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Description in Professional Art Criticism

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This study is a metacritical examination of published essays by three professional critics of Richard Avedon's exhibition, "In the American West." Its purpose is to determine if, how, and for what purposes critics describe artworks. It finds that these particular critics describe at length, literately and passionately, drawing from observations of the work and knowledge of external, contextual sources. They freely mix descriptive information with interpretive and evaluative arguments to persuade readers to accept their different understandings and appraisals of Avedon's photographs.

This study¹ is part of an ongoing program of research about the teaching and learning of art criticism (e.g., Barrett, 1989a, 1989b, in press; Lee & Barrett, 1990). It is metacritical inquiry in sympathy with past and recent efforts at elucidating the practice of professional art criticism (e.g., Geahigan, 1983; Weitz, 1964), and it is meant to contribute to the significant body of writing on teaching art criticism (e.g., Chapman, 1978; Feldman, 1987). It is within the tradition of art education that holds art criticism to be an essential component of the art curriculum (e.g., Barkan, 1966). This particular study² is an investigation of descriptive information found in three published articles by three critics who have considered Richard Avedon's exhibition of photographs, "In the American West": Douglas Davis's (1985) "A View of the West," in *Newsweek*; Susan Weiley's (1986) "Avedon Goes West," in *Artnews*; and William Wilson's (1985) review in *Artforum*.

Avedon's "In the American West" exhibition opened in 1985 at the Amon Carter Museum in Ft. Worth, and the work was simultaneously published in book form (Avedon, 1985). The choice of criticism of Avedon's work for this study is somewhat arbitrary in that criticism of other contemporary artists could have been selected; however, Avedon is a prominent artist, and his work is popular, has been widely reviewed, is available in book form, and will likely be considered historically important. The selection of critics is also somewhat arbitrary in that several other critics have written about this work; however, among the three selected for this study, one is a woman, one writes for a popular magazine, and two write for art magazines. One presents a negative appraisal, and two present positive appraisals in different degrees and for different reasons. Two of the critics' articles are reviews, and one is a feature.

The three articles are examined for their descriptive components. The research questions are: Do the critics describe? If so, how and for what purposes? In this study, description is considered in its critical-discourse sense; that is, to

¹It is serendipitous that this study follows the recent publication of another article on Avedon's work in an art education journal: Dubiel, R. M., (1989), Richard Avedon's in the American West and Jean-Paul Sartre: An existential approach to art and value, *Art Education*, 42(4), 18-24.

²The data for this study are culled from Chapter 2 of a forthcoming book by the author, *Criticizing Photographs* (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield, 1990).

describe an artwork or an exhibition is to tell or write about what one notices in the work or exhibition. Descriptions are answers to such questions as: What is here? What am I looking at? What can I state with relative certainty about this image, this body of work, and its exhibition? The answers to such questions identify factual information, both the obvious and not so obvious.

The descriptions written by the three selected critics were intended for different audiences. The descriptions are closely tied to the critics' interpretations and evaluations. Thus, this study will first identify the types of publications in which these critical essays appeared and provide brief overviews of the critics' understandings and evaluations of Avedon's work. It will then provide a detailed analysis of their descriptions, according to the categories of subject matter, medium, and form. It will conclude with a discussion of the importance of description in critical writing, making some distinctions about description and how it functions in criticism, and offering some considerations about professional art criticism and art criticism in art education.

Three Critics on Richard Avedon's "In the American West"

Douglas Davis, "A View of the West," *Newsweek* Magazine

As an art critic for *Newsweek* Douglas Davis (1985) wrote his review of "In the American West" shortly after its inaugural exhibition opened. His article consists of one magazine page plus a column in length—about 800 words—and is accompanied by four of Avedon's exhibited photographs. When Richard Avedon's photographs "In the American West" were first shown, Davis was in the difficult position in which art critics often find themselves—having to write some of the first words about some new and challenging work. Writing for *Newsweek*, he also had to write for an audience who had most probably not seen the work. Although Avedon's American West work is now relatively well-known because it has been traveling around the country since 1985 and has been widely distributed in book form, it must be remembered that this was not the case when it was first presented.

Davis's interpretation is that Avedon's new work is very stylized, and his judgment is that it both fails and succeeds because of its stylization. He argues that the new work has been promoted as a forthright, direct, and documentary treatment of the West and as a departure from Avedon's famous high-fashion style. But, although the photographs seem candid and spontaneous, Davis argues they are highly contrived and that the show documents not the American West but Avedon himself. Nevertheless, he says the show ultimately succeeds because it is immensely ambitious and because it is the continuation of the photographer's "own determined, exhilarating pursuit of the perfect photographic style" (p. 83).

William Wilson, a Review, *Artforum*

Shortly after it opened, William Wilson (1985) reviewed Avedon's show in *Artforum*. His article consists of about 1,000 words accompanied by one Avedon photograph. Wilson identifies himself in a by-line as a writer and an editor. Like Davis, Wilson does not accept the work as an accurate document of the West. He generally approves of the work but faults some of the photographs as "self-important," "patronizing," and mere "fashion" (p. 7). He understands the photographs as Avedon's fiction, but doesn't object; rather, he enjoys them as he would a good story. Wilson's general appraisal is very positive.

Susan Weiley, "Avedon Goes West," *Artnews*

Six months after the opening of the Avedon exhibition, Susan Weiley (1986)

published her feature article on it in *Artnews*. Her article consists of about 3,500 words accompanied by four Avedon photographs. In her feature, Weiley discusses Avedon's past work and compares his photography to other work which she finds similar, particularly the photographs of Diane Arbus. She is quite clear and strong about her approval of Arbus's work and her disapproval of this exhibition by Avedon. Whereas, according to Weiley, Arbus was truly engaged with her subjects, befriended them, and spent time in their lives, Avedon "Avedonizes" those he photographs. She finds his work "condescending to his subjects (one wants to say victims)" and "frankly arrogant" in its "exploitation" of them (p. 89). Although she admires Avedon's "flawless craftsmanship," she says the "American West" project is "cold and mechanical" and "without that power to deeply disturb"—it is "fashion, not art" (p. 91).

Types of Description

Descriptions of Avedon's Subject Matter

Davis (1985) summarizes the subjects of Avedon's photographs as "ranchers, housekeepers, rodeo riders and oil drillers, pig men, meatpackers and an army of unemployed drifters" (p. 83). Some of these subjects are identified by Avedon's titles, for example, *Jesse Kleinasser, pig man, Hutterite Colony, Harlowton, Montana, 6/23/83*. Davis, however, constructs the phrase "an army of unemployed drifters." He writes that the coal miners are "grimy," that one is "tall and enigmatic" with a chin "heavy with beard," and another has a face "painted with rock dust" (p. 83). He also writes of a "burly lumber salesman holding his impassive baby upside down" (p. 83).

Davis states that Avedon's project is as immense as the documentary efforts of William Henry Jackson and Edward Curtis who also surveyed regions of the West and photographed North American Indians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Although Davis compares the three photographers, he does not equate Avedon with the other two in terms of merit, stating that "Avedon is no Jackson or Curtis" (p. 83).

In his *Artforum* review, Wilson (1985) describes the show as "a human cyclo-rama" and says that although it includes cowboys and Indians, it also contains "a couple of mental-hospital patients; a physical therapist; three sisters from Wildhorse, Colorado" (p. 7). About the three sisters, Wilson adds that they had served as co-presidents of the Loretta Lynn Fan Club for the past 25 years. Using alliteration, Williams writes of "soot and grime and rips and rashes and blood" (p. 7) and states that the heads of slaughtered sheep and steers are important inclusions. He further observes: "In this West it's not the cowboy boot that counts, it's the tape holding the boot together at the instep and around the toe, and the mud caked on the heel" (p. 7).

When Weiley (1986) describes Avedon's subjects, she also describes subjects he does *not* photograph: "fearless gunslingers or stalwart lawmen or fierce cattlemen or Houston oil barons, or any of the stock characters that live in our imagination of the West" (p. 88). Like Davis and Wilson, Weiley lists the persons in the photographs by their occupations; then she describes the lot as "a catalogue of the odd, the bizarre, the defective, the deformed, the demented and the maimed" (p. 88). Like Wilson, but unlike Davis, she mentions the bloodiness of some of the subjects: "Slaughterhouse workers and their implements are drenched in blood, and severed, bloodied calf, steer and sheep heads all have their likenesses immortalized" (p. 88). She concludes: "After a short time one realizes the Westerners were selected solely for their strange physical

characteristics" (p. 88).

Weiley's *Artnews* article is a feature, and she has considerably more space than the single pages allotted to Davis and Williams. She describes much of Avedon's work, beginning with his older fashion photography in 1946. She relates that his photographs were different than those of his peers and that he freed the fashion photograph from the still studio pose. She describes the subject matter of this fashion work: In real and recognizable places he photographed models as they "leaped off curbs or bounced down a beach or swirled their New Look skirts through Parisian streets or gamed at a roulette table" (p. 86). She also mentions his ongoing portraits of celebrities including artists, writers, and politicians, writing that he reveals "the sags and bags, lines and pouches that flesh is heir to, the double chins, enlarged pores, glazed eyes and sullen expressions of the rich, the powerful, the famous" (p. 87). She also mentions the "devastating series" of portraits Avedon made of his father as he was dying of cancer.

Descriptions of Avedon's Use of Medium

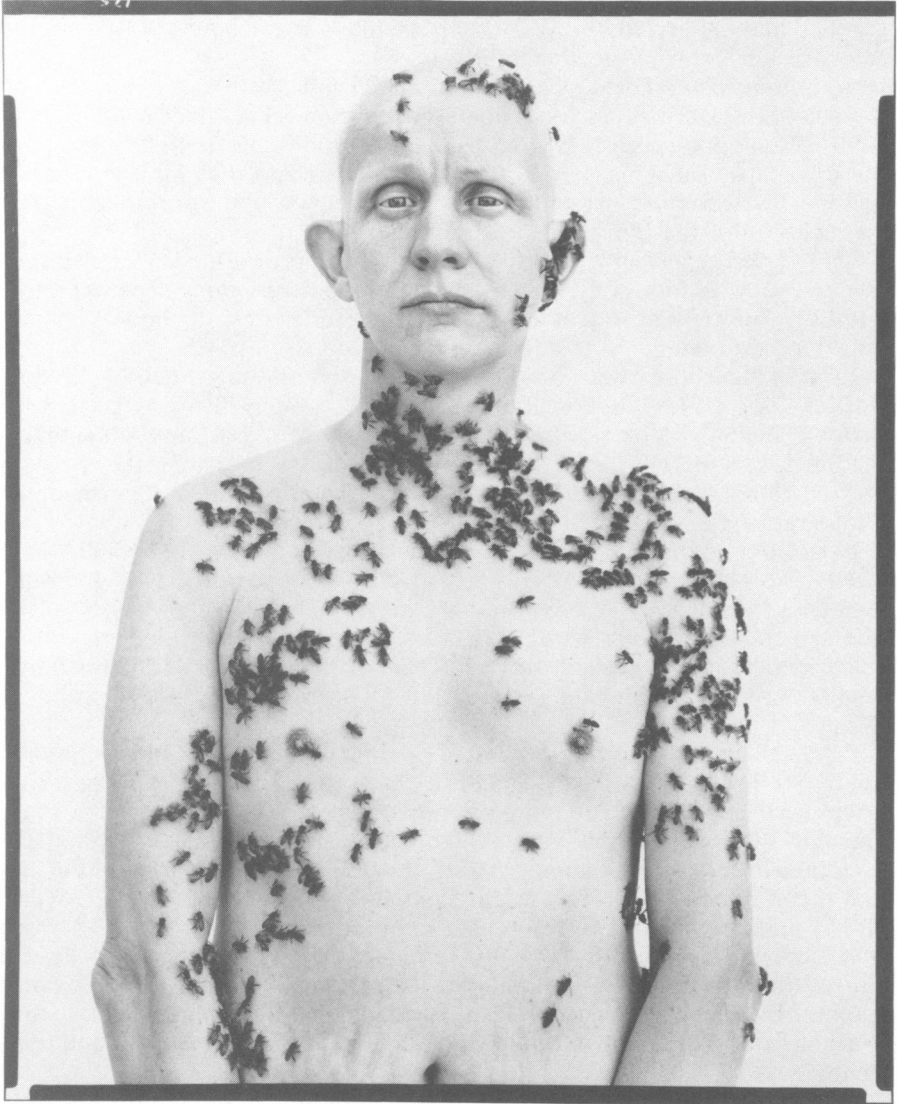
Of the three critics, Davis (1985) is the most complete in his discussion of how Avedon uses the medium of photography. Davis relates that Avedon photographed with an 8 × 10 inch Deardorff camera. He observes that the backgrounds are all uniformly white, made with a sheet of seamless paper hung behind the subjects, that the exposures are by natural daylight, and that all the prints are enlarged from uncropped and unretouched negatives. Davis reports that Avedon traveled extensively and went to the Rattlesnake Roundup in Sweetwater, Texas, to a rodeo in Augusta, Montana, and to coal mines in Paonia, Colorado, and that he held 752 photo sessions and shot 17,000 sheets of film.

Davis observes that Avedon's subjects seem relaxed and real, but that he "persuades a boy to pose with a snake wrapped coily around his arms" and that he has "a bare chested beekeeper stand before the lens with scores of bees crawling across his skin" (p. 83) (see reproduction³). He quotes Avedon as saying that when we look at one of these photographs he wants us to believe that the subject "was not even in the presence of a photographer" (p. 83). Davis attributes the credibility of these photographs to Avedon's method of photographing. He explains that Avedon's use of a long cable release permitted him to converse with his subject and to snap the shutter while he was standing close to them and away from the camera, thus contributing to the photographs' "seeming candor and spontaneity" (p. 83).

Wilson (1985) also mentions Avedon's specific camera — "the kind of camera you stand not behind but next to, the kind of camera that puts nothing between photographer and subject" (p. 7) — tripod, the large rolls of white paper used for background, and Avedon's ability to stand by his subjects rather than behind the camera when shooting. He also tells us that Avedon held 752 shooting sessions, and adds that he did this work over five consecutive summers and throughout 17 states, from Kansas to California.

Weiley (1986) does not detail much technical information about Avedon's photography, but she describes Avedon's positioning of the subjects, no matter where they are initially found, in front of white paper and writes that two

³Copyright © 1985 Richard Avedon. All rights reserved.



Ronald Fischer, beeper
Davis, California, May 9, 1981
56¼ × 45"

Collection of the Center for Creative Photography,
University of Arizona, Tucson

assistants load his camera. "He selects, arranges, directs, just as he would a fashion shot" (p. 87). She infers the psychological effects of his method: "He is in total control, has complete authority over his subjects" (p. 87). Whereas the famous people he photographs are media-smart and are used to being photographed and publicized, the Westerners are not—in the hands of Avedon they are "like innocents led to slaughter" (p. 89).⁴

Descriptions of the Form of Avedon's Photographs

Each of these critics discusses how Avedon frames his subjects, occasionally splitting some subjects into two different photographs, his frontal angle of view, the size of his prints, his choice of a stark white background, his use of natural lighting, his decision to present full frames without cropping or retouching, and his inclusion of the film edges in the prints.

Davis (1985) especially stresses the size of Avedon's prints: "Here we stand face to face with four grimy coal miners lined up across three separate photographs"—"more than 10 feet long, almost 5 feet high, it is the largest image in an exhibition dominated by lifesize faces and torsos" (p. 82).

Each of the three critics is concerned with determining whether Avedon's work is documentary, fictional, or fashion photography. They agree that it is fictional made to look documentary and closer to his fashion work than is readily apparent. They take various value positions regarding the merits of these fictional fashion photographs that have the appearance of documentary photographs.

In addition to discussing Avedon's American West work, Weiley (1986) also discusses his early portrait work, typifying it as "confrontational" and "frontal, direct, with a single subject centered, staring directly out at the viewer" (p. 87). She explains that, in his earlier portraits, he undermined the glamor of the celebrities he photographed, stripped them of their masks, and "brought the mighty down to human scale, assassinating all possibility of grace or vanity" (p. 87).

All three critics compare the work of Avedon to the work of other photographers. Weiley makes the most use of in-depth comparisons, paying particular attention to similarities and more often to differences between Avedon's work and that of Robert Frank, August Sander, and Diane Arbus. In comparing Avedon with Frank, Sander, and Arbus, she describes the photographs of each and specifies how they are different from and similar to one another. Wilson (1985) makes comparative references between Avedon and a wide array of other individuals, most of whom are *not* photographers: Sam Shepard, Edward Curtis, Mathew Brady, August Sander, Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Evil Knievel, Salvador Dali, Elsa Schiaparelli, Charles James, Andy Warhol, Tom Wolfe, Calvin Klein, Georgia O'Keeffe, Ansel Adams, and Irving Penn.

⁴Weiley is not alone in her negative appraisal of Avedon's American West work. In a particularly vitriolic article, Richard Bolton (1987) compares Avedon's approach to police photography—"the format itself communicates guilt"—and argues strenuously that Avedon exploits his 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).

Discussion

The Importance of Description

As is evident in these three examples, description is a very important component of professional criticism. Most of Douglas Davis's review is descriptive, and all of the three articles include extensive description. If the descriptive information were deleted from these three articles, few words would remain. Each critic considers aspects of Avedon's subject matter, his use of the medium of photography, and the formal arrangement of his photographs. Each of the critics offers descriptive information about Avedon's past work as well as the exhibit under consideration. Each critic offers descriptive comparisons between Avedon and others: Davis and Weiley compare his work to that of other photographers, and Wilson compares Avedon to a myriad of people in the artworld and in popular culture.

Descriptive Writing

All three critics employ literary language. Their descriptions are lively and written in an engaging style. Weiley (1986), for example, is not content to write that Avedon makes portraits of celebrities; rather, she writes that he reveals "the double chins, enlarged pores, glazed eyes and sullen expressions of the rich, the powerful, the famous" (p. 87). Wilson (1985) does not merely describe that Avedon photographs people living in the West, but writes of their "rips and rashes and blood" (p. 7). Davis (1985) does not merely list miners among Avedon's subjects, but writes of one "tall and enigmatic," another "heavy with beard," and one with a face "painted with rock dust" (p. 83). Nor is he content to merely specify that some of the photographs are 5' × 10'; rather, he writes of standing "face to face with four grimy coal miners" (p. 82).

These critics are writers aware of their audiences. For example, Davis is writing for a mass circulation magazine, *Newsweek*. The opening phrase of his article is "In the thick of the crowd of portraits on display in Ft. Worth by famed fashion photographer Richard Avedon to document the American West, there is one immensely ambitious—and revealing—triptych" (p. 82). This one sentence is packed with descriptive information, written in a noncondescending way, for a general audience. Davis also communicates some of his experience of being at the exhibition with the phrase "in the thick of the crowd of portraits." That the triptych is "immensely ambitious and revealing" sets readers' expectations and arouses curiosity. This sentence is also a premise in Davis's interpretive thesis and ultimate appraisal of the exhibition.

It is apparent, in reading Wilson (1985), that he is quite conscious of his writing style. He uses a personal voice: for example, "also smudged, fudged, erased are the boundaries separating art and commerce, art and craft, art and architecture, art and life, and yes, art and fashion too. God knows, Avedon doesn't err on the side of glamour" (p. 7).

Internal and External Sources of Information

Much of the descriptive writing in these three essays is based on external contextual information in addition to perception of the photographs themselves. One would not know, simply on the basis of looking at the photographs, that Avedon was a famed fashion photographer, that this work was long-awaited, that it was different from the artist's past work, that it was commissioned in 1980 by the Amon Carter Museum of Ft. Worth where the show opened, that the exhibited photographs were selected from 17,000 negatives made during 752 shooting sessions.

Each of the three critics quotes Avedon. Each of them compares the exhibition to other photographs by Avedon and to the work of other photographers, artists, writers, and celebrities. This information is descriptive, informative, and enlightening, and it comes from a variety of sources including press releases, interviews with the artist, the catalogue of the exhibition, and knowledge of photography history, the history of art, and contemporary culture.

Description, Interpretation, and Evaluation

Each of these critics mixes descriptive information with his or her interpretations of the work. For Davis to write, for example, that Avedon made the photographs "to document the American West" is an interpretive claim, rather than a descriptive one, unless Davis is citing an intention stated by Avedon. Indeed, central to each of these critical essays are arguments as to whether the work is "documentary," "fiction," or "fashion." These are issues resolved by interpretive argument rather than by descriptive observation.

Logistically, it is as impossible to describe without interpreting as it is to interpret without describing. The relationship between describing and interpreting is circular, moving from whole to part and part to whole. It is like reading a sentence: The sentence makes sense depending on the meaning of each word, but the words only make sense according to the meaning of the sentence.

Literarily, it would be tedious to write and to read descriptive item after descriptive item, fact after fact, without some interpretive structure on which to hang the facts. These critics may have privately listed as many descriptive elements as possible, but they chose to publish only those that promised to be most interesting, informative, and relevant to their interpretive and evaluative conclusions.

Although there are variations in how these three critics have characterized the subject matter of Avedon's photographs, this particular subject is relatively simple. The subject matter of some art is apparently simple but actually very elusive and quite dependent on interpretation. Cindy Sherman's work (Hoy, 1987) provides several examples. Many of her artworks are photographs of herself. In one sense her subject matter, quite simply, is herself. She titles the black and white self-portraits made between 1977 and 1980 "Untitled Film Stills." In them she pictures herself, but as a woman in a wide variety of guises, from hitchhiker to housewife. Moreover, these pictures look like stills from old movies. In 1981 she made a series of "centerfolds" for which she posed clothed and in the manner of soft-porn magazine photographs. Identifying the subject matter of these pictures is not simply a matter of naming the obvious. In a *New York Times* review, Michael Brenson (1987) names the subject matter of the film still photographs "stock characters in old melodramas and suspense films." But Eleanor Heartney (1987), writing in *Afterimage*, claims that both groups of artworks directly refer to "the cultural construction of femininity." They are pictures of Cindy Sherman and pictures of Cindy Sherman disguised as others, and they are also pictures of a woman as women are represented in cultural artifacts, especially as pictured by male producers, directors, editors, and photographers. To simply identify them as "portraits" or "portraits of women" or "self-portraits" or "self-portraits of Cindy Sherman" would be inaccurate and in a sense would be to misidentify them. Clearly, in the case of Sherman's work, describing subject matter is an interpretive endeavor.

In the published criticism of Avedon's work under scrutiny here, the critics' descriptions are rarely value free. Weiley (1986) disapproves of the work and

slants her descriptions accordingly. She summarizes his choice of subjects as "the demented and the maimed." She interprets a sub-text of the work to be "mutilation," identifying "a fat nine-year-old cradling a rifle" and "two prisoners (one armless) displaying knife scars and large tattoos of Christ wearing a bleeding crown of thorns" before she concludes that he chose his subjects "solely for their strange physical characteristics" (pp. 88-89). Davis and Wilson, however, generally approve of the work, and their descriptions have a positive tone.

Conclusions

These three critics include much description in their writing. They describe both what is there and what is not there, drawing descriptive data from within the artwork they are treating and from external, contextual sources. When they describe, they use language that is literate, colorful, and provocative. Their descriptions inform readers about the life and career of the artist, their experiences of the exhibition, generalizations about the work, and detailed observations about particular images.

The descriptive observations of these three critics are also motivated: That is, they write to be read, to inform, and to convince. They are aware of what their readers know and don't know about the artworks being described. Davis is aware that most of his readers have not seen the work he is discussing and are unlikely ever to see it. The other critics assume more art knowledge on the part of their readers, but they are still careful to describe what is not before the eyes of their readers. Even when they write about images whose reproductions accompany their articles, they still point out what they want their readers to notice. They are aware that what is obvious to them might be invisible to a reader.

These critics' descriptions might also be motivated by an awareness that their critical writings are data for recorded art history. They are chronicling the present for the future. Some of today's criticism will become tomorrow's history; some of today's firsthand and immediate responses written as criticism of new work will eventually become part of the art historical accounts for future generations long after exhibitions of this work have been dismantled.

Their descriptions are also motivated by their desire to convince. Although there is much overlap in these three critics' descriptive observations about Avedon's photographs, there are also different inclusions and exclusions, different emphases, and considerable variance in the language they use to characterize the work. These critics attempt to convince their readers that their way of understanding Avedon's work is the best way, or at least a very good way. They persuade by means of their reasons and their rhetoric. Their descriptions are always linked to their interpretations and evaluations. Part of their persuasiveness is in their choices of what to describe and how to characterize it, and what to ignore. Their descriptions are consciously slanted toward their understanding and appraisals, but their slanted descriptions are not necessarily unfair or inaccurate descriptions.⁵

The way these critics describe is different from the descriptive activities

⁵Mr. Avedon is aware of critics' writings about his work and, in correspondence with the author of this study, objected to some of the writing of the critics cited, cautioning that "inaccuracies in descriptions become facts." He objects, for example, to Davis's (1985) claim that the work contains an "army of unemployed drifters" (p. 83). Avedon counters: "The 'army of unemployed drifters'

specified by some art educators for teaching art criticism. The critics cited in this study freely mix descriptions and judgments, and their descriptions of Avedon's work depend on their interpretations of it. However, Feldman's (1987) widely known method of teaching criticism, for example, requires students to describe first and to avoid interpretive inferences and judgments: "In description, the language of the critics should be as 'unloaded' as possible; it should not contain hints about the meaning or value of what is being described" (p. 471). The professional critics in this study depend on a base of broad contextual information when writing about Avedon. "Aesthetic scanning" (Hewett & Rush, 1987), another popular form of school art criticism, however, asserts: "Successful scanning can occur even though the teacher may know nothing about the work (its subject, its medium, who made it, when and where it was made, or whether art experts consider it 'good')" (p. 42).

That there are discrepancies between professional practice and what art students and teachers are asked to do is no surprise. Some activities of professional art critics may be inappropriate for the classroom. More comparative research about professional practice and school practice, however, would be beneficial for the field. If the gap between the two is wide, attempts to close it might improve strategies for teaching and learning art criticism.

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numbers seven. Of the more than 100 portraits in the book, they were the exceptions among the working people and those actively looking for work. Hardly an army." He also sees his identification as a "famed fashion photographer" as limiting since much of his work is portraiture, including five books of portraits and reportage. He fears that this present study "continues to add fuel to an old (Marxist?) fire: This East Coast, successful man takes advantage of, exploits, and robs the humanity of his subjects. This *fashion photographer!*" (emphasis his).

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