

Explanations Are The Traitor Of Art

Serious art defies easy interpretation, and artists should resist the call to explain themselves

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Unexplainable? Jackson Pollock's painting, Number 17, 1949 ... 'The pictures I contemplate painting would constitute a halfway state', he said. Photograph: Reuters

It is a vice of second-rate art to come with [its own eloquent explanation](#) attached. If an artist can translate the meaning and purpose of a work into easily understandable words, it means one of two things. Either the artist is lying, in order to ease the way with patrons and funders; or the artist is a fool. And if dishonesty is the reason, that too is something that vitiates art. No serious art is easy to interpret. Nor is there ever a single valid interpretation of art. If art is good, there are many things to be said about it and much that will remain unsayable.

Yet, there are more and more pressures today on artists to explain themselves. Once, an artist was allowed to hide behind a vague and mysterious aura. The American abstract expressionist painters made grand pronouncements about their work that are so enigmatic they give away no hostages - nor do the kinds of [epigrammatic comments made by Francis Bacon](#). Yet artists in Britain today are always offering explanations for what they do.

If you're looking for the root cause of anything annoying, silly or spurious in the culture of art in 21st century Britain the source of the problem is never hard to locate. Once again the culprit is ... [public art](#), in which the popularization of art, the determination of institutions from parks to local councils to be associated with it, and a lingering British Puritan visual clumsiness [produce a lot of guff](#) as artists try to promote the accessible virtues of their ideas.

As soon as you start saying what people want to hear, adapting your art to the common sense political and moral platitudes of ordinary speech, you betray subtlety and poetry. Artists presenting proposals for the [Fourth Plinth](#), the [Tate Turbine Hall](#) and elsewhere should rebel again this. They should agree to all submit the woolliest and least explanatory pronouncements they can dream up. Something like: "The pictures I contemplate painting would constitute a halfway state, and an attempt to point out the direction of the future, without arriving there completely."

That's [Jackson Pollock](#), writing a grant application in 1947. I don't suppose it would get him much of a grant in Britain now. He'd have to explain what his webs and loops of abstract paint are all about ... but he'd sit there chewing his pen, no more able to offer a simple explanation of them than the critic is half a century later.