

Artist's intention



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Artistic Intention Literary criticism of the 20th century was dominated by the school of critical theory known as New Criticism. The driving force behind New Criticism was to reassess the central tenet of what must then be called Old Criticism: locating the meaning of a text by discovering what the author intended to say. It is worth noting, of course, that the critical theory construct of finding meaning by searching for authorial intent preceded the introduction of Freudian psychology which introduced to arena of critical thought the revolutionary ideas associated with subconscious thought and drives. New Criticism is even more aptly applied to the fine arts because of the elevated level of abstraction involved which indicates that it is probably impossible to understand a work solely through the artistic intention.

To assume that it is possible to understand a work of art solely by understanding the intent of the artist is to also to make a leap of faith that the artist is being completely honest about his intent. How many people every day do things for one reason, but say they did them for another reason. Jeff Koons, for instance, is famous for having a team of “assistants” who do much of his work for him (Avgikos 137). How many more artists do the same thing, or something else which can bring their honesty into question, without making it part of their artistic persona. Should one trust the stated intent of an artist more than a used car salesman? Are they not both, ultimately, in the business of selling their wares?

Even when an artist is being utterly honest about his intent that intention must still be called into question. Freud's theory of subconscious drives has long stopped being controversial; anyone who has ever thrown up their hands in frustration and said they couldn't explain why they did something intuitively realizes the authenticity of subconscious urges and drives. The

process of painting or sculpting is a process of the application of the mind to the hand and if the actions of the hand contains little mystery, it must be admitted that the landscape of the mind is fraught with mystery. The subconscious mind is littered with the memories that have been forgotten by the conscious mind; there is within the brain any number drives that are not realized by the conscious mind that can be interrupting that transmission to the hand.

In very few cases do artists admit that they are working simply for money. In the capitalist system of the 20th century, especially, when the starving artist cliché became the exception rather than the rule, art has become less an expression of a creative mind than just another commodity. Artists have always been forced to tailor their expression for public consumption, but instead of having to satisfy rich Florentine patrons, today's artist has to satisfy the fluctuating meaning of producing art that is "commercial."

Artistic intention must always be tempered by the understanding that very few artists work in the vacuum of not expecting, indeed not needing, to sell their works. Once artists reach a certain level of success, they must sell their works to maintain their lifestyle.

Artistic intent is not a reliable indicator of the meaning of a work of art.

Everyone's honesty must be called into question, whether a Republican President or a far-left sculptor just as a matter of course. More importantly, whether the artist is being honest or not, subconscious drives not attainable by the conscious mind of the art can often be the guiding hand behind any work of creation. Ultimately, the only statement of intent by an artist that can probably ever be believed 90% of the time is when an artist states that the intention behind his work is to make money.