

**HD** Circles of context: giving a work of art its meaning

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On the June weekend the Sydney Biennale closed, I arrived in Denmark to speak at a conference where the Greek theatre artist [Alexandros Mistriotis](#) proposed that “art liberates us from meaning”.

A week later in Copenhagen I met a **Chinese** dentist. Wang Xiang, the founder of **China**'s first privately-owned dentist chain, the Jin Ri Dentist Clinic, put the profits of his business into the [Peng Hao Theatre](#) which he built “to fight away fear and the inner poverty of people’s spiritual world”.

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The two positions seemed poles apart: how can art liberate us from meaning – at the same time as fill our world with it?

Perhaps part of the answer can be found in the economic contexts in which the two speakers reside. One from a Western country in a heightened state of economic crisis and one from an Asian country in a heightened state of continuous growth. In a state of crisis, art shows us that meaning is a luxury. In a state of growth, art gives meaning to life – earned after the fight for survival has been won.

Context and meaning

Whether economic, philosophical, social or cultural, the context in which an artwork is created and the complicity of the artist within that context is intrinsic to its meaning.

A “street artist” is, by definition, determined by the very context in which they create and exhibit: the street.

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The most well-known street artist, [Banksy](#), utterly apprehended the streets of Bristol. His artwork is intimately connected to that city’s urban, social, legal and architectural contexts which in turn have helped define not only the meaning of his artworks but also his meaning as an artist.

His complicity in the “appreciation of the value” of these contexts adheres his work and artistic identity to that city and the other cities he has used as a canvas.

It makes me wonder: does an artwork ever have meaning in and of itself? Is it possible to separate the meaning of the Mona Lisa from its historical, cultural and exhibition contexts?

What of Banksy’s artworks? The **commercial** art market would have us believe so, although it’s also true that the “canvasses” on which they are painted – buildings, houses, caravans – have often been **sold** as part of the art so inseparable are they from their context.

His work on the West Bank Wall depicting two children playing in the rubble and dreaming of a sandy beach on a tropical paradise has a poignancy that resonates because of its specific location and the history and politics it evokes. The context is not just intrinsic to the artwork’s meaning, it is the provider of its meaning.

Matters of context and complicity are just as problematic when viewed through presentation, exhibition and even temporal prisms.

[Rustom Bharucha](#)’s forensic dismantling of theatre director Peter Brook’s [The Mahabharata](#) so implicated Brook in a post-colonial context that his whole oeuvre was re-assessed.

An artistic project that had been lauded as a model of universalist humanism was re-framed as cultural appropriation largely because global economic and cultural dynamics had altered the contexts in which the work was being talked about and presented.

No artist can control the passage of time but these days they tend to be more mindful of cultural and presentation contexts, their complicity in them and how this process attributes meaning to their artworks.

Art, ethics and boycott

When academic and teacher Mathew Kiem called for [artists to boycott](#) the this year's Sydney Biennale, 39 participating artists signed an open letter to the Biennale **Board** protesting the involvement of the event's primary sponsor, Transfield:

in Australia's offshore immigration detention centres on Manus **Island** and in Nauru.

Nine artists boycotted the event.

Those artists were exercising their right not to have their artworks displayed in a context that implicated them in an issue that was not consistent with their own moral or ethical position. Mindful that, through their participation, meanings would be attached to their artwork they would find objectionable – that the internment of people seeking asylum was okay – they resisted their complicity in the cultural equation because for them it did not add up.

By exercising their right not to participate in the Biennale, the artists articulated the circles of context and complicity that pivot around art-making.

These circles brush up against each other, often overlap and, when they do, are central to the making of an artwork's meaning and, consequently, the making of artists as citizens. It is in these circles that the multiple meanings of an artwork and a society can be found.

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