ARTICLE

The Importance of Teaching Interpretation

Terry Barrett
College of Visual Arts and Design
University of North Texas

Professor Emeritus
The Ohio State University

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Interpretation is a process of deciphering what an artwork is about or expresses—not whether it is 'good'—but what it might mean to the maker and to its viewers. Meanings are the results of interpretations; meanings for the maker, meanings for the viewer. Sometimes meanings for the maker and the viewer coalesce, other times they do not. This article explores how artists and designers make meaningful artifacts with materials, and how viewers infer those meanings through thought and emotions put into words in response to what artists and designers make. The article encourages that we overtly and explicitly teach students to think about what they make, how they make it, and most importantly, what consequences the work has for the world.

Designing with a purpose

Architects, designers, and artists working under commission typically work within parameters established by the client who hires them. When accepting the commission of a design project for a functional space or object, one needs to be aware of such key factors as audience, purpose, and budget: An object or space must meet users' needs, fulfill a pre-determined purpose, and be competitively priced. Craftsmanship is an essential component of purposive making, whether the project is to be built to endure for generations or to last for a moment in a crowd of competitors.

Fabien Baron designed a bottle for Flowerbomb perfume, which debuted in 2005 and endures. Viktor & Rolf, who own the product, wanted the design of the bottle to begin with the name Flowerbomb: 'We wanted an explosion of a thousand different flowers, a flower bomb.' Baron designed a glass hand-grenade with pull pin. The owners were pleased with the design, seeing it as a diamond grenade that combined 'power and romance, preciousness and rareness,'[2] but critics of the design saw mangled bodies and severed limbs of soldiers and civilians, including children, and a cynical disregard of suffering by the protected wealthy and their fineries. Designers must be aware of what their designs actually suggest, no matter their intentions.

Commissioned art

Painters, sculptors, and other artists may have greater freedom than designers and architects, but they too work within the parameters of a project. The choice of media, subject matter, and intended message, and such practical considerations as space to work, equipment requirements, and budget impose limitations on what they can create.

Artists who accept commissions from individuals or community groups must address the needs of those clients and keep them in balance with their own creative criteria as artists. Artists who accept commissions for public art face similar challenges to architects and other designers.

Rather than viewing limitations as negative impositions on creativity and expression, successful designers and artists willingly accept them as positive challenges and as needed constraints. It is much harder for a student to do 'anything you want' than to start with some guidelines and restrictions, whether self-chosen or required by a client. In early coursework in art classes, many assignments start with certain constraints provided by the instructor. As student artists progress, they usually impose their own guidelines on their work in order to structure their creative processes.

The value to artists of knowing their intentions

Instructors of art generally expect their students to think about what they are expressing and why, and to be able to articulate their intents in words. Knowing one's intent is an essential part of the learning process. Oftentimes the instructor will supply the intent for students' work in the form of a class assignment, and will evaluate the work on how well it meets the course assignment. Beyond the classroom, however, students will find it essential to be able to discuss their work with others when they attempt to obtain gallery shows, apply for grants and other sources of funding for their work, or present their designs to a client.

Students thinking about what they want to express will guide their creative process. Their ideas will help them select appropriate media to express those ideas, will help them form their ideas in media with appropriate attention to craft, while they consider their audience and where their work will be shown. In the following paragraphs conceptual artist Tom Friedman and designer Maya Lin express their thoughts on the value of knowing their intentions when they are making their artworks. Painters Eric Fischl, Jackson Pollock, and Miriam Shapiro say that they sometimes discover and refine their intentions for works while they are making them.

Maya Lin, designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial at the age of 21 while an architecture student, and designer of other monuments, private homes, and maker of individual works of art starts her work by trying to anticipate the viewer's experience. The V-shaped Memorial wall of black stone, etched with the names of 58,000 dead soldiers, is now the most visited memorial in the nation's capital. At the time of its planning and installation it was very controversial because of its unconventional design. Many wanted a traditional sculpture of soldiers and viewed Lin's minimalist design as a protest to a very controversial war. There was more political energy devoted to stopping the project than implementing it. However, after the memorial was completed, a journalist reported its success by saying, 'Its political foes fell silent.'[3]

Lin 'creates, essentially, backward. There is no image in her head, only an imagined feeling.'[4] According to Lin, she stripped the question of how she wanted the Memorial to work to: 'How are all these people going to overcome the pain of losing something? How do you really overcome death?' During the development of the design, she remembers a skeptical veteran asking her, 'What are the people going to do when they first see this piece?' She remembers telling him something like, 'Well, I think they are really going to be moved by it.' She adds, 'What I didn't tell him is that they are probably going to cry and cry and cry.'[5]

Tom Friedman's *Untitled* is a sculptural work from 1992 that does not reproduce well but is easy to describe. It consisted of one thin wire that protruded, perfectly erect, from the middle of a floor. He made *Untitled* by placing the tip of the wire into a small, drilled hole. He observed the long wire: When the wire bent over, he would cut it down slightly and straighten it. He kept cutting down the wire and straightening it until he found the exact height at which the wire would support itself without bending.

About this wire piece, Friedman said, 'It was so sensitive that it would quiver with just the vibrations in the air, and it seemed to be defying gravity. It was almost invisible—you had to be shown where it was. I remember people would come into my studio, I'd point the piece out to them, and wherever they were, walking around my studio, they'd constantly have to orient themselves in relation to the piece. That's the kind of presence I was thinking about. Because of its fragility, people would have to consider it, hold it in their minds, and be sensitive to it so as not to damage it.'[6]

From what Friedman says, we know that he was sure of his intent in making the piece. He wanted a presence for the wire and its fragility that would sensitize people to it. Viewers who experience the piece may well go away thinking about the implications of the piece, what it might mean for their lives. That is, they might interpret their experience of the work and build personal meaning about it: perhaps about the fragility of a moment; the preciousness of a blade of grass; the care they might want to provide for another.

Had Friedman not made the piece just right, figuring out just what he wanted the piece to do, choosing an apt medium for his idea, crafting it carefully so that the wire did just what he wanted it to do, placing the piece in a place in a gallery where it would be seen, the piece would not have worked as he intended it to work. Also, if people walked into the gallery space, saw the wire, but pondered it no further, they would not have experienced a meaningful piece of art—they would just see a wire protruding from the floor. Both artist and viewer are engaged in an exchange of meaning when works of art are successfully made and interpreted.

There are important conclusions to be drawn about artists' intents in making works. Artists do think about and articulate the intended meanings of their work. Some artists form clear intentions from the start. Others do not always know with specificity what they mean to express when they begin a piece, and they are content to start with an ambiguous notion or a general direction and refine their idea in media as they proceed. Artists also learn more about the meanings of their works *after* they have finished them. Some of their intended meanings are very general and they do not offer explanations for particular works, but artists do concern themselves with what their work means to them and what they want it to mean to those who see it.

The process of interpretation: subject matter + medium + form + contexts = meanings

The following paragraphs examine how two artists express meanings in a sculptural installation and in a nonobjective painting. To arrive at sensible but tentative meanings, the works are considered according to how their use of subject matter, medium, form, and contexts contribute to interpretations of their meanings.

Martin Puryear made a sculpture in 1996 that he titled *Ladder for Booker T. Washington.* What follows is an interpretive examination of what the artist did in making the piece meaningful for himself and for viewers, by using the formula Subject Matter + Medium + Form + Contexts = Meanings.

Martin Puryear
Ladder for Booker T. Washington, 1996
Ash, 438 x 22 3/4 x 1 1/4 in.
(Fort Worth Museum of Modern Art)

Subject Matter

Puryear chose the subject matter of a ladder for his sculpture. In that single choice, Puryear invites many associations. Ladders are for climbing up to reach heights we might not otherwise be able to reach, to pick fruit from high tree branches, to reach the roofs of tall buildings. There are 'ladders to heaven' in songs and poems. We 'climb ladders of success.' Ladders also allow us to climb down from lofty heights. Ladders have rungs; one mounts them or descends them usually one rung at a time. One ought to climb ladders with some care; ladders ought to be inclined at a certain angle for maximum stability; ladders can slide out from beneath the climber, in which case one is cautioned to 'ride the ladder down' as it falls to the ground to minimize or avoid injury. Ladders are used to rescue people from burning buildings, and sometimes cats who are afraid to come down from trees they have climbed. Ladders generally carry positive associations.

Medium

Puryear made his ladder of wood, specifically, ash. He left the wood rough and did not varnish or otherwise coat it with a protective seal. The ash is hand hewn. The tree from which it came grew on Puryear's land in upstate New York. The artist felled the tree, split it into two continuous sections to form the sides of the ladder. He hand-turned each rung and joined them into place. His choice of medium and his acts of craftsmanship imply that he has a heartfelt attachment to his material.

Form

Puryear made the sculpture very long: 36 1/2 feet. He built the ladder so that it continually narrows from bottom to top: Each rung is narrower than the previous, and the final rung narrows to about an inch at the top from a two-foot span at the bottom. He did not straighten the sides of the ladder but rather let them curve in and out. Because the ladder is crooked, it would be more precarious to balance and treacherous to climb than one that is straight. By how he formed the ladder, Puryear implicitly asks: How high could a human climb on this ladder that diminishes to one inch at its top? Is the ladder meant to be climbed at all?

Contexts

Puryear provides three very important bits of contextual information that are part of and inform his piece. The first is that it is an artwork, not just a ladder. The artist signals to viewers that it is an artwork by showing it in an art museum. Because the artist made an artwork, and not simply a ladder, he invites viewers to interpret it. Second, when he places the ladder in an art gallery, he erects the ladder vertically and does not rest its feet on the floor.

The title provides a third bit of contextual information. Puryear expects his viewers to know that Booker T. Washington is a person of historical import. Washington (1856-1915) was born into slavery; he was six when American President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. He studied and then taught at the Hampton (Virginia) Normal and Industrial Institute and was later selected to head a new teacher-training institute for African Americans, now known as Tuskegee University. Washington was probably the most prominent black leader of his time, but his views were controversial: He advocated advancement for blacks through education rather than through demands for civil rights. His books include *Up From Slavery* written in 1901.

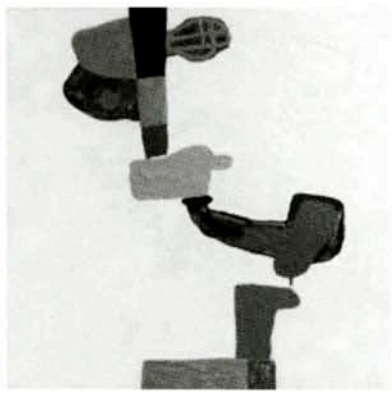
Puryear is an African American artist. It is likely that Puryear can relate to many of the experiences and struggles that confronted Washington.

Meanings

The sculpted ladder, handmade, crooked, and suspended off the floor, is clearly a metaphor. Puryear does not mean the wooden object to be seen as a functional ladder, but as a symbolic image. It is rich in symbolism. Ladders have many connotations, usually positive, about rising to new heights, about personal challenges to meet, about personal or societal goals. This is a very precarious ladder, however: It is not grounded or leaning, but suspended in the air. As this ladder rises, it becomes impossible for a human to safely climb because its rungs diminish in width to a mere inch at its top.

Perhaps the sculpture is a visual meditation on metaphorical climbing. We can literally climb ladders to reach new heights. We can imagine symbolic ladders that we might construct to reach a higher status in life or a higher state of consciousness. Puryear's ladder, however, is precarious. It is not grounded, and it has no support that it leans against. Because Puryear has made it progressively narrow, its top cannot be reached. Perhaps Puryear's ladder asks us to carefully reflect on imaginary ladders that we construct to reach new personal heights, economic gains, or social status.

Puryear's sculpture is not only a generically metaphoric ladder: The artist specifically identifies it as *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*. Because of Washington's biography—born as a slave, died as a leader for social equality—the subject of race is attached to the sculpture. We could juxtapose Puryear's title for the sculpture, *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*, with Washington's title for his book, *Up from Slavery*, leading us to a pessimistic interpretation that one cannot totally raise up from slavery. Perhaps the sculpture is Puryear's negative critique of the strategic ladder that Washington built to free blacks from social repression.



Anne Seidman
Untitled, 2002.
Aquamedia on wood, 24 x 24 in.
(Courtesy of the artist and Marc
and Susan Howard, Philadelphia)

It is likely, however, that this piece is positive because Puryear's other sculptures seem positive and optimistic rather than negative and pessimistic. Puryear is likely admiring the miraculous height to which Washington did rise, even with the limited social ladder to which he had access, or with the ladder that Washington built for himself.

Anne Seidman's painting presents interpretive challenges. Can meaning be constructed about such a nonrepresentational painting?

Subject Matter

The subject matter of Seidman's painting is the shapes and colors and textures of the paint she has used to make the work. It is an abstract painting that is nonobjective, that is, an artwork that does not depict objects in the world, but it may well refer to the world.

Medium

Seidman's medium is water-based paint that she has applied onto a surface of flat wood. She built up the paint so that the individual shapes are so heavily textured that they have a third dimension. By allowing a drip to fall toward a shape, she shows the liquidity of her paint.

Form

The shapes of the painting descend and ascend from the top and bottom of the composition. Because they are cropped at both edges, Seidman implies that they continue although we cannot see them.

One writer[7] applies an earth analogy to Seidman's paintings: He says that they are like strata of stacked earth, 'tectonic plates,' full of energy, tense with friction, piled along fault lines that could quake. Interlocking bits of shaped color are condensed into a limited space, and each one of these shapes holds its own against the other and against the edges of the composition. He sees that the artist has stacked chunks of organic material and has suspended them within a thick, white, textured field. Although the chunks share similarities, each one is distinct and unique in color, size, shape, and texture. Each holds its own identity in a pressurized field, yet they coexist, but with tension. The drip of paint from the bottom chunk of the top stack almost meets the chunk rising from the bottom stack. The ever-slight space that the artist left between the shape with the drip and the one below it is one 'contested boundary.' Most amazing is that the composition holds together even though it is clearly in danger of catastrophic collapse.

Contexts

Seidman has shown her paintings in art galleries that feature contemporary art. She exhibits this one painting with other paintings she had made around the same time. Any single work in Seidman's exhibition is in dialogue with other works around it. Seidman knows that her work is also in dialogue with all abstract and nonobjective works of art made in recent art history. Seidman and the gallery assume and expect that viewers understand and appreciate nonobjective abstraction in art. Were one to walk into the gallery showing Seidman's paintings never having seen anything but realistic renditions of people and places in paint, one would likely be baffled. Such a viewer would lack the necessary art historical context that Seidman's paintings presume and require.

Meanings

Seidman's painting does not present itself as a story or a political statement about current events. Rather, it presents itself as thick paint on board with nonrepresentational subject matter. Even though Seidman's painting presents itself as nonobjective and austerely abstract, the artist provides associations that may be personally relevant to viewers based on the shapes and colors and textures of paint on the board. The painting, as abstract and nonobjective as it is, delights in ambiguity. It is open to meaning by its lack of representational subject matter or narrative. Nothing in it prevents a viewer from building personally meaningful interpretive thoughts about the piece. The artist would likely be pleased to hear a viewer responding to *Untitled* with statements such as these: 'My life is like this painting!' or 'Our world is just like this, teetering on devastating collapse!' or 'Sometimes I feel that the relationship between the two of us is just like the separated shapes: I'm almost ready to touch you.'

'Right' interpretations

The interpretive thoughts about Puryear's *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* and Seidman's *Untitled* concluded with meanings. Are these meanings the right meanings? The single right meanings? No. Any single work of art can engender multiple meanings. No one of the meanings is the right meaning, even the artist's intended meaning.

When the artist who made a work provides the intended meaning for it—in an artist's statement, for instance, or in an interview—this intent should not limit to a single meaning the many meanings that the work can have. The false assumption that a work of art means only what the artist intended it to mean is known as the 'intentional fallacy.'[8] Works of art can mean more, less, or something entirely different than what their makers intended. The intentional fallacy can be taught as a reminder that students need to purposively decide what to include and exclude from their works so that they indicate to viewers a direction for interpretation. If they want to communicate a particular idea or evoke a particular response, they will need to consider all the expressive qualities of all

the visual elements in their work, and the context in which they place their work for viewing.

Students might also be encouraged or directed to show their work to artists and non-artists and get reactions to it while it is in process or after they have finished it. They can then match their intents for their work with viewers' interpretations of it and decide whether to alter your work or to let it be.

Eric Fischl was both surprised and hurt by how people interpreted and reacted to a sculpture he made when it was displayed in Rockefeller Center in New York City to memorialize the victims of 9/11 one year after the attack on the World Trade Center. The bronze sculpture shows a life-size female nude falling, her legs in the air and arms outstretched when she hits the ground. The Rockefeller landlord who had borrowed the sculpture from a gallery, quickly removed it from the Center and offered an apology when viewers complained and the New York Post condemned the sculpture. He added, 'For centuries, the horrors of war have been sculpted by artists so that people would never forget. That was the intent of this sculpture, and that has been overlooked and misinterpreted.' Fischl, the artist, also issued a statement, saying that the sculpture was 'a sincere expression of deepest sympathy for the vulnerability of the human condition, both specifically toward the victims of September 11 and toward humanity in general.'[9] Clearly the work meant more, or much differently, to viewers than the artist intended.

Are all interpretations equal? No. Because all interpretations require reasons, some interpretations will likely be more reasonable than others. Generally we do not say that an interpretation is 'right,' like the answer to an arithmetic problem may be right; rather we say that interpretations are 'insightful,' 'enlightening,' 'interesting,' 'compelling,' 'convincing,' 'a good way to look at it,' or on the contrary, that some interpretations 'don't make sense,' 'don't fit the work,' 'are without evidence,' or are 'nonsensical.'

There are three criteria by which we can test interpretations:
(1) coherence
(2) correspondence
(3) completeness

Coherence maintains that the interpretation ought to make sense *in and of itself*. We have all likely heard interpretations that sound like mumbo-jumbo: On that basis alone, they are not good interpretations because they do not even make sense in themselves.

But a thoughtful and coherent string of thoughts that sounds good in itself must also *fit the work* it is meant to interpret. This is the criterion of **correspondence**. We have all likely heard interpretations that sound good but that do not seem to match what we are looking at. These are not good interpretations. A good interpretation has to make sense and clearly fit what we see in or know about the artwork.

Thirdly, a good interpretation has to account for everything in the work and how, when, and where it was made. An interpretation that leaves out something that is in the work is likely not going to be a good interpretation. This is the criterion of **completeness**. Completeness includes knowledge of the artist who made the piece and the cultural context in which it was made. When interpreting Martin Puryear's sculptural installation, it would be important to say, for instance, that he is African American.

As artists, students can use coherence, correspondence, and completeness as criteria for making art that can be meaningful to others. Whether they begin with a preconceived idea or arrive at an idea while in the process of making a work, they can do a self-check to see if their ideas are coherent. They can check to see that what they show actually corresponds to what they want to express. Everything in a work of art counts toward meaning: Are there distracting elements in a piece that they might eliminate for clearer communication? If they mean the piece to be ironic, will the viewer be able to decipher its irony? Is the work complete in the sense that it adequately expresses what they want to express?

That all artworks have meanings does not necessarily mean that an artist must carry a burden to make profound works of art, tell complex stories, or communicate overt political messages. A work might well simply be about the joy of making or the delight in materials.

Deciding among competing interpretations

Students frequently ask who decides what is the best interpretation of a work of art when there are many competing interpretations of it. If it is the students' works that are being interpreted, they will likely decide which interpretation best fits their work while listening to what others have to say. In judging their own interpretations, they should apply the same criteria that they use to judge other interpretations: Does their interpretation make sense in itself; do their thoughts and words match what can actually be seen in the work; does their interpretation cover everything they have included in their work? They must learn that just because they want a work to mean a certain thing, it does not necessarily mean that to other people. If communication through their art is important to them, they will be wise to get a variety of interpretive reactions to their work and consider them, especially if they are coming from knowledgeable people.

Should a work of art survive in the artworld and become famous, the art community will decide what that work is about, and this interpretation will likely stand as the authoritative interpretation. Important works of art receive considerations from many people over time: the artist who made the work, other artists who see the work, critics, historians, collectors, and so forth. Each one's interpretive opinion will slightly or largely influence other opinions, and we will have a 'best interpretation' at any given moment, but that interpretation might be improved when others study it and make further comments. Thus, interpretations are not subjective, they are inter-subjective, formed by a community of interpreters. Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa continues to be interpreted in new and different ways centuries after it was made. We will never get a single right interpretation of it, nor would we want to: Interpretations are a matter of ongoing discussions.

The value to students of having their work interpreted

Many artists enjoy thoughtful attention when it is given to their art, as well they should. It is a significant compliment that someone would thoughtfully and carefully attend to a work of theirs, seeking what it seems to mean to the viewer and to the viewer's life. As Carrie Mae Weems says, 'I'm excited when my work is talked about in a serious manner—not because it's the work of Carrie Mae Weems, but because I think there's something that's important that's going on in the work that needs to be talked about, finally, legitimately, thoroughly.'[10]

We would be wise to inculcate the goal that student artists have their work interpreted by viewers. If paintings, for example, are made but not interpreted, they are then reduced to mere pigment on canvas. Without interpretive viewers, their art will not come alive or contribute to the world. Artists sometimes think that their art is misunderstood. Although their work may be interpreted in a way with which they do not agree, they can hear that interpretation, reflect on it, and decide whether to hold it and be influenced by it or let it float away as irrelevant. They can decide to change their work or to leave it just as it is.

When students are aware that viewers will construct meanings about their work, they can better guide and limit how their works will be understood by their choices of subject matter and how they present it, by the medium they use and how they use it, by the form of their work, their process of making it, by contextual clues they offer viewers, and by where and how they display it.

If serious and knowledgeable viewers study artists' works and give them serious interpretive attention but say that a work lacks coherence, artists may learn from this and consider changing their work accordingly. They can learn from their viewers.

Notes

1 This article is derived from Terry Barrett, *Making Art: Form and Meaning*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010).

2 Chandler Burr, 'Style: Smoke and Mirrors,' *The New York Times Magazine*, August 7, 2005, 55-57.

3 Peter Tauber, 'Monument Maker,' *The New York Times*, February 24, 1991.

4 Louis Menand, 'The Reluctant Memorialist,' *The New Yorker*, July 8, 2002, 62-63.

5 Tauber, ibid.

6 Tom Friedman, *Tom Friedman*, (New York: Phaidon, 2001).

7 Frank Galuszka, Schmidt-Dean Gallery, Philadelphia, PA, 2002.

8 W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy,' in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, (Lexington; University of Kentucky Press, 1954).

9 David Ebony, '0/11 Bronze Brouhaha,' *Art in America*, November 22, 2002, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_11_90/ai_94079478, July 11, 2008.

10 In Paul Fabozzi, ed., *Artists, Critics, Context: Readings in and Around American Art Since 1945*. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall 2002), 430.