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Criticizing Art with Children

Terry Barrett
The Ohio State University

This chapter is about engaging school children in the criticism of art. The first part is based on traditional theoretical research and explains what criticism is; the second part is based on action research and explains how children may be taught to do art criticism. During the past five years the author has served as an art critic-in-education, similar to an artist-in residence, under the sponsorship of the Ohio Arts Council. In his capacity, as critic-in-education, the author has visited over fifty schools in Ohio, including rural, urban, suburban, private, and public schools, and has taught art criticism to classes of children from pre-school, including three-year olds, through high school. The children have included "students at risk" of dropping out, gifted and talented, the cognitively and emotionally challenged, and children experiencing hearing impairments. These sessions with children have been documented with audio tape, video tape, children's writing samples, and the author's observations. This data is the basis of the latter part of this chapter.

The Theory

Art criticism is informed talk and writing about art for increased understanding and appreciation of art. The outcome of doing criticism, or of reading criticism, should be what Harry Broudy (1972) calls "enlightened cherishing," the compound concept that acknowledges feeling as well as thought without dichtomizing the two. Criticism is a complex activity (Geahigan, 1982), but Weitz's (1964) four categories of the activities of criticism — description, interpretation, evaluation, and theory — have proven useful for many years, and are used in modified forms in methods of teaching art criticism, most notably Feldman's (1984). After twenty-five years, the categories also still prove to be current in the practice of contemporary critics (Barrett, in press; Lee & Barrett, in press). These four categories of critical activities are used in this chapter to make the complex act of criticizing art more understandable in itself and more teachable to children.

Describing art (Barrett, 1990, Chapter 2) is pointing out and

listing facts gathered from internal and external sources of information about a work of art. Internal description is based on what can be observed in the work; external information is knowledge not observable in the work, but information pertinent to the art object such as historical facts about the world at the time that the artwork was made and the culture in which the work emerged. Although some methods of criticism in art education (e.g., Feldman, 1984; Hewett and Rush, 1987) request that students limit their descriptions to only what they can observe in the artwork, it is asserted here that a work of art cannot be comprehended adequately without placing it in its larger social context. Further, this is normal procedure for professional critics, and if children are taught to contextualize art, it brings art criticism done in schools closer to art criticism done in the world.

Description is an activity of transposing paint or marble to verbal language. Usual and useful subcategories of descriptive activities are commenting on: subject matter — persons, places, or things depicted in the work; form — how the work is arranged and composed; and medium — the materials of which the work is made and how they have been handled by the artist.

Descriptions are important because they inform viewers about what can be noticed and what might not have been noticed. Descriptions form the basis of interpretations, and if descriptions are inaccurate or insufficient, ensuing interpretations suffer. In principle, descriptions are true or false, accurate or inaccurate, although in practice, it is difficult to be certain about some descriptive observations. The merit of descriptions is based on relevancy; that is, on whether the descriptions further the viewer's understanding and appreciation of the art in question. Descriptive relevancy, however, is based on interpretation, and in fact, description and interpretation cannot be easily separated. In general, however, descriptions are factual and interpretations speculative.

To interpret a work of art is to figure out and tell another what the work is about (Barrett, 1990, Chapter 5). Interpretations are arguments based on descriptive evidence from within the work and from contextual information about the work. Good interpretations are objective in the sense that they refer to the object, the artwork, and have evidence in their support which other people can observe and with which they can agree. There is no one right interpretation for a work of art, but some interpretations are better than others.

Interpretations are judged according to whether they are enlightening, insightful, illuminating, reasonable, relevant, and backed by evidence; conversely, interpretations can be dull, factually wrong, without evidence for their support, and lack insight. Different interpretations arise from different ideologies, such as feminism, for example, or religious beliefs. Different reasonable interpretations of the same work of art are valuable because they can bring many facets of the work to life for viewers.

It is maintained here that interpretation is the most significant aspect of criticism, and educationally the most important. Other art educators (e.g, Feldman, 1973; Feinstein, 1988) agree with this claim. Description is a prelude to interpretation, and a thorough description and thoughtful interpretation render a judgment rather easily. Judgment without interpretation is irresponsive and irresponsible.

A complete judgment of a work of art entails a clear appraisal with reasons for the appraisal based on explicit criteria. In practice, however, critics often offer appraisals and reasons for them but may leave their criteria implicit. Judgments, like interpretations, are arguments put forth by critics. They attempt to persuade others to see an artwork the way they see it, and to value it similarly. Like good interpretations, adequate evaluations are objective in the sense that they clearly relate to the object of art being considered and are shown by the critic to relate. Judgments are provisional and open to challenge and to change. Different judgments of the same work by several critics can expand knowledge and appreciation of the artwork being judged. Critics judging many works of art by different artists face the difficult decision of applying one set of criteria to all, or letting different artworks indicate by what different criteria they are best judged. The first choice provides consistency, but also approaches dogmatism; the second choice is tolerant of diversity, but may lead to wishy-washiness.

In his analysis of criticism, Weitz found that judgment is neither necessary nor sufficient for criticism. That is, some critics do criticism by describing or interpreting, and not by judging, and their work still counts as criticism. Criticism which only renders judgments is insufficient as criticism. This is an important point to remember, especially since so much of criticism in popular media is judgmental, and because so many studio critiques are judgmental (Barrett, 1988). Art teachers and art students may think that

criticism is judgment, or that the goal of criticism is judgment, and that description and interpretation are merely a means to that end.

Critics, in the course of criticizing, formulate theory about such questions as how art should be judged, what art is, and what is its value to society. Under current rubrics of art education, such theorizing has been placed in the realm of the aesthetics rather than criticism (e.g, Clark, Day, & Greer, 1988). Nevertheless, critics do theorize in the course of criticizing art because questions arise which require theorizing — much new art challenges older aesthetic theory, and critics are then faced with theorizing anew about what should count as art. Aesthetic theories, like interpretations and judgments, are based on argument; unlike interpretations and judgments which attend to specific artworks, aesthetic theories account for all of art or several examples, rather than the particular work of art. Aesthetic problems and critical problems overlap in discussions of works of art, and recommendations for dealing with problems of aesthetics in the classroom are made by other authors (e.g. Erickson, 1986; Lankford, 1990; Hagaman, 1990; Stewart, 1990).

Professional critics (Barrett, 1989) usually do not first describe, then interpret, then evaluate, and finally theorize. They may begin with any one of these activities, and they often mix types of statements in the same sentence. Critics write for audiences. They do not usually write for the artist whose work they are criticizing but rather for a much larger group of people, such as the readers of the *New York Times* or *Art in America*. They often write about new art, or old art shown in new contexts, that usually has not been seen by their readers. They consider what their readers may already know and may want to know. Critics attempt to persuade readers to their views by citing evidence and by their literary use of language. Because criticism is persuasive argument, and always open to revision, criticism can and should be criticized.

The learning theory upon which the following experiences with children are based is cognitive developmental theory (e.g., Parsons, 1989). The experiences are guided by the novice to expert paradigm (e.g., Koroscik, 1990). Given what professional critics do, the author sought to find out what children can be taught to do regarding the criticism of art within their elementary years of schooling.

The Practice

Talking About Art

Starting with subject matter when asking young children to describe art is sensible because it is where they most often choose to start. Picasso's *Lobster and Cat*, a 1965 painting by Picasso, available through Shorewood prints, is a favorite choice of the author's for descriptive talk by groups of all ages, even pre-schoolers and kindergartners. The painting is an expressionistic oil of a cat and a lobster fighting. The paint is thickly applied with apparent rapidity. The picture is representational but abstract, and its subject matter is somewhat difficult to recognize. When leading critical discussions about this painting, the author usually starts with the question, "What do you see here?" Most everyone sees that animals are fighting, but from young children he has received such answers as a raccoon and a crab fighting. These answers are descriptively wrong, and the author usually softly responds to such answers with "Yes, they look like they are fighting, but no....it's not a crab and it's not a raccoon." Eventually children in the group will correctly identify the animals as a cat and a lobster.

That descriptions can be wrong is a simple but important theoretical point. It counters a tendency of adults to allow and reinforce any responses that children have when talking about art, even mistaken responses. It counters false beliefs that talk about art is subjective, and that there are no right answers, only irrefutable personal responses. Pedagogically, how one handles incorrect or inappropriate responses to art is another matter — psychological factors come into play, and good teachers are well equipped to appropriately deal with wrong answers from children without hurting their feelings or discouraging them from attempting better answers.

After identifying other aspects of the subject matter, like where they are located, the author asks "Who is going to win?" Most say the lobster. He then asks for reasons why. Then the children's answers are based in the form of the painting, and children are motivated to do a thorough formal analysis. They defend their choice of the lobster by pointing out how Picasso has painted the picture. The lobster is painted with definite long strokes of paint, whereas the cat is painted with squiggly strokes. The lobster looks strong because it is very angular and geometric, metallic and robotic.

Picasso has placed the cat backing off the canvas. The expression on its face is frightened. The lobster takes up more space on the canvas. Its diagonal direction of attack is more forceful than the cat's position of retreat.

One could start with formal questions, such as: What colors do you see? What shapes? What kind of brush strokes? But by starting with what is going on in the painting's narrative, the children are better motivated to discuss the painting's form. Form is not observed in an interpretive vacuum, but in the context of the painting's content.

As descriptions can be wrong, so too can interpretations. Lately, children are seeing "Satanism" in quite a few paintings, to take an extreme example of faulty interpretations. Children often offer inappropriate interpretations with their penchant for associational thinking and storytelling — "My uncle has a cat like that one, and...." Such interpretations are inappropriate because they lead attention away from Picasso's painting toward the child's biography. In these situations, children can be redirected to the painting — "What about Picasso's cat?" or "How is Picasso's cat different than your uncle's?"

Competing interpretations are more interesting to deal with. A class of fifth graders noticed the figures depicted in a painting of hockey players on ice by a German expressionist. The faces of the players are expressionistically painted, but the players look as if they might be wearing makeup, seem to have busts and hips wider than men's, and are in graceful poses not usually associated with ice hockey, a sport known for its roughness and violence. The children came up with different, competing interpretations during the discussion: The painting was German and done in the 1930's; perhaps women played hockey in Germany then. Perhaps the artist thinks that women should play hockey and is depicting what the game might look like if they did. Perhaps the painting is showing the gracefulness of sports and presenting the hockey players as dancers. Their interpretations are different, but each is sensible, and the students offered reasons in their support. The students were comfortable with their varieties of interpretations, and the author let the ambiguity of the painting remain. He did, however, explain that if they wanted more certainty, they could *research* the painting to find out more about the painter and his other works that might provide them with a more accurate and confident interpretation of this

particular painting.

The basic interpretive question (Danto, 1981) is "What is this about?" Variations and permutations of the question are endless when applied to specific artworks: "Why are these hockey players feminine?" "Why is this painting (*Guernica)* so violent?" "Based on these paintings, what is Magritte's view of the world?" "What do Bearden's collages say about being black in America?"

Different Works of Art

In addition to twentieth century American and European paintings, sculptures, photographs, and other works from art museums, especially including art by women and African American artists, the author has also used artifacts selected from children's everyday environments (cf. Chapman, 1978; Lanier, 1982). These have included such things as TV commercials (annual CLIO award winners available on videotape), *Batman*, the movie, ads torn from old issues of magazines in school libraries, "Air Jordan" t-shirts featuring the basketball star Michael Jordan and college sweatshirts that some of the children happened to be wearing, and cereal boxes and teddy bears which young children brought to school.

When using magazine ads, the author randomly passes them out to the members of class. By obtaining the magazines from the school library, he is assured of using magazines developmentally appropriate, to which the children have frequent access, which have ads that are marketed for children. He passes the ads out, pre-torn and pre-selected to save time, but allows children to ask to trade their ad for a different ad so that they are not obligated to the one they receive. He uses the ads, sometimes asking for descriptive statements and then interpretation. As a variation, students are asked to answer two questions about their ads: What is true about it? What is false about it? Another set of questions is: What is being sold? (That is, in addition to the product itself, what values are being promoted?) To whom? How? The children concentrate on how the form of the ads, as well as the language and the subject matter, delivers the messages. The author always asks that they back their assertions with reasons.

On a day when the author visited an eighth grade classroom in a rural section of Ohio close to the Michigan border, two children

were wearing University of Michigan sweatshirts, each with a different design. He asked them to stand in front of the room so that everyone could see and talk about their shirts. He taught the students to separate the denotations of the shirts from their connotations (Barthes, 1971). Denotations of words are ordinary definitions found in dictionaries; connotations are suggested meanings and overtones of meaning. Perrine (1977) provides linguistic examples: "home" denotes the place where one lives but connotes security and comfort; "childlike" and "childish" both denote "characteristic of a child," but "childlike" connotes meekness and innocence, and "childish" suggests pettiness, willfulness, and temper tantrums. In applying the concepts to images, identifying denotations is parallel to description, and identifying connotations, parallel to interpretation.

The group identified all the denotations on the sweatshirts, one by one: the colors yellow (maize) and blue, a football helmet, the words "Michigan," "Wolverines," and "go Blue," some words which they had difficulty reading such as Veritas and "scientia," the number 1878, and a gas lamp. The word "Michigan" appeared in different typefaces, and the students interpreted the different connotations of the style of the letters: one letter style suggested scholarship, another athletic competition. The students were able to decipher the gas lamp and Latin words as part of the official emblem of the university but could not determine the denotations of the Latin words; interestingly enough, however, they easily read their connotative meaning — tradition, antiquity, and academic sophistication. They were interested to note the similarities of the shirts — both of the same university, common colors, same name — and also how radically different were their connotations, one shirt being so scholarly, another so macho, as if they came from two different schools rather than the same.

Fourth graders in a small Ohio town were able to construct the techniques of narrative, Hollywood filmmaking by analyzing selected scenes of the recent "Batman" movie on videotape in their art class. They learned to descriptively identify such formal elements as lengths of shots, cuts, camera angles, camera movements; movement of actors, and actors and cameras moving simultaneously; back, key, and fill lighting; sounds of dialogue, voice-over, ambience, music, and sound effects. While students watched for visual effects, the sound was turned down so that they could better concentrate on technique and momentarily ignore the

story line. They counted the number of shots per minute in a romantic scene and those in an action scene and discussed the different tempos of each. They also timed the length of shots with their digital watches, noting that some were less than a second and some almost a minute in length before a cut was made to another shot. The author and their teacher encouraged them to watch television at home that evening with more critical distance than they would otherwise.

Writing About Art

Challenged by Wilson's (1986) request that children be taught to write about art as well as talk about it, and to reinforce the notion that critics are writers, the author tried some writing experiences with groups of children. To compensate for the lack of time in the art curriculum and the considerable time it takes young children to write, the author has used two different writing activities, one simulated, and the other actual but abbreviated.

When a class of children has gone to an art event, the author has gone into the classroom, announced that he was a critic and that he had to write a review of the event for the daily newspaper, and explained that they were to tell him what to write and how to write it. He provides them with a word count and a certain number of paragraphs, tells them that they will have only one accompanying photograph with their review, and that most of the readers will not have seen the event the children will be criticizing.

For example, the author recently accompanied the children of an urban elementary school in Columbus, Ohio, to see "The American Indian Dance Theater" in an hour-long performance in a downtown theater. Two days later the author visited the school and worked with fourth and fifth grade classes. He asked a fourth grade class first to remember all they could about the performance. When someone said "feathers" he wrote "costumes" on the blackboard and had the group remember all they could about the costuming in the performance. When someone said "bells" he turned that into the larger category of "sound," and they then listed the vocal and instrumental sounds of the concert. They also listed movements, stage sets and lighting, and performers. This was about a ten to fifteen minute descriptive activity.

To engage the children in interpretive thought about the performance, the author asked them to note what they now knew about native Americans that they didn't know before they went to the concert. He also asked them to relate, on the basis of the performance, what was important to native American peoples. The topics they discussed were animals, birds, spirits, gods, prayer, and dance. The children also discussed how the Indians' dancing was different from their own in that it was used to praise gods, request help from gods, and seek healing, as well as provide fun and entertainment. This discussion took about twenty to twenty-five minutes.

In the final ten minutes of the session, referring to the notes all over the blackboard, the group decided how they would organize the review they were pretending to write for the newspaper. The author needed to remind the students that they were writing for people who hadn't and wouldn't see the performance. He also praised the students for offering effective words and phrases, stressing that critics had to be good writers.

In another class at the school, after the students had orally described and interpreted the Indian dances, the author asked the group to transpose their enthusiasm for the event into why they thought it was good. He reminded them that they were pretending to write their review for others who had not seen the performance. They could not simply assert "It was great!"; they had to tell someone why. Two clusters of reasons they offered were that it was very enjoyable to watch and that it taught them things about other cultures that they did not know before. In a fifth grade class, the author skipped the evaluative discussion and, instead, asked each of the children to recall their one favorite moment of the entire performance and to write about it in one paragraph. This writing experience took about eight minutes. The students, if they volunteered, read their paragraphs aloud to their classmates. The following are exact quotes from two of the paragraphs which they wrote; the first by Croix Galipault, the second by Lauren Flemister:

> One of the most fantastic shows are coming to Columbus. It's called "American Indian Dance Theatre." So many different delighting dances will be shown. My favorite dance was the "Hoop Dance." One Indian starts with one hoop and ends up with about twenty at the end. He puts them every witch way around his body to form different animal shapes. At the end he has two 3 dementinal circles and about five hoops left over.

> On Monday morning November 12, '90, at the Ohio Theatre we saw a Indian Dance Company. They have amazingly detailed costumes with a wide variety of colors. They danced with sharp, quick movements. They had neat music. They played drums, bells, and they sang. The lights were also well done. It had a night set with a moon. They had a hoop dance, grass dance, circle dance, and shawl dance, and a couple more. I liked the whole show and I was watching and listening the whole time. The hoop dance was magic and I enjoyed that. But my favorite dance was the one with everyone, the circle dance. Indians really love the earth. You can tell by the dances. If it ever comes back to Columbus I will see it again. I give it a thumbs up!

In different writing exercises involving single paragraphs, the author used large, good quality reproductions of paintings by Rene Magritte from a monthly calendar. He divided the classes into four groups according to the tables they were seated at, and gave one reproduction to each group at the table. He asked the students in their small group to observe for five minutes all they could about their painting, so that they could tell the whole class about it. The children from each table reported their observations to the class, and class members added to the observations of the "table-groups." He presented three more Magritte paintings, one at a time, and led the group in an interpretive discussion. He then asked each child to write one paragraph on "The World of Magritte." Charkeeta, a fourth grader using invented spelling, wrote the following:

> I can see that when he makes his painting its like a puzzle. Its like a mystury you have to try and find what he put in. I think that his pitchers are real pure and like pure water. I think that he sees two halves, the first is bright and coliful the second is dreery but ok.

Molly Decamp, a fifth grader, wrote this:

> Rene Magritte sees the world in a different way than you and I. He has more than just an ordinary eye. A mountainside to you and I looks like an eagle spreading his wings to him. Only Rene Magritte would draw a painting of a painting of a scene. What other artist would draw a woman in a peach or a man thinking of an apple. Rene Magritte sees the world with a different eye.

> Mr. Paul Hammock, Molly's classroom teacher, was enthused about the process of doing criticism, and was moved by the work of Magritte. While his students were writing at their tables, he

> wrote this at his desk: Rene Magritte has a curious twentieth century view of the world. He is not painting to describe his world but rather to help the viewer feel his world. While his paintings are fairly bold and simplistic, they also are clearly surrealistic. They have a symmetry that is easy to see, but his subject matter haunts the viewer. Why does the key burn? Why does a large green apple float over a man's head? Magritte's paintings clearly stretch our imagination to try to capture the unreality of our reality. Is our world real or is it illusion? Magritte's rather sober paintings point to the latter.

Using one of Magritte's paintings, in a variation of this writing project in a different class, the author asked one group to write a descriptive paragraph, another an interpretive paragraph, a third an evaluative paragraph, and a fourth, a summary paragraph about Magritte.

Conclusion

Admittedly, the examples of children doing criticism given in this chapter are unique, led by a professor who specializes in criticism, and who, in the schools, enjoys the status of special visitor. In these situations he had advantages that regular classroom teachers and art teachers do not enjoy. He was teaching a relatively light schedule, and did not face the many day to day difficulties teachers face, especially art teachers. Nonetheless, there is evidence here about what children can do regarding criticism in school settings. There is also evidence that they enjoy doing it.

The fourth and fifth grade children who talked and wrote about Magritte and the American Indian Dance Theatre spent, without a break, one hour and twenty minutes doing criticism. This is a record amount of time for the author to have spent doing criticism with children. When he entered the first morning class, he expressed trepidation to the teacher over the length of time he was scheduled and asked her permission to end early if the session proved to be too long. He broke the session into two parts, the first dealing with the Indian dance performance and, the second, with Magritte. The children stayed on task the whole time. At the end of the hour and twenty minutes, the teacher said that she wished *more* time had been scheduled.

All of the other sessions reported here were full class periods,

ranging from forty to fifty minutes depending on the individual schedules of the schools. During that time, the children only engaged in critical activities, not art-making activities. At the end of a full session of talking about twentieth century paintings, Sarah, a fourth grader in a Toledo area public school, longingly sighed to no one in particular, "Oh, I could just do this forever!" It is the author's experience, reinforced many times, that children enjoy doing art criticism.

Classroom teachers as well as art teachers have become excited about the possibility of having their students talk critically about art and write art criticism. Art teachers need to determine how much time they are willing to give to critical activities, and how long their particular classes of students can attentively criticize art. But these sessions by the author have at least shown that in certain situations under certain circumstances, children can thoughtfully talk and write about art for long periods of time.

Author's notes

[1] *An immediate limitation of having children write about art during an art class is the clock time children consume while writing. Art teachers are severely pressed for time in the curriculum and are hesitant to devote their few allotted minutes to the teaching of critical writing. This objection can be eliminated by asking the classroom teacher, rather than the art teacher, to have the children write about works of art in addition to the topics about which they ordinarily write.*

[2] *February and March sales of monthly calendars in bookstores and especially art museum shops are a very economical source of good art reproductions. For plentiful smaller reproductions, weekly appointment calendars provide about fifty reproductions. The Museum of Modern Art, The Art Institute of Chicago, and the Metropolitan Museum, among others, offer mail order catalogues.*

[3] *When working in schools, the author has frequently seen classroom teachers spontaneously raise their hands along with their students to answer critical questions. They enjoy the process and want to participate in criticism.*

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