

**A REPORT: PROCEEDINGS OF A REGIONAL CONFERENCE
"LEARNING FROM WORKS OF ART THROUGH
MUSEUM/SCHOOL COLLABORATIONS"**

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Learning Through Works of Art

A Transcription of an Informal Talk by Terry Barrett

I love working with smart people in art museums, and from what I saw yesterday, you really have a good conference going. The level of discourse is high, many people are talking, and the questions and issues are important. It is exciting to be here, and I thank you for inviting me. I am more comfortable with a give-and-take situation rather than a lecture. I can lecture; I just do not think it is a good way to teach. The conference has been very interactive, and I want to invite you to be interactive, too.

I have a lot of material to show you, but you don't need to see it all, and we can stop at any point and discuss things further. I'll try to leave time at the end for questions, but prefer them in context, so just say, "Terry, what about this?" and that would help me to make it more interesting for you.

I'm going to show you work I've been using with learners of all ages in museums, schools, and community centers. A few years ago, a former graduate student, who works for the Ohio Arts Council, asked me to become a critic in the schools, like an artist in the schools. I said, "Oh, I don't know." But I tried it, and I have been hooked ever since! It has changed my research direction and certainly broadened it.

Today I want to show you the results of that work. I brought some slides of kids interacting with works of art. When I say, "kids," I mean that loosely. I also work with senior citizens in nursing homes. I do similar activities with them.

This first slide shows the youngest group I have worked with. These are preschoolers. The requirement was that they were diaper-trained. They are in a school in Cincinnati. It is a Montessori school, but a private school. The teachers have devised their own curriculum. These kids are three- and four- year-olds. I asked the teachers if I could work with them because I wanted to see how young we could go with art criticism. So it was an experiment on my part as well as the teachers'.

It was a typical class size. They had about fifteen children and about three adults. They were to bring in their favorite stuffed animals. Here are some of them. Getting started is always difficult for me in a discussion. So I simply said, "Who would like to talk about their animal?" And one brave kid showed her teddy bear, and that was the starting point. So, I asked her to tell us about her teddy bear. She really just described her bear. It had a red bow tie, it had eyes. Then I asked the other kids to see if they noticed something she did not describe. So, I was getting them involved and listening to her as well as observing what she was saying.

Then, I asked for another teddy bear. Then I said, "How is your teddy bear like Alicia's teddy bear?" I asked how it was similar and then asked how it was different. They both have ears, but he has blond feet instead of black feet. We proceeded that way with teddy bears for a while:

"That teddy bear does not have a tail. This teddy bear has longer fur, this teddy bear has shorter fur. This teddy bear is missing an eye; this one doesn't have a nose; this one doesn't have a mouth."

And then I introduced another animal. I kept them on track with teddy bears, even if they wanted to jump to Curious George. Then we moved on to another animal, like a lion. And the question there would be simple, like, "Lions are usually frightening. Why isn't this lion frightening?" This lion is cuddly. They could answer like that. And then we would talk about other cats. We would see if there were other animals in the cat family and in the meantime, we were grouping things. We grouped the teddy bears, the cats, the chimpanzees. And then we ran into something that just did not fit. And I said, "Where does it fit? Where are we going to put this animal? Would he be comfortable with the teddy bears?" And we came up with reasons WHY he'd be comfortable with teddy bears. "Would he be more comfortable with the cat family? Why?"

The session lasted a full twenty minutes, which is the time period in which they were used to talking. I always ask how long are they used to talking. Their teacher told me they work in 20-minute blocks, so I kept it at twenty minutes. They were thoroughly engaged the whole time. I think the lesson they learned was they can talk and they can be listened to, and they need to listen to one another. That is crucial for any kind of group discussion. If the kids, the learners, aren't listening to each other, you're doing one-on-one teaching, though you are pretending to be doing a group discussion.

Secondly, they were beginning to learn some pretty sophisticated concepts. They were defining, they were making visual definitions, "What belongs in each category, and why? How are the categories different?" These are higher level thinking skills that these kids were beginning to approach visually. In terms of art education, they were seeing that artifacts communicate. Artifacts express. You can interpret a teddy bear.

Any comments? Do you have any wonderings about that?

It is a logical set-up and there is a progression here. It is rudimentary. Imagine if these kids as three and four year olds had a comprehensive art education through 12th grade, imagine what they would be doing in your senior high school, or my undergraduate art courses.

In the same school, I worked with kindergartners. I used cereal boxes, because I know the kids eat cereal for breakfast. It was another sorting task. They were to bring in cereal boxes from home. We had all of these empty boxes, and I asked them to separate the boxes into two groups: boxes that were designed to be sold to adults, and boxes that were designed to be sold to children. Simply put in their language; "Which boxes are for adults, and which boxes are for kids?" They sorted them really quickly. No problem. More importantly, I wanted to know, how did they know those boxes were for children. And the kids would mention the tiger on the box, Tony the Tiger. While I forgot the names of all the characters, they knew the names of all the characters.

So they named all the characters. And I asked, "Why do the characters appeal to children?" And they could answer that. We talked about color selection, and why those colors may be appealing to children. We talked about the prizes in the boxes and how those appeal to children. These kids are not even reading yet. They are not reading words, but they are reading images.

This is a case of starting with what some in the field call "popular art" and then moving to fine art. There are some disputes about that. Some scholars say that popular art is popular and by definition, students do not need to study it in school. They know it, they get it, move on. Others say no, it is important to study popular art, because you can move on from popular art. You start where the learners are. There is a critical dimension that we ought to be looking at. Feldman has a great phrase: "the aesthetic dimension of social living." That is my rationale for including popular art. Here they are looking at adult cereals, and they have no problem figuring out why they are for adults. For kindergartners, this whole period lasted about twenty-five minutes.

We will go on to another topic. Do you have questions, comments? Feel free to object to any of this.

[An audience member asked Barrett if and how he moves from the cereal boxes to fine art.]

I do get to works of art. The transition is not difficult. It is "What do you see in this cereal box?" to "What do you see in this Picasso painting?" I would be content as an art educator to spend a quarter talking about popular art and looking at critical issues, historical issues, and production issues in popular art. I think the learning outcomes are very significant. I don't only use popular art as a stepping stone to fine art, but as a legitimate enterprise in itself. But, I know that could be argued, and it is argued in the literature.

Let's move into 20th-century art with Romare Bearden. I've used these artifacts with kindergartners. I haven't tried them with preschoolers. I have not had the opportunity. I use Romare Bearden and other 20th-century artists because I deal mostly with criticism when I am invited to the schools as a critic. I work with contemporary art and not historical art. While Romare Bearden has passed away, he is still pretty contemporary. And he is 20th-century. I know that is a quirky kind of distinction, because for kids, all art is new art because they haven't seen it before. We are studying art in our social context when we criticize contemporary art.

I do think it is important to bring African-American art into a rural, white community, where they do not deal with African-Americans. In some city schools, they have African-American, Asian-American, and Anglo artists. But when I go into the rural classrooms, I primarily see white artists. I think it is very important that all kids see a lot of cultures. I make a point to do that. It is a value-call on my part.

Here we have Marc Chagall. I've used Chagall with kindergartners. I play a little game with the class if it is not too big. I ask them to get in a circle, or at least a semi-circle. I think environment is really important. (This lecture is not a good environment for interaction. In a

classroom, I would make a good environment for interaction.) Then I ask each child to name or point-out one thing they see, with their words and not their fingers. I tell them critics have to use words, not their fingers. We can point with words and not fingers, and we have to listen to each other. The task is that each child, one at a time, will say one thing. "I see a green nose." Then it goes to the next child, but they cannot repeat anything. This trains the kids to be observant. It trains the whole class to listen to the speaker, and reinforces the notion that this is a group discussion. This is not one-on-one. Then we see how many times we can go around the room making new observations.

It becomes really interesting. I've done this with graduate students, and it works. I use a lot of the same techniques with my graduate students that I use with kindergartners. I don't know what that says about educational development and learning theory. If we go around the room three times without any repetitions, then they have really observed a lot in the art work. And then I try to bring it to summary, to some kind of conclusion of what the artwork is about. So that is a technique that works. It doesn't work if there are thirty-five kids; the 35th kid is really nervous by the time it's his turn to speak. It works with smaller groups. But it will work with all ages.

The children are really able to decipher a lot about this painting. Eventually, I tell them the title, *I and the Village* by Marc Chagall. I don't give them biographical information about Marc Chagall. First, I want to see how much they can infer from the painting. They can infer that it is probably not American. It looks like an agricultural community with a lot of religious influences, both Jewish and Christian. Animals are very important. There's a woman and a man. It is hard to figure out the relationship between the woman and the man. The goat on the left is very important and the man on the right is very important. I'm summarizing what they tell me after, say, a fifteen-minute discussion of this work. And then I'll say, "Chagall is an important artist. You can find out more about him in the library or from your art teacher, but you have done a good job of looking at this."

Next, Picasso. I use this one frequently, *Lobster and Cat*, 1965. By the way, the Picasso and Chagall are from Shorewood prints. They have a thematic set called *Animals in Art*. I like it because it works with younger kids and I can also use it at higher levels. It's like a theme show. I usually don't use one work of art at a time. I think sometimes we've taught art educators to use one work at a time and to study that thoroughly. I find that there is more to talk about and think about and respond to if you have more than one work of art. I might start with the Chagall, but then I'll move to the Picasso and then by the end of class, we'll have done four animals in art. I'll say, "What do these have in common? How are they different? How are the artists using the medium? What are they expressing about animals?"

I don't want to be dogmatic about that, but this is just a general principle: I try to use more than one work of art. It's similar to going to a museum gallery, where you usually don't have one work of art, (unless it's a huge work of art) you have several, and there is a theme there, a curatorial idea there. And that is something else that can be interpreted. In this case, so far,

they've had actual objects they can touch, their animals and their cereal boxes. I don't let them touch the reproduction just because I want them to use their words, not because the reproduction is a precious object. I want them to use their words and not to come up here and point to show me. I want them to develop language skills.

If we have original works of art, which we will have today at the Dallas Museum of Art, then of course, we won't have touching. When it becomes relevant, I explain that this is a reproduction, it is a poster, it is on cardboard, it costs \$8, and you can order it from New York if you want. It's important that they know what's a reproduction and what is not. And I do talk about the limits of reproductions. I'll show you some other devices I use as we go through these slides.

With this one, I say, "What's going on here?" I used the same question, "What's going on here?" just three days ago with graduate students while teaching art criticism. And people say there's a fight. The little ones say a cat and a crab are fighting. Some will say it's a lobster. I'll ask, "Is it a crab or a lobster?" I think that's important, because it reinforces that there are right and wrong answers about art. I don't like telling kids, "Art is wonderful, you can't say anything wrong about art." In fact, you can say a lot of wrong things about art. That is a simple descriptive error. So, I gently say, "Is everyone sure that's a crab?"

The next question is "Who's going to win?" And this is where it gets interesting, because they know the lobster is going to win. I say, "How do you know the lobster is going to win?" And I get answers from 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-graders like, "It's triangular." "It's pushing the cat off the page." "It looks robotic." "It's painted blue and looks like it's made out of metal." And someone will say, "The cat looks scared." And I'll say, "How does the cat look scared?" And then I'll introduce a little new twist and say, "How does Picasso show that the cat is scared?" I want them to know that this is an artist making an expression. It is not a cat and a lobster. This is Picasso's picture of a cat and a lobster.

I keep introducing, "How does Picasso's picture show that?" Then they will say, "Picasso showed the mouth open, Picasso showed the teeth, the hair hunched-up." Then I'll ask, "What does hair hunched-up on a cat mean?" The cat owners know what that means, but the non-cat-owners don't know that. I want them to bring scientific evidence to art.

I do not go through elements and principles of design. I start with, "What do you see? What's it about? And How do you know?" They just went through elements and principles of design. They said the lobster is triangular, going at a diagonal, it's pushing. They are using elements and principles, but it's so much more interesting and lively than saying, "O.K. let's learn the elements and principles of design today."

I ask them about the paint. "How does Picasso put the paint on? Did he put it on fast or slow?" And if we can compare Chagall to Picasso, that gives them more to talk about. "Which is faster? Which is slower?" The kids say, "Picasso did it faster. Chagall put the paint on slower." I'll ask, "How can you tell?" and a kid will say, "It's messy." And I'll say, "is it messy-good, or

messy-bad?" Because messy to me sounds bad, and I want to know if they think it's good or bad. And they will say, "No, messy-good.." So then they learn they need to make distinctions, about "messy," that their words aren't necessarily communicative.

They see that Picasso literally used his fingers. They can see finger prints, finger marks up in the left-hand corner of the painting. They can relate to finger painting. It can be more than just messy-bad. They like that. If they could see the original, that would be wonderful. I've never seen the original. Shorewood, on this one, doesn't even give the dimensions. I'm not sure how big it is. Has anyone seen this painting?

Through life in the classroom and being bored as a teacher, I don't start with description, then analysis, and then go to interpretation. Partly to keep myself sane. Even if I had a really good session for my first period, I'll change the lesson for my second period just to keep myself alive, interested. I'm doing research on the spot, just as you're doing research. I might write it down and publish it. I would encourage you to do the same. I'm keeping myself intellectually stimulated, and I am a better teacher because of it. If I am doing five classes with the *Lobster and Cat*, I've got to come up with something that keeps me interested.

We do talk about elements and principles. They talk about how Chagall's village scene is very unified. And I say, "How is it unified?" And they start talking about circles and ovals, the reds, the greens, and all of that. So we deal with them, we just don't start with them. I never deal with elements and principles out of context from the work of art, or a cereal box. They are always here, it's just a matter of where you start and what you focus on.

This next picture *Pool Parlor, 1942*, is by Jacob Lawrence. I love using contemporary art, because I'm a critic. Just this morning, the Dallas Morning News had a full-page article on Jacob Lawrence at Southern Methodist University, so I'd grab that and bring it into the classroom, because we have a living artist here who is working the college students. It is very exciting to work with a living artist.

Some questions would be, "What do you see?, What's going on? What's it about?" I would use this with older kids who are more familiar with pool halls than young kids might be.

This is a slide of a typical classroom. The teacher is sitting in the back. I'm in the front, holding the poster in one hand. The kids are raising their hands. I want them to raise their hands. I want them to speak one at a time and I want to train them to listen to one another. I want to distract side conversations, (especially with adults). Side conversations dilute the whole conversation. They'll get excited about something and tell their neighbor and exhaust their energy. They'll distract the rest of the group. We don't get the benefit of what they are saying so I try to be nice about it and say, "Excuse me, I'd really like to hear what you are saying. Would you tell the rest of us?" I don't do it in a punishing way, because I'm genuinely interested. "You're excited. What are you excited about? Tell us, don't keep it to yourself." And the whole discussion then elevates a notch, because people do tell the whole group. So I do ask for talking one at a time.

I always use name tags; for control basically. Then I don't have to say, "You, hey you, in the back." You might not have to do it if you're a teacher and know the students, but if you're a museum educator, I'd definitely recommend that you use name tags.

This is a group of René Magritte reproductions I got from a calendar. We were going on and on about this image, and some thought it was a calendar picture that Magritte made for February. Dumb teacher mistake. I should have cropped the bottom of the picture! But, I left it on for you to say that I get reproductions everywhere I can, from commercial producers, and from calendars. And then I make slides from them. Generally, I don't like talking in the dark about images. It's too hard. We don't have eye contact. I can't read body language. I'm much more comfortable seeing who is looking and who is speaking. I really learn a lot from body language. I can tell when they are getting bored, and getting antsy. I can tell when I should move on. In the dark it's harder to tell that. But sometimes slides are good.

This is another one by Magritte. What I'll typically do is give each kid a reproduction. These are freshman and sophomores in a city school. Being able to use multiple examples of an artist's work is one advantage you have with reproductions that you don't have with originals. If a museum is lucky, they may have one or two Magittes. Well, I can bring in twenty-four Magittes. Twenty-four are a big advantage. When the kids don't know Magritte, it is a disadvantage to have only one or two. We can talk about one Magritte certainly, but we will have much more to say if we can see twenty. It gives them ownership. They hold it. It is sort of theirs. Or, I'll ask them to tell the rest of us what they see in their picture. Then I'll ask the group to tell us anything that person didn't mention. We'll proceed like that through maybe ten prints.

I usually tell them we might not get through all of the pictures. If we get a good discussion going, I will gladly exhaust the rest of the class time on that good discussion rather than try to cover all the pictures. We can cover more of them tomorrow. After we have looked at several Magittes individually, I will bring it to closure: "What do you see in common in the Magittes? What is a Magritte? What makes a Margitte a Magritte? Do you see recurring subject matter?" And then I'll push for the big question. Here each student is writing a paragraph that starts with "The World of Magritte..." So, now they are forced cognitively to go from the specifics of their picture to a bigger picture, to a world-view. "What is Magritte's world-view? What does one Magritte add to our knowledge of experience, our knowledge of the world?" If we just stick with one picture, we'll probably never get to that. The paragraphs always start with the "world of Magritte." We read the paragraphs, and it is amazing how the interpretations expand our understanding.

I do research about artists, but I don't go in and say, "This is Magritte. He was born in Belgium," and on and on and on, because I want the students to first decipher what they can. But sometimes I do interject information when I know it and when I think it is at the right point. I will always say, "Magritte is a very famous artist. A lot has been written about him. If you like

his work, please go to the library, check it out, and come back and tell us about it." But I do not start with a brief historical overview, or even a brief biography. I might say he was a white male living in the years of such and such and then go from there, but I'm not going to tell them much more. We look at dates. We look at titles. If it was made in 1945, I will say, "What was going on in 1945 in Europe? Or in 1943?" and a kid will say, "Oh, the war?" I'll say, "Yeah, what war? And does that have an impact on what you see here?" So it becomes interdisciplinary at what I think are appropriate points. I as the teacher am making those decisions.

[An audience member asked Barrett to explain if and how he includes three-dimensional art works in his lessons.]

It's a real disadvantage trying to get architecture and sculpture into a slide or a print. I would not bring a slide of Claes Oldenburg's *Stakehitch* at the Dallas Museum of Art into the class; forget it. I would choose another Oldenburg for this kind of interaction. I would tell them about the *Stakehitch*, "By the way, he also made this wonderful piece. It's huge." You can see it in a slide, but I'd give them the contextual information.

[An audience member asked Barrett to explain how he selects the works of art for each specific age group.]

I think you have to carefully choose the work you're going to use with which group. Selection for age and learning readiness is really important. If I go in with a group of artworks they can't relate to, I'm going to have a difficult time that day. Or if I go in without enough for them to talk about, I'm going to have a difficult time. I can gauge the intelligence of a class by how long they can engage in a discussion of a Magritte. Some classes are good for about three minutes, and then they are ready for the next picture. I learned that the hard way going in with what I thought were four really interesting pictures and they went right through them. So, then, I was really treading water to fill-up my time, because I was there for the whole class period.

I remember I had a class that was really the most unruly class ever. It was a fourth grade class, and the teacher had quit out of frustration. They had put another bad teacher in there. It really was the "Fourth Grade from Hell!" The worst part was I had a former student there who was student teaching, so I really wanted to show-off, and to show her all this stuff really works. But by the end of the class, I was yelling at the kids, "You are not allow to talk! I don't want you to talk! Just listen! I'll show you these pictures!" It was the worst, the most humiliating experience. So it does not always go well.

This school in Cleveland is a college prep-school. These are rich kids. They do give a lot of scholarships for less wealthy students. It's K-12 and art is pretty important to them. This is an English class, not an art class. I also had a period with a dance class. I broke them up into three groups. I let each of them select one Magritte. They privately studied the Magritte and choreographed a dance based on their Magritte. They danced their dance. We interpreted their dance and related it to Magritte. That was really wonderful. We went from language, to looking,

to dance, to language, to looking. All within an hour. They were not great dances, but the point was that we raised a lot of ideas they could develop later on.

I sometimes use advertisements for the same reason I use cereal boxes. Even in my college class, and from 6th grade up. I'll say, "List everything that is true about this ad, and list everything that is false." And we will take it from there. And when I go into the schools, I'll go to the libraries and ask if I may have some of their back magazine issues. I'll pass out an ad to each student, or sometimes they will work in groups of two or three. But I am using materials they already have in the schools. I want them to be critical of it. As an art educator, I want them to be critical of their popular culture as well as of the fine arts.

Levels of sophistication: The younger children were adept at reading symbols and shapes, the older kids were somewhat adept to reading some of the literal meanings, the denotation meanings. Leilani (Lattin Duke) was talking last night about how sophisticated Madison Avenue has become. And it has. And the kids have become sophisticated in the sense that they can absorb this stuff, but they are not very sophisticated in the critical sense. That is what I want the kids to have--some sort of defense mechanism, to be able to analyze these ads.

I was not preaching to the preschoolers and kindergartners that sweet cereals are bad, "What about nutrition, what about dental hygiene?" This was not a health-education class. My lesson as a teacher, my goal, my objective was, can these kids understand that the designer is trying to get them to do something based on the design?" The same way Picasso was getting them to think about something based on design. I'm not moralizing about the evils of sugar, that's not my job.

This example has to do with denotations and connotations. The denotations of these two shirts are very similar, they are both from Ohio State University. The connotations are very different. And I'll have kids go through all the denotations. I've done this with sixth graders. The denotations are: Ohio State University, a lamp, a leaf, a pyramid, an opened book, gold, black, yellow. These aren't even the school colors. These are connotations from a designer. "What are the connotations of the tie-dyed shirt? What are the connotations of the block letters versus those Times Roman letters? What are the connotations of the athletic-type letters?"

This leads us directly to a piece here at the Dallas Museum of Art, Barbara Kruger's. She draws images from popular culture. Her work provides excellent examples to use with denotation and connotation. It is a real nice bridge to go from advertising to Kruger and maybe back to advertising or to other artists like Jenny Holzer, who are using words in their art and who are socially critical. With this one, a naive viewer might think this is a cute image, **We Don't Need Another Hero**. It could even be a Hallmark card. The one at the Dallas Museum of Art says, "Are We Having Fun Yet?" We use that phrase all of the time. It's kind of funny. It's a one-liner. It seems like a nice image.

That's the disadvantage of coming to a museum and seeing one Kruger. Museum curators

assume that you know Kruger, and they have a very good Kruger here. They expect you to fill-in all the other Kruger's. If you are a naive viewer, you say, "Well, I don't get it, but they spent a lot of money on it." Let's say you start with some of these lighter Kruger's before you get to this one, **You Construct Intricate Rituals Which Allow You to Touch the Skin of Other Men**. This isn't so cute. It is not a one-liner. What does this one mean? And we go into denotation and connotation. "What does it mean 'you construct'? How do you 'construct'? Who is 'you'? What are 'intricate rituals'? Do you have any examples of intricate rituals?" These are the kinds of questions I've asked both college students and sixth graders.

At a 6th-grade home economics class at a junior high school, I asked, "What does it mean 'touch the skin of other men?'" They came up with typical examples like football players smacking each other on the butt, or high-fiving, or basketball players hugging, or body-slammng Michael Jordan after the big victory. We talk about these as rituals and then we talk about "Who is YOU?" Who does it refer to--to men, or to women, or both? And then we talk about, "Do women have intricate rituals? What are their rituals? What are female rituals in our culture in the '90s?"

This slide shows the advantage of using reproductions. Each student has her own Kruger. Instead of just using the one image the DMA has, I have twenty-four Barbara Krugers. And these reproductions are pretty good, because Barbara Kruger doesn't care about the surface quality that much. She literally makes T-shirts, matchbook covers, billboards. These are sixty-cent Barbara Krugers. They are not real works of art, but it doesn't really matter, this is her art.

So here, reproductions are very good to use. And here they certainly inform us about the one work this museum owns. This one says, "Your Comfort is My Silence." That is pretty nasty. "Who is 'Your,' what is your 'comfort'? How is my silence your comfort?" Pretty soon, they decipher that she is a feminist, that she has some issues. **We Have Orders Not to Move**. These kids are deciphering the images. They are using language and interpretive skills. And then I try to come to some conclusion about, "What is Barbara Kruger's world-view? How is her art different from other art? How is she a Post-Modernist?" We get into art theory. Her work might have something to do with media familiarity, because Kruger is using media. It might have to do with the older generation of artists not wanting to. Someone is being blamed here. "Who is being blamed?" The teenagers probably don't feel blamed. When I see this, **You Have Received Orders Not to Move**, I think, "Have I ever put a woman in that position? Have I as a man done bad things to the other gender?" These are very confrontational images and kids might not have that same kind of feelings. The kids might feel more like the victim than the enemy. This stuff doesn't look like art. "What's that Barbara Kruger stuff doing in an art museum?" It doesn't look like it should look. It isn't very pretty. Students can discuss these issues intelligently.

I use William Wegman a lot, because he is accessible, both with kindergartners and with critics who write long articles about him in Artforum and Art in America. I do use critics to inform whether I am on base or not. If we are talking about Wegman and coming up with conclusions and interpretations that no other critic has ever come up with, I think "Uh-oh, something is

wrong. I have to ask, "Do I misunderstand Wegman? Am I teaching him in a shallow way?" But in most cases, the kids are saying very closely with different language what the critics are saying. It's my way of assessing my reaching. It is important.

"Right and wrong" are too strong. There is a general consensus about Wegman's work. Some of the interpretations, I don't agree with. Like someone has said Wegman is a very angry artist. Well, I don't think so. I'll give it a try, I'll read the critic, and then I'll broach it with the class, "One critic said this, do you agree/disagree, why?" So, I bring written criticism, or at least my capsulation of criticism. These are all stills. They are Polaroids. These are called **Faye Raye**, **Elephant**, and **Dusted**.

With **Dusted** students talk about drug abuse: cocaine, snow. We then get into social issues, or emotional issues. "Do you ever feel dumped-on? Are these pictures about animals, people, or both?"

This one is called **Sphynx**. Here we get into art history. Those who know about the Sphynx tell us. We make a comparison between Wegman's **Sphynx** and the Egyptian Sphynx. For those who don't know, I'll tell them a little bit, ask what they know, and again, I'll suggest they go to the library. I want to keep reinforcing you can't just make up anything about art. There are historians who study this, they know more about this than us. I feel free to tell them, "I don't know." But, we can read and find out.

This image is **Dressed for Ball**. I had a wonderful interpretation of this from 4th-grade girls. "It has a lot of tension. This is a hunting dog, she wants to grab the ball, but she can't, because she has to sit there." They took it farther and said, "It's like when my older sister gets dressed to go to the prom; she's worried about how she looks and how she's dressed and how she acts; she never has any fun." I think that is a profound interpretation for a 4th-grader. I've had it reflected in a more sophisticated language by other, older student critics.

This one is called **Duplex**. With it we talk about gender, race, and class. They typically consider the white dog to be a female dog, but we don't know. "It looks upper-class. It has the upper-class position. The dog on the bottom of the wooden box is the lower class. It's of color, it's not white." So we get into a lot of really good social and gender issues with this funny image. We do talk about Wegman's use of humor. And we talk about art that is about dogs and people, and it becomes pretty apparent this work is about people.

The work **The Green House** gets back to that question earlier about sculpture, installation. This is an image by Sandy Skoglund. It's a good image to use because she does make photographs but the photographs are made from life-sized installations. Sometimes she exhibits the installations. Sometimes she exhibits the photographs. Sometimes she exhibits both. The really interesting aesthetic questions, philosophy questions, are "What's the real art?" She is selling some of these animals. I have a friend who bought one. Has he bought a souvenir or a work of art? These are interesting philosophy questions.

On this one, I've asked learners to pick a person, animal, or object and to explain the situation from that point of view using the first person singular. I'll show you a few. This one is called **Radioactive Cats**. I do give the title and the date as part of the artwork. This is called **Revenge of the Goldfish**. This is called **Fox Games**, and this is called **The Green House**. I'll read you a paragraph from **Revenge of the Goldfish** that a middle school teacher wrote. It's interesting to me that when I go into a classroom, that teachers get as involved as the kids do. I love it when they do. This is what this middle school teacher wrote. She has assumed the voice of one of the fishes:

"I am very lively, quick, agile, beautiful in my own world. I have needs that you humans do not provide for. Your interpretation of what is best for me is shallow, shallow. How ironic. My life expectancy is often cut short because you assume that I am somewhat like you--greedy. Greed that motivates you to overfeed me and take more space than you need, leaving me in the most miserable condition and very often dead. You leave me gasping while you sleep.

I'll read you one more that a fourth-grader wrote about **The Green House**:

"I just finished clipping the walls and sweeping up the clippings. Now I have to feed the nineteen blue dogs and eight green dogs. No, I've already done that. How about I mow the carpet? No, I've done that. I got it! I'll clip the lamps. No, I've already done that. I'll clip the picture frames. No, I've already done that. I think I'll just stay where I am and go to sleep. Darn that dog fur!"

Now that is funny, and it's humorous, and it's very creative writing, but it is also very insightful and it's a really good interpretation of Skoglund. Skoglund is obsessive in her work. It takes her six months to build one of these environments. That is carefully clipped grass. The fourth-grade student picked up on that. In a class, another student would write about the purple dog and his dilemma. Someone else would write about the room from the point of view of the lampshade. When you get about twenty different paragraphs about one work of art, you get a lot of good interpretations.

Here's another example of my giving kids alternate interpretations on **Radioactive Cats**. There are two major ways to interpret this in terms of the professional literature: (1) the neglect of old people in America, (2) concern over the nuclear environment. They are different. They are competing interpretations. They are not conflicting, they are competing. Sometimes, I'll offer these two interpretations and I'll ask, "Which do you side with?" I'll give them two opposing critical views, both are plausible, and let them decipher what the critic is saying, what evidence does the critic bring to it. "Do you agree or disagree?" "Why?" We are doing critical thinking in the generic sense as well as art criticism.

I'll show you one final project. This is a high school in a small Appalachian town outside of Athens, Ohio. There are 234 students in the school. This is a photography class. They invited me to come work with them in an afternoon. There were 12 photography students, and I asked if

the art teacher would get 12 English students to join the class. I asked everyone to pick their favorite photograph, but one that was not their own. Here they are sitting in a circle and the prints are on the board, so we can see what they are talking about. Then I had each student talk about his or her photograph and why it was their favorite. We learned a lot. We got to see the photograph through their eyes. The assignment was to write a paragraph about your favorite photograph for someone who is not here in the room.

This girl is the photographer and this boy wrote a paragraph about her photograph. And that's how the session went. The paragraphs are quite insightful, and I'd read them if I had more time. The boy who made the photograph communicated with another girl. She wrote a whole paragraph seriously about his work. So we can go from writing about Margritte to writing about art that students make. We can turn studio critics into less about how to make a photograph, into "Hey, this is an expression. You made something valuable." It's so valuable, someone else can understand it. She can write about it. The whole class is interested in hearing what she wrote about what you made. We are treating studio critiques as criticism. We're not making divisions between art making and art criticism, we are unifying the curriculum.

Any general questions, comments?

[An audience member asked Barrett to explain if and how he discusses art production with his students.]

We do talk about medium. In the paragraph about the photographs, they are very "photographic" paragraphs: talking about light and shadow, light and dark, focus, lack of focus. With the Picasso, we talked about the thickness of the paint and how he applied it slowly, thickly. So we do talk about medium. With style, I don't refer to it as "style," because I think style can become shallow. I think style is a profound concept. I would rather talk about world-views, "What is Magritte's world-view? How do you know?" Answering these questions get at recurring images, recurring devices, color schemes. We get at all that stuff, but it's not in isolation, but "What is Magritte giving us about the world, what's his world-view?" That's how I get at those things, rather than specifically what is Magritte's style as opposed to Chagall's style. I ask, "How does Chagall present his vision of the world? How is it different from Magritte's?" We get at the learning objectives where I'm sure the kids are interpreting works of art.

By the way, we've talked for a long time now about criticism, and I've never mentioned the words "evaluation" or "judgement." I think the most important thing about criticism is interpretation. Once you thoroughly interpret Skoglund, Magritte, or Chagall, you know that they are good artists. We could go on and say why they are good artists but I don't usually find the need to. I don't like to ask 5th-graders or 6th-graders or sophomores in high school, "Is Skoglund a good artist?" Because they might say, "No, she's not very good, she could have done this or that," and I don't want to hear it. I want them to deal with what she has done. My implication is "Wow! She's a really good artist. We just spent an hour investigating her work."

By the way, for the Skoglund images, there's a whole lot of stuff you can download from the ArtsEdNet on the computer at the Getty's education website: (<http://www.artednet.getty.edu/>). This is true museum-university-Getty collaboration. Ohio State with Getty money, invited

Skoglund to come to the university to work with fifty teachers. We had teacher-educators such as Sydney Walker and me from Ohio State, Sally McRorie from Florida State, and Elizabeth Garber from the University of Arizona. For a whole week, we studied Skoglund's work. We made an installation with Skoglund. We heard the critic. We wrote about it. We planned how we would teach Skoglund. "What's important to teach about Skoglund? What's trivial?" Skoglund did a major installation at the Columbus Museum of Art. We went there, photographed her, videotaped her, and all that stuff is on the World Wide Web for you. That's really a nice example of a collaboration since that is the theme of this conference.

[An audience member asked Barrett to explain how he approaches having his students write about art.]

Sometimes, I'll leave the task to the English teacher or to the classroom teacher. Sometimes I'll say, I am an artist, I am an art teacher, I don't have time to have your kids write, because they take a long time to write. Could I get you interested in having them write about Magritte in your writing time? And they'll say, "Sure, we've been looking for writing ideas." A second point about that is, I don't like "creative writing" about art. I want interpretive writing in a creative way. I don't want them making up just any old thing about Skoglund, Magritte, or Chagall. I want them to write in a way that they understand Skoglund better. In this way, they are not sacrificing the artwork for creative writing. I want them to write creatively, but more importantly, interpretively, and informatively.

I think that classrooms are communities of learners, and I think if you tell us something about Skoglund, and you tell us something different, you are informing each other and all of us. We're acting as a community. I think her insight is going to benefit me and it's going to benefit you. Then when we write individually and read it back to the whole group, we can get that community of learners farther along.

[An audience member asked Barrett to explain how he assesses student work both individually and as a group.]

If you're asking for ways to accurately assess how they are learning individually versus what they learn in a group, it's not something I'm dealing with, but it would be a good research question. Those individual pieces of writing come out of a group discussion. The students usually write at the end, not at the beginning. I'm not having to deal with these particulars of assessment that you have to do, but that's a good question.

I think the model that I'm trying to teach is that as learners we can become independent of the teacher, we are a community of independent learners. Docents should show you how to look at artworks and then you can come back without the docents and enjoy other artworks the docent hasn't shown you. I'm trying to get independent learners, so that they are independent of me, the teacher. So they can come to a museum and enjoy it themselves without having to be told this is what the artist meant. That's not to be anti-intellectual. There are catalogs of shows, things to read, docents to listen to, but I am working towards independent learning.

Thank you. You have been very patient.

In the Galleries with Terry Barrett

Professor Barrett divided the participants into small groups and assigned each group a work of contemporary art to consider. He offered only two prompts to guide the participants' looking: 1.) What do you see? and 2.) What do you think it means?

As the group examined the first work, Sean Scully's *Company*, Barrett asked, "Are there visual clues, or evidence which leads to a human, or world view?" The participants identified the formal elements in the work of art. They noted that as they named the colors in the piece, they began to see them as skin colors, which led the group to consider shared life experiences. They looked for commonalities. They even used the phrase, "more than skin deep" to describe the work of art. As they presented the piece to the whole group, they deconstructed the location, size, and scale of each of its parts, noting the white, brown, red, yellow, and black sections. When they offered their interpretation to the whole group, they found that not everyone shared their view. One educator added that he is familiar with the artist's whole body of work, and that this is a formalist work about color and shape. Barrett then suggested that the difference between the participants' interpretation and that of the art world is important to consider. For the participants, the formal elements had led them to social and personal ideas. Barrett suggested that the participants investigate and think about the piece more, while asking, "How do we gain closure now?"

Again Barrett asked, "What do you see? The painting tells you how to interpret it." He went on to add, eventually when we understand the sophisticated nature of the elements and principles, our intellectual and emotional responses are woven and balanced. Barrett noted that if the work of art is just about what it is, why did a more personal experience, a connection occur? He added, "Judgement influences interpretation." He then asked, "How important is the title in directing your interpretation, or more, your misinterpretation?" Barrett concluded the discussion of the piece by saying, "We want to make sense on a human level of everything. We want to know what in this work is about me."

In the next gallery the participants examined Jackie Windsor's work, *Burnt Paper Piece*, made of paper and hydrostone. Barrett asked, "Is it art about art?" The large cube had black burn marks, smoke damage, charring, and ash on its surface. The four holes in the sides were there as if for seeing through the piece. The participants who had worked with this piece discussed the act of ritual. They discussed issues of man-made objects versus natural ones, and natural shapes versus geometric. The group members added the techniques keep you looking, questioning, while pushing you back. In fact, they added the process is a mystery. Outside, the piece is controlled, inside it is intriguing. They concluded that there is a constant contrast. Other participants asked if they were not perhaps being overly intellectual about the piece. In fact, one participant felt the group had really over-interpreted the work. Barrett reminded the conference participants that interpretation is not story telling, but educated looking. While the rituals have a social function and connection, he asked, "Is there a social meaning in this piece?"

A member of the larger group noted that the Dallas Museum of Art provides minimal information about the contemporary art pieces. She acknowledged that the interpretations of critics might constrain discussions about meaning. For this conference activity, Barrett had set

up the interpretation with a lengthy dialogue. What about the visitors who are not involved in a guided activity? A member of the DMA staff added, "A good label should open a discussion up, not contain it." She noted that there had been a long debate at the DMA over labels. She added that the DMA curators feel they set up dialogues by the way in which they arrange the pieces of art in the room.

In the last gallery, participants explored Chris Burden's *All the Submarines of the United States Navy*. The installation piece includes hundreds of miniature submarine ships suspended from the ceiling by monofilament. The didactics explain how each ship represents a submarine in the U.S. Naval Fleet. Barrett asked the participants, "What do you see?"

The participants replied:

- an unplanned planning
- categorized names and numbers on the wall
- president, states, cities, fish
- a sequence of production
- an energy force, all in one direction
- aggression in certain directions
- a school of fish, and a school of subs
- shadows on the floor and on the wall and the visitors are a part of the shadow making
- military attitudes and anticipation
- a grid on the floor, tape on the floor
- beauty and fear
- delicate lines
- order and disruption
- a human element as you read the book with the explanation
- life lost

One participant asked, "Is this a propaganda piece? Is it about anti-war or anti-politics?" Barrett replied, "What is it for, what is it against?" He went on to ask, "How does this change in an art museum versus if it were seen at the Smithsonian Institution's military history museum?" When you see toy soldiers or toy ships in a bathtub, there is a lack of difference. There is a sameness. But here, the toy ships have their own story. Contemporary art allows knowledge of our time. We infer meaning based on our lives today. With historical works of art, we need more information. A member of the NCAMSC advisory committee added, "Docents and educators need a body of knowledge to create comfort levels. Visitors want instant access to more information." Another member of the group replied, "We must also respect a lack of information, a lack of closure in contemporary works of art. These pieces are still changing, still evolving in meaning."

Barrett noted we gain more understanding working together to interpret works of art than in traditional lecture tour formats. As a result, visitors feel more comfortable coming back to the museum without a docent, and they will be less reliant on others and more on themselves. They

will read more for themselves. One member of the group asked, "Should we not prepare students for museum visits?" Barrett replied, "I am pro-context, but it is a matter of HOW you provide it. A museum docent could be a 'navigator' through this kind of personal looking." She then asked, "Based on the preparation questions Barrett provided, should we change teaching packets to not be as informational?" A university professor argued, "Free association techniques are not true to the art." While museums strive to be a place for visitors to connect with everyday life, she insisted that context, information, and facts are important. She added, "There are right and wrong answers in art." Barrett concluded by saying, "We need to teach children to think by using art in thinking exercises."