

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*

