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Fewer Pinch Pots and More Talk:  
Art Criticism, Schools, and the Future

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While I am writing this essay, the people of Cincinnati, Ohio, are buzzing about the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe in his exhibition *The Perfect Moment* hanging in its Contemporary Arts Center. The center and its director have been indicted by a grand jury on obscenity charges--two counts of pandering pornography. Seven photographs are at issue in the indictments.

About some of these and similar images, Hilton Kramer (1989) wrote in a Sunday edition of the *New York Times*: "I cannot bring myself to describe these pictures in all their gruesome particularities, and it is doubtful that this newspaper would agree to publish such a description even if I could bring myself to write one" (p. 1). Grace Glueck (1989), another critic for the *New York Times*, however, did describe them: "The Mapplethorpe show is a retrospective of the artist's work that contains images depicting homosexual and heterosexual erotic acts and explicit sadomasochistic practices in which black and white, naked or leather clad men and women assume erotic poses. Along with these photographs are fashionable portraits of the rich and trendy, elegant floral arrangements and naked children" (p. 9).

When the sheriff's deputies and Cincinnati police shut down the center for ninety minutes to videotape the exhibition for evidence, thousands of angry protesters yelled, "Fascists!" and "Gestapo go home!" Others talked of "faggots" and "queers" on radio call-in talk shows about the controversy, and a Cincinnati *sports* announcer, on the air during his call-in sports show, confidently condemned Mapplethorpe's art.

Meanwhile, 100 miles north of Cincinnati in the gallery district of Columbus, Ohio, vandals broke into a hair salon where contemporary local art is shown. Fifteen dollars were stolen from a jar for donations to the Columbus AIDS Task Force, and the vandals painted over genitalia of nude women depicted in the paintings hanging on the gallery walls.

The work of Mapplethorpe is controversial. When Glueck describes Mapplethorpe's work, she neglects to mention his photographs of a man urinating into another's mouth, a close-up of a fist and forearm penetrating a rectum, a close-up of mutilated male genitals, and a self-portrait with a bull whip protruding from the artist's rectum. Critics (e.g., Morgan, 1987) who defend the work admit to having difficulties with some of it: "Harder to tolerate is the easy passage, say, from flowers to people. We accept that flowers are placed in pots, but what are we to make of an event such as the pose of a nude male on a pedestal, like an object?" Morgan sees problematic power issues of master and slave emerging from the procession of young men, often black, posed as objects, serving the purposes of others in Mapplethorpe's photographs.

Veronica Vera (1989), an artist who poses as a model in one of Mapplethorpe's

photographs that depicts oral sex with a man, argues a position in direct contradiction to Kramer's not allowing himself to even describe Mapplethorpe's photographs. She asserts that the photographs debunk the whole idea of pornography--"helping society to get rid of that self-hating concept that ghettoizes sex, that implies that some parts of our sexuality are too unspeakable to mention, too private to be public" (p. 3). These remarks by Kramer, Glueck, Morgan, and Vera are opposed, but they are informed and above the name calling of "Gestapo" and "faggots" occurring in Cincinnati.

Cincinnati has had art instruction in its schools since 1842, more than thirty years prior to Walter Smith's introduction of art into the Boston schools (Wygant, 1983; Efland, 1990). Cincinnati is the home city of Laura Chapman, one of the finest and most influential art educators. The city is also in the state where Manuel Barkan proposed, more than twenty-five years ago, that the predominance of studio activities in art instruction was a problem that should be resolved by the teaching of art criticism and art history within art instruction (Efland, 1990).

This essay is a consideration of what might happen in the future if we were now to seriously and consistently introduce art criticism in the curriculum with a commitment equal to that of our commitment to teaching the making of art. I am suggesting that if the children of Cincinnati had been making fewer pinch pots, potato prints, and color wheels during the last 150 years of art instruction, and had been talking more frequently about the art of their own times, they would have been far better prepared to intelligently discuss the exhibition, and probably would have accepted it as an opportunity for personal and community growth, regardless of their ultimate stances on whether it is good art or not, whether it is moral or immoral. I doubt that as adults they would be trying to censor Mapplethorpe's art, as many are currently doing.

I believe the teaching of art criticism can aid in the development of a community of people tolerant of multiple understandings of the world, able to hold and cherish diverse beliefs, be willing to disagree, and strongly, but with informed discourse and without physical and psychological violence to one another. This is a lofty ideal, perhaps one that places too much responsibility on schools to solve communities' problems. Nevertheless, this special issue of the journal is speculative, and this essay is optimistic.

## II

Several educators in the field have been advocating the inclusion of criticism since around the time of the Penn State Conference in 1966 (Efland, 1990). This curricular recommendation is now receiving renewed impetus from advocates of discipline based art curriculum (e.g., Clark, Day, & Greer, 1987) and by the National Art Education Association in the United States (e.g., Cromer, 1990). Several strategies for engaging children in art criticism have been available for several years (e.g., Chapman, 1978, Feldman, 1987,) and more come forth frequently (e.g., Anderson, 1988, Feinstein, 1989). Critical approaches in use in education are critically scrutinized from within the field (e.g. Geahigan, 1983, Hamblen, 1986) in constructive manners. In short, there is much curricular material on criticism in place already; it is being improved and more is being developed (e.g., Smith & Levi, in press; Blandy & Congdon, in press; Barrett, in press).

Some conceptions of criticism practiced and advocated in art education, however, are inadequate for meeting the challenges of much of the art made today. The art of tomorrow is unknown, but there is already a gap between school art criticism and professional criticism and the art that it criticizes, that gap will likely widen unless we effect change.

Many of our current art teachers have learned criticism by engaging in critical sessions with their painting and sculpture professors, usually called "critiques," and often transfer these methods to their elementary and secondary art classrooms (Barrett, 1988). Critiques, however, are usually directed at makers of art rather than at art's viewers, and usually serve as strategies for teaching students how to make better art. They are highly evaluative rather than interpretive, frequently attending to considerations of form and technique rather than meaning. When they are interpretive, interpretations are often based on the critically flawed method of intentionalism, relying on the professor's intent in making the art assignment, or on the student's intent in creating the piece. The critiques are often dominated by the professor. Participation in such a limited form of criticism may help students to learn how to improve their paintings and sculptures, but will not necessarily prepare them to engage in insightful dialogue about challenging contemporary art such as that made by Mapplethorpe.

Art teachers also ask students to tell about their art work, and consider this talk about art to be art criticism. Asking Maria to hold up her tempera painting and tell her fellow fourth graders about it may have some educative benefits, but this form of talk from the point of view of the maker rather than the viewer reinforces dependence on the artist rather than viewers' understanding of art. Unfortunately some teachers accept this method as criticism.

Certain forms of "aesthetic criticism" are not much help in considering art by artists like Mapplethorpe. Ralph Smith (1989), for example, drawing especially upon the philosophy of Monroe Beardsley, argues for valuing art that is grounded in aesthetic concerns, rather than artworks made from "moral/social interests which are praised by critics for aesthetically irrelevant reasons" (p. 68). But it is precisely moral and social issues which Mapplethorpe's works raise: His work is universally praised for its stunning graphic elegance, its aesthetic form, but certainly it is not and cannot be accepted or rejected on formal grounds alone.

Harry Broudy's (1986) "Aesthetic Scanning" is a form of school art criticism also based in Modernism and promoted and taught to teachers by some Getty-sponsored institutes for furthering Discipline Based Art Education and to participants in the National Diffusion Network for DBAE. Scanning is steeped in formalism, tends to value form over subject, is ahistorical, and anti-contextual. It directs viewers to attend closely to the object itself and not to the social milieu from which it emerged and with which it interacts. To "scan" a photograph from Mapplethorpe's "X Portfolio" of a close-up of a fist and forearm penetrating a rectum for its sensory properties (line, shape, color, etc.), and formal properties (organic unity, theme and variation, repetition, etc.) is inapt.

Certainly this Mapplethorpe example is extreme, but the extremeness of this art is one of its essential characteristics. Much other important art of our times resists exclusively *aesthetic* consideration. Barbara Kruger's art comes to mind. *Untitled*, 1989, is a typical artwork by Kruger. It is an appropriated image of a woman's face split down the middle, one half printed in the positive, the other in the negative, with bold type

across it declaring "Your body is a battleground." In a subsequent work based on this image, Kruger made some of its meaning explicit when turning it into a poster by adding information about the April 9, 1989, march on Washington, D.C., to support legal abortion, birth control, and women's rights. Certainly its form is important, but an exclusively formal consideration of any of her works would be inadequate for their understanding and appreciation.

Cindy Sherman's traveling retrospective exhibition of 1987 provides several other examples that are impenetrable by formal, aesthetic considerations alone. Much of the work is photographs of herself, self-portraits, but she titles a series made between 1977 and 1980 "Untitled Film Stills." In them she pictures herself as a woman in a wide variety of guises from hitchhiker to housewife. These pictures look like stills from old movies. In 1981 she did a series of "centerfolds" for which she posed clothed and in the manner of soft-porn magazine photographs. The content of these pictures is multiple: Cindy Sherman, Cindy Sherman in disguise, film stills and magazine pictures of stock characters in popular media, the portrayal of women, and especially, according to critic Eleanor Heartney (1987), "the cultural construction of femininity" (p. 18). If one attended only to their aesthetic characteristics, one could not determine that they are several portraits of the artist in disguise, nor what they refer to, nor the power of their meaning. Adequate interpretations and appreciations of the artworks of Sherman and Kruger and many other artists working today are dependent on familiarity with feminist theory and postmodernist art practices, and they cannot be deciphered on the basis of their surface properties.

Work that in the past would have been attended to on the basis of aesthetic criteria is being tested by contemporary critics on grounds other than aesthetic. Richard Avedon's photography is widely admired for its aesthetic form--"an exhilarating pursuit of the perfect photographic style" (Davis, 1985, p. 82). But the aesthetic satisfaction it yields is not, for several critics, sufficient grounds for acceptance. Although she admires Avedon's "flawless craftsmanship," critic Susan Weiley argues that Avedon "Avedonizes" those he photographs. She finds his exhibition *In the American West* "condescending to his subjects (one wants to say victims)," and "frankly arrogant" in its "exploitation" of them (p. 89). Richard Bolton (1987) compares Avedon's approach to police photography--"the format itself communicates guilt"--and also argues strenuously that Avedon exploits his *American West* subjects: "Was it clearly explained to these people that the art system and the economic system would place more value upon their image than upon their life? Was it clearly explained to them that their image would sell for more than some of them earn in a year, or in two? Were they told that, had they been less dirty, less debilitated, or had better taste, or better posture, they might not have been chosen to be photographed?" (p. 14).

In our literature there are conceptions of art and its criticism more appropriate to the art of our times. While recommending to art educators the aesthetics of Beardsley, Smith (1989) also praises the contributions of Nelson Goodman and Eugene Kaelin. Goodman insists on the unique cognitive contributions of the arts toward understanding the world: "After a couple of hours at an exhibition we often step out into a visual world quite different from the one we left. We see what we did not see before, and see in a new way. We have *learned*" (Goodman in Smith, p. 43). A new or broader understanding is a more appropriate criterion for much of the art of our time than merely its aesthetic

excellence. Smith's (1989) summation of Kaelin's existential defense of aesthetic education is also very appealing regarding a new social order: "The percipient approaches the work open-mindedly and tries not to superimpose interpretive or ideological frameworks on it. Aesthetic experience thus demands as well as promotes tolerance" (pp. 45-46). This view of the value of art is consistent with much contemporary art.

If we art educators only teach our students to critique their own work and that made by classmates so that they may improve their art making, or if we only teach aesthetic criticism in restricted Modernist senses, then we are not preparing our future citizens to understand the art of their day and the critical literature about it, nor will we be enabling them to enter the important debates about its moral and societal consequences.

### III

Michael Parsons (1987) has provided goals for extensively teaching people how to interpretively interact with works of art. His book *How We Understand Art* is a psychological study of the evolution of people's understanding of works of art, but it can also be seen as a topology of what we can expect people to understand about art if we teach them to intelligently engage artworks.

Based on years of interviewing many people, children as well as art professors, about some paintings, Parsons posited stages of aesthetic understanding through which people may incrementally pass. He asked people interpretive and evaluative questions and sought reasons in support of their conclusions. The stages are sets of ideas with which people make sense of paintings with more and more adequate understandings. The first stage is characterized by children's self-centeredness in enjoying arbitrarily selected aspects of paintings with which they make freewheeling associations. In the second stage people are concerned with the realism and beauty of subject matter depicted in art. In both the first and second stages, paintings are generally judged positive but in a nonreflective way, and appraisals are taken to be self-evident and in no need of justification. The third stage is concerned with expressiveness and judgments are made on the basis of the depth of feeling an artwork may provide. This stage is also marked by skepticism about the usefulness of words about art, and people have strong doubts about the possibility of objectivity in interpreting and judging art.

The fourth stage represents greater richness in responding to works of art: medium and form are seen in relation to content, and most importantly, artworks are seen as set in an historical context and not as singular, isolated achievements. The interpretation and judgment of art is also recognized to be a communal as well as individual endeavor. The fifth and final stage is characterized by assuredness and deftness in responding to art. Viewers have embodied the positive features of the previous stages and have achieved autonomy in their thinking about art. They are able to engage in lively discourse but they are also introspective about their beliefs and alertly aware of their own experiences in considering art. They wonder about the influences on their understanding, have a healthy self-doubt, are willing to have their understandings challenged by others, and are also able to question others' standards of judgment. As they clarify their responses to paintings, they are also able to clarify their own feelings,

meanings, and ideals in relation to the paintings, thus gaining understanding of themselves as well as the world. This is the most adequate understanding of art, and one we might teach for.

Sally Hagan (1990) in her explanation of the Philosophy for Children program provides a means to reach the ends that Parsons identifies. Participants in the program consider the classroom to be a community of inquiry. Teachers facilitate genuine group dialogue among children in ways that avoid both indoctrination and subjectivism because each point that a child puts forth is subjected to rigorous examination by the others. In a typical session, questions or points of interest regarding a philosophical novel written for children (in our case, it would be an artwork or exhibition) are listed on the chalkboard and one or two of these are addressed by the class in group dialogue. Similar issues arise at different times about different artworks, and these are explored again, allowing for a deepening of the inquiry process. According to Hagan, the approach has three characteristics. First, children are asked to go beyond mere opinion, back their statements with reasons, and reflect upon the criteria they use in making their judgments. Secondly, the participants are taught to be self-corrective: They are encouraged to listen carefully to each other and to be willing to reconsider their own positions. Mindless relativism is discouraged and the ability to admit change in thinking is praised, but there is no grasping for single right answers. Thirdly, context is considered very important--"insofar as knowledge is a historical, linguistic, and social construct, it is dependent on context" (p. 152).

The Philosophy for Children's program of instruction and Parson's typification of the most adequate stage of understanding art are very compatible and ought be wedded.

The topics of the study of art, K-12, however, need to be broadened to include artifacts in our everyday environment as well as paintings in museums if we want citizens thoughtfully engaged in what Feldman (1973) calls "the visual dimension of social living." Artifacts to be enjoyed and understood would include those displayed in street fairs, ethnographic community festivals, commercial art galleries, and anywhere else they can be found. Artifacts would also include the T-shirts children wear, the cereal boxes their breakfasts come in, and what they see on music videos. Although children may already enjoy what they see, buy, and wear, in my experience they do not necessarily understand the implications and ramifications of these objects.

The art criticism curriculum would stress deciphering the meaning of art more than its judgment. It would not teach that one artifact was necessarily better than another, but that artifacts function in different ways in different settings. Such a concentration on interpretation rather than judgment need not foster rampant relativism concerning values. Interpretation of artworks would include an unmasking of the values, social as well as aesthetic, that artifacts implicitly espouse. Once these values are made explicit, competing values can be argued for intelligently. Individuals can then choose their visual environment more intelligently, carefully, and caringly.

#### IV

Although we cannot and should not expect education to solve our social and economic problems, to undo racism, poverty, and a deteriorating environment, we can expect education to contribute to solutions to these problems. We can ask art educators

to graduate students from high school who are able to enjoy a variety of art works, feel passionately, think analytically, and discuss them within their communities.

If this sounds too remote, it's not. Recently, an English teacher at a public high school in an industrial area of Ohio took a group of young men and women to the Mapplethorpe exhibition in Cincinnati. The students belong to an art club which the teacher sponsors. They needed to be eighteen years of age or older to enter the show, and thus legally did not need parental consent. The teacher had placed catalogues of Mapplethorpe's photographs in the school library so the students could see the photographs and decide whether they wanted to attend the exhibition. She brought me in to lead the group of about twelve in a discussion of Mapplethorpe's work before we went to the exhibition. About a dozen students visited the exhibition after school with the English teacher, a sympathetic woman who teaches Social Studies at the school, and myself. A staff person of the art center lead us in a lecture-tour of the show. The following day the English teacher met with the students for a follow-up discussion. With their permission, she sent me copies of their journal entries about their experiences with Mapplethorpe's work.

The students all expressed gratitude for the preparatory work they took part in before they saw the exhibition. They all found the exhibition very troubling, especially the explicitly homosexual and sadomasochistic photographs in Mapplethorpe's X and Z portfolios. "Some of the pictures were disgusting" (Kate). "I would look carefully at a picture and my throat would tighten up like before you vomit, and I would look away" (T. J.). "I couldn't even look at some of the pictures without squirming" (Sally).

Regardless, they all wrote that they were glad they went. They all defended the right of the artist to photograph difficult subjects and their right to see troubling imagery. T. J. wrote: "Perhaps this was The Perfect Moment to bring this subject matter, the convergence of both sexes, the convergence of painful and pleasurable sexual experiences, and the convergence of races into [the awareness of] mainstream America." Sally wrote: "I am glad that I attended. This exhibit showed me Mapplethorpe's experiences as a person having a homosexual lifestyle." Bruce wrote: "I'm glad I went to see the exhibit for myself. I wanted to base my opinion on what I would see, not on what I had read. I had no idea that Mapplethorpe also photographed flowers and clothed subjects, and when I mentioned flowers to my parents, they had no idea he even used flowers. Mapplethorpe isn't trying to lure anyone into his lifestyle through his work. He's only presenting his lifestyle, a documentary of the times, his Perfect Moment. I don't like them, but there is a place for them."

I think these statements are self-evident of the students' abilities to engage in thoughtful and socially beneficial dialogue about art they find difficult. They reinforce Goodman's belief that art can foster new understandings of the world, and Kaelin's that aesthetic experience can promote tolerance. The statements also provide evidence that people can reach more and more adequate understandings of art, especially if they engage in thought about art as a community of inquirers. The thought and dialogue of these teenagers is already more mature thinking than the name calling by many of the older citizens of Cincinnati. These students benefited from some good and caring but sporadic teaching about art during after-school hours by a dedicated English teacher who loves children and wants to provide them with abilities to enjoy a range of cultural experiences. Imagine what these same students could have done with the Mapplethorpe

exhibition had they been taught art, including critical dialogue about all kinds of artworks and events, by well educated teachers, every week of every year during the twelve years of schooling they have had.

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