

The Burden of Legibility

Why Art Is Increasingly Expected to Explain Itself Before We Meet the Work

The first encounter with art is often no longer an act of looking. It is a decision: do I stay, or do I move on?

For many people, that decision now happens on a screen they did not open in search of art, but in search of orientation. What happened overnight? Who wrote to me? Which story matters? Between headlines, advertising, private images and entertainment, art appears too: a photograph, a painting, a fragment of an exhibition, a short museum video.

Art does not arrive in a space prepared for attention. It enters a stream in which radically different things compete for the same scarce resource: time.

The work no longer arrives as an event set apart. It arrives as one claim among others on an already occupied mind.

This is not a complaint about digital platforms. They have widened access and allowed artists to reach audiences without first being legitimised by galleries or institutions. Yet the same openness changes first contact. In a feed, a work may have only a moment before the next thing appears. Scarcity of time does not only change how long we look. It changes which works receive the chance to be looked at for longer.

That scarcity is not created by platforms alone. Work, family, messages and permanent availability divide the day into smaller units of attention. We carry that rhythm into museums as well. We arrive trained to sort quickly: relevant or not, understandable or not, stay or move on.

Under these conditions, visibility is rarely enough. A work must also communicate why it deserves attention.

A work is increasingly expected not only to be something, but to explain why it matters.

That explanation can be necessary. It can make historical, political or biographical conditions visible when they are not apparent in the work. But it often performs another task as well: it must differentiate the work, name its relevance and justify why it should be shown, funded, collected or discussed.

Before a work reaches an audience, it may already have passed through applications, open calls, grant proposals and editorial selections — spaces in which its relevance must first be demonstrated in language. The explanation is therefore often more than a translation. It is also a promise of relevance.

It helps to distinguish meaning from the claim of significance. Meaning can emerge in an encounter; it can remain provisional or contradictory. Significance, by contrast, is the assurance that a work is important and deserves our attention.

The more often that assurance is required, the greater the risk that it wears thin. When almost every project is described as critical, urgent, resistant, transformative or socially necessary, those words lose some of their power to distinguish. The text starts to sound like a familiar formula. The viewer encounters not an invitation to look more closely, but a claim whose function is already recognisable.

When everything is presented as significant, the claim of significance eventually distinguishes nothing.

The obligation to explain can devalue explanation. Serious work is affected too, because its framing can begin to sound interchangeable. What was intended as access is dismissed as art-speak, marketing or posture.

As an artist, I know the impulse to explain a work before anyone has had time to really look at it. A text can create access. But it can also become a form of self-defence: an attempt to prove, in advance, that the work is relevant. That does not make the explanation dishonest. It reflects a field in which visibility rarely emerges from the work alone.

Yet the force of a claim does not depend only on what is said. It also depends on who says it.

The self-description of an unknown artist is heard differently from the same sentence on a major museum wall. A curatorial text, a review, a prize or a collection gives the claim additional weight. It signals that relevance is not being asserted by the artist alone, but confirmed by others.

Authority has not disappeared. It has fragmented.

Institutions, curators, critics, galleries and magazines still distribute attention and symbolic weight. Their authority now competes with reach, measurable response and algorithmic visibility. Follower counts can suggest importance without establishing it. Institutional recognition can elevate a work that attracts little attention outside the art world. No single actor decides alone, yet not every voice carries the same weight.

Relevance often emerges through reciprocal confirmation. The artist articulates meaning. An institution takes it up. Criticism deepens or challenges it. An audience responds. A platform distributes further visibility.

By the time we encounter a work, a field of possible meanings may already have taken shape around it.

The interpretive space takes shape before interpretation begins.

Many of us know the small reversal: we read the wall text first, then turn to the work and begin looking for evidence that the text was right.

An exhibition title, an artist's name, a caption or the authority of a museum creates expectations. Those expectations do not determine what we will see, but they direct our attention. They influence which connections we seek and which details we prioritise. Pre-structuring does not remove interpretive freedom. It makes some readings more likely than others.

A text about ecological grief, identity or social inequality can reveal what might otherwise go unnoticed. It can also focus attention so strongly on one reading that other experiences recede.

Mediation is therefore not neutral. But neither is it automatically manipulation. Its influence often lies in making certain aspects of a work more available than others.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that art should be encountered without context. Art has never been unmediated. Churches, courts, salons, academies, museums and criticism have organised perception for centuries. The past was not freer. It was differently structured.

A democratic culture needs mediation. Without it, art risks remaining accessible mainly to those who already know its historical and institutional codes. For many people, orientation is a precondition of an open encounter.

Interpretation is not the enemy of experience either. It connects perception with memory, history, knowledge and social reality. At its best, interpretation extends an encounter. The decisive question is whether it still grows out of that encounter — or whether it arrives before it.

Orientation can open an encounter, but it also leaves fingerprints on what follows.

No viewer is neutral. We bring memory, education, language, cultural experience, political convictions, fear and hope with us. External mediation meets that inner context. Meaning arises neither from the work alone nor from its explanation, but between the work, its public framing and the viewer's own experience.

That becomes harder under contemporary conditions of time. Some works establish an immediate relation through a face, a body, a personal story or a recognisable conflict. Others unfold through sequence, repetition, spatial relation, ambiguity or slow observation. They are not necessarily deeper or better. They simply require a different duration.

What happens to works whose first quality is that they do not open immediately?

Under scarce attention, such works face greater pressure to translate themselves. To earn the possibility of a longer encounter, they must first survive a very short one.

The burden of legibility does not begin when art is explained. It begins when explainability becomes a condition of visibility.

That pressure does not stop at presentation. Artists learn which projects can be summarised quickly, which single images attract attention and which social references are immediately legible. It is worth asking whether those conditions now enter the creative process earlier.

A work does not become content simply because it appears online. The shift begins when circulability becomes an internal condition of its production.

We are not outside this economy of attention; we help produce it.

We scroll, click, share and seek orientation. Platforms record our behaviour. Institutions watch reach and audience response. Artists observe what becomes visible. The altered field shapes our expectations in return.

Every society creates conditions under which it perceives art, and over time those conditions begin to influence the art itself.

Photography makes the effects of mediation particularly easy to see because photographs can appear to offer direct access to what was in front of the camera. Context can enter so quietly that it becomes difficult to separate what the photograph shows from what we have learned about it.

Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* is an obvious example precisely because it has become so difficult to encounter without its history. Lange made the photograph in 1936 in Nipomo, California, as part of a series showing Florence Owens Thompson and her children.[1] Around the image accumulated descriptions of poverty, motherhood and the Great Depression until the photograph itself became one of the period's defining visual symbols.

That history changes what becomes available when we look. A hand against a face can register as anxiety. The children turning towards their mother can become dependence. Her expression can carry the weight of circumstances that extend far beyond the frame.

Later knowledge complicates that legibility. Thompson came to regret the way the photographs had fixed her within a public story of destitution.[2] The image had acquired meanings larger than the encounter from which it came, and the person within it did not disappear into those meanings as completely as its later symbolic life could suggest.

The photograph remains the same. What surrounds it does not.

Context can therefore make an image more historically legible while making its apparently settled meaning less secure. The information that allows *Migrant Mother* to stand for poverty and displacement can also remind us that a photographed person exceeds the role an image later acquires for her.

Taryn Simon's *The Innocents* produces a different relation between image and explanation. The project portrays people who served prison sentences for violent crimes they did not commit and were later exonerated through DNA evidence. Simon photographed them at places that had become significant through their cases: scenes of crimes, arrests, misidentifications or alibi locations.[3]

Here, contextual information does not simply arrive after the photograph. It is part of the structure through which the photographs become legible.

Charles Irvin Fain, for example, was photographed at the Snake River in Idaho, the scene of the crime for which he had been wrongfully convicted and a place he had never previously been. He had served eighteen years of a death sentence.[4] None of this can be recovered simply by examining the visible landscape and the person standing within it.

Without the accompanying information, the photograph still offers a person in a place. With it, the relation changes. The landscape acquires a legal history; presence becomes complicated by an absence; and photography itself enters the problem, because *The Innocents* also addresses the role that photographs and visual identification played in wrongful convictions.

The text does not merely explain what the photograph means. It makes a relation available that the image could not establish on its own.

The difference between the two examples matters. *Migrant Mother* has accumulated contexts that continue to alter the ways an already existing image can be encountered. In *The Innocents*, image and contextual information belong more deliberately to the work's method from the beginning.

Neither case gives context the final word. Mediation makes certain meanings more available without making them compulsory.

For photography, that distinction is particularly important. The medium can make context easy to overlook because a photograph seems able to say, with unusual directness: this was there. From that modest claim, larger meanings can begin to feel equally visible. Yet a title, caption, archive, sequence, commission or institutional setting may be doing part of the work through which those meanings become available.

The question cannot therefore simply be whether art needs context. It does.

The harder question is when context enters, how much arrives at once and what happens to the interval in which a viewer might still form an initial relation to the work.

How much orientation does an encounter need in order to open — and when does that same orientation begin to predetermine its outcome? Which works still receive the chance to unfold in

their own time when they must prove, in the first instant, why they deserve our attention? And are we still willing to trust our own perception for a moment before being told why a work matters?

Perhaps that moment is small.

But it matters.

A work may need context to become available to us. It may also need a brief interval in which something can happen that no one has already named on our behalf.

Notes

[1] Dorothea Lange made the photographs now known as the *Migrant Mother* series in March 1936 in Nipomo, California. The woman was Florence Owens Thompson, photographed with her children during Lange's work documenting migratory agricultural labour for the Resettlement Administration. Library of Congress, *Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" Photographs in the Farm Security Administration Collection*.

[2] The Library of Congress records Thompson's later regret that the photographs had fixed her within what she regarded as a "Grapes of Wrath" stereotype. Library of Congress, *American Women: Resources from the Prints & Photographs Collections — Exploring Contexts*.

[3] Taryn Simon's *The Innocents* documents people wrongfully convicted of violent crimes and later exonerated through DNA evidence. Simon photographed participants at locations significant to their cases, including crime scenes, sites of arrest, misidentification and alibi locations. Museum of Modern Art / MoMA PS1, *Taryn Simon: The Innocents*.

[4] Taryn Simon, *Charles Irvin Fain. Scene of the Crime, the Snake River, Melba, Idaho. Served 18 Years of a Death Sentence for Murder, Rape and Kidnapping*, from *The Innocents*, 2002. Museum of Modern Art, New York.