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Artist as Purveyor of Meanings: Notes, Proposition and Reprise

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Abstract

This essay is based on the author's thoughts and notes taken over the years as an art practitioner. It is driven by referencing various texts on art theory, philosophy and criticism. Importantly it is influenced by the author's own practice as an artist and artistic idea (gnosis). By adapting the notion of the artist as "purveyor of meanings" – the text discusses learning as a syncretic idea build on explorative intuition (and reaction) towards exposure to disparate type, style and approach of art forms. Notably, the discussion is presented in a performative manner by writing to ask, "What do I do as an artist?" instead of the expected probing of wondering what art is.

Keywords Purveyor; Notes; Proposition; Reprise; Artist

Introduction

In the past, I have benefited from being exposed to the work and writing of conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth, his seminal work *The One and Three Chair* (1965), and book *Art After Philosophy and After* (Kosuth & Guercio, 1991); and Michael Craig-Martin's *On The Table* (1970), *An Oak Tree* (1974). I was interested too, visually and idea-wise, with the work of Josef Albers, Sol Lewitt, On Kawara, Ilya Kabakov, Panamarenko, and Mark Dion. There are more artists, but it would be excessive to name all, and very often it would also be a specific work that provides epiphany.

In addition to ideas derived from Phenomenological thinking, from Brentano's Intentionality to Heidegger's what work does art do; Derrida's writing on deconstruction practice is particularly important to me (Spivak & Derrida, 1998) – in a nutshell as an attitude towards the tyranny of singular meaning, and continue asking myself, "What else"? I appreciate Foucault for his thinking about space and heterotopia and time

(Foucault, 1984) – and Lefebvre and Deleuze, both very different undertaking in addressing the idea of Space. Finally, taking cue from semiotics for its take on interpretation and meanings, and the politics of meanings – something humanity needs to understand between the differences of interpretation and values, across space, time and contexts.

From learning, in a most superficial manner, about “Being-ness” (Heidegger) to “becoming” (Deleuze), the journey brings me to different threads which finally meets, Zen and Taoist discussion of change and permanent impermanence and the notion of cyclical change via Trimurti in Hinduism: Brahma (creation), Vishnu (preservation) and Shiva (destruction). This deliberation into thinking about the act of creation as on-going process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari) seems to me addressing an important notion of change and exchange; might even address the idea of capitalism as creative destruction. But such polemics would require critical revision which I do not have the knowledge, as artists, in general, would very often alleged as being eclectic and lacking criticality as many a scholar or (professional analytical) philosophers could.

Yet this endeavour in thinking about the artist as a purveyor of meanings would turn to, and begin with one important introductory book on philosophy of art by the analytical philosopher Noel Carroll. Briefly, in the book *Philosophy of Art* (Carroll, 1999), he laid out the various approaches in defining art, i.e. Imitation theory, Representation theory, Expression theory, and Formalist theory, to examine if these theories were too narrow or broad an approach. Lastly Carroll ventured to what he terms Neo-Wittgenstein Theory of Art which employs an “open” concept and association by “family resemblance” based on Wittgenstein's idea of the open definition which had also informed the like of Kosuth and other conceptual practice.

In view of the broadness of such an open definition of art, Carroll posited that the Institutional Theory of Art useful in conditioning the reception of art, that the recognition and acceptance an object as art very much depends on social network or social institution in conferring it an artwork. By proposing the idea of (conceptual) art (work) which operate as "propositions", the conceptualist would be to be able to tackle the apparent power relation between institutions (theory) and provide agency to the artist/object/recipient.

It is such an idea of a proposition which I wish to offer in turn.

Artist as Purveyor of Meanings - a proposition

In my mind, art is as complex as human, so the idea to construct a perfectly non-controversial, comprehensive definition of art, not necessary a fallacy itself, and subsequently describing who are the art practitioners can be a promising yet daunting task for a long-term career.

I tend to see artistic production as a manifestation of the mental activities of the person. What I mean by mental activities is inclusive of the intellectual, aesthetic, spiritual, expressional and meditative. All these mental activities are contrastive complements to the mundane yet valuable functioning or instrumental items that we usually produce, for us to maintain our physical existence, for example, food, shelters, and clothing. In other words, these mental activities that lead to the production of an artwork (regardless of the form) are activities that are concern with the making and consumption of 'meanings', or of something 'meaningful' in one's life. I am still contemplating if this is an inevitable psychology need – a need for the production and consumption of meanings.

A differing aspect is to consider in terms of the "meaningfulness" of art, instead of a certain set meaning. I have yet to develop further how best to express the idea of the meaning of 'meanings', but to depend on the idea of text-context-meanings (Derrida's aphorism "there is nothing outside the text") or if it could be placed as a liminal experience/process (Kristeva notion of Chora).

So I think artists are makers of a meaningful art, be it a work of art, an artefact, in the form of material object, or in contemporary discourse, a project, an action or series of it, and expandable to event sort of whereby the meaning is transmitted via a form, image, sound, concept, or as semiotic "text" – 'meaning' depending on the particular context it is embedded in; and how accessible is the context to another person.

At times, the artefact might just be a non-intentional consequence of the practitioner's process of attaining 'meanings', but would it be morally just to stop someone else to appreciate the artefact as artistically meaningful to them? It is a choice of the audience, whether they find the maker's intention a relevant factor for them to identify what is artful to them.

In other words, the audiences would have their own context – frame in seeing the work. Hence, the reverse of the situation would be that an audience does not agree with the meaning or how meaningful artwork is as compared to the artist, the maker. Here lies an important ethical position – the purveyor of meaning is not an absolute imposing enforcing position. It is not an object, or artefact already embedded with a particular (and absolute) message and meaning that must be understood accordingly.

Meanings hereby are open for interpretation, experience, received, perceived, conceived, by the artist and the onlooker, maker and the user. The meaning to the artist and to the audience does not have to be equal or similar, in qualitative or quantitative sense. This acknowledges a simple ethical position, the differences of personal context in reading and experiencing art; is it due to neural psychological factors, does it differ because of social-cultural psychological or some would argue it as a social production (Janett Wolf, Bourdieu). This remains for further investigation on my part.

What it entails is that there is room for expansive discussion if both / all parties so desire – which is an issue of attitude and cognition – how does one recognise another being and one attitude towards another. In extending the idea of the institution of art – or institutional theory – which its limitation and also strength is in acknowledging the role of the readership, the power conferred to these different parties and the responsibility and agency of the artist – art – audience in determining the meaning for oneself. Thus, an artist can be as idiosyncratic and self-serving as one intended, but as soon as an artwork is shown to a second being other than the artist's alter-ego, the context whereby the artwork exists as claimed by the artist must face the scrutiny or the acceptance of this audience as well. Not that it will necessarily rob the artist claim of it being an artwork but the solitary artist will have to face the audience, the critics, the art agencies; the relationship has turned into a constant negotiation between the artist and the others.

The artist could produce something that is idiosyncratically meaningful, yet as it enters a larger social context, it could acquire more than what the artist might intent, or possibly misreading or misinterpretation, from the artist's point of view. This is where the idea of discussion is important, the social role of curator and art critic comes into play – the ethical stance of the critic and curator is towards the discussion and understanding of the art; between the maker, the audience, and the various contexts, field of knowledge once can draw from, in expanding the discourse of art – by assessment of the critic, and by facilitating discourse and experiencing of the art by the curator.

Hence this proposition - art practitioners are purveyors of meanings, through their artwork providing a link to apprehend the self and the society, produced and consumed for both themselves and the society, nothing more nothing less.

Artist as Purveyor of Meanings: Reprise, Reflection

Who is the artist?

Who is an artist?

Who made art?

Taking a cue from Neo-Wittgensteinism that takes art as an open concept, which the concept of art is neither to define, nor to identify whether something is art or not but operate via its resemblance of other forms that we think is art. Artist is a person that began with an intention – something abstract – to make art – another abstract idea. How does one proceed, to make something nearly similar to what one had experienced in terms of form, visual or content? Or even a production that involves a larger social sphere? A theatre or music production – an artistic direction, vision or a relational manifestation / provocation.

If art can be an open concept- thus there is no constraint of who can be an artist – but is your ‘creation’ shared by someone else as art? Can the context that you believe in providing the artfulness of your creation aptly apply to the other person, or received by them?

Artist is one who intends to and finally made an art – and the existence of this art is shared by those who can accept it as art. The choice to accept one thing as art thus depends on (i) the politics of choices, (ii) the politics of representation, and (the) politics of selection.

There appear a great divide of artistic production and the mass audience – the mass and the perceived audience. One cannot fully satisfy the audience – the mass. And a greater divide is sophisticated audience seek to be enlightened or entertained in a manner they deem comprehensible, while artist seek for self-gratification.

These disjointed thoughts are some issues I find problematic in thinking through, and I might have naively tried to bring them together in my practice. To this, I offer one more reprise of my art.



Figure 1 A Closer Look at the Illusion of the Whole (Yap, 2005)



Figure 2 “Could Contemplating on the Less Apparent Structure Bring us a Perception of a Much Larger Whole?” (Yap, 2005)



Figure 3 “The whole is more than the sum of its parts” (Aristotle)



Figure 4 Exhibition Space

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