

## Criticizing Art With Others

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### *Criticism*

I have been involved with art criticism for more than fifteen years. My involvement includes writing criticism for regional journals, editing *Columbus Art* (a local bimonthly newsprint tabloid of art criticism), writing in academic journals about teaching criticism, conducting college critiques with art and photography students, and teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in art criticism, photography criticism and the teaching of criticism. In the past five years, my activities with criticism have accelerated and diversified because of an interesting new involvement. Through the suggestion and sponsorship of the Ohio Arts Council, I am functioning in a developing experimental program as a critic-in-education, parallel to an artist-in-education. As a visiting critic, I am working with different groups of people in diverse settings and leading them in the criticism of various kinds of art.

I use several different approaches to criticism. All of these approaches, however, eventually are reduced to activities of describing, interpreting and evaluating works of art—and sometimes theorizing about art. I believe that interpretation is the most important aspect of criticism and stress it over evaluation. Unless we understand it, art cannot contribute to new knowledge of the world and alternative ways of experiencing it. If people sufficiently understand a work of art, its judgment is implied or is relatively easy to derive. When people do not understand art they become intimidated by it and eventually indifferent or even hostile toward it.

Our critical discussions are guided by beliefs that art is about something: it demands interpretation, it is interpretable, and there is no one correct and definitive interpretation. The artist's interpretation of his or her own art is one interpretation among many competing interpretations. These views of interpretation aid us in resisting dogmatic interpretations and also allow that some interpretations are better grounded in evidence and more convincing than others. We challenge interpretations when they seem unfounded, too idiosyncratic or too far removed from the art object itself.

I try to establish a psychologically safe environment in which people feel comfortable to discuss art by reinforcing their comments, disallowing put-downs from others, acknowledging the role of individual histories in perceiving art, encouraging a multiplicity of understandings and drawing many people into the discussion. I especially encourage careful listening and ask members to build on each others' comments. We often begin with personal preferences for artworks and then move to interpretive or evaluative discussions of them. When we judge artworks we always ask for reasons that support evaluations and attempt to make explicit the criteria in which the reasons are embedded.

This essay relates some of my experiences in facilitating discussions about art with various groups of people. Its major points are that people of all backgrounds and ages can critically encounter artworks of all kinds. Through critical discussion of works of art, people increase their understanding and appreciation of art. They also gain self-confidence in their ability to independently enjoy experiences in artworlds they may have thought previously closed to them because of their lack of familiarity with those artworlds and a means of access to the objects they contain.

### *Some Situations*

My first stint as a critic-in-education was in a public elementary school in Lima, Ohio. This occurred as part of a dance residency of Stuart Pimsler Dance and Theater, a postmodern company making dances that respond to contemporary social issues. To become familiar with the Company's work, which was new to me, I studied videotapes of their pieces, watched the dancers in rehearsal and talked with them about their dance and my attitudes about criticism.

During their three-week residency, Stuart Pimsler and Suzanne Costello, principal dancer and artistic co-director, led the children in movement exercises, talked with them about contemporary dance, choreographed a core group of fifth graders into some of the Company's pieces and performed a concert for the school and the community. I arrived toward the end of the residency and after the performance. For periods of about fifty minutes I led four classes of

fourth and fifth grade children in critical discussions about dance and criticism.

I began the classes by asking what they understood about art criticism. We discussed how the term "criticism" has negative connotations in everyday language and that it means to find fault in people, things or events. They were familiar with film critics appearing on television shows such as "Entertainment Tonight" and "At the Movies." We added food critics, music critics and art critics. Because the critics with whom the children were familiar functioned primarily as guides to consumers, offering ratings with stars, forks or thumbs up or down, we discussed the value and limitations in society of this kind of criticism. I explained that art criticism covers much broader concepts than positive or negative evaluations. I explained that as a critic who writes about art, I am more interested in informing others about works of art and helping others to appreciate new and sometimes difficult pieces. I also explained that when I write about art, I understand it better and appreciate it more because of the focused time, careful attention and thought that writing criticism requires. For the purposes of our discussion I then asked the children to reconstruct in language one of Pimsler's pieces they saw and performed.

From the dance company they had already acquired sophisticated vocabulary to describe movement. We used this vocabulary to decipher and articulate the meaning of some of the movements in the dance. The interpretations the children had were insightful and the discussions lively. One of the dances utilized baby dolls as props and the dancers mimicked the stiff movements of toy dolls. The children readily related their knowledge of and experience with dolls and posited that sometimes people behave like dolls, passively allowing themselves to be manipulated. They enjoyed the challenge of examining their experiences and putting them into language and were pleased with their ability to intelligently discuss contemporary dance.

In a related situation, in an arts magnet school in Columbus, Ohio, elementary school students were in the culmination of a month-long residency with a visiting professional dancer, a musician and a visual artist. During this residency the artists and core groups of fourth and fifth graders built a large-scale multisensory environment. The children dramatically transformed a large room with tunnels of paper, life-size contours of their bodies cut out of diazo photosensitive paper, various textures on which to walk, dramatic lighting, original tape-recorded electronic music the children composed and child dancers in costume. School children and their parents moved through the environment throughout a Friday. I also experienced the environment that day and returned on Monday to facilitate an hour-long session

of criticism about it with a class of fourth graders who constructed and performed in the piece.

I introduced myself as a critic and the editor of *Columbus Art*, showed them a copy, said that I had experienced their environment and asked them what I should say if I were going to review it for the paper. They answered: "Say it was great!" They were very proud of their environment. I asked them to describe what it was but that request did not initially make much sense to them because they had seen it and I had seen it. They saw little need to describe it until I explained that the people who would read the review would not have seen the piece, and because it was a temporary piece, would not be able to see it. Now motivated to tell others what had been there, how it came about, who made it, of what and where, they had much more information to offer. I jotted their key ideas as notes on the black board, stressing that critics need to make clear and lively descriptions and praised their effective uses of language.

From this verbal reconstruction of the piece and how it came about, we next attempted to explain to our imagined readers what the piece was about and if and why it would be a valuable experience for others. The children wanted to simply declare it valuable because they had made it and because they wanted good publicity for their school. I insisted, however, that I had a conscience as a critic and could not praise things just for personal gain. I also insisted that as critics we need to offer reasons for our judgments that others could understand and believe. An enthusiastic discussion followed, with more notes written on the board.

With about ten minutes of the class period left, we organized the random scribbles on the blackboard. I told them that the editorial limitations of our review were that it was to be 750 words in length, about four or five paragraphs, with one black and white photograph. We decided how to start and how to finish the review and constructed an outline on the board that we would follow if we were to write the review. I ended the session there.

In an out-of-school situation, I accepted an invitation to conduct a critique of the work of an art club in a small rural town in Ohio. A group of about fifteen adults who, for the most part, made art for recreation brought samples of their work to the previously advertised critique on a week night. It was sponsored by the Coshocton Fine Art Guild. Most of the artists were older adults who painted scenes of barns, flowers and countrysides. One woman painted whimsical cows in eerie environments, and a recent college graduate made close-up photographs of cows in barns and photographs of herself in psychologically penetrating self-portraits which involved partial nudity. I picked a painting that we would start with and asked that the artist remain a listener and not

contribute to the conversation. I led the group in an interpretive discussion, focusing the discussion on the question "What does this piece express and how?" During the two-hour session we discussed two paintings by two painters and the photographs mentioned above.

I had forewarned the group that we would not get to all of the works and had explained that the purpose of the session was to learn about art criticism itself and how art can be thoughtfully reflected upon. They were more accustomed to critiques that offered advice to artists, usually by an artist more experienced or better known than them. The discussion was lively and the speakers insightful about the artworks. Both the artists whose works we discussed and the discussants were very enthused about the evening. They had not previously participated in a critique that concentrated on interpreting their artworks rather than judging and giving advice on how to improve them; nor had they been involved in critiques that disallowed the artists' slated intentions from guiding their considerations. They were pleased with how much they could discover and articulate about an artwork and were flattered that their artworks could sustain penetrating discussions.

#### *Some Other Groups*

My work in criticizing art with others has included a broad range of student groups. I have worked in public urban, suburban and rural elementary and secondary schools, private college-preparatory schools, Catholic schools and universities. Participants have included children considered to have mental and emotional disabilities, children "at risk" (of dropping out) and, with the help of a sign language interpreter, teenagers with hearing impairments. Outside of schools, I have had occasion to lead groups of recreational painters, museum docents, senior citizens living in a retirement home, camera clubs, classroom teachers and principals on art field trips, arts council board members, a college art history club and a large group of professional visual and performing artists serving as artists-in-the-schools.

My work with senior citizens has been very challenging and ultimately rewarding. Working with them often required some quick improvisation. For example, in one setting there were about thirty elderly people who gathered in a commons room of a Jewish retirement center. The director, expecting a lecture from me, had seated the people in rows. After an introduction he handed me a microphone with a cord so short that it allowed for no mobility. I began asking them descriptive questions about a large size reproduction of Oscar Kokoshka's painting, the *Mandrill*. They quickly and angrily informed me that they could not see it because of the dim lighting in the room. They also resented the distance I was from

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them. When I moved forward, I had to drop the mike and the people in the back rows could hear neither me nor those responding to my questions. The lights were as bright as they would go. The audience was increasingly annoyed and vocal. I had an hour left and resisted a very strong urge to apologize and flee. I asked the attendants to help me seat the participants in small groups. After minutes of mayhem with attendants moving people about, about six groups of five people each had their own reproduction of different twentieth century paintings and went about discussing them.

I asked that their discussions be interpretive at first, and we then moved into discussion of artistic value, attempting to identify criteria by which the artworks should be judged. I was invited to the Center to prepare them for a task at hand. This retirement center sponsors a large and progressive curated outdoor summer sculpture exhibition, and the senior citizens select a piece for a purchase award.

Their insights into the paintings, based on years and years of varied life experiences, were interesting and their enthusiasm for learning this late in their lives was inspiring. They, in turn, were enlivened by the artworks they examined and their ability to interpret and value them. They were anxious to use what they had learned about looking at art on the sculptures that they would judge. Their curiosity and desire for mental challenges compensated for any losses due to their age such as failing vision and hearing.

On another occasion I worked with teenagers with hearing impairments in an after-school photography course sponsored by the Dayton Art Institute. The teenagers learned to make photographs with Wayne Levin, a Hawaiian photographer and recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts Photographer's Fellowship. I brought several contemporary reproductions of photographs for them to critically analyze. Some of the teens read lips, some could hear with the help of microphone and amplifier, some spoke, others signed. An interpreter accompanied the group. We had a lively discussion, with all participating and all contributing insights. They compared the artworks to the images they were making. My unease due to my unfamiliarity with hearing-impaired people quickly vanished as we talked about the photographs.

One of my most personally rewarding sessions was with a group of about thirty Dayton city school fourth, fifth and sixth grade students experiencing developmental disabilities. Teachers and aides settled the children on the floor of a carpeted room. I was struck by how long it took the teachers and aides to gather and focus the children's attention. Once they were settled, I showed them several large reproductions of twentieth century paintings depicting animals of various sorts in a variety of styles. These included Picasso's *Cat and Lobster*, Macke's *Landscape with*



*Cows and Camel*, Klee's *Sinbad the Sailor* and Chagall's *I and the Village*. I elicited answers to questions based on what they could see in the paintings and had them talk about subject matter and form and the relation between the two. They had astute observations, were anxious to talk and listened to each other. The thirty minute period went very quickly for them and for me. Their teachers and I had underestimated their attention span. Our time together could have easily been extended.

#### *Different Kinds of Art*

In addition to critically attending to dance, artworks by students and adult artists, paintings, sculptures and photographs from the twentieth century Western art tradition (including an African American collection), I have used other art shown in different settings. This has included original art of contemporary African Americans in a not-for-profit gallery, art from several cultures in a commercial ethnographic gallery of art, Islamic prayer rugs in a museum, a reel of Clio Award winning television commercials and the movie "Batman." Some of the more interesting contemporary art I have used includes the postmodern feminist pastiches by Barbara Kruger, Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial exhibition "The Perfect Moment" (*in situ* and in reproduction) and *The Deerslayers* by Les Krims.

Mapplethorpe's *Man in Polyester Suit* generated an interesting discussion among adults. A group of about a dozen classroom teachers, art teachers and principals from Lima, Ohio, sponsored by the Lima Arts Council, took a weekend trip to Chicago. The council invited a theater critic and me to engage the participants in critical dialogue about a range of contemporary arts we were to see. We viewed the now famous Mapplethorpe exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art. In our ensuing discussion back in our hotel suite, two Black women got into an intense but friendly interpretive dispute concerning whether or not *Man in Polyester Suit* was a racist image. The black and white photograph has great clarity of detail and depicts a Black man from below his shoulders to above his knees, wearing a three-piece suit. His face is not visible. His penis, which is uncircumcised and very large, hangs from his open fly.

One woman argued that the picture reinforced negative stereotypical constructions of Black men as sexual brutes without brains. She was offended that the image was made by a white photographer, that the man was anonymous and faceless and that he was apparently chosen for his trim body and the size of his penis. The second woman argued that the image was ennobling, that it celebrated sexuality and the power of the Black man and that it was liberating in its confrontation—the white man's polyester and

all that went with it could not suppress the vitality of the Black man.

I brought slides of Krims's *The Deerslayers* to high school students in a hunting area of the state. The portfolio is a collection of grisly photographs of men, women and children with deer lashed across the hoods of their cars. About one-third to one-half of the group had hunted. Predictably, the students were divided on the issue of hunting. Several had shot deer that very season, and several thought hunting was inhumane and disgusting. Perhaps also predictably, but surprising to me, those who hunted thought that the Krims portfolio was promoting hunting; those who were opposed to hunting thought that the portfolio also opposed it. Despite my prompting questions, the students could not go beyond their own belief systems to more objectively consider what was in the photographs.

I used the imagery of Barbara Kruger with a high school class in creative writing. Kruger's work is challenging for anyone: her images can be read very simplistically and incorrectly because her denotational information is quite clear. However, the very rich connotations of her words and appropriated images are difficult to decipher. For example, *Untitled* (1981) shows a baby's plump hand reaching to grasp an adult female hand. Two strips of words declare in bold type: "Your every wish is our command." On the face of it, the image can be read as a cute and simple Hallmark greeting card message about parenting. The student critics, mostly female, were able to offer several sophisticated readings that were in keeping with Kruger's socially critical work. They considered the pronoun "your" to be referring to adult males and "our" to refer to women rather than reading either as referring to the infant. They also considered issues of unwanted pregnancy and issues of lawmakers legislating about women's bodies and their right to abort.

In Lodi, Ohio, in a junior high school in a farming community, we deconstructed award-winning television commercials, seeking to determine who was selling what to whom and by what means. I showed a thirty second or sixty second spot once, entertained answers to the general questions, then showed it again and again and asked them to count shots, look for cuts, angles of view, lighting, casting and costuming to support their interpretations of the commercial.

These students were tracked into "academic" (normal) and "challenge" (gifted and talented) classes. A Pepsi commercial, specifically targeted to their age group, baffled the academic group, leaving them unable to determine much beyond that it was Pepsi that was being sold. They were unable, without considerable help from me, to decipher that they were the intended audience and could not decipher the advertiser's means of manipulation. The challenge

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group was quite insightful in their psychological penetration of the ad. They also deconstructed some full-page cigarette ads we tore from magazines, adeptly considering questions about the selling of desire.

The following day we turned our attention to the movie "Batman," recorded on video tape, and critically attended to scenes I randomly selected. The students already had a general context for the scenes (all but one or two had seen the movie and several had seen it many times), so plot reconstruction was not necessary. We viewed a complete scene with sound; I then asked for general observations about how the scene was constructed and toward what effects. We viewed it again, without sound, looking for the psychological effects of the director's formal decisions such as the rhythm with which the shots were cut, and we contrasted dialogue scenes with action scenes.

The disparity between the two groups of students, however, is worrisome to me and points up the need for more education about television and advertising *somewhere* in the school curriculum. The challenge students could spend a lot of time on one ad or movie scene, seeking more and more insights without tiring; the academic students tired after two viewings, wanted to move on and be stimulated anew.

When dealing with artworks from outside of a group's culture, we seek information about that culture by which we can better understand and appreciate the work. When someone with a group has expertise, I gladly turn over the session to them. An American woman married to an Iranian and who had lived several years in Iran before the revolution led us in a very informative investigation of Middle Eastern prayer rugs on temporary loan to the Columbus Museum of Art. When the group visited the Ethnographic Gallery, a moderator was assigned to research the cultural origins of the collection and to lead our discussion. In these situations where the group needs information, we still avoid lectures and instead invent strategies by which they can more actively learn.

#### *Critical Activities*

All of the critical sessions discussed in this essay are highly interactive among participants. I ask for answers to probing questions about the artworks and ask that the participants direct their insights to each other rather than to me. I frequently ask the group if they are able to physically hear a response and then if they agree or disagree with what has been said. Answers are based on evidence of an internal source (within the artwork) or an external source (contextual information). Some of the information I supply if I think it will further the discussion, but I keep my remarks brief and avoid lecturing. Most of the time the discussions are interpretive, understanding meaning and effect through what the art expresses. I encourage participants to challenge interpretive

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assertions that are not based on evidence or which are too far removed from the work in question. I frequently and sincerely compliment insightful comments. Through the process I also learn things about works of art with which I am already quite familiar.

I often but not always begin discussions by asking for descriptions. When discussing representational work I usually start with subject matter rather than form because I think this is a more comfortable and natural place to start. When using Picasso's *Cat and Lobster*, for example, I begin by asking: "What is happening in the picture?" Once the audience deciphers this very expressionist painting to be a cat and lobster fighting, I ask: "Who is going to win?" The lobster. "How do you know?" They discover that they know because they are able to read the formal properties of the work: because of the aggressive angle of the lobster, its metallic color, the frenzied strokes Picasso used for the cat, because the cat is receding off the canvas's edge and so forth.

Occasionally we judge artworks. When we do we usually direct attention to criteria and how an artwork ought to be judged as good. I sometimes ask participants to place a colored "stickum" on the reproduction they think the best and a different color one on the work they like the most, and we discuss the reasons for their different choices. It is especially interesting when their preferences differ from their judgments of value. In a session with mostly African American high school students in Dayton, after I noted the paintings that received no votes from the students, I tried to select paintings "that they would really hate." In general they preferred representational images and realism. At first I succeeded in finding paintings they did not value by showing them works by Helen Frankenthaler, but then some students began seeing value in abstraction and minimalism and defended her paintings to the other students. Midway through the session I argued that all the paintings were good for different reasons but that the most realistic piece I had was the weakest aesthetically. I provided reasons for my views and asked for counterreasons from the students. At this point the two art teachers jumped in rather emphatically: one was a realist himself, and the other did not want her students exposed to any negative judgments about art, believing they should value it all.

Occasionally we begin and end with preferences. In Chicago I asked the group of Lima teachers and administrators to tour the many commercial galleries in the River North gallery district and to come back and tell us which one piece of art they would buy. To accomplish their assignment, they perused many galleries, talked with gallery directors and occasionally artists. In the process they learned the economics of the art market and generally became much more



comfortable with and less intimidated by a gallery world.

## Conclusion

Art is powerful because of its content as well as its means of expression. The power of art is evident in the stimulation people feel in thinking and talking about it. This is particularly the case if they are given some hints as to how to proceed and a psychologically safe environment in which to talk and learn. They need ways to enter into works, a means to extend their attention and a way to proceed productively in thinking about and interacting with art. They especially need enough confidence to begin.

Choices of what artworks to present to a group is important. The more challenging the work, the more engaging the session. If the artworks are very simple and noncontroversial, then one's questions have to be stimulating. If artworks are too far removed from the viewers' experiences, however, then the viewers will have little with which they can relate. In this situation they must be funded with relevant information. Their need for too much funding can result in a spontaneous lecture by the facilitator, an action which will prevent critical discussion among the participants.

In group discussions, wonderful things can happen between and among individuals when they engage with each other about works of art. This cannot happen when viewing art individually. A group of individuals can construct a broader range of meaning than an individual can. Groups also tend to be self-correcting about interpretations that are too far removed from the work to be convincing. Groups can widen narrow, dogmatic or idiosyncratic views about both art and life.

It was an awesome experience for me to watch a group of wary adults with little prior experience with contemporary art move through the difficult exhibition of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe. They were moved by the beauty of the exhibition and simultaneously repelled by some of its tough subject matter (mutilated testicles, a man urinating in another's mouth, anal penetration by a fist and forearm). They were willing to articulate their reactions and to talk about their responses with others. The exhibition engendered some frank and honest discussions about homosexuality, sadomasochism, black-white relationships among men and men and men and women, child nudity in erotically charged environments and rights of artistic expression.

I can imagine that these Ohioans returned to their communities and told of their experiences to family, friends and colleagues. It is likely that they articulated some understanding, honest uncertainty and a sense of excitement about being challenged and being able to adequately meet the challenges of art. Our trip took place a few months before the Mapplethorpe uproar

in Washington when the Corcoran cancelled the same exhibition we had seen in Chicago, and several months before the Contemporary Arts Center of Cincinnati and its director were indicted on obscenity charges for displaying the same photographs. The Lima group beamed with pride over their ability to consider the issues passionately and reasonably.

Similar results can be obtained with less sensational work and with people of much younger age. After a full session of discussing twentieth century paintings in an elementary school in Toledo, a fourth grade girl looked up wistfully and to no one in particular sighed, "Oh, I could just do this forever!"

The experiences these persons have had with critically attending to art are not fleeting. In May of 1988, in a small rural school near Bowling Green, Ohio, I had a class of fourth graders describe and interpret twentieth century paintings for a class of kindergarteners. The kindergarteners listened for the whole forty-five minute period, and the fourth graders spoke to them in language they could understand. The attentiveness of the small children and the care of the older ones in communicating with them was very endearing. The following spring I returned to the school and met those kindergarteners who were now first graders. Before starting our session, I asked them if they remembered me from last year. I expected comments on my beard but instead got detailed recall from memory about the subject and form of every painting they had seen a year ago. They were excited to see some new paintings, but they first wanted to see again last year's with the excitement of seeing old friends.

In talking about art that is difficult to decipher, for whatever reason, people can be taught to listen respectfully to the insights of each other if they are genuinely interesting in coming to grips with the work. In a private school in Cincinnati, a fifth grader noted that Wynn Bullock's landscape photographs were "rather enigmatic." When I asked him to explain further, he did and quite accurately. More amazing to me, however, was that no one laughed or jeered him for his sophisticated language. These children listened intently to their classmate and nodded in understanding and in approval. They had already learned to respect intelligence. Works of art were just another occasion to reflectively engage in stimulating thought and talk.

In my work in schools and communities, I keep myself motivated and stimulated by seeing how far children and adults can go with art. I keep trying new works and different strategies. I began with contemporary dance, then dealt with art by children taught by adult artists, brought in the work of a variety of contemporary photographers, gathered reproductions of paintings with diverse subject matters and styles, took advantage of exhibitions from other

cultures and tried the work of Mapplethorpe and Kruger, "Batman," TV commercials, ads in magazines and other artifacts from daily life.

There is a shortage of good quality, large reproductions of contemporary art and especially art made by women, people of color and other underrepresented artists. When I find such artworks on posters or show announcements, I save them. I frequent bookstores after January looking for calendar sales, hoping to find art calendars, and buy exhibition catalogues and books of contemporary art and remove the bindings to make sets of comparatively inexpensive reproductions.

There are many ways to teach people about art, but I think engaging them in the thoughtful criticism of art, the art they themselves may make, art from throughout the world and especially the art in their own communities, is a particularly good way to teach. Their acts of criticizing art get them involved in

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deciphering what is being shown to them and make them less dependent on the authority of artists, historians or docents and more independent in their ability to move through their visual world, which is a cacophony of competing messages both spiritual and crass.

My experiences have shown me that there are far fewer limits to what can be done with people and art, in schools and out, than we may imagine and that the activities of criticism are several and can be widely applied to a range of objects with anyone who is willing. I think the results are that some people are less afraid of art, less susceptible to visual manipulation, better equipped to enter multiple artworlds from street fairs to museums, more joyful in their encounters, more respectful of their fellow critics and artists and more tolerant of a diversity of experiences and expressions.