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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

such as *Up the Down Staircase* (Kaufman, 1964), *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (Postman & Weingartner, 1969), and Jonathan Kozol's *Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools* (1967). Regardless of my liberal social beliefs and readings, I was unprepared for an African American urban environment and had no formal preparation to teach art.

The students in my classes were friendly and I felt safe with the students who knew me, but the school was large and the psychological environment was violent and stressful to me. Discipline in the high school was primarily by the threat of violence. I was physically slight at the time, weighing 148 pounds, and being a nonviolent, war-avoiding person, I maintained discipline by keeping the students interested in what we were doing. I projected an external look of fearlessness (not at all true) and was respectful of the students. Confounded by my lack of violent displays or threats, some students fabricated the rumor that I possessed a black belt in karate. I did not attempt to dispel the rumor.

I believed that my primary responsibility was to provide a kind of art therapy for my students, helping them feel some success in life, and in this case, in making things. I taught one art history class, the last class of a long teaching day, when both the students and I were tired and ready to go home. I attempted to bring African art history into the course that was based on Western art history. The theory on the ghetto streets was that Blacks ought to be proud of their heritage and would be, especially if young Blacks were exposed to positive African influences such as African art. My students, however, wanted nothing to do with what were to them strange and embarrassing masks with large lips and wide noses or totems with pointy breasts or prominently erect penises. Neither, however, were they or I particularly interested in various forms of Greek columns and other topics I had been expected to learn. With tacit consent, we all sloughed off that art history class.

My other classes were studio based. Two of them were composed of TEs, that is, "terminal education students," who the school system had determined were *not educable*. They were to be maintained in school only until they had reached the age of 16 when they would be dismissed from public education. The art classes had names like Art I, Art II, but I taught the same material in each class, inventing new projects on a daily basis to meet what I assumed to be the students' short attention spans, and I did not know how to expand a lesson beyond 1 or 2 days, and storage of long-term projects was a constant challenge that I could not meet. In retrospect, my lessons were narrow in scope (making modern art) and random in sequence. I exhausted myself in curriculum invention: short studio projects that would have a high chance of resulting in things that looked like contemporary art and that would be personally gratifying to the students. Often they achieved things that looked like respectable modern art but things that were not satisfying to students: They could not understand why I valued what they had made. Had I known more crafts, I would have taught more crafts, teaching the students how to make things they could be genuinely proud to show.

Two books that were of help to me as an art teacher were *100 Ways to Have Fun With an Alligator & 100 Other Involving Art Projects* (Laliberté & Kehl, 1969) and Jean Mary Morman's (1967) *Art: Of Wonder and a World*. I still do not understand the title, but the book's attitude toward art and teaching was upbeat and inspiring. Sister Corita Kent's graphical *Damn Everything but the Circus* (1970) was also attitudinally inspiring.

Teaching was a me-them situation. I was clearly white: My students were not frequently exposed in person to white people. To me, they were clearly black: I had never been in a black person's home. I tried hard to bridge gaps, to find out about their lives, their views. They were surprisingly naïve about the lack of social necessities and niceties they had access to in the ghetto. To them, the world seemed mostly fine, or at least the way it was, which was all right with most of them. One of the young men, whom the administrators thought most likely to retire in prison, believed he could be president of the United States. He was tall and wore a long

black coat and a gentleman's large hat and he could alternately be charming and intentionally menacing. One afternoon after school I invited him to my apartment to meet some of my college friends, but outside of his neighborhood he reverted to a little shy boy, almost autistic. Intellectually, I was conflicted between my belief that existence could precede essence and my awareness of the oppression of being born black in the United States of America.

The value of art for me at the time was attitudinal and instrumental. With an aesthetic attitude, an artistic way of looking at the world, both human-made and natural, one could transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, or recognize that the ordinary was not at all ordinary, but beautiful. Susan Sontag (1978) would later characterize some aspects of my view negatively as "aestheticizing" the brutality of social reality to make it acceptable and to relieve us of the burden of improving social conditions. Although I might be able to teach my students to aesthetically appreciate aspects of their daily lives, an aesthetic response would not alleviate their poverty or rectify the social imbalances of the city and society in which they were born and kept by skin color, class, negative societal expectations, and meager opportunities.

I brought other beliefs about art to my teaching: Art ought to be fun—*Damn Everything but the Circus*. These were the days of Pop Art. Art ought to be experimental and innovative and expansive: "Art is anything you can get away with" (McCluhan & Fiore, 1967). These were the days of Happenings (Kaprow, 1993), the days when art styles and movements in the New York galleries changed in a New York-minute. The Bauhaus was also an educational influence: Artists can and ought to improve society through art and design. Art and design are more similar than dissimilar and allied rather than competing. Art and design ought to be in the service of better designed communities and more socially equitable societies. Tom Wolfe would later satirize the consequences of some of the Bauhaus architectural beliefs and consequences in *From Bauhaus to Our House* (1981), but many of the Bauhaus's premises remain influential in my life and teaching today.

As both an aspiring artist and an art teacher, I was unconcerned with art critics and unaware of art criticism as a discipline. I browsed art, design, and craft magazines for personal visual inspiration to me as an artist, and as potential sources of curriculum—that is, art-making ideas, but I did not read the magazines for art ideas articulated in language. I was quickly forced to abandon my ambitions to make art during the school year. As a fellow teacher (mathematics) told me, the best way to prepare for teaching was to be asleep by eight o'clock in the evening. From college studio critiques, I learned that criticism is usually judgmental and negative, and I was committed to be a positive force in my school students' lives. From college critiques, I also knew that one should say *something* after students have finished a project. Therefore, I hung up my students' work and said nice things about it.

I taught 2 years at Sumner before I accepted an opportunity to work with teachers and students in a "media lab" housed in a high school in University City, a progressive, innovative, and racially integrated school system neighboring the city of St. Louis. The schools were supported in part by the John D. Rockefeller III Fund "to provide all the arts for every child" (Madeja, 1973). Nearby, Stanley Madeja was running CEMREL, the Central Midwestern Regional Educational Laboratory, where one of my friends from Webster College worked. She informed me about "aesthetic education" and making exciting and innovative "educational packages" to infuse school curriculum with arts-based learning. CEMREL was buzzing with consultants coming and going, people whose names at the time I did not recognize: Jack Davis, David Ecker, Elliot Eisner, Jerome Hausman, Guy Hubbard, Al Hurwitz, and Mary Rouse.¹

Two years later, in 1972, I was hired onto the faculty of Art Education at The Ohio State University by Ken Marantz to teach future art teachers about photography, sound,

¹My colleague Candace Stout (2002) has written a book, *Flower Teachers*, about art teachers who began their profession around this time and their parallel experiences.

film—"newer media" with which they could enhance their teaching of art—in a laboratory that Manuel Barkan had founded a couple of years before his death. Barkan had hired Robert Strobbridge from Webster College to establish the experimental space. I joined Tom Linehan, also from Webster, in "the media lab." Prior to coming to Ohio State, I had not heard of Barkan nor had I known that there was such a field as "art education." Barkan's notion that art education ought to include art history and art criticism in addition to art making made quick intuitive sense to me and was logically compelling. I wished that I had had an art education like the Ohio State students were receiving before I taught at Sumner.

When I visit inner-city schools today, I do not see much educational difference from 30 years ago when I taught in St. Louis. Students and their teachers still work in oppressive conditions and prevailing negativity. I think there is still a great need for as yet undiscovered ways to innovatively and engagingly teach African American youngsters about improving their lives with and through art. Were I to teach again now at a school like Sumner, I would want to have been born a person of color, and I would bring to the students artworks by contemporary American artists of color, especially those working with social concerns such as Anthony Barboza, Michael Ray Charles, Mel Chin, Renée Cox, Jimmie Durham, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, David Hammons, Edgar Heap of Birds, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Willie Middlebrook, Adrian Piper, Faith Ringold, Lorna Simpson, Clarissa Sligh, Kara Walker, Pat Ward Williams, Carrie Mae Weems, and Fred Wilson. We would have a curriculum centered on art that mattered to the students, and especially art about the students' lives as children of color in a racist society.

EARLY COLLEGE TEACHING

During the Uses of Newer Media classes I taught at Ohio State in the early 1970s, I would hang on the wall photographs made by the students and try to initiate a discussion about them. By now having learned of Edmund Feldman and his method of criticism (1970), I would ask students to first describe the photographs. In response, they would look at me as if I had asked a silly question. These were photographs we were looking at and what we were seeing seemed obvious to them, too obvious to bother describing them. They could be coaxed into some formal analysis, the second step of Feldman's method, because they were used to hearing about form in their painting and sculpture courses. They experientially knew that the photographs were in part mechanically produced, so *interpretation* seemed to be a matter of reading too much into a picture. They resisted looking for meaning beyond whatever reason the photographer gave for making the photograph. My critiques limped along, more often than not turning into a spontaneous and sometimes good and sometimes a not so particularly good class. I took these failures as impetus to investigate whether other photography instructors were having similar problems trying to engage their students in discussions about photographs. Sure enough, they were. The study resulted in my master's thesis (1974) and then some articles on the subject of teaching photography criticism (Barrett, 1977, 1978; Barrett & Linehan, 1977).

My early work in criticism was heavily influenced by Morris Weitz (1979), the aesthetician who applied Wittgenstein's ideas to aesthetics and who is best known for defining art as "an open concept." Arthur Efland advised me to look at Weitz's *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (1964) in which Weitz analytically studied the major writings of critics on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Weitz drew many notable conclusions: When critics criticized, they primarily described, interpreted, judged, and theorized. Any one of these activities can constitute criticism. Description alone can constitute criticism. Criticism need not entail judgment. When critics interpret, they answer many different kinds of questions. Description can yield true and false information, but the other procedures do not. One cannot truly define art but attempts at definitions are valuable because they identify what critics find meritorious in works of art.

Although not explicitly stated by Weitz, it also became clear that there was not an established method of criticizing art, but likely as many methods as there were critics. Weitz's work on criticism was liberating.

WRITING AND EDITING CRITICISM

Between 1971 and 1983, I exhibited photographs, as art, in galleries and museums, and published photographs as illustrations and covers for books and magazines. As a part-time graduate student studying photography, and a full-time faculty member teaching photographic media, I was frequently part of studio critiques. On occasions more rare, my work was mentioned in published critical reviews. To have had my own work the subject of criticism and to have it ignored by critics was a humbling experience. Consequently, I have empathy for artists whose work I might criticize.

For about 10 years beginning in 1983, at the urging of my colleague Robert Arnold, I edited a local newsprint journal of art criticism called *Columbus Art*. The paper came out every 2 months and covered exhibits and art events in the Central Ohio area. As editor I recruited critics; coached them; edited their reviews and feature stories; identified exhibitions that ought to be covered; chose content for covers; and oversaw layout and design, printing, and distribution. As editor of art criticism, I had an insider's view of some of the business of the artworld. Some shows were covered for political, personal, or economic reasons. I could not always obtain the writers I wanted. Some writers would promise a review of an important show, one by Deborah Butterfield, for example, and then never deliver it and the show would go unreviewed and the journal would look uninformed.

Many writers could not resist their urge to include some (unwittingly) condescending bits of advice for artists, to show that they were indeed being "critical." Some writers felt the need to be superior to the artists they were reviewing; others saw their role as subservient to the artist's work. Some writers relied too heavily on predigested fact and information sheets about the artist provided by the sponsoring gallery; others ignored these press packets altogether. Some critics paid studio visits or interviewed artists they were reviewing; others kept a distance. Some manuscripts required virtual rewrites; others required little or no editing.

I would like to see research done on the formal and informal policies of art journals and magazines that are published for regional, national, and international audiences. I would also like to see research that "shadows" professional critics when they observe shows, write, and read what they have written after it is published. Such projects would make art criticism more real and less ideal. For this reason, I like reading about critics and the artworld. Janet Malcolm (1986a, 1986b) provided two articles on art critics that were delightfully informative about some baser aspects of the critical profession. She reveals that Rosalind Krauss is "quick, sharp, cross, tense, bracingly derisive, fearlessly uncharitable—makes one's own 'niceness' somehow dreary and anachronistic" (Malcolm, 1986a, p. 49). Krauss herself is quoted saying that Max Kozloff, in editorial meetings of *Artforum*, "was very busy being superior" and that there was "quite an unpleasant quality emanating" from him (p. 49). Krauss says Thomas McEvelley is "a very stupid writer" who dreadfully "seems to be another Donald Kuspit" (Malcolm 1986a, p. 51). Malcolm quotes John Coplans, founder of *Artforum*, saying in contrast that McEvelley is "first rate, absolutely first rate" (p. 52). Eight days from the press run, Ingrid Sischy, then the editor of *Artforum*, was still waiting for articles from McEvelley and Rene Ricard. For 3 nights she went to Ricard's apartment to work with him on his promised piece, staying till two or three in the morning until she finally got it from him.

This kind of information, admittedly gossipy, provides me with the knowledge that criticism is difficult work for professional critics, psychologically as well as intellectually. Critics, too,

are human. Peter Plagens, currently art critic for *Newsweek* magazine, admits to insecurities as a critic: "I wonder if I've ever had a real art idea" (Plagens, 1986, p. 119). Critics also can be vicious in their judgments of one another. Their condemnations strike fear in my heart that I must confront, overcome, or at least avoid when I sit down to write about art. There is some comfort that one critic finds another "very stupid," whereas another finds him "absolutely first rate." There is also comfort, and annoyance with the magazine, knowing that even one of its former editors finds much in *Artforum* "unreadable" (Sischy in Malcolm, 1986a, p. 52).

I wrote some criticism for *Columbus Art* and for *New Art Examiner*, *Dialogue*, and more scholarly journals such as *Camera Lucida* (Barrett, 1982). I was encouraged to write criticism, in part, by the biography of A. D. Coleman, a pioneering photography critic who started writing about photography while he was a drama critic and became interested in photographic images. He first wrote photography criticism for the *Village Voice* in 1968 and eventually defined his criticism as simply "the intersecting of images with words" (Coleman, 1979, p. 204). I adopted attitudes about criticism from other working critics. Jonas Mekas, a critic of independent (not Hollywood) films for the *Village Voice* in the 1970s and 80s, said that he only wrote about films he admired. Lucy Lippard (1988), the prolific art critic, wrote that she wanted to "forge simple words that even the children understand" (p. 184).

As one who sometimes writes criticism (e.g., Barrett, 1992a), I have experienced how daunting and intimidating the task can be. A critic writes for an anonymous public that likely includes the artist, other artists, and other critics, and undoubtedly some who know more about the art than the writer, and some who know too little to be informed by a review that is so limited in length. I am always appreciative of editors who allow me to refuse to write about a show: I often feel that I have too little to say about a show to accept an assignment. Sometimes I have to struggle to find enough words to fill a column, and other times I have to cut many more words than I want in order to fit a required word count. I choose to write about that which I think I have something to say but I still worry that I have insights of import about the exhibition or a work. I learned that writing criticism is putting into permanent print tentative thoughts about new work and new ideas, of the artist or of the critic. One hopes that readers are aware of the tentative nature of art criticism.

Whether writing criticism or research, I have always tried to write clearly. In *Artforum* Peter Schjeldahl (1994) admitted that he has "written obscurely when [he] could get away with it. It is very enjoyable, attended by a feeling of invulnerability." Then he added, "Writing clearly is immensely hard work that feels faintly insane, like painting the brightest possible target on my chest" (p. 69). I've tried to maintain the posture of being clear so that I could be shown to be wrong if I was. I resent authors who do otherwise, who hide behind language or who attempt to intimidate readers into accepting their positions or to let them go unchallenged. I agree with Karen-Edis Barzman (1994), a feminist art historian, who complains about writers who have "a dependence on so much erudition that the reader is disarmed and even daunted at the moment of reception, a moment in which asymmetrical power relations between writer and reader are at least implicitly affirmed" (p. 331).

Having written criticism has affected how I teach criticism. I first and foremost stress that critics engage in critical dialog *for an audience*, and one that is much larger than the artist who made the work. Art criticism in schools and universities too often is reduced to comments made to the artist who is present in the room, and students leave art classes wrongly believing that art criticism is for the artist who made the work rather than for the audience who reads the magazine or paper in which the criticism appears. I ask my student critics to determine an audience for their papers or I identify their audience as the university community whose readership is composed of art majors, an occasional art history professor, and undergraduates who may know little about art. I believe that good criticism will speak, somewhat, to all of these readers. I sometimes ask my students to write criticism for their grandmothers or grandfathers

or for young nieces and nephews or for best friends who are not arts majors. When able, I give students a choice of works to write about rather than imposing a single work. I establish a word limit. I stress that professional critics are writers. If one is to be an art critic, one better enjoy writing and write well enough that a reader wants to read what is written.

WRITING BOOKS ABOUT CRITICISM

I earned tenure at the rank of instructor at Ohio State in 1978 based on articles, editing, good teaching, and exhibitions of my photographs. Sometime after receiving tenure, I put aside art making, continued writing and editing criticism, and pursued a doctorate. For my doctoral dissertation (Barrett, 1983), I theorized about how we derive meaning from photographs. It was a philosophical study. In it I identified three unique characteristics of photographs: selectivity, instantaneity, and credibility. I also saw that photographs could be categorized as descriptive, explanatory, interpretive, aesthetically evaluative, ethically evaluative, or theoretical. These categories are overlapping and are meant to be used heuristically by a viewer to discover how a photograph was meant to be used and how its meaning could be altered through contexts. I saw that meaning was highly dependent on three types of context that I identified as internal, external, and original.² I do not know if I discovered these distinguishing concepts about photographs or invented them. My research methodology was to draw on my experience as a photographer; my experience of writing about photographs as a critic, synthesizing and applying what other scholars and photographers have written about photography; and my own teaching of photography.

I was working on theoretical issues of photography in the 1970s and 1980s during a time when aestheticians were becoming aware that photography is an interesting phenomenon (e.g., Arnheim, 1974; Barthes, 1981; Cohen, 1988; Scruton, 1983; Sekula, 1975; Sontag, 1978; Walton, 1984). I wrote articles (1980, 1981) about some of the ideas I was pursuing before rewriting them for my dissertation. I also rewrote sections of the finished dissertation for articles for research journals (1986a, 1986b), and then I differently addressed these ideas for teachers who might want to teach about photography (1986c, 1986d, 1986e). Gill Clark and Enid Zimmerman encouraged me to reposition and rewrite ideas for different audiences. Writing as art educator for photography professors who taught studio courses felt like risky business; so did writing about photography for art educators in art education journals. For a long time I felt like an outsider to both groups.

I wrote my dissertation two pages at a time, every day, for about an academic year. I was going through a divorce at the time, and dissertation work was a pleasant relief from that emotional turmoil. The daily page limit is somewhat arbitrary, but the motivation is compelling for me. I do not know from whom I learned the strategy, but it is to write one or two or three pages a day, whatever limit you set for yourself. I have read that Stephen King writes six to eight pages a day (1998). If you finish by nine in the morning you can quit and go to the beach. If it takes you till eleven at night, then you stick with it for that long. I write finished pages, double spaced with proper margins, and with accurate footnotes and references. In a week, I have 14 pages; in a month, 60 pages; and in about 9 months, a dissertation-length manuscript. I still use this strategy. Sometimes, when I am very busy with teaching and committees, I may have to set the goal to a paragraph a day. When I am really struggling to write something that I would rather avoid, then I switch to an hour a day until I can get over my resistance, and then go back to a page count per day. I also learned, from Hemingway, I think, to end a day's

²Mary Ann Stankiewicz (2002) has shown how these types of contexts can be used to teach fifth-grade students about the photographic work of Lorna Simpson and other artists.

session in the middle of a sentence so that I know just how to start the next day. When I do not keep this routine because I am traveling or for other reasons, I find that when I get back to writing, I anxiously waste time, chasing away demons before I can write again.

Before I write, I read and take copious and carefully transcribed quotations from what I am reading. I enter these single-spaced and accurately referenced. Sometimes I include parenthetical notes to myself about how I might use the quoted material. When writing *Interpreting Art: Reflecting, Wondering, and Responding*, for example, I relied on 68 pages of single-spaced quotations from scholars writing on interpretation of art and literature. Among aestheticians who write on topics of interpretation, I gathered dense quotations from Nelson Goodman (1976), Arthur Danto (1981), Israel Scheffler (1991), Richard Margolis (1995), Noël Carroll (1997), Robert Stecker (1995), and George Dickey (1997). Quotations from literary scholars and philosophers writing about interpreting literature include insights of Umberto Eco (1992), Jonathan Culler (1992), and Richard Rorty (1992). Critics such as Suzi Gablik (1970) and Griselda Pollock (1996) provided me with their thoughts on the work of specific artists, René Magritte and Edouard Manet, respectively. I used a short appreciative essay by David Carrier (2000) on the comics of Gary Larson and another by Michel Foucault (1983) on Magritte's painting *This Is Not a Pipe*. In preparation for *Art: Form & Meaning*, I compiled 100 pages of single-spaced notes. I feel confident that I have sufficient material when I stop finding surprises in what new material I am reading.

When I have finished gathering relevant material, I sort it into topics or chapters and start writing. I do not necessarily write from the first chapter to the last, nor from the first paragraph to the last. Sometimes I start with what is easiest for me to write; sometimes I start with what is most difficult. Sometimes I know what I am going to say before I say it; other times writing is a discovery process for me as much as a telling to another. I always try to leave time to put a finished piece away for a while, and come back to it and revise. I sometimes read what I have written out to catch clumsy phrasing, and I sometimes ask my wife Susan to read it aloud to me to hear where she stumbles and how it will sound to a reader new to the material.

I have learned to appreciate editors both professional and amateur. I revise a piece until I am happy with it and then find one or more readers to review what I have written.³ Sometimes I choose readers who I predict will provide encouragement if I feel I need that: Sydney Walker (2000), an Ohio State colleague, responded positively and helpfully to early chapters of *Talking about Student Art*, specifically encouraging me to articulate and include in the book more of my own insights into my thinking process as I conducted the discussions with students which are the heart of that book. Sometimes I choose a reader who will give me a general critical reading: Michael Parsons, my chairperson at the time, read each manuscript chapter of *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary* (Barrett, 1994) as I wrote them. He would tell me what he found interesting and about what he would like to read more of. When I broach areas I am insecure about, I seek someone in that discipline to read what I have tentatively finished. Sometimes I want a general reader to respond to new material: My older sister Barrie Jean, an independent software trainer with an MA in English, responded to chapters of *Interpreting Art*, telling me what she found most interesting, what she needed more discussion of, and what she found tedious. Susan is my "ideal reader," genuinely eager to read new pages that I bring home daily or every other day, penciling comments in margins about what she finds exciting or what is troublesome to her because the idea is not yet fully realized in the writing.

A former editor of the *Village Voice* is said to have said that his job as editor was to keep writers from making asses of themselves in public. (When reading my *Criticizing Art* manuscript, Mike Parsons pointed out that I had Kant in the wrong century.) Editors also have

³This piece has been improved by suggestions from my wife Susan and my colleague Candace Stout. Stout (1995) is the author of *Critical Thinking and Writing in Art*.

a job of keeping the journals they publish from appearing foolish. Book editors want their books to sell and help their authors revise to better speak to their intended readers. Mayfield Publishing Company, now owned by McGraw-Hill, sent out prospectuses and sample materials to reviewers, professors who might use such a book in their teaching, and then later sent the finished manuscript to a different set of scholars and professors. The editor forwarded the reviews to me verbatim, summarized her reading of them, and then we negotiated what changes I would make. Waiting for such reviews considerably slows the process, but as an author I like knowing that my Mayfield and McGraw-Hill books have already gone through rigorous scrutiny from other scholars. Sometimes the reviewers the editors choose lack tact and kindness and offer this writer, at least, unnecessary obstacles to overcome—their sarcasm or meanness, for instance. (I want to be a kind critic.) I enjoy a good copy editor, one who makes wise suggestions as to how to improve my prose. Making revisions of a piece with copy editor's suggestions is to me like matting and framing a finished photograph, procedures I also enjoy. I have regretted the few times I have bypassed or shortchanged editorial processes because that material is not as good as it might have been.

During and after I completed my dissertation in 1983, I decided that I would no longer both make art for exhibition and write because I felt that I could not simultaneously do both to my satisfaction. It was also apparent that I could not write, teach, and devote as much time to art making as did my colleagues in the art department. I decided to keep writing: I was enjoying it and thought I was making more important contributions to the world with my words than with my images. Getting published motivated me more than having my photographs exhibited. While driving Jesse, my young son, back to his and his mother's home after Christmas holidays, we passed time by making New Year's resolutions. We were jointly resolving, and Jesse was transcribing. I made a resolution to get an article published in *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, in my mind, the premier art education journal in the 1980s. Jesse needed to know how to spell *aesthetic* and wanted to know what it meant. When the article came out the following year (Barrett, 1985), I sent him the first copy.

I was proud to see my work in print and continue to be. At conferences or wherever it may happen, I am inspired to continue writing by an occasional spontaneous compliment from someone who has read a piece or whose students have benefited from one. Around 1997, I began making art again, for personal enjoyment, not for exhibition. I now find that I am professionally happiest when I am teaching well, have a writing in progress at school and a painting in the works at home. The hierarchy is important to me. I think I have been able over the years to gainfully integrate teaching, writing, and art making: Each feeds the other.

As I was writing my dissertation, I thought it had potential to become a published book. I did not simply revise and publish it for college students. I had intended to do that, but reviewers of the proposal reported that they liked the proposed book, would want it on their personal bookshelves, would list it as a recommended text on their syllabi, but would not require it. This was economically troubling to Mayfield who was in the textbook business, and intellectually puzzling, to me. From reading between the lines of the reviewers' comments, I inferred that the book was too much my theory, and that they would not use it as a common text if they could not feel more ownership of the material. I revised the contents considerably and then rewrote. Unlike what I did in the dissertation, I took up Weitz's (1979) distinctions of critical procedures—description, interpretation, judgment, and theory—as the organizing structure of the book. I eliminated my properties of photographs that I call “selectivity,” “instantaneity,” and “credibility.” I kept my six categories and my three types of contexts but subsumed them under Weitz's general category of interpretation. The published book has chapters on criticism in general, how critics describe, what interpretation entails, interpretive categories for photographs, contexts from which to derive interpretive conclusions, how critics judge photographs, theories of photography, and a final chapter on how students can write

and talk about photographs. The reviewers liked the changes; Mayfield published the book as *Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Images* (1990), and it is in its third edition with a fourth edition planned by McGraw-Hill.

The publication of *Criticizing Photographs* was serendipitous. I admired Barbara and John Upton's book *Photography* (1976) adapted from the luxurious multivolume set, *Life Library of Photography* (Time-Life, 1970). It is well written, in large format, with many lushly printed duo-tone black-and-white and color reproductions. I wanted *Criticizing Photographs* to be like it. I sent a prospectus and a sample chapter to Little Brown, who first published *Photography*, and another to an editor I had met at Harcourt Brace, who also produced lushly illustrated art books. The latter quickly said that such a book was "not in their plans," and I eventually received an uninformative form letter of refusal from Little Brown. There was a marginal note on my returned prospectus from Little Brown: "Does he realize the cost?" I had not realized the lack of a market for an expensive photography criticism textbook. Discouraged, I put the prospectus in my file drawer and returned to writing articles. One day, Jan Beatty, an acquisitions editor from Mayfield, was scouting campuses for publishing ideas and knocked on my door seeking general information about art education and what books I thought the field might need. During our conversation, I remembered my idea for *Criticizing Photographs* and told her about it and its two rejections. Jan asked to take the prospectus and sample chapter and send them out for review. Shortly after, I had a contract and about 2 years later—a year to write, a year in production—I had a published book and felt like an author.

Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary (1994) followed. It presented new fears and challenges for me to face. Well aware of status divisions in academia and art, I had overcome my hesitancy to enter the photography world as an art educator, but now I was going to put my writing forward into the larger and "higher" world of art. Professors of art and art history would have to approve of the ideas of an art educator involved in photography and adopt the book, were it to be successful.

To write that book, methodologically I first polled about 50 friends and colleagues who knew current artists and critics and asked them which they thought should be included in *Criticizing Art*. I used several of the people they suggested and favorite artists and critics whom I already knew I wanted to include. I obtained a small grant from my college, hired an undergraduate art education student as a research assistant on hourly wages, gave her a list of artists and a list of critics, and sent her to the library to find and copy articles in current criticism journals and magazines. I sorted through the large stacks of material she brought me and read and took notes in the form of exact quotations.

In both *Criticizing Photographs* and especially in *Criticizing Art*, along with the scholarship of critics, aestheticians, historians, photographers, and artists, I wove in valuable insights of art educators who have influenced my thinking, including Manual Barkan (1955), Barkan, Laura Chapman, and Evan Kern (1970), Rogena Degge and June McFee (1980), David Ecker (1967), Arthur Efland (1983), Elliot Eisner (1972), George Geahigan (1983), Vincent Lanier (1982), and specifically cited considerations of art criticism articulated by art educators Tom Anderson (1988), Harry Broudy (1972), Kristen Congdon (1991), Arthur Efland (1990), Edmund Feldman (1973, 1987), Elizabeth Garber (1991, 1992), George Geahigan (1983), Sally Hagaman (1990), Karen Hamblen (1987), Sun-Young Lee (1988), Wanda May (1992), Michael Parsons (1987), Harold Pearse (1992), Ralph Smith (1973, 1992), and Brent Wilson (1997).

To organize what I read and what I knew, I continued using Weitz's categorical topics of description, interpretation, judgment, and theory. Although these clearly emerge from a modernist perspective, I find them and my use of them to be adaptable to postmodern concerns. These four topics constitute the basis of chapters in *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary* with an introductory chapter on art criticism in general and a final chapter on college students' writing and talking about art. In the second edition of *Criticizing Art*, I moved the

theory chapter from the end of the book to the beginning. I had first placed it toward the end because it contained the most difficult material and I did not want to lose readers early. However, theory is so essential to criticism that I placed it early in the next edition, after satisfactorily trying that new placement with students I taught.

The theory chapter was most difficult to write: It contrasts postmodernism and modernism, and I struggled to make postmodernism clear for readers who are new to the ideas but sufficiently sophisticated to satisfy graduate students and professors of art theory. The most enjoyable chapter to write was the first, an overview of art criticism. In my work with art students of all ages, teachers, and professors, I have heard strongly held assumptions about art critics and criticism, many of which I think are mistaken and misguided. When introducing myself to a group of fourth graders, for example, I asked, "What do art critics do?" The first answer I received was, "They make fun of artists." Adults' assumptions are often similar. I have found it difficult to convince learners that criticism is a positive activity rather than a negative one. Many art professors are cynical about critics and criticism and they pass along their doubts to their students, many of whom become art professors and art teachers. Art teachers often think of art criticism as "advice" to artists to improve their artmaking. The premise of both *Criticizing Art* and *Criticizing Photographs*, and that of my later book (Barrett, 1997), *Talking about Student Art*, is that criticism in all schools would be better if it were closer in spirit and practice to what professional critics do when they criticize art.

I believe that the introductory chapters on criticism and the later chapters on interpretation are the most valuable in both *Criticizing Photographs* and *Criticizing Art*. Both books set forth photography criticism and art criticism, in the words of photography and art critics, as *positive* activities that are meant to engage audiences of readers that may or may not include the artist about whose work the critic is writing. Criticism is generally not written for an artist. Art critics generally love the work that they do and are much more often positive in their remarks than they are negative, and spend considerably more print space describing and interpreting art, rather than judging it. When they do judge art, their judgments are more often positive than negative. I present criticism as an ongoing conversation among people interested in art. Most critics believe their statement to be provisional and open to revision. Criticism is usually about new art, not old art; when criticism is about old art, critics consider the old art as it affects us now.

The interpretation chapters offer and explain *principles* for interpreting art. I have devised or appropriated the following principles from literature on interpretation, and experiences with interpreting art, as a tentative set of *guides* for making meaning about works of art and other items of visual culture. I have eclectically compiled and fashioned these principles from scholars of art (e.g., Danto, 1981; Dickey, 1997; Goodman, 1976), literature (e.g., Culler, 1992; Eco, 1992; Hirsch, 1967), philosophy of knowing (e.g., Margolis, 1995; Rorty, 1992; Scheffler, 1991), art educators (Chapman, 1978; Feldman, 1970; Parsons, 1987), art critics (e.g., Hickey, 1997; Plagens, 1986; Raven, 1988), artists (e.g., Charles, 1998; Close, 1997; Fischl, 1990; Skoglund, 1998), and from many personal experiences in interpreting art by myself as a critic and especially with groups of many kinds in schools, museums, community centers, and at dinner tables as a facilitator of art criticism (Barrett, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 2002).

The principles constitute a set, but a loose set that can be expanded or contracted. I believe the set to be noncontradictory. All the principles are asserted as reasonable, but not all reasonable people concerned with matters of interpretation will agree with any one of them or all of them as a set. All of the principles are open to revision, and none of them are meant to be dogmatic. These principles are offered to help guide any interpreter of any artistic object or event. They may well provide directions to any and all interpretive endeavors, and not just to making meaning of artworks and artifacts of visual culture. Interpretation in realms other than the artistic are beyond the chosen scope of my research. The principles are meant to provide

the security of some stability to the insecurity of the risky and exhilarating efforts of making meaning of artistic objects and events that seem to shift as we gaze at them and change as we reflect upon them.

If these principles are followed, interpreters can be confident that their interpretive efforts are in a right direction and of a right spirit. One may also use the principles as methodological ways to begin and continue constructing an interpretation of a painting, a dance, a poem, or a poster. Any single one of the principles will set one on one's way toward a meaningful encounter with a work of art. To apply all principles to every interpretive situation would likely be beneficial, but prohibitively exhausting except in cases of serious and thorough pursuit. In some interpretive discussions and for some works of art, it is likely that the interpreter will find some of the principles more pertinent than others in the set.

- Artworks are about something.
- SUBJECT MATTER + MEDIUM + FORM + CONTEXT = MEANING
- To interpret a work of art is to understand it in language.
- Feelings are guides to interpretation.
- The critical activities of describing, analyzing, interpreting, judging, and theorizing about works of art are interrelated and interdependent.
- Distinctions between form and content are dubious.
- Artworks attract multiple interpretations and it is not the goal of interpretation to arrive at single, grand, unified, composite interpretations.
- There is a range of interpretations any artwork will allow.
- Meanings of artworks are not limited to what their artists meant them to be about.
- Interpretations are not so much right, but are more or less reasonable, convincing, informative, and enlightening.
- Interpretations can be wrong.
- Interpretations imply a worldview.
- Good interpretations of art tell more about the artwork than they tell about the interpreter.
- The objects of interpretations are artworks, not artists.
- All works of art are in part about the world in which they emerged.
- All works of art are in part about other art.
- Good interpretations have coherence, correspondence, and inclusiveness.
- Interpreting art is an endeavor that is both individual and communal.
- Some interpretations are better than others.
- The admissibility of an interpretation is determined by a community of interpreters and the community is self-correcting.
- Good interpretations invite us to see for ourselves and continue on our own.

AN ART CRITIC IN EDUCATION

In 1986, Scott Noppe-Brandon, a former student of mine who was then working for the Ohio Arts Council and who is currently director of education at the Lincoln Center Institute in New York, encouraged me to become an "Art Critic in Education" and visit schools and engage children and teens in discussions about contemporary art. By courtesy of the Ohio Arts Council, the state of Ohio enjoys a robust artist-in-education program, sponsoring artists and writers in long-term residencies in schools throughout the state. The artists work from a studio model and Scott and the Council were interested in expanding their programs to include more reflection on and responses to studio products and practices. My first invitation was to join a contemporary dance workshop in a public elementary school to do interpretive work with students who had

performed with the visiting company as well as with students who had seen the work but had not been active in making it.⁴

I responded to the invitation tentatively and contingent on meeting the dancers and seeing their work. I had hesitations: I enjoyed modern dance as an audience member, but could I lead an informed critical discussion of it? Were the artists antagonistic or favorable toward critics and criticism? Would their dance works hold enough personal interest for me to want to discuss them? Would children be interested in talking about these dances? These are the questions I continue to ask about artifacts and educational opportunities when choosing artifacts and groups of learners. After attending a rehearsal and talking with the choreographer and dancers, my hesitations quickly evaporated.

This first experience of Art Critic in Education was successful: The children talked intelligently, insightfully, and enthusiastically for 45 minutes about the dance works. I facilitated the children in orally recalling what they saw and felt, prompting them with video clips when their memories failed, and asked what some of the aspects of the dance meant to them and why. Our discussion was descriptive and interpretive, what Ralph Smith (1973) might call "exploratory aesthetic criticism." The professional dancers, too, were pleased with the children's verbal articulations and insights. Were the professional dancers not pleased with our interpretive endeavors and results, intellectual and political conflicts would have ensued and would have required resolution.

Buoyed by this experience with the elementary students, I accepted a second invitation to engage high school students in art criticism in a Catholic high school. This experience was key for my development as a critic in education, but it was a negative experience for me. A product of Catholic schooling myself, in preparing for my visit I had nostalgic memories and optimistic hopes for a warm and honest homecoming, of sorts, mediated through works of art that I imagined would be in the students' artroom. There was little art in the art room to discuss; the students were very reticent to say *anything* out loud; they seemed self-consciously aware of visitors who observed from the back of the room; and the 45-minute period seemed to me to drag interminably. I was humbled by my naive expectations and embarrassed by my poor performance, especially in the presence of the sponsors who had observed it.

I learned important lessons from that experience: Always have too many works of art to be able to talk about rather than too few. Realize that observers or participants new to the core group will affect the psychological atmosphere of the classroom. Know that when I am a visitor or part-time teacher, the personality of the class I am teaching will have already been largely shaped by the school or by the students' primary teachers. As a visitor, I will always inherit certain but unpredictable givens and must patiently accommodate. For example, the students may have never before talked in an organized way about works of art. Indeed, some classes have never talked publicly in an organized way about any topic. Students may not be knowledgeable about or comfortable with speaking in front of their peers and teachers and to a stranger. Many students do not know how to listen to one another in group discussions. Many students have not been taught to think for themselves or encouraged to honestly express their views. Many art students have been taught to believe that works of art "speak for themselves." Many students have been allowed to put one another down; thus, individuals are very reluctant to speak and expose themselves to subtle or obvious psychologically painful criticism from their peers or teachers.

After many sessions as a visiting critic, I have found that if my schedule is Art I or Art II, Ceramics II, and Photography I, for example, it will likely be a more challenging day for me than if my schedule is English, English II, Social Studies, and AP English. We teachers have generally taught art students not to talk about art, although we have generally taught them to verbally and orally engage with ideas in humanities and social studies classes.

⁴Stuart Pimsler Dance & Theater, Lima City Schools, Lima, Ohio, 1986.

"Learning readiness" is a key concept in art and other subjects: Some people are not ready for some works of art, nor should they be expected to be. Therefore, choosing which artworks to show to which audiences also quickly became crucial to my success or failure as a facilitator of discussions. I have had educational success with pre-K, K, and early elementary students talking about stuffed animals; boxes of breakfast cereals; photographs made by William Wegman; 20th-century paintings of animals by Picasso, Chagall, and Marc; and works that the children themselves have made. I have also learned not to underestimate students' abilities to handle challenging works of art. A group of girls and boys in a middle-school home economics class, for example, taught me that they could be very intelligently engaged with political and postmodern works of art made by Barbara Kruger. These same artworks can also be stimulating to older learners including adults. Fourth graders have insightfully discussed installations that they have built in their schools with visiting artists. Fourth graders have intelligently discussed Native American professional dance performances and written about the paintings of René Magritte (Barrett, 2002) and installations made by Sandy Skoglund. High school students have insightfully engaged with art made by Richard Avedon, Romare Bearden, Deborah Butterfield, Salvador Dali, Helen Frankenthaler, Jenny Holzer, Jacob Lawrence, Sean Scully, Cindy Sherman, Jerry Uelsmann, works that the students themselves have made, graphical t-shirts, TV commercials, popular magazine ads and covers, and clips from Hollywood feature films.

I have had occasions to facilitate discussions about difficult art, some of which have been made controversial. Sharon Rab, a public school English teacher and sponsor of an after-school art club, The Muse, invited me to her high school to prepare students to see in person Robert Mapplethorpe's exhibition, "The Perfect Moment," when it was shown in nearby Cincinnati after it had been shut down by the sheriff and then reopened, but under litigation concerning Cincinnati's pornography laws. This visit resulted in an article that I co-authored with Sharon Rab (Barrett & Rab, 1990) in which we heavily quoted the students with whom we worked. I had a second occasion to work with high school students and Mapplethorpe's photographs in a Columbus public school.⁵ Both cases demonstrate that teenagers in school, when given the opportunity, a psychologically safe environment, and facilitation, are able and willing to talk about subject matter that their teachers and parents might think too difficult to discuss.

Similarly, fourth- and fifth-graders in a public school in a rural area of Ohio⁶ were able to insightfully write about photographs made by Sally Mann of her children, sometimes partially nude. These photographs (Mann, 1992) are controversial for some adults and are sometimes targeted by groups demanding that they be removed from bookstores. Mann's photographs were not controversial for the fourth- and fifth-graders who saw them, but the photographs did provoke the students to think and talk and write passionately about Mann's children and their mother, as well as all children and mothers and growing up (Barrett, 2000c).

Two full classes of fourth-graders and a core group of 12 fifth-graders selected from their regular classes talked and wrote about the Mann images. Twelve high school students went to and wrote about the Mapplethorpe exhibit. About 30 students in the Columbus high school talked about Mapplethorpe images in their art room. Only two of the parents of all these elementary and high school students objected to the material: One mother did not want her daughter seeing Mann's or any nude and partially dressed children, and one parent of a high school student asked that her daughter be excused from the discussion of Mapplethorpe photographs. Administrators in both schools supported the teachers, me, and the students working with photographs by Mapplethorpe and Mann. Although I recognize the difference between *intelligent selection* of artworks for the curriculum and *censorship*, I think that many art teachers

⁵Columbus Alternative High School, Lisa Vottero, sponsoring art teacher, Columbus, Ohio, May 1992.

⁶Forest Park Elementary School, Jann Gallagher, sponsoring teacher, Euclid, Ohio, March 1992.

unfortunately and unnecessarily self-censor their curricula. What is difficult for some adults may not be difficult for those whom they teach: "Difficult" is a relative term.⁷

There are many artists who make art that challenges aspects of American society. This art, in the hands of wise and sensitive teachers, could benefit students. Works made by African American artists such as Robert Colescott, Carrie Mae Weems, and Michael Ray Charles can serve here as examples. Each of these artists deals in confrontational ways with racism. Colescott employs sarcastic humor in many of his paintings, depicting historical white figures as if they were black, sometimes uses sexual narratives to make his points. (Brent Wilson once wisely remarked, "If you don't want to talk about blowjobs, don't show Colescott's *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware*."⁸) Carrie Mae Weems (1994) has made photographs with texts. *White Patty*, for example, is a photograph of an African American girl, about age 10, wearing boxing gloves, with a confident and threatening facial expression, with text in bold caps: "WHITE PATTY, / WHITE PATTY, / YOU DON'T SHINE, / MEET YOU AROUND THE CORNER, / AND BEAT YOUR BEHIND." I believe a skilled teacher could use this image and talk with young girls and boys about pain inflicted by racism and about conflict resolution in response to it.

Michael Ray Charles (1998) appropriates stereotypical representations of African Americans into his paintings, using Aunt Jemima, Sambos, minstrels, and pickaninnies in degrading postures and situations. I think these images are generally inappropriate for young children, but may be very salient for high schoolers, particularly for African American students in all-black classrooms and in racially mixed groups. Using such material, however, requires intellectual and emotional maturity on the part of the teacher and the students. The work that Charles makes is volatile: Many African American viewers find them objectionable and want neither to display them nor to talk about them.⁹ Warning: Charles's paintings might be especially volatile subjects for high school students in racially mixed classrooms who do not know how to talk about controversial subjects. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, when I was working in high schools, I recall classroom fist fights among students erupting when well-meaning but socially and psychologically naive teachers showed historic films of Negroes being lynched in the American South.

With teachers and art museum docents I have used images by Weems, Charles, Andres Serrano, The Chapman Brothers, Joel-Peter Witkin, and by other artists whose content is justifiably challenging to many. I do not necessarily recommend that the teachers use such imagery with their students: I encourage teachers to decide what content they will use based on their knowledge of their students, school, and culture in which they teach. I do think it important that teachers become comfortable talking about uncomfortable images if they plan to use such images with their students. I also believe that art teachers have a professional responsibility to be aware of and articulate about art made during their lives and the lives of their students regardless of whether they teach about *all* of that art. As a profession, art education has, I think, irresponsibly removed itself from the fray of public controversy over some artworks made by Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, Chris Ofili, Renée Cox, and many others. If we want a citizenry that can deal with difficult art in a more sophisticated and

⁷When Susan Barrett and I were recently invited to work with docents on "difficult art" in an art museum, we prepared material with which we and the docents could talk about issues of sex, religion, and politics that works of art raise. Some artworks that entailed these issues were difficult for the docents; but more difficult for them, to our surprise, was abstract painting and sculpture.

⁸Brent Wilson, public discussion following a workshop that I led at Penn State University, February 24, 1995.

⁹When invited in 1997 to prepare tour guides for a Michael Ray Charles exhibition at the Austin Museum of Art in Texas, no African American docents attended the workshop; nor did any choose to tour the exhibition. See Juliet Bowles (1998) for a published account of controversy within African American communities surrounding images of Blacks by artists such as Charles, Colescott, and Kara Walker.

enlightened way than either censorship or blind acceptance, we need to educate the present and future citizenry. If we don't, who will? A sheriff in Cincinnati, a mayor of New York City, a senator from South Carolina.

STUDIO CRITIQUES AND ART CRITICISM

Studio critiques are a peculiar form of art criticism that have tremendous import in the teaching of art at all levels, but especially in colleges and graduate-degree programs of art. Studio critiques are a special form of criticism. Critiques are generally for artists whose art is being discussed in a school setting. They are often directed to the artist who made the work being discussed, and usually with the understanding that the critique is for the purpose of the artist improving his or her art making. Art criticism, however, is usually a written form of discourse about art published in magazines and newspapers for the benefit of an audience of many readers who are interested in art. Perhaps too simply put, art criticism is discourse about art meant to increase understanding and appreciation of art in those who participate in the discourse by reading and writing and talking: Studio critiques are a special form of art criticism usually directed at the artist to improve his or her art making (Barrett, 1988). Unfortunately, people who have participated in studio critiques when they took art studio courses often mistake critiques for art criticism.

When critiques are confused with art criticism, art criticism too quickly becomes judgmental, and frequently degenerates into giving advice to artists. Whereas art criticism can generally be understood as discourse around topics of description, interpretation, judgment, and art theory (aesthetics or philosophy of art), studio critiques frequently bypass much description, often ignore interpretation, and proceed quickly to judgment or even begin and end with judgment with no interpretive talk in between. When art is interpreted during studio critiques, the interpretation that ensues usually rests on the artist's intent (or the intent of the instructor who gave the art assignment). Intentionalism is a very limited but widely used and frequently flawed form of art criticism. When items of visual culture are included in the art curriculum, current models of studio critiques will be of little use to deciphering those items, their meanings, and values.

Since 1993, I have been collecting answers to open-ended questions about studio critiques from groups of individuals in colleges across the United States. I have hundreds of responses to different questionnaires from faculty and art students at 26 institutions including some in Canada and Australia. All respondents confirm that studio critiques have been influential in their lives, both in positive and especially in negative ways. Some of the results of these questionnaires have been published with suggestions for improving studio critiques by generally adapting positive notions of and by paying more attention to the implied meaning of works of art, regardless of the artist's intent in making the work (Barrett, 2000d).

Art teachers have been influenced by their own participation in studio critiques while they were in college, taking art courses. Many art teachers have had more art courses than they have had courses in art education. Art teachers' experiences about art criticism from studio professors are likely more influential than whatever they read by or heard of Edmund Feldman and other art educators who write about improving art criticism in art education. Moreover, many art professors have negative attitudes about art critics and consciously or subconsciously communicate these to their students.

A long-term goal of mine has been to merge professional art criticism and studio critiques in schools of all levels. *Talking about Student Art* (Barrett, 1997) is a book I wrote for art teachers. It attempts to insert into practice lessons learned from professional art critics and aestheticians with children as young as 4 years old, children in elementary and middle schools, teenagers

in high schools, and with adults who make art occasionally. There are many educational advantages of bringing art education into closer alignment to some artworld professional practices: a most important advantage is that the art room becomes more like what the learners will experience in the artworld outside of school, and thus learners will be better prepared to interact intelligently with art outside of their classrooms. Another important advantage of using appropriate professional critical practices is that by doing so, children learn that their art, when made seriously, can be taken seriously and approached with serious questions, many of the same questions posed by professional critics about art made by professionally mature artists.

Talking about Student Art consists of about 30 case studies of discussions with students about the works of art that the students made. The book employs action research to find ways to improve the quality as well as quantity of students' thinking about their peers' and their own art by using critical strategies employed by critics and other art professionals. The book contains transcriptions of dialogs between the students and me as guest critic about art the students have already made as assigned to them and supervised by their art teachers. The discussions include reflections about the dialogs and the choices I made as discussion facilitator, what was good and not so good about my choices, and how the discussions could have been better.

Following are some key suggestions, strategies, and questions for students, derived from research for *Talking about Student Art*, that are based in part on real-world practices of art critics. Because critics write for specific audiences, I ask middle or high school students to write interpretively about an artwork so that a younger brother or sister—or a class of second- or third-graders—would understand the criticism. I ask the writers to read their writing to their intended audience to see how effectively it communicates.

A teacher could ask a student or a team of students to curate a show of student work. Explain to the students that a curator is a person who usually works for an art museum, and decides what to show, why to show it, and how. The student curators could consider these questions:

- Will you show the work of one student or many?
- If you hang a group show, which artists will be included and why?
- What pieces will you select and why?
- Will you display them chronologically or by some other organizing principle?
- Will you hang the work according to themes of subject matter, similarity of media, or some other organizing principle?
- How many works by each artist will you include?
- Will you hang all of one artist's work together, or disperse them among other artists' works?

These are two sets of questions meant to elicit *interpretive* discussions about works of art made by the students and other artists. The questions bring student artists and viewers to consider aspects of art larger than what the artist likely had in his or her mind when making the work. The following questions, if answered, will lead art teachers to consider carefully the assignments they make and the consequences of those assignments of which they may be unaware. The questions are also very appropriate for items of visual culture such as TV commercials, music videos, printed tee-shirts, and posters.

- What seems most important in this artwork? How do you know?
- What do you think the artwork is for or against?
- What political, religious, or racial views does the artwork seem to uphold?
- What would this artwork have you believe about the world?
- Does the artwork represent a male or a female point of view?

- What does this artwork indicate about the time in which it was made? Could it have been made at *any* time and place, or only at a *specific* time and place? What evidence do you have for your answers?
- What does the artwork assume about the viewer?
- Is the artwork directed at a certain age group, a certain class of people?
- Is this an optimistic or a pessimistic view of what is shown?
- Who might most like this artwork?
- Might some people be offended by the work?

The next set of questions for middle and high school students will likely move the discussion effortlessly and naturally from criticism into *aesthetics* (philosophizing about art and visual culture). Ask:

- Is there truth in fiction?
- Is there truth in art?
- What is factual and what is fictional about an artwork or artifact? This question is particularly appropriate for artworks that have realistically depicted subject matter, such as photographic work.

Artists who work in one medium think differently when they then work in another medium. A photographer, for instance, always has something in the viewfinder and thinks about what to include and exclude as the photographer moves the camera up, down, in, and out. The painter, however, starts with a blank canvas and adds to it. Photography, in this sense, is a subtractive medium. Painting is an additive medium. Ask learners to discuss *how they think* when they are using different media:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of any particular medium?
- What are the limitations of any particular medium?
- What does any one particular medium allow an artist to do best?
- Are there “wrong” or improper uses of media?
- Teachers in the Bauhaus workshops wanted a medium to look like the medium it was. For example, they believed poured concrete for a building’s wall should look like poured concrete. They would leave the newly poured concrete walls textured from their wooden forms, and natural gray instead of painting them. They considered cardboard to be beautiful, and would use it, undisguised, to make furniture and other items. Do you agree with these “honesty of materials” principles? Why or why not?

The next questions will engage students in both critical and aesthetic (philosophical) discussions of their art and *all* art. The questions are concerned with *the role of the artist’s intent* in making a work of art when interpreting that work:

- Can we know an artist’s intent? Ever? Always? Do some artists work intuitively, drawing on the subconscious, and even intentionally block specific intent?
- Is an artist’s intent, when available, always relevant to the meaning of the artwork?
- Can an artist mean to express one thing, but then express more than that, or something different from that?
- Should the artist’s stated intent be the final arbiter when determining the accuracy of an interpretation?
- As a teacher, what are your beliefs about artistic intent? Are you consistent or contradictory when you teach about artistic intention, art making, and art interpretation?

Studio critiques, at any age, quickly, easily, and unintentionally turn *negative*. Teachers can redirect unnecessarily negative discussions. When students are being overly and unproductively negative during a critique, teachers can point out that the students are being negative, and redirect questions to elicit more positive answers: "Tell me what's *good* about this artwork." "Tell me what the artist *has done*, not what you think the artist *should have done*." When discussing work that the teacher thinks is good but students do not, allow the students their preferences (what they *like*), but challenge them to think about why others might think it is a *good* work of art (what some people *value*). "Why do museum personnel regard this work of art to be good enough to be preserved, protected, and displayed?" Ask: "You don't have to like this artwork, but why do you think someone else might think that it is good? Can you think of reasons why someone might value this work of art?"

When purposely engaging learners in judgmental questions about works of art, teachers can elicit *positive* critical judgments by phrasing judgmental questions in ways such as these:

- How is this a good work of art?
- What is the most effective part or aspect of this work of art?
- How or why are the artist's choices good ones?
- How would you persuade others to appreciate this artwork as much as you do?
- How could you convince someone to appreciate a particular artwork that he or she thinks is not good?
- What artists throughout history might most appreciate this artwork?

Questions can also be addressed to expose the underlying values of works of art and items of visual culture:

- What are the social implications of what is depicted?
- Do you want to be part of a society that upholds the values implied in this artifact?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As I reflect on what I have done in the past and what motivates me today, I am aware of being rooted in *art* and humanities in my formal education and professional life, more so than in the field of *education*. I have spent my university career in a college of the arts, not in a college of education, and daily pass by or through a gallery filled with ever-changing exhibitions of contemporary art, some of it still wet. I am daily grateful that I see such art on my way to my office rather than what I see on bulletin boards when walking through the halls of the college of education. Nonetheless, my research and practice is informed by education literature and practice, especially my own many and frequent experiences working with children and teenagers in schools. I think it would be informative for someone to research the beliefs and attitudes about art and education held by those educated within and working within colleges of education versus colleges of art. I think some significant differences would emerge, and these differences will likely have import for debating and implementing educational reform.

I am drawn to contemporary art and Western art more than to historical art and art of other cultures, although I continually seek to learn about and enjoy all art. When faced with art that is foreign to me, I am awestruck by the amount of knowledge and experience it takes to comprehend and appreciate such work. I recall informal comments by David Ecker, who wondered how anyone could assume to understand another culture or its artifacts without intimately knowing the language of the culture. I worry about shortchanging that artwork by well-intended but shallow introductions of it to students. It seems self-apparent to me that

there is a distinct educational advantage in working with contemporary art that is made and displayed in one's own culture. It is of us and from us and therefore accessible. I think that it is common sense to start with art around us and then move to art that is further removed from us by time or geography or culture. Yet, many art teachers and museum docents fear contemporary art as foreign, strange, and difficult to teach about.

I approach the teaching of art with the sensibility of an artist, a critic, and an aesthetician, but I do not necessarily give any one of these sensibilities hierarchical status over the other, and I do not engage in all three simultaneously. I privilege one over the other depending on context, circumstance, and purpose. When painting, I have a need to consciously block the critic and aesthetician from my consciousness so as not to be so self-conscious of critical and philosophical issues as to become hampered and constricted while making art. When I teach art making, I want students to inhale an art spirit and think; and make art as mature artists might think, feel, and make. As an art teacher, I want reflective art making from students about feelings and ideas about which they genuinely care, followed by thoughtful and respectful reflections by their classmates on what they have made. I believe art making constitutes a unique way of being in the world. I believe art making is a uniquely valuable way of experiencing and knowing the world. I believe works of art give us new knowledge, and without works of art, the world would lack this knowledge and suffer for the lack.

When I look at art as a critic and when I engage students in critical looking and thinking, I emphasize *interpretation* of works of art:

- What do they mean?
- How do they mean?
- What do they mean to me?
- What do they mean to others? How do I know?
- How might these artworks change my life?
- How might they change others' lives? Are such changes morally desirable?

When criticizing art and engaging others in its criticism, I generally deemphasize judgment in favor of interpretation. Judgment without interpretation is irresponsible and irresponsible. Thorough interpretation often renders judgment unnecessary or transparently obvious. Interpretation ought to include *consequences of content* in artworks and items of visual culture, and such thinking entails judgment. Interpretation entails description, as needed, and formal analysis and how it affects meaning, but the distinction between form and content often held by art teachers and professors is dubious. Distinctions between aesthetics and ethics are artificial and merely academic.

Although I appreciate many types of art, I especially cherish art that is socially engaged. When I make art, however, it is usually abstract, and I intend it to be more than about itself and to be about living life optimistically. The "more" that my art is concerned with is spirituality of a humanistic sort. As a critic and aesthetician and especially as an art educator who teaches students in schools and future art teachers in college, I am resistant to Formalism, the 20th-century theory of art that insists that art is about itself and of itself and apart from all else in the world. I appreciate formalist art, and want to teach others to be able to appreciate it, as one type of art among many choices. Attention to form is essential to thoughtful attention to any artifact, but many art teachers confuse form and Formalism and the conflation of form and Formalism has seriously hampered the teaching of art in the last 50 years and continues to limit art instruction today.

As an art educator, my leanings are toward social reconstructionism and liberatory pedagogy, which, I believe, can be furthered by art making and by critical and philosophical thinking about art and culture. I believe art education should actively embrace the critical study of

popular culture in addition to the art we find in contemporary art galleries and historical art museums. I think visual culture and fine art culture are mutually informing, and that study of one can enlighten understanding of the other. If the study of either does not genuinely engage the learner with issues of life, however, neither is worth pursuing in the manner it is being pursued. These are the presumptions that motivate my work in art education through art criticism.

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