

Intention(S)

by Joseph Kosuth

Intention (Artists)

Intention is the forward-leaning look of things. It is not a reconstituted historical state of mind, then, but a relation between the object and its circumstances. -Michael Baxandall¹

When art historians, even the best of them, write about intention there seems to be a presumption that you have two things: the work of art and the artist's intentions. As an artist I find this, perhaps more than any other single thing, the major division now between how artists understand their work and how art historians see them. While the primacy of the object has long been questioned by artists, it remains the basis for much of the art-historical enterprise. This difference in the two disciplines, I feel, has been brought into focus by the issues raised by the context of art with which my own work has been long associated: Conceptual art. Paradoxically, it is some recent writing on this movement which has now brought art-historical writing into a crisis of meaning of its own.

Conceptual art, simply put, had as its basic tenet an understanding that artists work with meaning, not with shapes, colors, or materials. Anything can be employed by the artist to set the work into play—including shapes, colors, or materials—but the form of presentation itself has no value independent of its role as a vehicle for the idea of the work.² Thus, when you approach the work you are approaching the idea (and therefore the intention) of the artist directly. The 'idea,' of course, can be a force that is as contingent as it is complex, and when I have said that anything can be used by (or as) a work of art, I mean just that: a play within the signifying process conceptually cannot be limited by the traditional constraints of morphology, media, or objecthood.

Art can manifest itself in all of the ways in which human intention can manifest itself. The task for artists is to put into play works of art unfettered by the limited kinds of meanings which objects permit, and succeed in having them become not the autonomous texts of structuralism, but the production of artists as authors within a discourse, one concretized through subjective commitment and comprised of the making process. It is the historically defined agency of the artist working within a practice that sees itself as such a process, in which an artist's work becomes believable as art within society. To do that, work must satisfy deeper structures of our culture than that surface which reads in the market as tradition and continuity. The more enriched our understanding of that 'text' of art becomes, so does our understanding of culture. A focus on meaning, by necessity, has focused our concerns on a variety of issues around language and context. These issues pertain to the reception and production of works of art themselves. The aspect of the questioning process that some now call 'institutional critique' began here, too, and it originated with Conceptual art's earliest works.³

The relevance of this to the question of intention is in what it implies: the disappearance, perhaps with finality, of the threshold between what had been the art object (that which is now simply art) and the intentions of its maker. Indeed, there can no longer really be a separation between the work and the intention of the artist: the work of art, in this case, is manifested intention. Ultimately, we might want to ask, of course, if intention is the text itself, or the production of the screen upon which the greater social text appears—even if the fragments and overlaps are of many projections: race, creed, gender.

Recently I have corresponded with an art historian who wrote her master's thesis on my *Passagen-Werk*, a large installation I did for Documenta IX, in Kassel.⁴ In one letter, discussing artistic intention, she writes, "the relativizing position of the art historian says 'even if we can know what the artist intended, it isn't that important. What is important is the work of art and how it generates meaning.'" I don't doubt her assessment, but reading her letter I felt again the distance between the art historian's approach and mine. What this suggests is that the art-historical process is a kind of conspiracy, even if unwittingly so, to politically disenfranchise my activity as an artist. If my intention is denied at its inception, then my responsibility for the meaning I generate in the world

as an artist is also nullified. The artist becomes just another producer of goods for the market, where the work finds its meaning.

This, it seems to me, was exactly where we came into the picture in the sixties, when Noland, Olitski, et al. would never need to leave their studios; just paint 'em and ship 'em out, and let Clement Greenberg and his minions provide the meaning. For them, art and politics were separate, and their practice reflected that. What is seldom discussed is how one looked at those paintings and saw the theory. I think this greatly explains why, for so many now, such work is held in the low esteem it is. Perhaps I should make clear that I am not suggesting that artists are the only ones capable of discussing works of art. On the contrary, art historians and critics play an important role in the struggle of the work's 'coming to meaning' in the world. But that is the point: they represent the world. That is why a defining part of the creative process depends on the artists to assert their intentions in that struggle.

One of the greatest lessons defending the primacy of the intention of the artist, and the increasing importance of writing by artists on their work, is provided by this period of the sixties.⁵ Our more recent experience of the return to painting in the eighties reminds us again of the bankruptcy of a form of art that relies on its meaning to be provided by other than its makers. If Conceptual art means more than a style, its defining difference is established here in the rethinking of artistic responsibility in the production of meaning.⁶ Without this, the politics which inform work remain homeless, only a topic among others that distinguishes style.

Artists working within such a practice have a particular responsibility not to permit their work at its inception to be defined 'by the world.' What the work is (that is, what distinguishes it from what preceded it) must be established by the artist before 'the world' includes it within all that is given. 'The world' begins as a process of institutionalization, and the art-historical and critical establishment is its first moment: without it there would be no 'professional' artists. Here is where one finds the true 'aesthetics of administration,' and it is a structural, and apparently inescapable, feature of the process of a work coming into the world.

Only a state of deep denial could keep an artist from avoiding the fact that seeing isn't as simple as looking: the text the viewer brings to a work organizes what is seen. The production of that 'text' has become a primary part of the artistic meaning-making process. The productive result of this understanding, beginning with Conceptual art, has been precisely the emergence of an 'art of intention' as I discussed above. If the actual people standing behind works of art-- who provide the belief, in a sense, as they take subjective responsibility for the meaning of what is produced-- think that an object 'speaks for itself,' they are sorely mistaken. The (making) process of putting a proposition (that signifying action which may or may not employ the object, performance, video, text, et al.) 'into play' is only one of the responsibilities of the artist. The act of putting it into the world is empty unless an artist also fights for its meaning. This informational framing of the proposition itself increasingly becomes part of the artistic process. Thus, a key to the changed role of intention and the artist's self-perception of his or her practice, is the role of writing by artists. On this subject, in the introduction to "The Play of the Unsayable," a curated installation I made for the Wittgenstein centennial in 1989 in Vienna and Brussels, I made the following statement:

One question remains unsaid: what is this text? This text owes its existence to the parentheses of my practice as an artist. This text speaks from that first and last. While philosophy would want to speak of the world, it would need to speak of art as part of that, if only to deny it. That which permits art to be seen as part of the world also nominates it as an event in social and cultural space. No matter what actual form the activity of art takes, its history gives it a concrete presence. Framed by such a presence then, this theory is engaged as part of a practice. Such theory I'll call primary. Secondary theory (by this I refer to art-historical and critical writing) may be no less useful (in many cases, more useful) but the point I'm stressing is that it has a different ontology. Primary theory is no more interesting than the practice, in toto, is. However, theory about art not linked to an art practice is unconcretized (or unfertilized) conversation after (or before) the fact. It is the fact of an artistic process which, having a location as an event, permits the social and cultural weight of a presence independent of a pragmatic language. It is, in fact, the nominated presence of the process which allows secondary theory its external object to be discussed. Behind every text about art rests the possibility of an artwork, if not the presence of one.

Texts about artworks are experienced differently from texts that are artworks. It is abundantly clear by now that we do not need to have an object to have an artwork, but we must have a play manifested in order to have it seen. That difference which separates an artwork from a conversation also separates, fundamentally, primary theory from secondary theory,

The work of art is essentially a play within the meaning system of art; it is formed as that play and cannot be separated from it-this also means, however, that a change in its formation/representation is meaningful only insofar as it effects its play. My point is that primary theory is part of that play, the two are inseparably linked. This is not a claim that the commentary of secondary theory can make. Talking about art is a parallel activity to making art, but without feet-it is providing meaning without an event context that socially commits subjective responsibility for consciousness produced (making a world). Standing guard, just out of sight, is the detached priority of an implied objective science.⁷

There is another consideration of artistic intention, also important. It is part of the intention of this particular artist for the works to engage the viewer/reader's participation in the meaning-making process. By bringing with them what they do in their approach to the work, they thereby complete it. They are every work's 'local' site. This role would be rendered passive, and would provide only a moment of consumption, without work which is anchored to a larger process of signification. Thus the speaker is designated, embedded in the human meaning which artistic intention constitutes. No speaker, no listener.

Intention (Art Historians)

In considering this exchange of the objective voice for the subjective one, I, of course, contemplated the genre of confessional writing. But that seemed too obvious, too easy. Instead I decided on ventriloquism. I would write as though through the first-person account of many other characters, actual historical characters, whose narratives I would, by the mere fact of bringing them into the orbit of my own subjectively developed voice, suspend somewhere between history and fiction.-Rosalind Krauss⁸

It's a dangerous moment for artists. The models of art historians writing on contemporary art give every indication of being in transition. The inherited model of art history's self-conception, part of its professional 'unconscious,' as it were, is one in which an old apparatus has not yet been completely dismantled. It implied that art historians speak with an authority which is 'objective and scientific.' The art-historical enterprise's links to academia do not contradict such authority, which originated with the internalized values of a regnant science upon which intellectual life in the university was founded. The social sciences must mimic the hard sciences, the assertion went, as this is the economy of academic standards and discipline. Thus, the question remains, does the art-historical enterprise speak with the voice of objectivity, even when its mission is contradictory to it?

That contradiction becomes increasingly pronounced as the works of artists are approached in a distinctively new way: as inspiration for the production of essentially subjective, creative texts by auteur writers on art. A rather ironic development, considering that the 'death of the author' discussed by Barthes and Foucault decades ago hasn't prevented the stylish use of French theory otherwise. Such theory, although making claims as art-historical text, betrays a hope that their production will gain status itself as a cultural object, post-S/Z. (Keep the power, have the fun?) It's one thing to commingle discourses, but, within this transformed discipline, what, finally, is the intention of the art historian that emerges? That seems a fair question, since the result of such writing on individual works (or, for that matter, an activity spanning a lifetime) selected for this treatment can be both deeply unfair and inaccurate.⁹

Perhaps what has initiated this transmigration of models, or, should I just say it, the source of this license, has been critical theory. It is one thing, however, to anchor one's writing within a discourse such as critical theory, with its position theoretically compelled to something like consistency vis-a-vis, for example, the originary and the historical narrative. At least their texts have a perceivable principled basis and there is no confusion about the writing of history in its more 'objective' conventional form. One can then perceive the (ethical) space within which the writer is operating: reader/buyer beware. Here, all 'texts' are equal, the work and the text it generated all being a part of the same surface, and any claims of objectivity are suspended as they are made irrelevant.

The hybrid of which I speak combines such a license with a conventional form of authority. This practice occupies a very different and self-servingly ambiguous ethical space. Having a mixed parentage has given us an interesting patrimony: rather like little Frankensteins of Art-Language (a license at least partially sired by Charles Harrison's fictive histories of the Art & Language group), we have another, and mutant, form of art theory as art, except this time it is not the production of artists but of art historians. Maybe I'm partly to blame, writing as I did in Art-Language in 1970 that "This art both annexes the function of the critic, and makes a middleman unnecessary."¹⁰ I didn't realize at the time, however, that the art historians might join our ranks under cover. This emerging professional class of writers seems to want celebrated careers like those of artists while they keep their protective perch, and its detached view, with the perquisites and power of recorders of history. It appears that there is a palpable, if admittedly vague, dimension of something like a 'conflict of interest' if those given the responsibility to inscribe history are under a powerful and conflicting need to, instead, make it.

This leaves us with a brand of art-historical 'intentions' which begin to produce an ambiguous ethical relationship with the artist, in curating as well as writing. The history of recent art history leads one to conclude that there is a conservatism which pervades the art-historical and critical establishment, in which convention necessitates a view of artists as bewildered children playing with lumps of wet clay, in dire need of the paternal art-historical and critical presence to swoop down and make sense of it all. If you are one of the artists who risk standing up to this conception, prepare to be vilified.¹¹ As I've asked myself and others before: is our production, as artists, really only nature, from which critics, as historians, make their own 'culture'? And doesn't it violate society's sense of fair play that they are permitted to do so behind a mask of implied 'objectivity' without having to take the kind of subjective responsibility for the production of consciousness which artists have historically had to, and which has previously distinguished the two activities?

Who now seriously believes that the decisions made by such art historians in the performance of their craft are really any less subjective than those made by an artist, given the career needs and the social relationships of art historians such writing reflects? Previously there seemed to be some kind of moral imperative for art historians to be above such considerations out of a sense of professionalism. Having it both ways seems, at this receiving end, like an extremely unjust, and even corrupt, development. I always thought that critics, as journalists, could discuss the meaning of an artist's present production with the public in ways that indicated that the critics either got it or didn't (and artists could either deal with that or not.) The assumption was that, in the long run and after the smoke cleared, at least the historians could be counted on to be basically fair and accurate in saying who did what and when, why, whom it influenced, and the like. I assumed that the trail of evidence one leaves as a practicing artist with a public life would, in some sense, secure an honest record.¹² That record is, however, nothing more than a history of the intentions of particular individuals living in a given moment. The record of those intentions is the anchor, perhaps, which puts weight on the ethical responsibility of the art-historical enterprise. Without the meanings which such a record suggests, our cultural production as artists is reduced to being a playpen, a free-for-all of interpretation, institutionalizing history as a creative act-but only for its writers.

Finally, the reason we don't really consider the paintings by monkeys and children to be art is because of intention; without artistic intention there is no art. The subjective presence which stands behind a work of art and which takes responsibility for its meaning something, which I have discussed here, is what makes it authentic as a work. This is the human power which informs, in a sense gives life, to what would otherwise be empty forms and objects. Just as the grunts and groans of language would be gibberish as only physical properties of sound in themselves, within a system of relations they become meaningful. There is a tenacious formalism lurking in the art historian's argument which wants art as a language dead-archaic and unreadable, its meaning the province of whoever owns it-for they are free to make a decorative trophy of it and that would be its final meaning. In this view it is the role of the art-historical process to locate the value of art in the cadavers of passing artistic forms and materials, an institutionalizing process which severs the language from its speaker, so that it can give up its meaning to the market.

