Is the signature important? Is the chair important?

The elements:

This project is build on a presupposition says that the difference tights things together.⁶ There are many elements involve in this project such as the participatory, materialistic, contextual, monetary, and visual elements. There are three core elements: the chair, the signature and the slogans. All these elements appear together in several details of the project such as in the banners, cards, and the exhibition, while the signature and chair appear in poster, flyer, and the post card chair. The chair appears solely in installations, drawings, ladder of chairs, games using the chair, the lighting chair, and a video film.

The chair:

It is the core element of the project, and it is chosen to be present in all its details. It is important because every person symbolically needs a seat to practice life from it. In the context of elections every candidate hopes to have a seat in the assembly to practice what he/she believes in. And the elector too is looking for a seat in the assembly indirectly through the elect's seat. In this context the project steps in to make a comment on the status of art in life at both the time of elections and other times.

The chair has a very long history and the man is using it for the past 5000 years.⁷ It was developed during the history with different peoples, and it has a plenty of meanings and associations depending on its material, color, design, size, place, and its user. Generally the chair is connected with authority and power. We find chairs from ancient ages with legs formed as slaves or conquered people.⁸ Nowadays chairs become for unrest of the people with the powers they can not control.⁹ History of art has a large number of examples old and contemporary show the chair's rich capacity for wide rang of expressions. To name few modern and contemporary artworks which used chairs as their main object, we can mention Van Gogh's Chair, Joseph Beuys' Fat Chair,¹⁰ Andy Warhol's Electric Chair,¹¹ George Brecht's Chairs, Joseph Kosouth's Chair,¹² and Lucas Samaras' Chairs.

The signature

This element being combined with other elements in the project shows its traditional function for documenting and responsibility. Its origin, finger print is used since prehistoric man until now even though it is used today for other functions such as criminology. And another origin is the stamp which returns back to the Sumerians. The signature as we know it is invented in the Renaissance and spread all over the world afterward.

The signature in art has its history too which, as far as I know, has not been written yet and it would be interesting if realized. There are examples which considered artworks by their own such as the Tughras. They are elaborated signatures of the Uttoman Khalifs enhanced from the 16th century on. They are created by excellent transcribers. It is possible that Danto have not come over these Tughras because he was thinking of signature in Latin letters when he says that:

In the letterhead universe of officialdom, the seated signature is universally recognized as the mark of power and authority _so instantly acknowledged a symbol that I have often wondered why artists who traffic in punning interchanges between banner and reality, Magritte, for example, should never have produced the artwork of my dreams, consisting of the curvaceous horizontal signature in suitably elegant Empire majuscules.¹³

I considered this as invitation to include the signature and the chair in the project especially when he adds "One's chair is one's signature."¹⁴

The slogans

I made up some slogans in two categories: the first is commenting on some practices during the time of elections, and the second is about art. This first group was written on banners hanged in campus and moved out after a while to the city. They appear also in cards and in one film. They are:

Elect me and you will lose your vote

Do not elect me and you will win your vote

Both slogans are rhetorical on the same meaning as said by the chair. It is a comment on people who vote or run for the assembly because of personal interest.¹⁵

Imagine yourself in my situation ... Please

This one alludes to the chair, the artist, or the educated person as he or she is watching the process of elections. We are aware of that the process of democratization in this country is still far away from being ideal one but we should start developing it.

... Company announces seats for sale

This slogan says that the seats of the assembly are not for sale and if you need to buy one visit any furniture store showroom. This is against the connection between capital and elections.¹⁶

Sitting until amount is gone out

Reserve your seat now ... it is a limited amount

These two slogans seem to be directly quoted from advertising which usually push the person targeted to take advantage of the offer. In the election context it is also an important opportunity because the seats in the assembly are 110 and it is a call not to miss the chance to elect the best for the nation's interest.

For every seat (place) a suitable speech

Some people could not realize that for any given situation there are limits to move within. And it is in the banners of most of the candidates which filled by promises with no hope what so ever to accomplish them.¹⁷

Shake hands with the artist and get your free seat (chair) immediately

It is a promise that can be realized. It is an advice to go along your conscious. Vote for the right person and for the real art by participating in it and you will be rewarded.

The chair rests on four legs

Any state is constituted of three authorities and the slogan adds a fourth one which is the awareness of being all separated entities. The last one needs to be addressed by the cultured people in purpose of heightening its importance for the better life of people.¹⁸

One seat in ... is better than ten on the tree

The bird in the original known saying is replaced by seat. It shows that this is not the best election formula in terms of its law and regulations but it is still one step forward and we should build on it.¹⁹

Please ... elect ... the seats are comfortable

Some political slogans made by some candidates are so unrealistic and they replace in a way the political practice. And by this wrong doing they left a sense of unreal comfort.²⁰

Flying chair (carpet)

No seats for the birds

The chair became in our days a machine for seating²¹ but the flying carpet soars without any machines and the birds too can hover in the skies without chairs or any other support. It seems that these two slogans are related to each other and reflect two opinions concerning this election, one side thinks it is a game and nothing good will come out of it, and the other side with no tribal or political party connections has no chance to be elected or presented.

... The prize is a car with five seats

It is alluding to the benefits the elected person will get advantage of which are a high salary, special passport, retiring salary, and a car without paying costumes. Some people said that these benefits for the elected are not found in any other state in the world.²²

200 seats in the Bowling but ... in the Concord

I don't know until writing this text the exact number of the seats in the first mentioned plane besides there are several models of it. For the second plane the number is left empty and it is huge because of its huge size, however, it has been retired. It is the activity of the assembly and not the number which can affect people's life.

Wishing a seat for art

The second set of the slogans centers on art by propagating the names of Jordanian artists. The name in big fonts is preceded by drawn image of a chair and followed by my signature, and over every name appears the slogan: wishing a seat for art. They are names of ten males and five female artists. Their art is absent in the time of elections and in other times too.

Realizing the dream: Details of the project:

The artist looks like clown with a lot of ideas and tools which be set everywhere and make sense of his games.²³ The project started its core events on 06/6/2003 and went on until the 06/16/2003 that is one day before the elections.

The Banners

The volunteers hanged the banners at the night of 06/6 in the campus of Yarmouk University. The employees and students next morning got astonished because they know that it is prohibited for any institution to propagate for any candidate but afterward they usually realize that it is some kind of art. And by this way we attracted the people for the project and they started talking about it.

Flyer

This is the chair's election program constituted briefly of its personality through history. The chair is talking by itself eloquently and ends by that: "If you want to understand me look at me in the social, economic, political, cultural, and aesthetic context." It seems that the chair personalized is working hard on its purpose by pretending goodness the same way some politicians usually do at the time of elections. The flyer was distributed on the shields of the parked cars in the school and in other parking lots around it.

Poster

Its design contains parts of an image of the chair, the signature and some distorted text from the flyer. It is distributed all over the departments of the school and the city. It is not very clear but our intention is to let people ask and then to stimulate their curiosity. In this way it is sarcastic because the propagation for art needs to be propagated.

Cards

These cards look like business cards small and well designed. They contain the same slogans appeared on the banners and by this way we are taking Benjamin's advice to make them very close to the beholders to fulfill their need for possession.²⁴ These copies work very well for this purpose especially when we distributed them in the streets.

Chairs installations

We rented hundreds of chairs all grey, same size and same design for several days. The volunteers install them in campus at night on 06/11 in groups. Three things at least were considered: attractiveness, directing the paths of the traffic, and having meanings. It is interesting to watch all the cars controlled and forced to go through designed paths decided by the presence of chairs (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Khaled Alhamzah , Chairs Installation 2003 video still

The lighting chair

In one of the focal points in the city streets we built a large frame and drew a chair with lighting wires. In the context of the elections it would be very annoying to find a chair advertised since no candidate dares to make it. Near it the banner was hanged with the slogan "Shake hands with the artist and get your free seat (chair) immediately." The post card chair distributed in the site and this act alludes to that the person should fulfill his or her promises (Figure 2 & 3).



Figure 2. *Khaled Alhamzah* , Lighting Chair Installation 2003 video still



Figure 3. *Khaled Alhamzah* , Paper Chair 2003 video still

Chair drawing

Some volunteers went to some elementary schools and asked the students to draw chairs with colored pencils on paper. A lot of interesting drawings produced. This detail of the project as the following one was made to attract parents and teachers to the project.

Children chairs

It is done with the children in a cultural center found in a public park within the city. Many games such as running competitions and musical chairs were played with colorful kids-chairs. About fifty of these chairs were given as prizes for them.

The ladder of chairs

On 06/13 the volunteers made a ladder of chairs on the wall of the College of Fine Arts at Yarmouk University. It is attractive and full of symbols especially at the context of the elections. Ladders are used for climbing or descending but seats are not made for any of them (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Khaled Alhamzah , the Ladder of Chairs 2003 photo

Post card chair

This is a card designed of two sheets of paper of the same size and fixed together. The inside one has a chair with its lines cut in so it becomes three dimensional when opened. Printed parts of the chair and signature were on the outside sheet. It is a real chair but small and papery so it looks like a relic from the project.

The video films:

It is planned from the beginning to produce some video films as details of the project. The following two were ready for the event taking place in the city titled "shake hands" I put forward the ideas and directed all these films.

The chair

This one-minuet film presents a white plastic chair in all its possible settings as moved by an unseen magical hand. Even though it is captured in color video camera the film seems in black and white and this helped in neutralizing the form and emphasizing on the symbolic meanings of the chair (Figure 5).

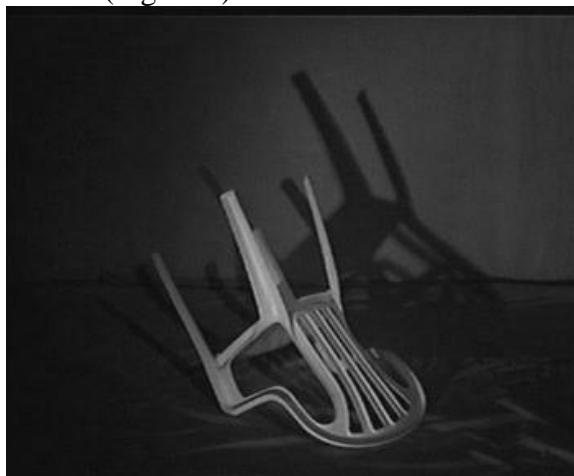


Figure 5. Khaled Alhamzah , Chair 2003 video still

Chairs and slogans

This two-minuets film depends on some chairs from the book titled: "One Thousand Chairs"²⁵ with the slogans which appeared on the banners. It is better here to see all the slogans on one place presented on the screen. This detail of the project attracted the crowds to the project and aroused discussions.

The rocking chair and the media

This one is not produced until today and it is, I believe, better not to make it because any person looking by a remote control for a station in his or her TV set is making the film. It is a collage of nothing which is a comment on media and thinking, generally speaking, as unrelated today at least for the viewer.

The documentary

It is about 12-minuets documentary film for the events of the project beside shots of the first and the second films. It opens with the screen in the street and ended with it. The events are not in the same order of their happening. The film intended to be another state of the project and for that matter it looks like home video to keep it in the same characteristics of the project. There are images, writings and comments put together in the film which produce new context for all elements. Shots of the artist, its director, and the common people appeared in several places in the film alludes to the presence of the artist at work either on the project or on the film.

The exhibition

A show was organized in the Gallery of the College Fine Arts at Yarmouk University and opened on 05/12/2004 that is about one year after the core events of the project ended. It is clear that returning to the gallery is not turning back of the project's participatory qualities but giving all the volunteers, the students and the faculty members an opportunity to see all details of the project in one place even though in new context. A broken white plastic chair was put in the center of the show after roughly repaired by metal wires. Ladders of paper chairs were made as descending or climbing large white cubes with gradual change in size. The post card chair was used as invitation card. The title of the show "Your seat is reserved" is printed on the invitation card. It is a comment on the art shows with few attendants. The documentary film was screened at the show.

Interpretation of the dream: Comments on the project:

Nearly all the components of the artistic milieu, the artist, artwork and the beholder are changed. The artist, for example, becomes more aware of the nature of artwork and its role in life. The influence of Duchamp was enormous on the conceptual artwork since he brought about the mental processes in it and attracted the beholder to these processes. And he showed the creative artistic process in the final art product.²⁶ The artistic experience today isolates itself and becomes far from being part of peoples experience to enrich their imagination. This is the case with both the high and popular arts with different causes, and more than this art becomes difficult to be apprehended even for the critics and thinkers.²⁷ This situation, I believe, should not prevent the artist from trying untraditional ways and strategies to come over these obstacles. This project simplified the concept of perception by introducing artists' names to the public which can produce awareness toward their art or any art.

The purpose of this project is to irritate the static and isolated art perception by offering participatory art. This is an art centers on behavioral context and invites the beholders to be involved in the creative experience by their bodies, emotions and conceptions. In this way it faces what the beholders have accustomed to because they trained to believe that art should not relate to life and at the same time they like the art which means something in their lives or imaginations. Some people in the West believe that it is prohibited for art to have content which make it open for all the communities and means something socially for them. In this way the art will broke out of the art world which controlled its

market and interpretation.²⁸ But we in the Arab world have different problem in that there is nothing of these elements found. We do not have any structure of art world, or critics, and consequently there is neither market nor patronage. Our crisis in art is different and we have to search its causes. I believe one of these causes is the absence of the social content which may be considered the reason for this isolation. The artists instead of blaming people for their art illiteracy they should work on the people's vital needs and problems.

This project is anti individualistic and anti stylistic as crystallized in modernism. It asserts its position on this matter through going into false glorifying of its symbol, the signature. It used uncostly materials such as printed paper and rented plastic chairs and by this matter it is connected with some strategies of conceptual art which appears from a political point of view using such materials and the media to secure its publicity. The content of the project is art and politics, which are always integrated in the sense that exhibiting an artwork is a political act either consciously or unconsciously according to Daniel Buren.²⁹ But this project is intended to open clear its political and artistic contents by its visual symbols written or drawn and their context within the elections. It is noticeable that its language is not far from that of advertising. The language of politics too becomes, as Herbert Marcuse put it, undistinguishable from that of the advertising.³⁰ The details of the project emphasize the polarity of art forms and the importance of its role in the life of ordinary people. The texts played a decisive role in both attracting the attention of people and forwarding messages to them. Whenever you see written words publicized there would be an ideological and political struggle just like the graffiti and the banners of the demonstrators.³¹ The written words when combined with images they would be direct especially if the texts are sarcastic and mocking or have something hidden between the lines or questions.³² The project emphasizes its common purposes and sharing characteristics by these means. The project mixes between what is private and what is public in its details especially in the slogans. They are quasi sayings or advertising captions transformed to be in accordance with the purposes of the project and its content. It is approbations of the overpowering and fully coded symbols. And this is important because it is not easily played in the traditional art forms or their traditional shows. It becomes the duty of the visual artist to think in issues of narrative, drama, and rhetoric even though they are from literature aesthetics.³³ There are many artists who work this way, Jenny Holzer in 4th of May, for example.

We have, in the Middle East, some level of political conscious although it is less developed from other societies but still better than the level of artistic one. This project by using the elections context helped increasing participation in the democratic process and in realizing the importance of art or at least this form of art in people's life. And by this way it is possible for art itself to refine its presence and to test its capacity in forwarding its messages practically.

Every time we plan and execute such art project we, the artist and the volunteers, rediscover the limitation of art teaching practiced in the institutions. We are not alone in this dilemma since this problem is not limited to these institutions in the Arab world but also found in many other places in the world.³⁴

The contemporary art in the world is in the process of questioning itself, and in this respect some artists believe that they have the right to use all art forms and styles exactly as the artists of the pre art era (Danto's view considers it before the first edition of Vasari's Lives).³⁵ These artists are researching new ways for a suitable exits more connected with the human issues today. There are projects related in some way or another to this one such as Hanson's Waste Land, Mierle Laderman Ukeles' Maintenance Art, and the Guerrilla Girls' many projects. Discussing the American art in the nineties of the twentieth century, Danto finds that while art expresses political trends, artist are not serious about political change by art since they still rely solely on the museum for testing their art. He adds that to be a serious devotee for political change you should move art from the museum and put it into life.³⁶

During the election time the media reports interesting stories such as the one about a calligrapher who hanged a banner with a slogan 'elect the calligrapher Ishmael for your election banners.' Another report tells that a 13 years-old boy holding on his chest a sign with the text "Elect the dignified living." The report adds that he is walks through the crowded streets of downtown Irbid. It is interesting to note that at the time we are trying to bring art back into life with great efforts by thinking of, planning for, and executing art projects you find some ordinary people some times do some acts like theirs spontaneously.

¹ Arthur C. Danto, *Philosophizing Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999.

² Nina Felshin, *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1995, PP. 10-11.

³ This election with accordance of the elections law for the representatives assembly no. 34 year 2001, see Tayseer Ahmad az-Zubi, *Sharh Qanoon al-Intkhabat li Majles an-Nowab (The Elections Law)*, Published by the auther, Jordan, 2001.

⁴ According yo the article no. 22, of the law see Tayseer Ahmad az-Zubi, *ibid*.

⁵ Articles 15, 65 of the law see Tayseer Ahmad az-Zubi, *ibid*.

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 8th printing., 1999, P. 31.

⁷ Kim Gurr I, Leon Straker, and Phillip Moore, "A History of Seating," Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Western Australia, See

<http://www.exmoorantiques.co.uk/History%20of%20Seating.htm> , PP. 1-2, 23/12/2004

⁸ Arthur C. Danto, *Philosophizing Art*, *ibid*, PP. 145, 148.

⁹ Arthur C. Danto, *Philosophizing Art*, *ibid*, p. 157.

¹⁰ Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s Redefining Reality*, Thames & Hudson, 2001, PP. 28-9.

¹¹ Arthur C. Danto, *Philosophizing Art*, *ibid*, p. 159-61.

¹² Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, Phaidon, London, 1998, PP. 10. 88.

¹³ Arthur C. Danto, *Philosophizing Art*, *ibid*, p. 144.

¹⁴ Arthur C. Danto, *Philosophizing Art*, *ibid*, p. 150.

¹⁵ Nazeeh ash-Shawaheen, *Report on Elections*, ad-Dustoor, no. 12889, Part 1, P. 4, 06-15-2003.

¹⁶ The newspapers reported some deals of trading votes for money were occurred, see Jihad al-Mansi, *Selling votes is hot*, al-Arab al-Yum, no, 12202, part 1, P. 7, 06-12-2003. And Samih al-Mayta, *It is the Government responsibility to bring those selling and buying votes to justice*, al-Arab al-Yum, no, 12200, part 1, P. 3, 06-10-2003

¹⁷ Abd ar-Raof at-Tal, "The Mess of the Election Slogans," ad-Dustoor, no. 12883, Part 1, P. 23, 06-09-2003.

¹⁸ Many known Jordanian writes share this idea see Ehab Mojahed, "The Absence of Culture", ad-Dustoor, no. 12881, part 1, P. 5, 06-07-2003.

¹⁹ Tariq Masarwah, "We Elect in Spite of Every Thing," ar-Rai, no. 11961, part2, P. 40, 06-17-2003.

²⁰ Husayn Abu Urabi, *The elections and slogans*, al-Arab al-Yum, no. 12206, part 1, P. 9, 06-16-2003.

²¹ Arthur C. Danto, *Philosophizing Art*, *ibid*, p. 157.

- ²² Nazeeh al-Qsoos, Note, ad-Dustoor, no. 12889, Part1, P. 8, 06-10-2003.
- ²³ Jean Fisher, "Globalization and its Critics," *Fiker wa Fan*, Translated into Arabic by Husayn al-Muzani, no. 76, Vol. 39, 2002.
- ²⁴ Walter Benjamin, "The Artwork in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Fiker wa Fan*, *ibid*.
- ²⁵ Charlotte Fiell, Peter Fiell, And Simone Philippi, *1000 Chairs*, Taschen, 2000.
- ²⁶ Gertje R. Utley, "Las Menines in Twentieth-Century Art," in *Velazquez's Las Menines*, ed. Suzanne L. Stratten-Pritt, Cambridge University Press, 2003, P. 180.
- ²⁷ Fredric Jameson, *ibid*, P. 147.
- ²⁸ Lucy R. Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan, Selected Essays on Feminist Art*, The New Press, New York, 1995,, PP. 121-23, 139-41.
- ²⁹ Tony Godfrey, *ibid*, P 209.
- ³⁰ Tony Godfrey, *ibid*, P. 148.
- ³¹ Tony Godfrey, *ibid*, P. 346.
- ³² Nina Felshin, *ibid*, p. 16.
- ³³ Lucy R. Lippard, *ibid*, P. 139.
- ³⁴ Lucy R. Lippard, *ibid*, P. 161.
- ³⁵ Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1997, P. 114.
- ³⁶ Arthur C. Danto, *The Madonna of the Future*, University of California Press, 2001, P. 7.