



Some Thoughts on Artists' Statements

Jeanette Bicknell

INTRODUCTION

I used to be employed to teach philosophy at a university-level institution for art and design. One of the many pleasures of doing so was that I got to see a lot of art. The art on display, whether it was figurative drawing and painting, large-scale installation pieces, intricate metalwork by materials design students, or conceptual art, was almost always accompanied by artists' statements; more often than not, I took the time to read them. Some genuinely illuminated the works they accompanied and enriched my experience of them; some were autobiographically frank and expressed the artist's joy of creation; others made reference to theories and insights gained from the student's compulsory humanities courses; and some came over (for one reason or another) as a bit confused.

It seems to me that artists' statements can perform two different functions and often perform both. First, an artist's statement allows the artist to provide information to viewers that is not necessarily discernible from the work. Such information might include the artist's own attitudes toward the work and thoughts about it or information on the materials used and on specific techniques. Second, an artist's statement can contextualize a work. It can direct the viewer to see, interpret, or appreciate a

J. Bicknell (✉)
Independent Scholar, Toronto, ON, Canada

© The Author(s) 2019
R. Sassower, N. Laor (eds.), *The Impact of Critical Rationalism*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90826-7_22

291

work in specific ways. Of course, an artist's statement cannot *compel* viewers to have a particular experience of a work; the most it can do is to suggest or guide viewers in a certain direction.

Artists have long written about their work, but this writing was often personal (in diaries and letters) or intended for other artists and students. Artists with strong theoretical or political interests have written articles, manifestos, and treatises. However, artists' statements, and their public display alongside a work or a body of work, are a comparatively recent phenomenon. They have become ubiquitous only in the last 20 years or so. Artists' statements are now standardly required as part of the application process for many art world institutions, including graduate programs, residencies, jobs, grants, and so on. According to a 2008 survey of art colleges, 90 percent of the respondents said that their institution taught the writing of artist statements (Garrett-Petts and Nash 2008). All students in the art program in the university where I taught were required to write one by their fourth year. In fact, the expectation that an artist will provide a statement has become so entrenched that when I asked a senior administrator what would happen if a new artist simply refused to do so, he looked genuinely perplexed and said that he "couldn't imagine" such a situation.

This institutional entrenchment of artists' statements makes it all the more remarkable that they have received little philosophical scrutiny. I have modest ambitions in this chapter. I want to open up the discussion by pointing out a few areas where our approach to artists' statements will have a bearing on deeper philosophical questions. I owe the approach I will take to the position set out by Ian Jarvie's "The Objectivity of Criticism of the Arts" (Jarvie 1967). In this article, Jarvie attacks the view that judgments on works of art are irremediably subjective and proposes a Humean alternative. Objectivity is to be found not in individual critics or their pronouncements but in the traditions of rational arguments about the arts and in the institutions which carry on these traditions. In seeking objectivity in the arts, we seek minimally biased institutions with built-in mechanisms for self-criticism. Objectivity is "a sort of democracy of opinion and criticism, within which the truth may be pursued" (Ibid., p. 3). Critical claims which enjoy wide agreement and have stood the test of time are more likely to be true than those that have not, although we must always be alert to the possibility that even widely endorsed claims may be upended one day.

Accordingly, my claims in this chapter are intended as provisional conjectures, robust enough to be criticized and improved upon, rather than as settled conclusions. It is too early for there to be a "received" view or

settled consensus on the topics I discuss here. Philosophers of art have had so far little to say about the phenomenon of artists' statements. The closest they have come, it seems to me, is to discuss the philosophical significance of artworks' titles (Fisher 1984; Gombrich 1991; Levinson 1990). Titles and artists' statements raise some similar problems. Both prompt questions about the ontology of works (are they parts of works or not?) and interpretation (how much weight should be given to them?).

However, the similar problems raised by titles and artists' statements should not make us overlook important differences. Throughout the history of art, there have been many different conventions regarding the entitling of artworks, and philosophers over-simplify these at their own peril. The practice of entitling started to take hold in the early modern period, with the growth of the art market in the Netherlands. Titles were as likely to be chosen by art dealers as they were by artists themselves (Yeazell 2015). Artists' statements, in contrast, are presented as being composed by artists to accompany their works. (Although this may not be actually the case, as there are professional writers who will craft artists' statements on behalf of artists for a fee.) Furthermore, artists' statements are supposed to be genuinely informative, which is not necessarily true of titles, even of titles chosen by artists themselves. A title might only minimally designate a genre or subject ("Madonna and Child," "Still life") or place a work in a sequence ("Abstract no. 7"). Artists' statements demand more, on the part of artists, critics, and viewers alike.

Let me now turn to three areas that seem particularly fruitful for thinking about artists' statements: ontology, interpretation, and evaluation.

ONTOLOGY

On one common view, some singular artworks are concrete objects. (I set aside conceptual works because they raise special difficulties.) In contrast to this view, a contextualist would argue that that the work's identifying properties depend on certain features of the context in which it was created (Levinson 1990). On a contextualist view, would an artist's statement about a work, say, a painting or a sculpture, constitute part of that work? If so, then many works which seem to be in one medium are actually hybrid works, consisting of painting and text or found objects and text, and so on. Furthermore, many of the artworks of the past, which traditionally were not accompanied by artists' statements, are rather different things than contemporary works in similar media that do include artists'

statements. The ontological “advantage” (an explanatory written text that is part of a work’s essence) enjoyed by contemporary works will certainly have implications for how we interpret them.

The alternative to the view that an artist’s statement is part of a work would hold that artists’ statements are more like tools to help us understand artworks, which are themselves concrete objects. Although this view seems plausible, we might want to consider whether statements written by a work’s creator are different from explanatory statements written by others, such as curators, historians, collectors, and art critics. In practice, artists’ statements would seem to have a different ontological status and demand from us a different kind of respect. (Whether they *should* have a different status is of course a separate question.) If it seems plausible that artists’ statements are not on a par with, say, curator’s statements, then we might want to consider how far their “different status” extends. Does it extend to their being constitutive of the works they elucidate? Imagine a sculpture displayed without the written statement that the artist meant to accompany it. Is the work incomplete, or does it merely lack a useful tool that might have helped us to appreciate and interpret it? Can there be a general rule about this, or do we have to decide on a case-by-case basis? If the position that artists’ statements are constitutive of works is correct, then these are hybrid works.

Matters are not any clearer if we venture beyond the position that artworks are concrete objects. According to a rival account of the ontology of art, artworks are processes, action types, or performances (Davies 2004). On such views, viewers attend to a “focus of appreciation” rather than a work, strictly speaking. For example, the painting by Diego Velazquez called “Las Meninas” (1656) is the focus of appreciation of the artwork that is in turn constituted by all the actions committed by Velazquez while painting that particular canvas. “Las Meninas” didn’t come with an artist’s statement, of course. Viewers have only the canvas to appreciate. If they chose, they can also research the history of the painting, learn about the context of its creation, and rival theories about the painting’s meaning. But there is no definitive statement by Velazquez imparting his views on the work.

Compare “Las Meninas” with a contemporary painting that is intended to be accompanied by an artist’s statement. It would seem clear that the statement is part of the artist’s actions or performance and so is part of the work. So, on a “process” view of the ontology of art, artists’ statements are constitutive of the work. But then, so are all the actions taken by the

artist in creating the work. Does the statement have any special status? Does it constitute part of the focus of appreciation? We have solved the ontological question (the contemporary painting is a process encompassing both a concrete object and a text), but the implications that follow for the work's appreciation are not clear.

Amie Thomasson (2005) has argued that the answers to ontological questions about art are to be found in our practices, more concretely, in the practices of those whose words and actions ground the terms. On her view, claims about the ontology of art are not mind-independent facts that we may "discover" the way we discover facts about the natural world. Rather, the competent users of these terms ground the ontology of such terms through their usage. In the case of painting, competent "users" would presumably be artists themselves, art teachers, critics, and consumers.

Setting aside the adequacy of this view, I think that artists' statements pose a particularly tricky problem because there are as yet few established practices. (And how long does a practice have to persist before it is considered "established"?) Some people make a point of ignoring artists' statements, while others read the artist's statement before looking at the work. (In fact, if there is a crowd around a work and I can't get to it, I may read the artist's statement while waiting my turn to view the work.) Another way of weighing the ontological status of artworks with accompanying statements is the fact that students learn to write statements during the course of learning effective use of materials, color, and design, as if the written words are as important to craft as the artwork itself. In other words, the writing of artists' statements is integrated into artistic pedagogy and therefore supports the view that artists' statements are part and parcel of any work of art.

Stephen Davies (2003) has suggested (sensibly, I think) that our ontology should be revealing of how and why art is created and appreciated. By this he means to say that philosophy should not stray too far from artistic practice and appreciation. Whichever ontology of art we start with, the status of artists' statements will have to be confronted. While I lean toward the view that artists' statements are constitutive of works, I think that some philosophical work needs to be done here before this view could be robustly defended.

INTERPRETATION

How much interpretive weight should we give to artists' statements? If statements are constitutive of works, then their status must be acknowledged and taken seriously when discerning the meaning of those works. I have already said that we seem to treat artists' statements differently than similar writings by curators, collectors, and critics. Since an artist's statement is "from the horse's mouth" (so to speak), we accord it a kind of deference that we don't necessarily extend to writings by people who are not the creators of that particular work.

Is this practice defensible? It would seem perverse to ignore artists' statements in our interpretation of works. Artists often take great care in crafting these statements, and even if we decide that they are secondary to the art object, they are at least one source of information about the works they accompany. At the same time, we expect that audiences will bring their own background and experience to the works they view, and that multiple interpretations are reasonable (if not all equally plausible). We don't assume that the composer of a musical work will necessarily give the single correct or even the best performative interpretation of that work. In literary criticism, the "intentional fallacy" is said to be committed when an interpreter assumes that the meaning intended by the author of a work is definitive. Furthermore, artists (like any of us) may be self-deceived. Their sincerely expressed beliefs about their own work may be mistaken, and placing too much weight on an artist's statement might impede coming to a different, more plausible interpretation of the artwork.

A further complication arises: Must we assume that all artists' statements are transparently written? What of statements that are ironic, or even deliberately misleading? For example, photographer David Leventi writes, of his series *Bjoerling's Larynx: World Famous Opera Houses* (2012): "I have photographed each house systematically from the spot at center stage where a performer would stand." But looking at these photographs, it is obvious that some of them were taken not from center stage but from the back of the house facing toward the stage. An assistant at the gallery where I first saw the photographs told me that Leventi was not always allowed access to the stage, and that is why some of the photographs are taken from the back of the house. What are we to make of the contradiction between the statement and the work? Is it a simple oversight? That is possible, but seems unlikely as the rest of the statement has obviously been written with care. Does it imply an injunction to see the work in a certain

way? Or are we perhaps meant to think about the gap between ideal aspiration and actual realization?

Can an artwork carry a meaning that has not been indicated or sanctioned by the artist in his or her statement? We do not need to imagine an extreme case, where a statement claims that a work that endorses X, while an interpreter believes that the work condemns X. I am thinking of a case where an interpreter sees some meaning in a work that an artist has not specifically indicated and is perhaps not even aware of, but might endorse. This question is especially interesting with regard to young artists. Their work may have historical echoes and resonances that of which they are not fully aware (because they have been poorly informed or poorly trained in the history of their craft, and perhaps because of both). Yet the artist might well endorse such significations if they were pointed out, whether by a mentor, gallery owner, curator, viewer, or potential buyer who likes the piece exactly for these significations. In such cases, writings by a more knowledgeable critic or curator might be more illuminating than the artist's statement.

How much interpretive weight to give artists' statements is further complicated by the fact that artists, like the rest of us, sometimes change their minds. It is not difficult to imagine an artist in her 40s who decides with the wisdom of hindsight that she was mistaken in important ways about the works she made while in her 20s. The more mature artist may have a very different relationship to her work and a very different understanding of it than did her earlier self. If given the opportunity, she may wish to revise or modify her earlier statements about these works. These considerations further undermine any reliance on artists' statements in the interpretation of art.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

From comparing films among friends to reading critical notices about the latest show or gallery exhibition, much of our engagement with artworks consists in criticism, evaluation, and relative ranking of them. We compare artworks with one another, discussing the supposed flaws of one against the merits of another. We discuss an artist's mature output in light of his or her earlier work. We devise and debate "top ten" lists and argue about who really deserves that prestigious prize. In evaluating an artwork and defending that evaluation to others, how much regard (if any) should we give to artists' statements? Does the answer change if we are considering not just a single artwork, but a body of work or even an entire career?

If an artist's statement is ontologically constitutive of a work, it would seem to follow that critical evaluation of that work should include a consideration of the artist's statement. If a work of art is (nothing more nor less than) a concrete object, and the artist's statement is not constitutive of it, then it would seem that we should decide on a case-by-case basis what weight (if any) to place on it.

Whether we think of artist's statements as part of a work or as a source of information about a work, the role we give them in critical evaluation may turn on the importance we place on artists' intentions. I've heard art students speak as though the single most important evaluative criterion was whether or not a work fulfills the maker's intentions. For those holding such a position, the artist's statement is a crucial source, as it may be the only direct and sanctioned evidence we have of the artist's intentions for the work. Can a work be successful even if it does not fulfill the artist's intentions as manifest in the corresponding statement? Such a situation certainly seems possible; one can esteem a work for many different reasons, not all of which have to do with the maker's intentions. Yet any critic making such claims would be in a tricky position: Praising the art while diminishing the significance of the artist's own hopes for it might be seen as patronizing.

There is another, even less comfortable possibility: The artist's intentions may be banal. We may conclude that the statement is woolly and reflects a sketchy understanding of fashionable intellectual trends. In such a case, should we allow our negative reactions to the artist's statement color our judgment of the art object? Or, should we try to set aside our response to the statement so as to appreciate the value of the work on its own? I was faced with such a dilemma when viewing the photographs by Leventi mentioned earlier. Now, his artist's statement for the series is neither woolly nor intellectually shallow. On the contrary, it is well-written and for the most part illuminating. But Leventi claims that his photographs of empty theaters "freeze for eternity the instant before a performance takes place" (2012). I found this claim to be disconcerting, at the very least. Performances do not take place in empty theaters. I would go so far as to argue that nothing taking place in an empty theater counts as a performance. So, I'm not sure that I even understand what Leventi means here. While these misgivings marred my enjoyment of the photographs, would it be proper to let them affect my evaluation of them? A critic who shared my view might come to different evaluations of the photographs whether she judged them "as photographs" or "as photographs that purport to capture something important about performance."

CONCLUSION

The institutional entrenchment of artists' statements completes a transition in the way we regard artists. The artist is no longer seen as a craftsman who is mentored or apprenticed to a master. Instead, contemporary artists are formally educated or credentialed individuals who are supposed to display their education in words. I suspect that there is another reason why viewers pay attention to artists' statements. Because these statements are purported to be a direct communication between artist and viewer, they provide a substitution for (or the impression of) a genuine personal connection. Clearly, artists' statements would benefit from and repay increased philosophical attention.

Acknowledgments I am grateful to Ian Jarvie, Raphael Sassower, and the audience at the Canadian Philosophical Association 2012 annual meeting held at Wilfrid Laurier University for comments and discussion.

REFERENCES

- Davies, David. 2004. *Art as Performance*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Davies, Stephen. 2003. Ontology of Art. In *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. J. Levinson, 155–180. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fisher, John. 1984. Entitling. *Critical Inquiry* 11 (2): 286–298.
- Garrett-Petts, Will F., and Rachel Nash. 2008. Re-visioning the Visual: Making Artistic Inquiry Visible. *Rhizomes* 18. Special issue on “Imaging Place.” Accessed August 1, 2017. <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue18/garrett/index.html>.
- Gombrich, Ernest H. 1991. Image and Word in Twentieth-Century Art. In *Topics of Our Time: Twentieth-Century Issues in Learning and in Art*, ed. E.H. Gombrich, 162–187. London: Phaidon.
- Jarvie, Ian C. 1967. The Objectivity of Criticism of the Arts. *Ratio* 9: 67–83.
- Leventi, David. 2012. Artist Statement. Accessed February 23, 2011. <http://www.davidleventi.com/#/artist%20statement/>.
- Levinson, Jerrold. 1990. Titles. In *Music, Art, and Metaphysics: Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson, 159–178. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Thomasson, Amie L. 2005. The Ontology of Art and Knowledge in Aesthetics. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63: 221–229.
- Yeazell, Ruth B. 2015. *Picture Titles: How and Why Western Paintings Acquired Their Names*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.