

What is existentialism in the art world

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Existentialism in the art world

Existentialism can be described as a philosophy that came about during the occupation together with the French post-war era of 1945. This was an era of great transformation with the atrocities and aftermath of the World War II leaving Europeans and possibly the whole world's population re-examining the significance of their existence and simultaneously being confronted by not only death, nuclear threat but also mass destruction (Panza & Gale, 2009).

During the post-war era, existentialism spread through to all aspects of main line modern-day thinking which saw a general interest for explaining man's place within the field of things being developed. The greatest exponent of existentialism Jean-Paul Sartre took Martin Heidegger's and Soren Kierkegaard's texts and re-examined and added them to a contemporary existentialism philosophy. Other prominent existentialists comprise Genet, Beckett, Camus, Ponty, Ponge as well as Simone de Beauvoir who was also Sartre's partner. Thus, the post war climate brought with it not only a new but also devastating dimension for the person as well as the world politics (Panza & Gale, 2009).

The philosophy of existentialism is closely related to art production. Thus according to Sartre, the consciousness of man is subjective and therefore can never objectively become aware of its own self except via "Other's gaze". Consequently if other individuals act as mirrors, then it means the work of art too can be viewed as a mirror. This position held by Sartre on the utilisation of artwork in terms of existentialism has placed a lot of

significance on the realistic “ use” of art to community. Nevertheless existentialism’s broader relationship is not as easy. It places each individual in charge of his/her life, modeling himself/herself as s/he wishes society to be. Thus, the artist standing in front of a blank canvas has the chance to totally control a part of the productivity of his existence more than any other person. The objects created by the artist are cultural contributions to the society and through his art s/he is trying to model society in the style s/he deems fit. Since no reality exists in inaction directly communicates to the artist, reassuring him/her that unless s/he creates what s/he should, then there is no explanation for the artist’s existence. The relationship of existentialism to art from these phrases seems to be via the authoritative use of art in benefiting society and it is the benefit of the art to existentialism that brings in doubt regarding genuine intentions (Panza & Gale, 2009).

Thus existentialism’s concentration on personal experience turned it into a perfect tool through which interpretation of much of the post-war abstract art could be done. Particularly, after the late 1940s it became useful in discussing Art Informel which is an extremely individualistic and expressive abstract art that thrived in Europe . Though existentialism never enjoyed similar popularity amongst American artists, nevertheless, it entered Abstract Expressionists’ discussions especially through Harold Rosenberg’s concept of “ Action Painting” which comprehended the creative process of a painter as an act of obligatory self-assertion, an expression of authenticity and freedom (Panza & Gale, 2009).

In addition, existentialism contributed to figurative art discussions in the

post-war era, modeling responses to particularly Alberto Giacometti's as well as Francis Bacon's works. This basically is indicative of the philosophy which came to popularly referred to as intellectual expression of anxiety regarding humanity's fate in the atomic age (Panza & Gale, 2009).

Works cited