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Artists' intentions and artwork meanings: some complications

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ABSTRACT

Artists' intentions are among the primary data retrieved by art appreciators. However, artistic creation is not always deliberate; artists sometimes fail in their intentions; artists' achievements depend on artworld roles, not only intentions; factors external to the artist contribute to artwork meaning; artworks stand apart from their creators; and interpretation need not be exclusively concerned with recovering intended meaning.

I agree with the authors of "The artful mind meets art history" both that the empirical study of art appreciation should take account of the relevance of art-appreciators' awareness of an artwork's provenance and that this is methodologically possible.

The authors identify artists' intentions as the primary data that appreciators attempt to retrieve from the art-creative context in the process of comprehending artworks. In this note, I draw attention to complications and difficulties that attend this view.

(1) According to some theories, much of the creative process may be unconscious. If so, artists literally do not know what they do or why they do it. Reference to their avowed intentions then would be irrelevant or misleading. Moreover, even if such theories of the creative process are not universally plausible, as seems likely, at least some acts of artistic creation are probably of this form.

(2) It is possible that artists often have appreciation-relevant intentions that fail. Quite likely, they aim to produce very good, unified, powerfully expressive or meaningful works. And frequently they will fall short of this goal, yet need not be aware of doing so.

(3) In focusing on artists' intentions, it is easy to overlook the facilitating conditions that make their realization possible. It may be that what the artist can achieve depends in part (but importantly) on the status and authority that go with the role of artist in the informal institutions of the artworld. In that case, understanding what was done by the artist should be as much concerned with how he or she came to occupy the relevant role and with the authority that it

establishes as with the particular intentions that crossed the artist's mind in the production of a given work.

(4) Many art-contextual features relevant to assessing an artwork lie beyond the mind of the artist. In "The artful mind meets art history", this is acknowledged in the discussion of forgeries, for instance. But it is important to recognize how pervasive and important these non-personal factors are. Artworks take on some of their art-appreciable properties in relation to the context of their production and to a large extent this context is given to and assumed by the artist, rather than being established by him or her. The art historical context includes the works of previous and other artists, established conventions, traditions, genres, styles, and practices, and the state of art technologies available for use. Indeed, the art historical context soon connects to much broader social structures, values, and patterns, such as the standing of the arts in the culture, artists' accessibility to audiences, ties between the arts and politics or religion, and so on.

(5) Among an artist's intention, we should distinguish categorical intentions – that the work be a tragedy or a satire, for instance – from those concerning how the work's content is to be understood. The former are crucial for establishing the identity of the object of interpretation if it is the artist's work we wish to interpret. But the latter might be rightly ignored by the art appreciator. It is a convention of art-interpretative practices that the work stands on its own (Nathan 2006), and perhaps also that evidence of intention beyond what is manifest in the work itself should not be consulted in interpreting the work.

(6) Even where it is agreed that interpretation should target the artist's work identified as such, there is debate about the extent to which artists' intentions are relevant to their works' meanings. Where some (such as Carroll 2000) see artists' successfully executed intentions as determining their works' interpretative significance, others suggest variously that we interpret the work with reference to the intentions of a hypothetical author rather than the actual one (Levinson 2010), that intended meanings do not exhaust the possibility of work meanings (Stecker 2006), and that we should maximize the work's interpretative interest while respecting its identity (Davies 2006).

(7) In any case, it is not obvious that interpretation must confine itself to the artist's work properly identified as such. A more fanciful approach to the work's interpretation could be no less legitimate. In this case, the interpreter uses the work as the jumping off point for an imaginative exploration that brings in idiosyncratically personal associations and the like. Reference to artist's intentions is largely irrelevant to this kind of freewheeling interpretative endeavor.

The considerations I have listed do not undermine the project of empirical aesthetics as advocated in "The artful mind meets art history", but they do indicate how sophisticated and sensitive that approach needs to be.

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