Research In Practice

Intent, Altruism and Ethics
(The consideration of sustainable work)

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Intent, Altruism & Ethics.

An Independent Research Document Proposal

Attempt to interlink the meaning of my three proposed keywords, towards the intention of constructing my independent research document inquiry. The brief of this essay is to consider sustainable work within the Fine Art context. Where do the ethics lie in the light of those we consider to be 'great'? When does 'greatness' become egocentric? Is it a common theme for the big names in art to take a 'fast' approach to creativity, cutting out all consideration and humanity? Investigating the blur between one morals and intention, where one may have to sacrifice their personal ethics to succeed.

Intent/ Intention

Intent; can be simply described as the 'purpose'. Where it is plausible that purpose is the cause of existence, and one's existence is defined by their 'purpose'.

> "cognizance of order, coherence and purpose is one's existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfilment"
>
> (Reker and Wong, 1988, p.221).

The intention of Artists can often be captured via the materiality and aesthetic.
It is considered that artistic intention refers the decision an artist makes about how they can create art that communicates a greater meaning. As an audience, we can agree that many find that art is missing intention, it lacks a message or purpose. This arguably, deters interest or high regard. One could say that art made simply for the 'aesthetic' is not art at all.

The intent of an artist can be looked at from the perspective of two theories: Intentionalism and Anti-intentionalism.

Intentionalism recognises that the artists own intention works as a standard foundational working point for forming an interpretation, regarding these criteria, as it acknowledges that meaning of artworks alone, can be contrived or ambitious (Livingston, 1998, pp. 831-846).

Alternatively, anti-intentionalism establishes meaning through semantic and poetic practices. This unapologetically rejects all significance of the creator's intention, meaning interpretation is made through autonomous means as well as relevant aesthetic factors (Livingston, 1998, pp. 831-846).

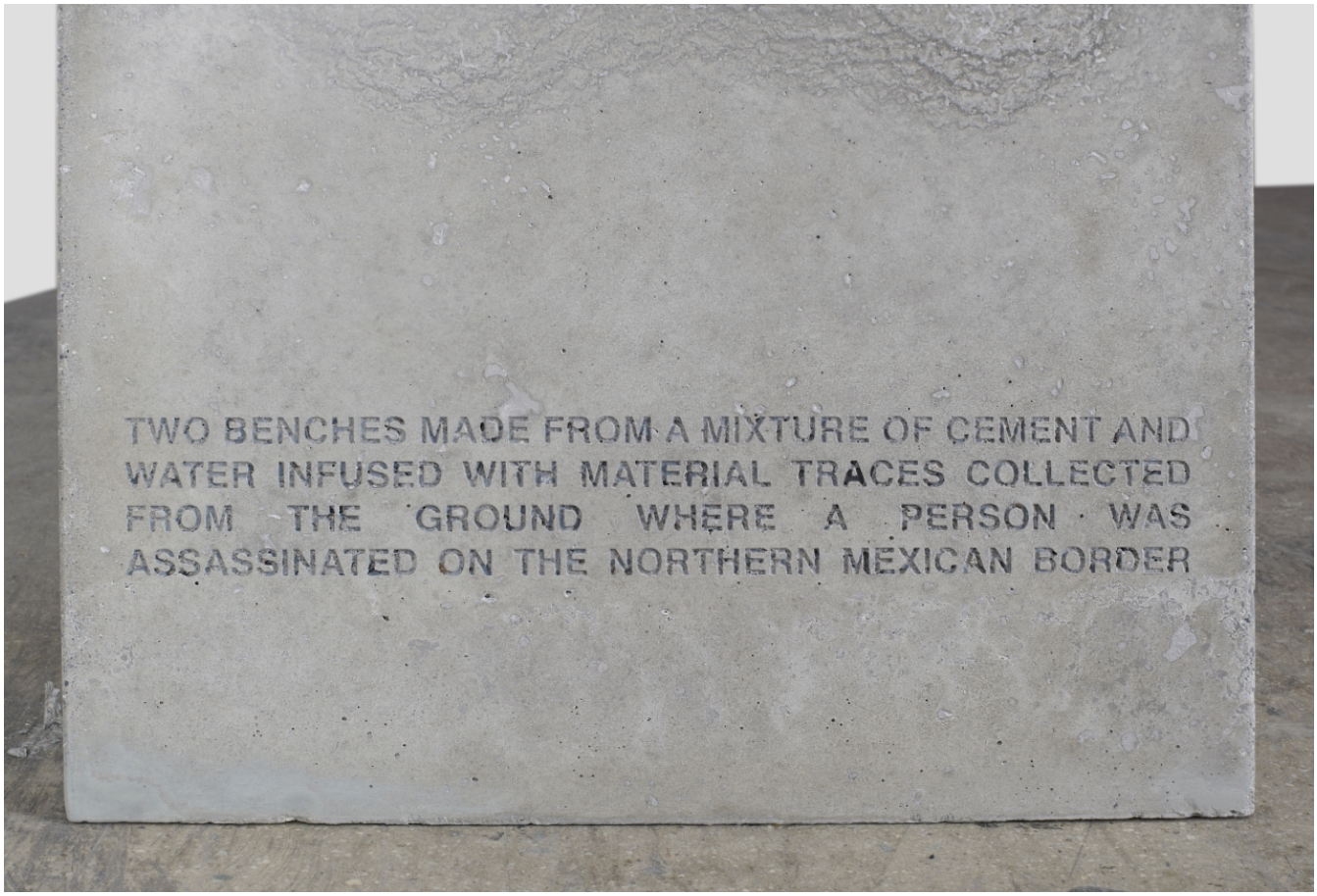

Figure 1. (Jamescohan.com, 2022) Teresa Margolles, Dos bancos, 2020

Teresa Margolles, a Mexican conceptual artist curates' collections of interactive art sculptures. Margolles' work may not be initially appreciated via the untrained eye. To recognise the complete 'greatness' of her work is to understand the context, the artists 'intent'.

The concept to use social sculpture as a means of interacting with issues of great prevalence, which are so often blind sighted by the public, is arguably an example of an ingenious idea to create. Margolles has a way of creating that is ,almost , inconspicuous. Where artwork represents such common and normalised brutality, these public exhibitions are admired but misunderstood. It is incomprehensible that benches sat on contain the remains of people killed, yet the people who sit on these may be oblivious.

Carolina A. Miranda (2016) defines Margolles' work as much an imposing piece of sculpture as it is something more ethereal. It is as much as a 'gesture' as it is an abstraction and inference of the landscape.

Intention in art refers to the ascribing of definition to an artist's work (Livingston, P. 2005 pp 2-3). Therefore, intention holds such importance in Art. The potential for an artwork to have interpretation, not only provides meaning but provides cause and engagement. It is frequent we encounter Art whether it be a painting, film or a book, that lack a certain gauge of 'story telling', an absence of attraction and the ability to captivate an audience. It could be disputed that half the curiosity and enjoyment from art comes from the significance of a piece. The explanation is what elevates a sculpture that appears as just a slab of cement (to the naked eye), to an activist sculpture for victims of homicide in low-income countries. Margolles' work inspects the link between violence and absence, and challenging the spectator with painful facts through a focus on underrepresented bodies. Its goal is to engage the public through using the materiality associated with the crimes and traumatic events, often contributing the remains, residues and debris within her work.

Is activism an overriding excuse to abuse the 'aesthetic of death'? Would there be so much attention to the sculpture Margolles creates had it not been surrounded by so much controversy?

Altruism

It is prescribed that as a social norm, we often find ourselves surrendering our moral compasses in order to survive. We must work to earn money, as it is only the fortunate minority that have the capacity to live off others. It is necessity for many to work to provide for themselves and others… is this necessarily wrong?
For example, I would never choose to work for a fast fashion company as they are renowned for cheap labour and poor-quality clothing, alongside the catastrophic environmental impacts for which many are the wielders.

My practice largely focuses on the environmental sustainability and materiality, with the ultimate intention to create a completely natural art-form that creates as little interference with my surroundings. It is only through my research that I have realised that 'sustainability' is not limited to the environmental impacts. The foundation for a long term sustainable practice also accounts for the way in which we treat ourselves and how we have an effect on others.

Must an artists sacrifice to be great? What defines greatness?
Altruism is a common moral compass, often used to describe those in religion as a core value. A selfless characteristic, where one makes sacrifice to grant greatness to another, this often comes as a cost to oneself (Fehr, Ernst & Fischbacher, Urs, 2003).

Figure 2. Vanity Fair (2012) Lucian Freud with Subject

Lucian Freud a well regarded artist that continued to create into his late 80s where he was allegedly painting up until two weeks before he died (Elisa Wouk Almino, 2015). Freud was unapologetically dedicated to art. His dedication ultimately came at the expense of his family and concluded in 'unfortunate' personal affairs. Perhaps, this simply came as an abnegation of responsibility. He had no interest in raising his children conventionally, and in fact stated he was quite selfish with his time. There are multiple pieces of literature authored by some of the children of Freud, highlighting the absence of and resentment towards their father (Kamp, 2012). It seemed that more often than not, out of the children he recognised (of which there were many) (Molony, 2014), it had to be accepted that the only way you could have a consistent and fulfilling relationship with their father was to sit for his paintings. Perhaps not, was this

from a place of malice but rather the upmost personal sacrifice to something far greater than himself, art.

As an audience and a collective, we have benefitted from his commitment and ardour for his practice. A commitment that could have been described as a 'selfless dedication' to his practice, he sacrificed his life for the sake of art. Was this, however, with the intention to be one day recognised as significant? How, I wonder did his decision effect those closest to him. In an interview with David Dawson, Freud's former apprentice that succeeded the last 20 years of his life, he reflects on many of the moments they shared and the thoughts Freud exclaimed. The most common notions fitting in with this 'selfless dedication', Dawson in a podcast interview, talk art, recalls "he felt that doctrines and rules were to be broken", he often rejected the movements of his time.

Perhaps, alike the works of Margolles, in their eyes this may be the upmost 'altruistic act' someone could perform, as it does not matter the sacrifice of their 'reputation' or 'life' as it has the chance to positively impact another. The life and works of Freud, for example, will be remember for decades to come, having massive influences on art and culture.

Ethics

The idea of having an ethical premise in art has been a growing internal dilemma for myself, particularly in terms of materiality and longevity in my own practice. I am curious, do others not ask themselves the same questions? What happens to the paint I have used one I am gone… will the left over acrylics be washing up in the coast of Japan? How many micro plastics have I already accounted for? What happens with time? How much can one human account for in terms of waste, the environmental and humanitarian harm? When did people stop caring?

How commonly have people been told…'just for now'… Or, 'one more time'. It's the reiterated statements that allows many to enable the harmful tendencies of centuries. We live in a convenient world, where people expect short wait times and tasks to be completely immediately. Whilst generations are evolving in this fast pace society, I propose that we slow down.

How does this relate to ethics in art? Well, moral compass starts in the daily rituals, which allow this way of thinking into everything else a person may do. The principle lies within the question, 'what defines success?'

Art, is a cumbersome and intricate topic, which unravels many sub topics and conversations about context, politics, history and controversy. Controversy being a highlighted noun in the past hundred years.

Being controversial has been a defining moment for the artists of the 20th and 21st century. It is what engrosses the masses, and what achieves the artists name in every critic's mouth. My next question is, why drop morals for headlines?

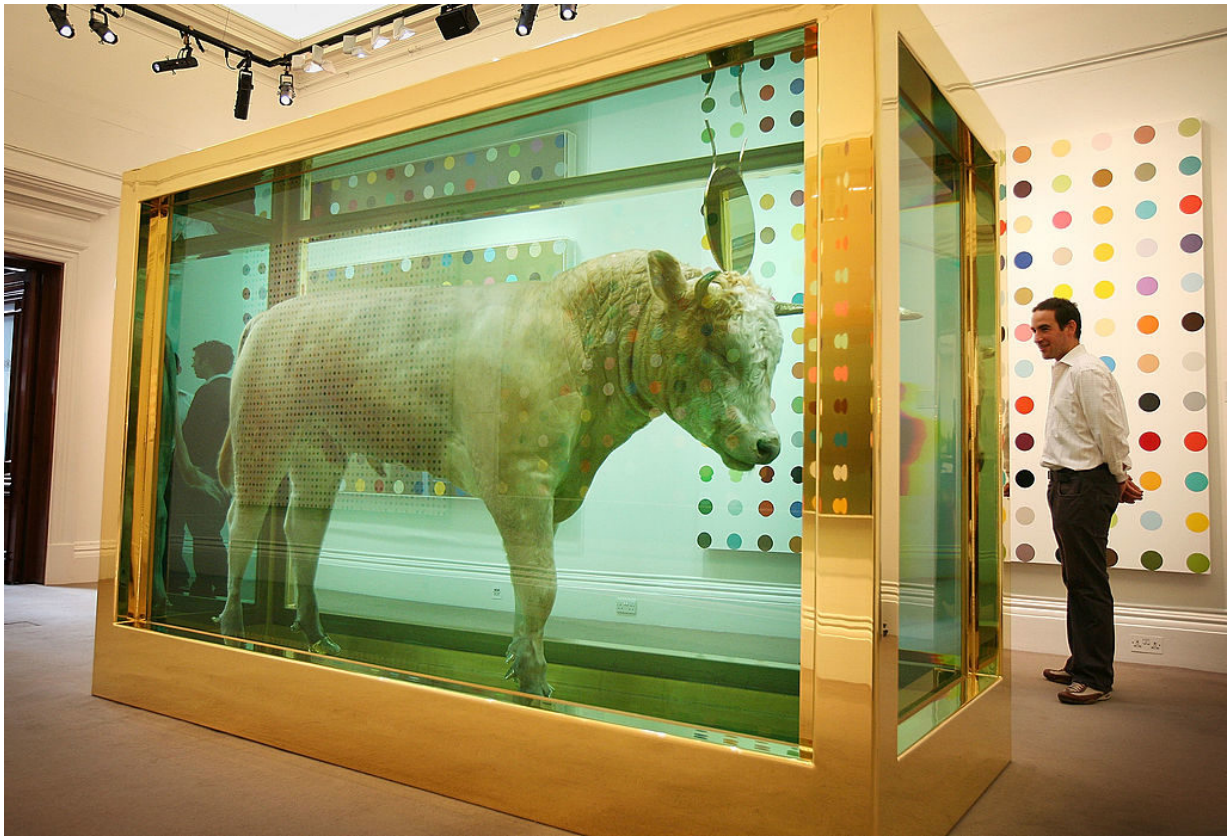

Figure 3. Artnet (2017) Damien Hirst's, The Golden Calf.

Damien Hirst, possibly one of the most widely known British artists of his time, and possibly one of the wealthiest (Brown, 2020). Hirst is accomplished through his work on religion and mortality. While every synopsis of work spikes interest and depth of context, his work has victimised those who are helpless. Hirst artwork has accounted for the lives of approximately one million animals (Goldstein, 2017). A topic I've touched on before, and yet still amazes me every time.

Since when did controversy define success?

"The best art is built on Morality"
(Alibhai-Brown, 2019)

Christoph Büchel a Swiss installation artist, who's often the catapult in the art world for controversy.

Figure 4. Artnet (2021) Christoph Büchel's, Barca Nostra

The Barca Nostra was displayed at the Venice Biennale exhibition titled, 'May you live in interesting times' in 2019 (Dafoe, 2021), by Christoph Büchel and received an array of feedback. The ship itself was a vessel for the transportation of over 1,000 people from Africa. Hundreds of these refugees died when the ship collided and sunk off the Libyan coast (Dafoe, 2021). Barca Nostra loosely translates to "Our Ship" (Keener and Keener, 2020) an ironic statement that was intended to memorialise the Mediterranean migration crisis. It was criticised for lacking context and was condemned for its insensitivity.

"One of the broad assumptions about works of art in this exhibition is that works of art are never reducible to being 'about' a particular issue or subject. Art is not a message that we can simply decipher and comprehend; Indeed, interesting artworks do not offer us conclusions so much as deeply engaging points of departure".

Rugoff, R (2019)

Perhaps, this was an intentional provocation form Brüchel? The Venice Bienalle is an internationally renowned cultural exhibition, celebrating art and architecture (La Biennale di Venezia, 2017), where the high society visit and is often associated with large displays of wealth. Possibly this was placed to highlight the ignorance and neglectful attitudes of those who are not directly effected by such matters. The controversial 'sculpture' was meant to be disliked. It is a reminder that avoidable catastrophes have happened and continue to occur.

These topics interlink in reference to the ongoing debate between the artistic and aesthetic autonomy and the idea that it has inherent value independent of it's subject matter. In my independent research paper, I will be asking the question Why must Art require context? In this enquiry I will be developing and defending this thesis on the basis of why can an artist *not* make Art for Arts sake.

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Figures

Figure 1 – Jamescohan.com. (2022). Teresa Margolles - Artists - James Cohan. [online] Availableat:https://www.jamescohan.com/artists/teresa-margolles2/featured-works?view=slider#6 [Accessed 18 July 2022].

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Figure 3 – Goldstein, C. (2017). How Many Animals Have Died for Damien Hirst's Art to Live? We Counted. [online] Artnet News. Available at: https://news.artnet.com/art-world/damien-whats-your-beef-916097 [Accessed 18 July 2022].

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