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# Critics on Criticism

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TERRY BARRETT

This article presents the thoughts of several contemporary professional publishing critics concerning what they do when they criticize art. Their thoughts are especially offered to art teachers to add to their knowledge base about art criticism, a discipline that engenders strongly held beliefs and sometimes unfounded biases. Some of the critics disagree with each other, but despite occasional differences of opinion, critics generally agree about what it is they do when they criticize art. Their thoughts may be corrective to some notions of art criticism and are presented in this spirit. Implications for teaching art criticism are offered at the conclusion of the article.

## Love, Hate, and Criticism

Several critics are uncomfortable with the term "critic." René Ricard, a critic and poet, stated in *Artforum* that "in point of fact I'm not an art critic. I am an enthusiast. I like to drum up interest in artists who have somehow inspired me to be able to say something about their work."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Lucy Lippard, a prolific critic who has authored several books of criticism, says that she never liked the term—"Its negative connotations place the writer in fundamental antagonism to artists."<sup>2</sup>

Many critics are sensitive to the negative connotations of "criticism" and explicitly assert their positive sentiments about art and their profession of criticizing it. Robert Rosenblum, a free-lance critic in New York City, says: "You presumably write about works of art because you love them. I don't write out of hate. I write out of love, and that's what I think criticism should primarily be."<sup>3</sup> Ricard agrees, saying: "Why give publicity to something you hate?" Rosenblum states: "We just want to write about art and look at it and talk about it."

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Rosalind Krauss, a founder of the critical journal *October*, says:

Presumably one gets involved with this rather particular, rather esoteric form of expression because one has had some kind of powerful experience with it—and that presumably this powerful experience then makes you want to go on and think about it and learn about it and write about it. But you must have at some point been ravished, been seduced, been taken in.<sup>4</sup>

These thoughts of critics about their love of art might help offset the generally negative associations the term “criticism” evokes.

### Critics' Definitions of “Criticism”

A. D. Coleman, one of the first and most enduring critics to consider recent photography seriously, defines his critical work as “the intersecting of photographic images and words.” He adds: “I merely look closely at and into all sorts of photographic images and attempt to pinpoint in words what they provoke me to feel and think and understand.”<sup>5</sup> Donald Kuspit thinks of criticism somewhat similarly. He wants to know why “we respond to this artist's image of a Madonna and child rather than that artist's image? Why do we like a certain texture and not another texture?” He goes on to say that “it's part of the critic's task, perhaps his most difficult task, to try to articulate the effects that the work of art induces in us, these very complicated subjective states.”<sup>6</sup>

Roberta Smith, a critic who writes frequently for *The New York Times*, says that sometimes her criticism is “just like pointing at things. One of the best parts of it is that occasionally, maybe more than occasionally, you get to write about things that haven't been written about yet, new paintings by new artists you know, or new work by artists who aren't known.” She adds that criticism is “a revelation of myself, me thinking out loud about how to look at an object, and hopefully giving other people ideas about how to look at an object, but I also hope that I get people to go out and look at art—and think about it. Sometimes it's just like pointing at things.”<sup>7</sup>

Lawrence Alloway, the recently deceased critic who named Pop Art, defined the art critic's function as “the description, interpretation, and evaluation of new art.” He particularly stressed the new: “The subject of art criticism is new art or at least recent art. It is usually the first written response.” He understood art criticism to be short-term art history and information available at the moment. It is “the closeness in time of the critical text and the making of the work of art which gives art criticism its special flavor.” He distinguished between the roles of historians and critics: “Though critics enjoy the art of the past, their publications on it are less likely to be decisive than those of art historians.” Alloway stressed the importance of description, wanting to maintain a balance between describing

and evaluating. For him the critic's function is more toward "description and open-mindedness rather than premature evaluation and narrow specialization." He wanted to stay away from saying "good and bad."<sup>8</sup> There is a fuller discussion elsewhere of Alloway's criticism and implications for teaching art criticism.<sup>9</sup>

Robert Pincus-Witten, past editor of *Artforum* and a current writer for *Flash Art*, agrees with the necessity of dealing with the new: "I see the critical task as being essentially that of pointing to the new . . . the real issue at hand is not new modes of criticism but what happened to painting and sculpture during the last few years."<sup>10</sup>

Andy Grundberg, a former photography critic for *The New York Times*, recognizes and dismisses "connoisseurship" as a type of criticism. He rejects it because it is based on personal taste and because connoisseurs often merely assert conclusions: "Criticism's task is to make arguments, not pronouncements."<sup>11</sup>

Critics differ on the importance of judging art. Although Alloway and other critics minimize judgment, Clement Greenberg, likely the most influential critic of American art in this century, says, "You don't choose your response to art. It's given to you. You have your nerve, your *chutzpah*, and then you work hard on seeing how to tell the difference between good and bad. That's all I know."<sup>12</sup> He goes on to assert that "the first obligation of an art critic is to deliver value judgments." He is quite insistent on the point: "You can't get around without value judgments. People who don't make value judgments are dullards. Having an opinion is central to being interesting—unless you're a child." Smith concurs less adamantly: "You have to write about what you think. Opinion is more important, or equally as important, as description." She adds that "you also define yourself as a critic in terms of what you don't like."<sup>13</sup>

Arthur Danto, an aesthete and critic, rails against any orthodox Modernist critic who would tell us, "*Don't* talk about subject matter or the artist's life and times; *don't* use impressionistic language or describe how a work makes you feel; *do* give an exhaustive account of the work's physical details; *do* pass judgment on its esthetic quality and historical importance."<sup>14</sup> He thinks it very important to talk about subject matter and he argues that it is time for art to be about something besides itself.

Critics sometimes predict future directions in art. In a review of a new show of the Surrealist André Breton, for example, Peter Plagens, art critic for *Newsweek* magazine, foretells the future: "Already there are signs of neosurrealism creeping into the art world. . . . So far, the new style has been a little timid. But don't be surprised if, with a little boost from the end-of-the-century *Zeitgeist*, surrealism makes a serious comeback."<sup>15</sup>

Joanna Frueh, a feminist critic, speaks eloquently for the need for intuition in criticism:

Art criticism, like other disciplines that privilege the intellect, is generally deprived of the spontaneous knowing of intuition-of knowledge derived from the senses, and experience as well as the mind. Nerves connect throughout the body, conduct sensations, bits of knowledge to the brain. Blood pumping to and from the heart flows everywhere inside us. Knowing is being alive, wholly, not just intellectually. It is a recognition of human being, the intelligence of the body. The intellectual may feel enslaved in matter. If only she could escape from the body. But the mind will not fly unless we embrace the body as a path to freedom.

She asserts the value of and need for feminist thinking in art criticism:

System and hierarchy. They withhold (information). Everything in its place. Discuss an artist's work chronologically. Picasso was more influential than Braque. 'Straight' thinking. Feminist thinking is the curves, bends, angles, and irregularities of thought, departures from prescribed patterns of art historical logic. To be 'straight' is to be upright-erect-phallic-virtuous-heterosexual, but feminists turn away from the straight and narrow. Deviants without their heads on straight. Logocentrism produces enclosure, tight arguments. It sews up the fabric(ations) of discourse. Feminists with loose tongues embroider, patch new and worn pieces together, re-fabricate.<sup>16</sup>

### Critical Arrogance and Humility

Sometimes people attribute to critics snobbery, pomposity, and arrogance. Critics are often portrayed this way in popular culture, perhaps deservedly. Neither critics nor artists are necessarily kind people. In one of his critical essays, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe reminds us that the Greeks who gave us concepts of democracy and aesthetics were slave owners.<sup>17</sup> In a two-part series of articles on the editing of the influential critical journal *Artforum*, Janet Malcolm writes that Rosalind Krauss "is quick, sharp, cross, tense, bracingly derisive, fearlessly uncharitable—makes one's own 'niceness' seem somehow dreary and anachronistic. She infuses fresh life and meaning into the old phrase about not suffering fools gladly."<sup>18</sup>

Many critics, however, express humility about being critics. Peter Plagens is a critic and artist who used to live and work in California before some years ago moving to the East Coast. Describing his experiences of visiting New York to determine whether he wanted to write for *Artforum*, published in New York City, he wrote [emphases his]: "*They know more than I do*; deference seems called for at all times." After a week in New York, he complains of the tediousness of "listening to somebody's opinion of *this* writer's interpretation of *that* critic's opinion of *this* artist's influence on *that* artist's early work." He candidly admits his insecurities: "I wonder if I've ever had a real art idea."<sup>19</sup>

Patricia Phillips acknowledges the difficulty she has in writing criticism:

This is a challenging time to write about art. There are so many ambient conditions that affect and influence it. Art is often so short-lived, so conditional, that when viewing it is like coming to terms with a sensation, a memory or fast-flying thought. In the here-today-gone-tomorrow world of contemporaneous ideas, the critic frequently writes about an object or installation that has disappeared—extinguished like an ordinary event or a single day.<sup>20</sup>

Coleman began writing photography criticism precisely because he felt he didn't understand photographs or the effect they were having on our society. When he began writing about photographs, he was a drama critic for *The Village Voice*. He approached photography as one wanting to know more about it rather than as an expert. He "came to feel there might be some value to threshing out, in public and in print, some understandings of the medium's role in our lives."<sup>21</sup>

Gilbert-Rolfe worries about being wrong, and even worse, influentially wrong, in his published criticism: "It may be the case that your interpretation of the work is entirely wrong but conceivably so influential as to color the way in which the work is seen even by succeeding generations, so that you may in fact both be the one to recognize the importance of the work and the person responsible for consigning it to infinite misreading."<sup>22</sup>

Linda Burnham, who primarily writes about performance art, says that "anyone who calls him/herself a critic can look back over a very checkered career, propelled by very little encouragement from anyone."<sup>23</sup> Plagens, reflecting on his career as a critic and as an artist, also expresses doubt and resentment about his critical efforts: "At best, I'm seeing through the game-playing, and it's tedious; at worst, I'm just tired of being a handmaiden to other people's work."<sup>24</sup>

### Critics and Their Audiences

Critics are very aware that they write for readers of newspapers, magazines, journals, and books. They slant how they write depending on whom they think they are writing for because they are concerned with reaching their audiences. Lippard, for example, would like to extend her readership beyond the limits of the art world. She says, "As a middle-class, college educated propagandist, I rack my brain for ways to communicate with working-class women. I've had fantasies about peddling socialist feminist art comics on Lower East Side street corners, even making it into the supermarkets."<sup>25</sup>

Patrice Koelsch is dedicated to increasing multicultural awareness in the artworld and thinks what we most need in democratic communities are

"living demonstrations of authentic critical inquiry." She especially thinks it important to demonstrate to ordinary citizens the process of thinking critically because of recent attacks on art by politicians such as Senator Jesse Helms and 1992 presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan. Koelsch wants critics to enlarge the scope of their communities and audiences by writing op-ed pieces for people who do not read the art press. She exhorts critics "to practice more honest, more informed, more engaged (and engaging) criticism." To reach wider audiences, she believes that criticism has to change: "It has traditionally been a voice of authority: purportedly omniscient, objective, and capable of discerning universal truths and values." Criticism as it has been practiced "invites the reader to observe the rational processes of the properly educated, appropriately situated, implicitly privileged writer," and this is alienating to the reader and counterproductive in effecting change. She cautions her fellow critics when they write about culturally diverse art to "be aware of our own tendencies to interpret the meaning and to ascribe value to it as it satisfies our own expectations of what that work should be."<sup>26</sup>

As a critic publishing in a daily newspaper, Smith sees herself "constantly talking to readers in a kind of immediate way. You can say one thing one week, and another thing another week. You don't have to say everything at once. You don't have to be right all the time." To repeat, she says that criticism "is a revelation of myself, me thinking out loud about how to look at an object, and hopefully giving other people ideas about how to look at an object, but I also hope that I get people to go out and look at art—and think about it."<sup>27</sup> Rosenblum says that "you like language, and you like things to see, and you try to put them together in a way that teaches what you're looking at, and you hope that this will be communicated to an audience."<sup>28</sup> He sees an advantage in not having to write for a daily paper in that he can't cover everything, so he chooses to write about art about which he is most enthused.

### Difficult Criticism

A frequent complaint about critical writing is that some or much of it is too difficult to read and too hard to understand. Malcolm says about Krauss's critical writing, for example, that it has a "hard-edged, dense opacity; it gives no quarter, it is utterly indifferent to the reader's contemptible little cries for help."<sup>29</sup> About reading *Artforum*, Plagens writes: "Tried to read three issues of *Artforum* on the plane coming in, got through one part of one article before my head hurt."<sup>30</sup>

Gilbert-Rolfe acknowledges that there is a general feeling that criticism should not be difficult and that some people think art "really isn't difficult at all, but is made difficult by critics in the same way that ordinary people, with good reason, often suspect that the law itself is straightforward but is

made difficult by lawyers."<sup>31</sup> He does not agree with such a position, however, and defends the difficulty of criticism based on the difficulty of art: "Art and its criticism are difficult whether one likes it or not." He sees art as purposively challenging and difficult.

Nonetheless, some critics are calling for greater clarity in critical writing. In an editorial Steven Durland of *High Performance*, a West Coast magazine devoted to performance art, very adamantly and with some sarcasm calls for clear communication by critics, especially those writing criticism that is theoretical:

If you theorists out there rally care about the things you are theorizing about, then *tell it. WORD*. Most people are trying to develop theories on how to pay the rent. They don't have time to figure out what someone is talking about when it requires more than a ten-year-old paperback dictionary. They don't hate theorists, they just don't have time. If you're the one with some answers about how to make things work, and you can tell it, you'll be more famous than Madonna. You won't even *need* tenure. And people will love you for it. Trust me.<sup>32</sup>

As inspiration for her writing, Lippard keeps a postcard over her desk that shows a little black girl holding an open book and grinning broadly. The caption on the card reads: "Forge simple words that even the children can understand."<sup>33</sup>

### Criticizing Criticism

Critics often disagree with each other, sometimes quite harshly. John Coplans, founding editor of *Artforum*, recalls: "When I was editor of *Artforum*, I had half a dozen editors on my board. They were always quarreling with each other. They all hated each other. They were strong people, all academically very well trained, all extremely knowledgeable, the most experienced writers and critics in America."<sup>34</sup> Among the critics to whom Coplans is referring are Lawrence Alloway, Max Kozloff, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, and Robert Pincus-Witten. Krauss also recalls those days: she remembers having "stupid arguments" with Lawrence Alloway and that Max Kozloff "was always very busy being superior—I could never understand why."<sup>35</sup> Referring to current times, Krauss lambastes critic Tom McEvilley as "a very stupid writer. I think he's pretentious and awful . . . I have never been able to finish a piece by McEvilley. He seems to be another Donald Kuspit. He's a slightly better writer than Donald Kuspit. But his lessons on Plato and things like that—they drive me crazy. I think, God! And I just can't stand it." Coplans, however, calls McEvilley "first rate, absolutely first rate."<sup>36</sup>

About Hilton Kramer, formerly an art critic for *The New York Times* and founder and editor of *The New Criterion*, Lawson says, "Kramer and the *Times* were a formidable combination. There, on a regular basis, he could



press the authority of his opinions on those who were unable or unwilling to think for themselves; there his forceful mediocrity found its most congenial home."<sup>37</sup>

Critics sometimes praise critics and criticism. Kuspit, in his general preface to the anthologies he is editing of art critics (including books by Dennis Adrian, Dore Ashton, Nicolas Calas, Joseph Masheck, Peter Plagens, Arlene Raven, and Robert Pincus-Witten), calls them "master art critics" because they provide sophisticated treatments of complex art. He praises their independence in their points of view and their self-consciousness about their art criticism. He admires their passion, their reason, and their lack of dogmatism, saying, "They sting us into consciousness."

In a book review of Danto's latest book, Marina Vaizey, art critic for *The Sunday Times of London*, praises Danto for being able to make the reader "feel, see and, above all, think" and to describe "the sheer captivating sensuality of a particular work."<sup>38</sup> Her criteria for good criticism include literary merit, judgments made in a setting that is more than local, and insights that have a relevant vitality that goes beyond the short time span implied by a periodical of current comment.

Kay Larson, critic for *New York* magazine, adds "fairness" to the artist as a criterion for criticism.<sup>39</sup> Mark Stevens of *Newsweek* tries to avoid "nastiness" when criticizing art. He thinks critics should be "honest in their judgment, clear in their writing, straightforward in their argument, and unpretentious in their manner." For him, good criticism is like good conversation—"direct, fresh, personal, incomplete."<sup>40</sup>

### The Value of Criticism for Critics

Although critics write criticism for audiences, they also say that the process of writing criticism is valuable to themselves. Robert Rosenblum says: "What you're really trying to do is to educate yourself, and educate the audience that's going to read about how you're going to educate yourself."<sup>41</sup>

Marcia Siegel, author of several books of dance criticism, says that the process of writing criticism helps *her* appreciate the artwork more: "Very often it turns out that as I write about something, it gets better. It's not that I'm so enthusiastic that I make it better, but that in writing, because the words are an instrument of thinking, I can often get deeper into a choreographer's thoughts or processes and see more logic, more reason."<sup>42</sup>

### Implications for Teaching Art Criticism

The critics quoted in this article unanimously are pleased to be engaged in writing about art—they even speak of love in relation to art. Their thoughts might be used in classrooms to offset a common misconception that critics are negative about art, and negatively judgmental in general.

Critics' definitions of "criticism" vary, but some commonalities emerge: criticism is a use of language, it seeks to make art more understandable to another, it is a kind of pointing with words, it is usually about new art. Critics differ on the importance of judgment in criticism: a few insist that judging art is the primary critical task, but the majority of the critics cited here stress the importance of conveying an understanding of art rather than a judgment of it. Frueh, in particular, reminds us of the importance of intuition in criticism. She argues that criticism too often privileges logic and denies spontaneous, intuitive knowing.

Critics write for audiences and are aware of the audiences for whom they are writing. Metaphorically, they want to take their readers somewhere, namely, to their impassioned love for and understanding of a work of art. One hopes that in the art classroom, when art educators engage students in criticism, they will engage them in lively and impassioned discussion about works of art about which students really care. Teachers might encourage students to be persuasive as critics and to try to persuade their classmates to the student critics' point of view.

Although professional critics write of their awareness of their audiences, they do not mention their awareness of the politics of criticism, nor the editorial biases and ideologies of the publications for which they write. Published criticism, however, is situated within publications with editorial ideologies, and these are often implicit rather than explicit. *The New Criterion*, for example, places itself on the far right of the political continuum and *October* on the far left. Rosalind Krauss would not be a frequent contributor to the former, nor would Hilton Kramer be to the latter. Informed critics know this, but uninformed readers may not. Students ought to be made aware of the ideological contexts in which criticism appears.

Critics can be arrogant in their speech, and perhaps in their writing, but very many critics express humility regarding what they do when they write criticism. Many speak of learning in public, for instance. Gilbert-Rolfe worries about being influentially wrong. Smith says that in writing daily, she doesn't have to be right all the time, clearly implying that she is sometimes wrong. These admissions by professional critics might help students reduce fears they might have about saying the wrong thing—the consequences of making a mistake are not so great, even for published critics.

That critics know that they can be wrong in their criticism of art might serve as a caution to teachers who say, "There are no wrong answers about art" when encouraging students to talk about art—critics do strive for right answers to their questions about art and realize that there can indeed be wrong answers.

Some criticism is difficult to read, difficult enough to give Plagens a headache. Durland, an editor of a critical journal, is particularly adamant in calling for criticism that communicates—he is not asking for simplicity of thought but for understandability of language when communicating complex

thoughts. Lippard wants to “forge simple words that even the children can read.” In educational settings we would certainly want to promote clear communication that is mutually understandable to the group involved in a discussion about art. We might also teach students to read criticism intelligently, perhaps starting with reviews of movies they may have seen. Teenage movie critics in the *Chicago Tribune* join Siskel and Ebert in having their movie reviews published: the teenage critics selected from Chicago area schools review movies marketed for their peers. Older students may be comfortable with and interested in reading criticism in *Rolling Stone* magazine or other publications directed to young adults.

Critics disagree with one another. Sometimes they harshly criticize each other, resorting to name calling. This demonstrates that critics, like other people, have moral shortcomings, but we as educators should not condone such criticism, pointing out that such criticism is logically flawed because it is directed at the critic rather than his or her criticism. Often critics are positive about other criticism. Critics demonstrate that criticism can and should be criticized, and they offer several criteria for criticism; for example: criticism should not be dogmatic, should reveal independent thinking, be passionate, reasonable, relevant beyond the time it is written, have literary merit, be fair to artists, honest, clear, straightforward, unpretentious, direct, fresh, personal.

Many of the critics referred to here consider what they write as incomplete, in the sense of not being the final word, especially because it is often about new work that they write. They think of their writing as a contribution to an on-going conversation about new art. Their comments, however, are not unleashed speculations; they are carefully considered points of view, especially when put forth in print. But critics say that they want their views to be always open to revision. Implications for teaching criticism are that people in a discussion about art may be encouraged to disagree with one another, but kindly, and to add to another's thought, because art criticism is incomplete, like an ongoing conversation. Teachers should discourage their students from making dogmatic statements, positive or negative, about art that tend to close discussions.

Some artists are very skeptical of criticism. Artists have vested interests in what critics say about their work. There is an important caution that should be made here: art students who become art teachers are frequently being taught by artist-professors, some of whom have strong negative opinions about critics and criticism because of how their work has or hasn't been attended to by critics. Artist-professors and artist-teachers may have deeply held, and perhaps unexamined, assumptions about criticism and are implicitly or explicitly conveying them to their students. Antagonism toward critics from artists might be lessened if artists and their students understood that critics are generally positive, often want to interpret rather

than judge, seek to understand the phenomena that artists produce, and are generally writing to expand artists' audiences and deepen appreciation of the art they produce. A further caution is that criticism as taught in college art courses is usually for teaching better art making.<sup>43</sup> Professional critics in their writing are not concerned immediately with such a goal, but certainly art professors are.

Finally, none of the critics in this study mentions any type of personal or universal method they use when they criticize art. They may or may not have a method, but the topic of method does not occur in what these critics say and write about their criticizing art. Alloway, for one, does say that criticism is the description, interpretation, and evaluation of new art, but he does not offer or suggest a method. The literature of art education contains descriptions of many methods for criticizing art, some of which might be efficacious in teaching students to criticize art. Along with teaching any critical method, however, we might also want to make it very clear to students that this is not how critics write about art.

#### NOTES

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