

We're very pleased to be able to devote this entire section of **Afterimage** to a report on the second Conference on Photographic Criticism, organized by A.D. Coleman and held at the Visual Studies Workshop, April 22-24, 1977.

## Photographic criticism in an

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Criticism is informed discourse about art for the purpose of increased understanding and appreciation of art. When critics do criticism they do so to inform their audiences about art. When students engage in the critical process they primarily inform themselves, and secondarily their peers, about art, and also gain increased knowledge about themselves, an important effect of the educational process. This paper will expand and clarify the above definition of criticism and give reasons for the desirability of teaching criticism to photography students in an effort equal to that now being exerted in teaching the making of photographs.

When students choose an area of concentration within their general education they are seeking to increase their expertise in that area. Within the chosen field the students develop an ability to perceive complex aspects of problems and situations. As the students gain more experience, their perceptual abilities increase, their points of view broaden, and they develop expanded frames of reference. The experience which leads to this expansion determines not only how and what they see, but their ability to relate what they see to a larger context. As a result, the students acquire perceptual insight; they see not only forms and the relationships of forms, but also the meaning implicit in those relationships. Criticism is an excellent means of doing this.

Criticism is discourse about art, or orderly communication of thought in speech or writing. While criticism is a process which primarily serves to enhance understanding and appreciation about art, it can also strengthen the students' abilities of perception, intel-

lectualization, and communication both in responding to photographs and in making them. For classroom purposes discourse will most often take the form of talk about photographs with a group of peers and a teacher. This proposed talk would ideally be done more often by the student-critics rather than the teacher-critic since it is the students we are interested in educating to the critical process, and learning through doing, particularly in the case of talking, seems an appropriate and trustworthy method. The teacher's role is seen primarily as initiator and facilitator, and when appropriate, as meta-critic. While the authors work primarily with college or adult groups, other art educators working in the areas of response to art have successfully engaged even young children in critical discourse of a substantive nature.

Theoreticians of criticism, particularly Morris Weitz, have shown that critical discourse involves some or all of these procedures: description, explanation, evaluation, and theory. It is noted that these procedures may not be immediately apparent in cursory reading of published photographic, dramatic, film, or other critical reviews, and that stylistic considerations of practicing critics mask these basic procedures in a variety of literate ways. However, in learning about and practicing the procedures of description, explanation, evaluation, and theory, photography students possess categories and a structure which they can use to qualitatively investigate their work and the work of others and intelligently talk to others about their insights.

Description is a data gathering procedure: listing facts, pointing out what is given, and determining all there is to consider about a chosen photograph. Description may also include the identification of relevant elements external to the photograph such as facts about the artist, the relation of the photograph to other works, facts about the objects or persons in the photograph, or in general, facts about the context or causal environment of the photograph. Descriptive information of an historical nature about Eastern European nomadic peoples, for instance, might be

## educational context

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beneficial in criticizing Joseph Koudelka's *Gypsies*.

While description is a simple information gathering procedure, it is an important one because it enables students to identify and articulate the visual and expressive aspects of photographs, prolongs aesthetic attention with pictures, informs about the complexity of the image, and builds a basis for explanation or interpretation. Students with different backgrounds might beneficially attend more carefully to different areas of description as a means of broadening their awareness. Photography students with a non-art academic background tend to be oblivious to the visual aspects of a photograph, while art-trained students tend to ignore expressive qualities and overly attend to its formal qualities.

Explanation involves the students in formulating a claim, based on descriptive evidence, about what is central, significant, or most important in the photograph. Explanation is more widely referred to as interpretation. The term interpretation, however, is often taken by students to mean arbitrary and subjective associations, all equally valid. The term also triggers the objection of "reading into," or more detrimentally, of "reading too much into." Therefore it is important to stress that explanation is neither random association nor "reading too much into," but rather is the formation of an hypothesis about the photograph which is based on and accounts for verifiable information contained in the photograph or from its contextual environment. It involves the student in building a case for an interpretation with evidence that can be pointed out in the photograph or from external data related to the photograph. When the explanation does not account for significant elements of the photograph it is unsatisfactory, and ought to be challenged with counter-claims or more adequate interpretations from others in the group.

Faced with two or three varied interpretations, student critics will usually accept all three as viable, no matter how diverse the interpretations may be. It is a prevalent "to each his own" attitude that is detrimental to critical thinking. While it is important to point out

that explanation is an open-ended procedure, in that no explanation will be definitive and absolute, it is equally important to stress that some explanations are considerably more reasonable than others. The student may choose to explain the photograph in terms of style, form, subject matter, cultural context, information about the artist, or from some other viewpoint. A good explanation would have identified the approach which yields greater understanding about the photograph than others, and which accounts for the significant elements in the photograph.

If the students involved in the critical process realize that on the one hand no explanation past or future is going to definitively close the issue by arriving at one explanation, and on the other hand that all explanations are not equally meritorious or adequate, they are freed to explore, argue, and counter-argue. This procedure is an important means of attending to photographic meaning. The attempt to interpret builds skills of information assimilation and synthesis, and encourages the public expression of ideas about photographs.

Describing and interpreting the expressive aspects of artworks means that the students describe and interpret those facets of the piece to which they attribute feeling and meaning. This procedure builds skill and experience in discovering how relationships between visual forms construct meaning. The ability to recognize both unity of form and meaning in visual statements contributes to increased perceptual insight. This increased perceptual insight affects the students' work in that they become more aware of their individual frames of reference, what is personally significant to them, and how best to express it visually.

Photography students, along with students of other visual arts, experience the problems of mastering both technical and perceptual skills. Photography, because of its technical process, represents a different consideration. The photographer must recognize his visual statement instantaneously. He must see visual forms, their interactions, and how those interactions provide meaning. Unlike the painter who perceives emerging form as he paints, the photographer must acquire the ability to perceive those qualities as they appear in a unified instant. It is not only the interaction of visual forms which is perceived, but the implications of those interactions.

A mere judgment does not constitute criticism. Nor does a statement of personal preference constitute criticism. Criticism often, but not always, includes the procedure of evaluation or judgment. Evaluation consists of praising or condemning a photograph, with the use of clearly stated criteria and reasons for the merits and applicability of the criteria employed. The

procedure of evaluation, in its fullest sense, as in explanation, involves argument and invites disagreement, since it, too, is an open-ended procedure yielding more adequate or less adequate conclusions rather than definitive and absolute conclusions. This sense of evaluation liberates students from narrowly equating the term criticism with judgment.

The procedure of evaluation can be used to encourage students to make independent judgments about artworks and to understand the criteria for those judgments. The emphasis here is on independence. Individuals tend to make judgments, offer opinions, express that which is of value to them, as well as that which is not. The students are of course influenced by the artist's judgments, the teacher's judgments, parental judgments about their early environment and experiences, and the judgments of their peers. However, assimilation and synthesis of all these influences—the processing of information—is uniquely the individual's, and results not only in their own judgments but provides a basis for an understanding of their criteria. When individuals evaluate they do so from some framework or context. This framework can be seen as a question, the thrust of which determines the nature of the evaluative statement. When individuals understand their personal framework or question, they understand a great deal about themselves. The importance here is in identifying and understanding one's values, both personal and aesthetic, which formulate one's individual and personal criteria.

Talk about criteria often leads the discussion into the realm of theory where students may attempt to formulate definitions of art or photography. In Weitz's notion of criticism these attempts to define the indefinable are logically illegitimate, but are valuable in increasing understanding about what is central to the medium.

The teacher, rather than determine values for the students, facilitates the learning process whereby the students better understand their own values, beliefs, and attitudes, and how these affect their actions. The students' knowledgeability about where they are coming from enables them to build confidence regarding their insights into art, their own and that of others. Because they become aware of and are confident in their own criteria, they can begin to distinguish and weigh their personal criteria against other criteria. Eventually, through practicing the evaluative procedure, the students will better understand what they individually want to express photographically, will have a better grasp on how others respond to their imagery, and will gain an increased sense of worth about their ability to articulate their values in words and images.

Making a good print is a skill which, once learned, should simply be subsumed into the students' data bank under the category "how to make a technically adequate photograph." It does not need to be belabored when talking about the artistic statement. Some talk is simply irrelevant and extraneous to what is more important in the photograph. To encourage such talk is to continually misdirect the students' concentration to irrelevant aspects of their work. The students leave their photographic education knowing only that the photographic community values print quality; that print quality is the most important aspect of photography; that if their technique is good, their photographs are good; and that print quality is the most appropriate criterion for judging the artistic merits of photographs.

In summation, criticism provides a process for engaging students in qualitative thought and talk about photography leading to a greater understanding of photography, the creative process they are engaged in, and aids them in clarifying their personal aesthetic criteria.

Thought and talk about criteria at this level will hopefully raise more substantive concerns than print quality, a topic that currently consumes too much time in classroom talk about photographs. Two aspects of the photographic process, as in other artistic media, are technical vocabulary and mechanics. These facets are taught so that students can competently make pictures using light sensitive materials. Photography as a medium is more intricate than painting or drawing, as is lithography or other processes which necessitate artists using elaborate equipment in the execution of their statements. An inherent danger in these media is that students may use the technical aspects of their art making as significant or sole criteria for evaluating their work. Too often in photography the print quality of a photograph becomes more important than its intended statement.

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## Discussion

**A.D. Coleman:** I'd like to welcome you all to the second Conference on Photographic Criticism....I would like to indicate to you some things that I feel about the group of papers we're considering this morning, the ones which for better or worse I put under the category of hermeneutically-oriented.

I see in them a great concern with forging a vocabulary for talking about photographs. I see a great deal of interest in relationships between photography and language, or in considering photography as language, without any of us, including myself, having much background in the subject of language, so that I would classify most of what was written as half-baked, and that would include most of my own references to photography as language in my own writing. I see the lack of any coherent methodology in talking about color photography.

I see a dreadful lack of humor in almost all of our writing, and that raises a question for me of how can we at the same time enrich or deepen and make more encompassing the critical activity that we're doing and keep that from becoming less and less accessible except to an increasingly narrowing audience. This is not to suggest that writing needs to be trivialized, but that somehow at the same time as we are trying to be much more cogent in the ways that we discuss photo-

graphs, we have to find ways of making that available to people who don't have extensive training in the medium or in critical attitudes toward the medium. And another question: how often are we as critics writing what I have referred to elsewhere as speculative fiction, in the sense that there is no actual referent for the viewer or the reader of the criticism in terms of being able to approach the work? So I would throw those out as questions that have been raised for me by this group of papers, and I would like to throw the discussion open now to the floor...

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**Barrett:** This is a paper on photographic criticism in an educational context. Basically we're defining criticism as talk about art, but it needs to be informed talk. We make a distinction between professional critics, who are writing for an audience, and student critics, and we're saying that student critics primarily inform each other rather than a massive audience. Students certainly can write, but more often they'll talk about images that they've done or that other professional photographers have done. We're looking at theoreticians of criticism, especially Morris Weitz in his book **Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism**.

Theoreticians generally agree that criticism contains some or all of the following: description, explanation, evaluation, and theory. Description is basically a data-gathering process; explanation is hypothetical and needs to be based on visual information in the photo-

A panel discussion ensues: the complete transcript is in Afterimage, Vol. 5, Nos. 1 & 2. A follow-up article on the conference was published in the following issue, Vol. 6, No. 3, September 1977, by A. D. Coleman, the conference organizer.