
32

Investigating Art Criticism
in Education:
An Autobiographical Narrative

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INTRODUCTION

When invited to write this chapter, I decided to construct a personal narrative of my life in art education to pass on lessons learned during 30-some years. In the telling I hope that I am neither inflating nor minimizing the work in which I have been engaged as an art educator interested in art criticism. When I began teaching, I viewed myself as an artist who had to teach, but I now view myself as an art educator and writer who wants to teach and write. Since 1990, most of my writing has been books. The editors' request of me to write a chapter for this anthology provides me occasion to take a reflective pause in the midst of two larger writing projects. The first is a book titled *Interpreting Art: Reflecting, Wondering, and Responding* (Barrett, 2003). It encourages college students to actively interpret the art that they see and study rather than passively receive interpretations from their professors and other scholars. The second project is a book for college art majors titled *Art: Form & Meaning*. I especially look forward to this project because the publisher is providing 300 reproductions, 200 in color—many more images than I have been able to use in other books—and my wife Susan, an art museum educator (Hazelroth & Moore, 1998; Hazelroth-Barrett & Moore, 2003) and Montessori teacher, is working on the book with me.

Interpreting Art and *Art: Form & Meaning* follow publication of a third edition of *Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Images* (Barrett, 2000a) originally published in 1990, and a second edition of *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary* (Barrett, 2000b) first published in 1994. They are books for college students that explain what professional critics do, how, and why, so that students can then engage with art more deeply, read criticism more intelligently, and write criticism more insightfully. *Talking about Student Art* (1997) is a book I wrote for art teachers, kindergarten through high school, to encourage teachers to engage their students in more and better talk and deeper thought about the art that they and their classmates make. I am 57, have been teaching at The Ohio State University for more than 30 years, and I am still eager to get up each morning and write and teach, and then

come home and make art. What follows is an attempt to make public sense of my continuing involvement in art education especially through art criticism.

TEACHING HIGH SCHOOL

I graduated from college in December of 1967. A year prior to graduation, I had left a prayerful and usually silent monastic life of poverty, chastity, and obedience that I had been part of from age 13 to 22. My philosophical education, within monastic studies, was an incompatible mix of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and Existentialists, especially Sartre, Camus, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard, and Beckett. The latter group, predominantly atheistic, was more convincing to me than the former, so that I eventually found myself in the uncomfortable position of being an agnostic humanist studying to become a monastic priest. Through Existentialism I came to believe that "existence precedes essence": That is, one can define oneself by choices and through actions rather than follow one's predetermined nature. I left the monastery and completed a degree in art and philosophy at Webster College in St. Louis. At that time Webster was a small, Catholic, predominantly female college with a progressive educational philosophy. At Webster I was persuaded by Sister Jacqueline Grennan, college president and an educational advisor to President Kennedy, not to look for a place to fit but to make a place.

As a child in the 1950s attending the Catholic grade school in Westmont, a small town outside of Chicago, I experienced minimal art education, if it can be called that. On occasional Friday afternoons between about 2:15 and 3:00 dismissal, had we been "good" and if nothing else was more pressing, Sister would place pages torn from coloring books on a counter below the chalkboard. We would line up, pick a page, receive one precious piece of coarse manila paper, and attempt to copy the coloring book picture onto the drawing paper with pencil and then color it in with crayons. With no instruction from Sister, this was at first very difficult and frustrating, but somehow I became good at it and frequently got to parade my colored drawing copying of rearing horses through other admiring classes of children. This constituted art education for me from about fourth grade through eight grade. My father brought my older sister and me to the Art Institute of Chicago to joyfully gaze at paintings. I supplemented my school drawing by saving allowances or birthday money and bought Walter T. Foster's (1938) learn-to-draw books, one at a time. Each purchase was exciting. Animals were my favorite subjects. From Foster's books I learned to successfully copy, step by step, his mountain lions and antelopes onto paper and call the pencil drawings mine. A kind and nurturing aunt and uncle applauded these and my school drawings. I was unable, however, to transfer any knowledge learned from Foster's step-by-step method to be able to draw any other animal, person, or thing without Foster's books. I still do not draw well representationally, despite successfully completing drawing courses in college.

In high school, a Catholic seminary, I was fortunate to participate in art classes taught by Margaret Dagenais, an artist who made liturgical art and who taught in Chicago at Loyola and De Paul universities. She did not "teach" us other than to provide materials, show some minimal techniques, and offer encouragement. Somehow I was successful, and made liturgical mosaics, unglazed terracotta ceramic saints and crucified figures, and Madonnas with Latin phrases painted onto cloth and hung as banners. The priest who brought the artist to us in the seminary, Fr. Gregory O'Brien, taught me a love of reading and writing in his English classes, and I am forever indebted to both him and Ms. Dagenais for my lifelong involvement in art and writing. Jann Gallagher (1994) included me in her dissertation as one in a series of biographical case studies of "lifelong writers" and what influenced them to be such. She won an award for her study. Similar studies on lifelong art lovers, I think, would be helpful in our field.

My college education in art was that of a studio major, with emphasis in graphic design and with active interests in photography, experimental film, and environmental design, along with courses in classical figure drawing and sculpture. Webster's art department was split between a faculty entrenched in classical drawing and sculpture and a faculty committed to aesthetic and social change through functional art. I saw benefits to and enjoyed both orientations. Photography was struggling in the artworld to be recognized as a legitimate art form. An itinerant photographer happened by the college and got three of us to clean up an abandoned darkroom, showed us the rudiments of photographic chemistry, and we taught ourselves, not so well, the magic of making black and white prints, enough so that my senior project was in photography.

When I graduated, America's involvement in Vietnam's civil war was escalating rapidly. I was strongly opposed to that war, but the day I graduated I was no longer automatically deferred from the draft by being a student. I still had some options, however: get drafted into the military and likely be thrown into Vietnam; avoid the draft by fleeing the country (some classmates chose Canada); feign being insane or gay (the draft boards considered them similarly); or teach school because my local draft board had enough young men in its pool that they were not drafting teachers. My advisor, Sister Gabriel Mary, who was also opposed to the war, generously found me a teaching vacancy in the Public Schools of the City of St. Louis. When I began teaching art at Sumner High School in January 1968, I did not know that I would be teaching art ever after.

Sumner, an inner-city school in the heart of the St. Louis ghetto, was the first African American high school west of the Mississippi, and for many years the only African American high school in segregated St. Louis. Some famous black people attended Sumner, including pop singer Tina Turner, operatic singer Grace Bumbry, and tennis star Arthur Ashe. Having grown up in white suburbs, I feared putting myself into a black school. Two African American friends at Webster who had graduated from Sumner furthered my anxieties by teasing me with funny but macabre and threatening stories about the school. However, I had more repulsion for and trepidation of shooting and being shot by the Vietnamese. Also, something in me wanted to face the challenge of teaching in that school, and I believed in the political cause of integration and the promise of social equality that Sumner was presumed to represent. The school's enrollment was about 2,000 students, all African American. There were about 100 teachers, all African American except three White teachers. The principal openly referred to the three of us as "hippies" and many of the students addressed us in the hall as "white muh-fuhs."

The Black Power movement was emerging. Race rioters burned neighborhoods in Detroit in 1967. The very evening of the day that Martin Luther King was assassinated, our school principal held a prescheduled PTA meeting but made no mention of the murder, although riots were raging in over 100 American cities as he spoke. King at that time was anathema to conservative black citizens who thought him too radical and likely a Communist. The FBI was surreptitiously spreading negative misinformation about King. When some politically progressive students in the high school-founded a Black Power Club, the only faculty member willing to be their sponsor was the white woman on the faculty.

I was sympathetic to and sometimes active in the Civil Rights movement. I was aggressively opposed to the war and to the social inequities brought about by "Ma Bell" and American capitalism. I occasionally participated in protest marches against the war and worked on an "underground paper" that supported civil rights. In the summer of 1968, two of my college professors and I went to Mississippi to make photographs of the Deep South for educational materials. Whenever we went into black communities, we were bumper-to-bumper tailed by squad cars driven by white sheriffs or their deputies. At the time, I was reading books such as John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1961), Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968), and novels by James Baldwin (1953, 1963). I was also reading popular books critical of education

