

# BEYOND CRITIQUE

DIFFERENT WAYS OF TALKING ABOUT ART

*Edited by*  
**Susan Waters-Eller**  
& **Joseph J. Basile**

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Baltimore, Maryland, 2013

Beyond Critique: Different Ways of Talking About Art  
Susan Waters-Eller and Joseph J. Basile, editors

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***Dedication***

RICHARD KALTER served MICA as philosopher-in-residence from the 80s up to his death in 2004. He formed a bridge between the making of art and the ways people talk about life in the world. He was trained in phenomenology and theology. He taught no classes and had no official schedule. He just was there when it was time to talk about art and about life. Students quickly took to him, even when they could not easily follow all that he said. By tying together art-making, the material life-world, and the processes of the mind, he reassured students that what they were engaged in and committed to had real significance after all—that it was about much more than learning a craft, that they could really make the world a better place. The profound growth of intellectual awareness at MICA from the 80s on was largely Richard's doing. In gratitude for that, and for many other reasons, this book is dedicated to him.

### *Acknowledgements*

A BOOK LIKE THIS is obviously a collaboration, and beyond the contributions of the authors and editors themselves. Thus we wish to acknowledge the support of several important individuals within the community we call the Maryland Institute College of Art. First, we thank MICA's forward-looking president, Fred Lazarus IV, who is retiring in 2014 after a 35-year tenure, the longest in the history of the college. Fred has been a dynamic booster of diversity in the college curriculum—this has been made manifest through the active support of Provost Ray Allen, and Vice Provost Jan Stinchcomb, who provided the resources to make this volume possible. The members of MICA's Cultural Expansion Committee (listed in the Preface) worked diligently to take *Beyond Critique* from the realm of possibility to reality. MICA alumna Skye McNeill designed the volume and has been very patient through several delays; thanks also to Ellen Lupton for her advice, and for recommending Skye. And Bob Merrill, professor in the Department of Humanistic Studies who was required to step away from his role as co-editor of the volume when asked to be interim Vice Provost of Research and Graduate Studies, has very graciously returned to help the current co-editors with production and publication. Without the help of all these and more, *Beyond Critique* would not have been possible.

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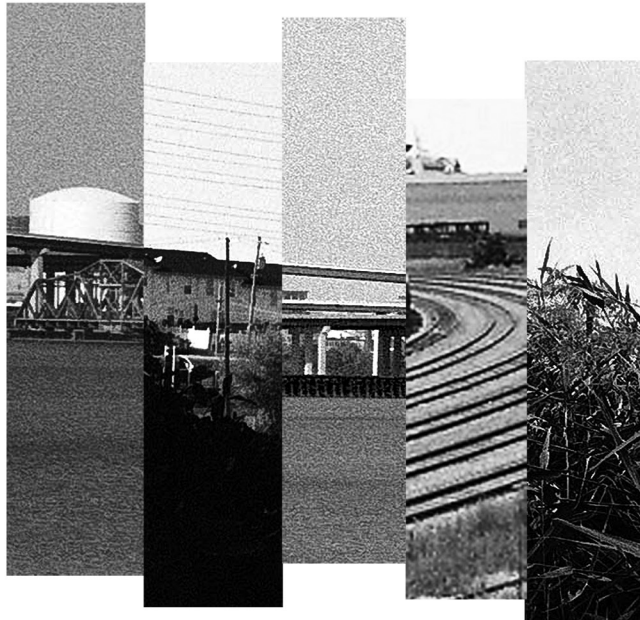
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# INTRODUCTION

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IN THE PAST, most qualitative discussions of art were connected to art criticism. Art critics discussed work in relation to historical Western European standards and class discussions of art for the most part followed that model. Today, growing worldwide communication has showcased the wide range of cultural perspectives across the globe and requires a reorientation in our notion of how to talk about art, one that is no longer restricted to classroom and critic. Discussions that use art as the point of departure can stimulate creative thinking for anyone once it's clear that there's no one right answer. Assessments that favor one way of seeing and disregard others feel out-of-date and elitist when faced with the diversity of contemporary student populations. In art schools the traditional mode of critique inculcated a set of values and a particular standard of what art should be. It's the natural setting for the reformulation of stimulating ways to discuss art that don't compare the work to standards of value that may not be relevant to artists who are influenced by other cultures and sensibilities. Their goals reflect the context of their lives and need to be taken into account. New approaches to how art is discussed are needed.

Since there is very little specific education in how to discuss art critically, and few books on the subject, teachers have based their methods on the models from their own education and the traditional critique continued even while curricula and teaching methods evolved to accommodate the diversity of individuals involved. The same transformation is necessary in the way we think about what is most useful in discussing creative work. Since evaluation depends on measuring against a particular standard, it can limit and even inhibit growth



Sarah Peeler Adams

where the legitimate values of the artist are different. Rather than throw out the concept of standards altogether, what's necessary is to reconfigure the way we present them and turn it into real information instead of personal opinion. That can be achieved by the simple addition of the background from which the standard emerged. This shows the student artist how an individual point of view develops and how that affects a response to their work. A professor with a particular background and education is sensitive to the emphasis from those influences and can help a student see certain things about their work that the student may miss while acknowledging the different perspective of the student. When two local residents of an urban area asked to join the discussion of sculpture in their neighborhood, the teacher reported it was one of the best conversations the group had ever had. The perspectives of the residents enriched the discussion with entirely different life experiences. Seeing what's communicated to a range of sensibilities offers understanding of what is universal in human response.

The "D.I.Y." culture that has emerged with the Internet reflects how individuals can use the spectrum of information available to develop a personal way of doing just about anything. Rather than propose a particular method, this book offers twelve personal views of how to discuss art and the background philosophy that led to them. Written by faculty members at Maryland Institute College of Art, they reflect widely different understandings of what the discussion should be. One of the great advantages to a college like MICA is that there are so many diverse approaches to art and how to teach it. For students trying to find their own paths, having such a

wide range from which to choose allows their individuality to flourish. Having multiple perspectives breaks down the idea of a single authority and increases intellectual freedom. Rather than push a particular standard, it makes more sense in our twenty-first century international community to help young artists gauge their effectiveness for themselves by providing a variety of mechanisms for getting feedback on their work. The more different methods, the more information a student has from which to proceed. This puts more responsibility on the student; there is not one authority or system to tell them what to do. They choose what resonates with their own motives using the best ideas from different individuals for the growth of their work.

Offering this range of perspectives is the beginning of opening the discussion of art to a wider audience. Discussing art has been found to improve children's scores in other subjects as well by stimulating creative thinking in a context where there are no wrong answers. For the same reasons it's been used in some medical training which depends on visual sensitivity for diagnosis. The value of developing visual intelligence is now more widely understood. Strategies for educating this essential capability are necessary, and it's natural that they would emerge from the context of an art college.

Including our cultural and educational orientation in these essays is a way to demonstrate the value of our differences and how they shape our approach. The book begins with an essay by faculty member Ken Krafchek; his immersion in the world of social justice and cultural work leads him to question who decides the standards and to transform the historic idea

of critique with ways to give voice to more ideas. His essay outlines the methods and problems with the traditional critique and offers alternatives that can open discussion.

Fletcher Mackey considers what makes a good discussion through personal stories. He focuses attention on the many factors that influence response to art and how it can be employed to open the creative nature of entire communities.

Dan Dudrow writes about his experience working with the late Dr. Richard Kalter, MICA's philosopher-in residence, who through his presence and vast erudition opened up new ways of talking about art that connected it to the larger world of ideas. Bringing a scholar with a different area of expertise refreshed the discussion in novel and unexpected ways.

Jane Elkinton's many years studying Asian and particularly Japanese art led her to use the tea ceremony as a way to help students experience their responses to every aspect of an experience and to focus attention more deeply. She describes their immersion in each stage of gesture and response and the subtle levels of communication that are there to be noticed when you empty the mind of other thoughts.

With thirty years of studying perception and the brain, I use discussion of student work as a way to help students see the mechanisms of visual response. Showing how their compositional and stylistic choices create sensations and feelings, they see that certain visual structural principles underlie archetypal human experiences and are felt across cultures no matter how diverse the content.

Whitney Sherman has worked in the fine as well as applied arts, from undergraduate to graduate level. She gives us a range of tools for discussing work and shows how she decides which is most appropriate to particular students and situations.

Mina Cheon brings a cross-cultural perspective to the discussion of work among students in Korea and the United States. Her use of a blog as part of international collaboration and dialogue taps the power of this modern format and demonstrates just how differently people in varied cultures may look at the same topics.

Poet and literature professor John Peacock combines the values of his Dakota background and rigor of Critical Theory analysis with an approach that focuses on determining the important questions and looking at differences in Western and Non-Western attitudes towards art making. He uses specific stories to explore the role of storytelling in talking about art.

Margee Morrison examines the subject of rhetoric itself, its functions and how language shapes what we see and understand. How the subject of the discussion changes according to how we talk about it illuminates an essential feature of the discussion dynamic.

The positions in this book are not in opposition to each other but are all different routes to the same goals. This is not to say they are in agreement. Nancy Roeder sees talking about the work as "primary" to the education of the artist and gives specific examples of the most successful interactions. How the art reflects the context of the individual life is shown in stories of



specific experiences, and show where straying beyond the customary areas of response can open new levels of insight.

At the other end of the spectrum, Dennis Farber questions where the real value is in these discussions. His essay is a meditation on the nature of meaning.

Ultimately, the core of the process is the search for a way of talking about art that is useful to all involved. As Director of the graduate sculpture program, Maren Hassinger focuses on the line of inquiry that will get to the heart of the work. She starts with the understanding that the artist knows more than she does about what they've made and offers a group of questions that help open the discussion to include motives and influences.

Joe Basile ends the collection with an "epilogue" that examines the critique in light of the notion that visual artists and designers share a "parallel vision" with many researchers in the humanities and sciences: they "think" with things.

Throughout the essays, the question of the role of the viewer, the broader context from which the art emerges and what constitutes useful information are underlying themes that support the need to re-examine this issue. The styles range from poetic to scientific, academic to personal, Socratic to narrative. Our goal is to support creative growth, to encourage while providing methods for self-examination. Having more perspectives from which to draw, a new level of creative and intellectual freedom will be possible. Less concerned with how images and ideas match an external standard, everyone involved in

talking about art can become more attuned to an internal one that reflects their whole self, measured by personal authenticity.

As in biology, cross-pollination creates new hybrids that are better adapted to the new world. It's a universal pattern. Having more people of different backgrounds talking about art builds a larger picture of what art does. This palette of varied techniques for the discussion of art can be a model for how different ideas can coexist, enlarge awareness and morph into original, more globally pertinent ideas, allowing new forms of art to emerge. As the range of art grows, so can its relevance. Art can reconnect to communities and enrich the expressive life of the public. Talking about art is a way of learning about ourselves and the different ways that archetypal patterns play out in different cultural contexts. Moving beyond criticism is a way to invite everyone to participate, pooling our perspectives and building our understanding of all the ways universal human qualities can be expressed.

### ***Susan Waters-Eller***

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#### CULTURAL EXPANSION COMMITTEE MEMBERS 2010 :

Susan Waters-Eller, <i>Chair</i>	Fletcher Mackey	Margee Morrison
Paula Philips	Robert Merrill	Soheila Ghaussy
Ken Krafchek	Carole Poppleton	Maren Hassinger

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## THE LIBERATORY CRITIQUE

*Ken Krafchek*

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THE ACADEMY, or high art institution, exists to transmit the values and principles of the dominant cultural paradigm to its students by way of teachers who support this agenda. The academy-trained artist is therefore trained in a manner reflecting this set of ideals, the form and function of “legitimate” art being limited as prescribed by the teacher. In contrast, the student interested in becoming a community artist or cultural worker must seek out a set of skills, knowledge and competencies that transcend the normal physical, intellectual, and spiritual confines of today’s academy.

The field of community arts supports the fundamental tenet that a community defines its own creative/cultural prerogatives. The community artist is therefore receptive to and nurtures “multiple truths,” unique concepts of beauty, and standards of excellence that may be very different from those normally advocated by the academy.



Tom Symonds

The following liberatory critique or assessment format represents one way of engaging visual art students and community in a liberatory dialogue. It was developed at the undergraduate level in partial collaboration with Christopher Shipley, John Peacock, Bob Merrill and other Literature and Culture Faculty, Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). This format and process has now been applied and further developed as part of MICA's MFA in Community Arts.

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**THERE ARE EIGHT INTERLOCKING STEPS TO THIS INVESTIGATION.**

***Step 1***

Critique participants silently familiarize themselves with the artwork presented and mentally record their own personal reactions for future reference and discussion. It is important that critique participants acknowledge their own first reaction without interpretation or judgment. These “unconscious” responses serve each participant as an important “point of meditation,” allowing for real self-critical analysis.

INSTRUCTOR: Participants in this liberatory critique process include faculty from multiple disciplines, students and guest artists, along with members of the community that the artist is making artwork with or about. By including community members, the notion of the “expert” is now expanded; the formerly voiceless

“subject” of the artwork in question now imbued with the power to co-construct meaning and significance of the artmaking process and resulting art object(s).

***Step 2***

Critique participants (except the artist whose artwork is being critiqued) each describe what they *see* when viewing the piece of artwork in question. Individually and as a group, audience responders take inventory of each and every component (regardless of perceived significance) comprising the sum total of the artwork.

***“I see...”***

This step includes a listing of items, objects or qualities existing in the artwork, including formal elements (color, texture, line), relational dynamics, historical precedents, symbols, signs, etc.

The first step to becoming an accomplished critical thinker is to see the world's particulars with an unbiased eye. At the very least, we must learn to recognize our biased view of the world—including that which we acknowledge (see) and that which we are oblivious (do not see).

INSTRUCTOR: For this “new seeing” to occur and related critical thinking skills to be developed, we must borrow the eyes of others. In fact, a wide variety of people, experiences, expertise and cultural perspectives are invited into the liberatory critique process. The simple act of listing what we *literally see* and acknowledging what we do not when looking at a piece of artwork is life changing. Seeing alongside of and through the eyes of

others as part of a respectful, inclusive “community of equals” is to develop a new relationship to the world.

The above process is relational (as opposed to the object-centric nature of the traditional critique process); therefore a large investment of time is required. Relationship building is a lengthy ongoing process requiring mutual respect—every participant possessing a different relationship to time, mode of communication, learning style, etc. Therefore, the liberatory process requires the academy to rethink institutional structures as they relate to time, course schedules, credit hours and teacher contracts.

STUDENT OBSERVATIONS (COMPILED): The student whose work is being critiqued is a black male from Jamaica, approximately 40 years old. The work is hung with clear pushpins in each corner of the piece. The center of the artwork is just below the artist’s eye level or five feet from the floor. The lighting in the hallway gallery space is soft white with no glare. Students and faculty sit and stand between three and 10 feet away from the art.

The work is square in shape, roughly three by three feet, flat against the wall. There is no frame or matting. The support system is unstretched canvas, with paper and other opaque overlays. An orange “Baltimore Crab” with the line quality of a talented youth or inexperienced adult adorns an eight by 10 inch subsection of the piece. Another section above and to the left represents a Baltimore street scene of muted brownstones with shadowy nondescript figures in various poses. Towards the bottom left edge, wire segments, two to three inches long stretch across most of the width of the canvas in an undulating row. Each of 30-35 wire lengths pierces the canvas, as would a sewing or

hypodermic needle, except there is no syringe or holes for thread. Thick blood red paint stains the surrounding areas.

The various parts of this painting/drawing/collage are linked by a color, line, composition and mark making “logic.” None of these distinct parts dominate. A real sense of equanimity persists, even as these sections vie for quiet attention. The overall color scheme includes reds, hot pinks, and oranges muted with varying degrees of whites and grays. Black is used as a structural component, present throughout but serving more as a physical counterpoint to the ethereal qualities of this art.

The artwork reflects certain aspects of traditional abstraction. It possesses the added qualities of a postmodern collage; images rendered by the hands of different artists but, as choreographed, ultimately bowing to contemporary, high art principles. Additionally, semi-realistically rendered persons and objects—each subordinate to the aesthetic qualities of the piece—populate the piece.

There is a gash, 12 inches long, running top to bottom in the left half quadrant of the painting. This jagged cut puckers along its edges, engorged with a thick red residue, embedded with stones, glass and other seemingly foreign objects, surrounded by a stretched surface of pinkish “skin”.

It takes approximately 30 minutes for audience participants to list most aspects of the painting. Left to their own devices, many participants prefer to stop this listing process after two or three minutes with only a small fraction of the available information “lifted up” and acknowledged. Some participants attempt to skip immediately to a “meaning making” and/or “judgment making”

process. Oddly enough, most everyone is surprised and pleased by the comprehensiveness of the list that is ultimately compiled.

INSTRUCTOR: It is easy to see that *if* persons not of the academy had participated in this critique, outcomes would very likely have been very different. This begs the question: What things unmentioned previously would have been noted? No doubt, another level of seeing, a different dimension of sorts, would have revealed itself.

### Step 3

Critique participants (except the artist) each describe what they feel when viewing the same piece of artwork.

*“I feel...”*

These “felt” reactions are noted without justification or judgment. Whether emotional or intellectual, this data allows the artist being critiqued to gauge the impact of her/his work; serves as the basis for future interactions between the artist and critique participants; and provides fertile ground for everyone involved to acquire a better understanding of their own values, biases, personal history and social, cultural, racial and other influences.

INSTRUCTOR: Locating one’s feelings in relationship to a piece of artwork is an act of both intimacy and vulnerability — not necessarily related to the artwork itself — but to fellow respondents participating in the critique. The artwork viewed stimulates a response (powerful, weak, happy, angry, etc.) in each member of the audience; every stroke, color, line, or object depicted provoking

a lifetime of emotional, physical and intellectual “memories.”

STUDENT OBSERVATIONS: A female student questions the artist about the depicted gash or wound, aiming to address its yet unexplored symbolism and perceived negative connotations. Other students express a sense of confusion, uneasiness and/or sadness by certain elements and perceived contradictions. Yet, most respondents are “pleased” by the work’s aesthetic qualities. Most express real respect for the artist and his art.

STUDENT 1: *“The piece overall was one of sadness, loneliness, and desolation for me. I felt trapped, disgusted by the insinuation of needles. I liked the texture created by different surfaces that were adhered together.”*

STUDENT 2: *“I felt that it was disturbing and upsetting based upon the large wound/slit with broken glass in it and the translucent cheesecloth covering...”*

### Step 4

Critique participants (except the artist) try their best to articulate why they feel a certain way about the piece of artwork being addressed.

*“I have a personal history and unique belief system (including my own values, biases and opinions) which lead me to react in a certain way to what the artist has presented...”*

Within the academy, the practiced mantra of “anything goes” encourages multiple interpretations by an audience. In fact, the traditional critique justifies a myriad of *uninvestigated* “truths”—truth being the sole purview of the object, a “thing” existing outside the parameters of a public “living” discourse. The community artist must, therefore, acquire the skills, knowledge and competencies enabling each to recognize, celebrate and act on truths born from a communion between (and about) the artist and community.

INSTRUCTOR: There are infinite available responses to a piece of artwork. That said, there are powerful cultural and political pressures forcing the nearly inevitable acquiescence of the viewer to one dominant viewpoint. It must be remembered that dominance requires the other to remain blind to his/her own ideas, opinions and feelings and the importance thereof. The coming together of many peoples and ideas, this multi-dimensional community of experts, negates the authoritarian teacher, purveyor of “the right way.”

STUDENT 3: *“I remember thinking that the crab looked out of place, and thinking it was an ironic placement when paired with the violent images in the other two drawings...I was saddened that the side of Baltimore that the crab represents is probably not what the artist(s) of the other two pictures gets to experience.”*

INSTRUCTOR: The question of irony and ironic placement begs the question of what “is.” What is believable in modern times, the contradictions of life pitted against the notion of truth? Are

communities in stress defined by unknowable or non-existent truths? How might community residents (as opposed to academy-based students and faculty) respond to this question? Are the privileged in sole possession of authentic truth? How do we bridge the gulf of discordance that “irony” seemingly commands? These questions are extremely important to the community artist. The time required to fully address these matters is extensive, well beyond the normal parameters of the traditional critique. In fact, they encompass a whole new curriculum of possibilities.

STUDENT 5: *“The images were drawings of Baltimore community members and represent things of certain pride. For example, the crab drawing can be seen as celebratory and/or the naiveté of what some people see or don’t see. It is a sad piece and the three-dimensional wound represents abuse, violation, etc.”*

INSTRUCTOR: This respondent picks up on the contradictory or dual aspects of community as represented in this piece. The juxtaposition of pride and sadness, celebration and naiveté leads to important, lengthy discussions about the dominant culture and its definition of and control over certain communities.

STUDENT 6: *“I remember someone wondering about the artist including two pieces that his students created. My curiosity was about how he juxtaposed them and how they took on new meaning when put inside his work, especially wondering how the person who created the crab, which I read as a source of pride, felt when they saw the final piece, with their piece of ‘positive’ artwork amongst a more negative view of Baltimore. And how they might*

*feel about the artist as an outsider, making these comments about their community after only having lived here for a little bit.”*

INSTRUCTOR: Without the active participation of community members in the critique and all other assessment/evaluation methodologies, it is impossible to gauge the response of the community or indeed respect the community’s right to define its own standards and desired outcomes. That said, the conversation above illustrates academia’s predilection to hold closed conversations about “others” and what they may think, feel, believe, etc. The doors to and from academia and the community must swing both ways and include the voice and viewpoints of the larger world.

STUDENT 7: *“I couldn’t help but think it (the gash) was a vaginal representation and the broken pieces in it were piercings. I also took the wound as representing the vaginal birthing canal of Baltimore, having been ripped and torn and left with broken shards of the careless. It was a difficult but beautiful piece for me to look at.”*

INSTRUCTOR: This comment points to a more encompassing investigation of subjugation and abuse. The study of oppression not only includes racism — but sexism, ableism, heterosexism, adultism and more. What was seemingly lost on male audience members was a very important topic for discussion by female members — male dominance and its historically destructive tendencies.

### **Step 5**

The artist speaks for the first time and responds to the critique.

*“I heard \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ regarding my work during the critique.”*

*“I feel \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ about the critique of my work.”*

This step acknowledges the complex nature of interpersonal communication, a “call and response” process lifting up unique perspectives and new understandings. Together, the artist and audience close the circle on a newly formed community that is based on authentic investment, clear communication, understanding and reciprocity.

INSTRUCTOR: The academy-based artist assumes, having adhered to the Western Aesthetic, that his/her artwork will be seamlessly understood and celebrated. The fact that the artist is comfortable with multiple interpretations by the audience is often disingenuous—the audience being packed with like-minded, like-trained practitioners all beholding to the same set of principles and practices. Yes, responses may vary within the limited realm of the Western Aesthetic. But they are in reality a variation on the same theme. A real diversity of opinions is nowhere to be found. Consequently the artist is not challenged to transcend or transmit anything other than the “norm.”

The academy-trained artist therefore acquires a deaf ear to the voice of others and his/her own underlying belief system and motivations (or lack thereof) for engaging a diverse world of peoples and ideas. The self-defined “apolitical” artist is *never* apolitical; in fact he/she is entrenched in politically charged practices.

ARTIST BEING CRITIQUED: *“I was happy that my fellow students were commenting because it meant that I had successfully created an interactive piece of art, a piece where someone could view and the work elicit a response. I am aware that I may not always agree with these responses, but I understand that once art is created and placed in the public domain, it is open to any kind of interpretation.”*

INSTRUCTOR: Interactive artmaking supports the practice of community dialogue, the backbone of community arts practice. This communion or intimate relationship between community members points to something larger than the sum of its parts; promotes the importance of process and ongoing authentic engagement; and models the kind of respect required of an inclusive community.

### **Step 6**

The artist attempts to explain his/her intentions regarding the work critiqued.

*“To the best of my knowledge, I am attempting to...”*

Within the academy, the student is rarely encouraged, willing or able to interrogate his/her own motivations for making art and related life experiences, ideas or values. The traditional critique rarely measures or evaluates the artistic output of the student against the student’s own self-defined standards *or* beyond the ill-defined aesthetic considerations of the academy.

INSTRUCTOR: Deeply resonate, self-critical analysis must be nurtured over time and applied to all aspects of the student’s

creative output and work in community if she/he is to be a successful community artist. Accountability to something beyond oneself requires self-knowledge and a deep understanding of and relationship to others. It takes a community to educate an artist

ARTIST BEING CRITIQUED: *“I learned that there are layers of interpretation and each layer has its individual character...I take responsibility for any interpretation but...my intent is also very important. Therefore, the viewer bears some responsibility for their interpretation.”*

INSTRUCTOR: What is our relationship to each other as humans? What is the artist’s relationship to her/his audience, and the audience to the artist? What is the community’s relationship to its members? These relational dynamics represent a new set of challenges for the academy-trained artist. No less challenging is the academy’s unmet challenge to conduct research usually associated with the university and publish findings about the community arts field.

### **Step 7**

Critique participants react to the artist’s declared intentions and give suggestions (if any) on how to “improve” the artwork.

*“If your intention was to do \_\_\_\_\_, I think your artwork would be enhanced by doing \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ ...”*

The audience is now positioned to provide the artist with legitimate suggestions for enhancement that are based on in-depth analysis of how the artist wishes to dialogue with the world.



INSTRUCTOR: This communion benefits not only the individual but also the interchange between individuals and the community as a whole. The traditional practice of artmaking is turned inside out and upside down, the individual partnering with others within an intimate relationship of equals.

STUDENT 8: *“I noted during the critique that I saw a vagina stuffed with broken glass. At the time I contextualized this as a ‘feminist’ reading of the work, but I think everyone should be a feminist – so perhaps it was more a humanist reading. I recalled a song lyric by a feminist musician ‘...my cunt is built like a wound that won’t heal...’ (Ani DiFranco, ‘Out of Habit’) that was very influential to me in my middle and early high school years.”*

*“I remember asking the artist if he was accountable to my reading of it and hearing... ‘I suppose you could read it that way but that was not my intent to depict or reference such thing.”*

ARTIST BEING CRITIQUED: *“For this particular piece I won’t change anything based on the critique. But there are situations where I will make changes to a piece of work because of an observation someone may make. If I decide the observation is important to an interpretation relating to my intent, I will definitely make that change. Once the work is complete then any stated observation becomes an interpretation.”*

INSTRUCTOR: We learn from each other and in doing so refine our understanding of and relationship to the world. Truth is born from this coming together—truth no longer an abstraction or the possession of an elite few. In this case, the artist and audience agree to “get to know” each other with honor and respect.

### **Step 8**

Critique participants conjecture on how the proposed changes might alter the impact of the “modified” artwork.

*“If certain modifications were made, I believe the ‘voice’ of the artwork (and artist) would be changed in the following ways \_\_\_\_\_ ...”*

This envisioning process stretches the intellectual capacity of the artist and participants who together seek unique solutions to new questions and problems. The artist and his audience practice an ideation process grounded not in isolation but in relationship to the “we.”

INSTRUCTOR: Having unearthed the historical, intellectual and philosophical groundings of the artist and his/her audience of respondents, the artist is now prepared to “recraft” her/his artwork to better address his/her intentions as they relate to the “us.” This final step represents the physical manifestation through art of knowledge and truth.

*CONCLUSION*

Within the world of the community arts, truth *exists* in relationship to the *other*. There *is* meaning by way of accountability to a people, place and community.

I advocate for a collective rethinking of how the academy orients its students to the empowering relevance of community. The reward is an all-inclusive universe of creative possibilities.



***“We learn from each other and in doing so refine our understanding of and relationship to the world. Truth is born from this coming together—truth no longer an abstraction or the possession of the privileged and powerful. In this case, the artist and audience agree to understand each other with honor and respect.”***

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**ROOSTER STORIES***Fletcher Mackey*

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Jon Marro

BACK IN THE DAY, when I was an undergraduate art student in Texas, a friend of mine who was not particular one to discuss or talk about art came by my apartment one afternoon and noticed a drawing that I had done of the poet Nikki Giovanni. It was in the usual situation of hanging there on the wall. I told her that I had done it. She stared at it for a few seconds then turned to me and said, “why did you do that?” with all the curiosity as if I had poured ketchup on my pancakes. About the same time frame I was in the painting studio at the university one day when the painting professor John Biggers came in. He observed me painting my self-portrait, which was in somewhat of a desolate landscape that I seemed to always do, having been inspired by the work of the artist Hughie Lee-Smith. He finally spoke and said that I should paint a rooster on my head. He didn’t really explain why but I certainly have since read into it in many ways and see its relationship to African and African-American culture.

These two moments are of the earliest that I could remember of people commenting on my work in a critical sense during my quest of earning a degree in painting. The former continues to tease my mind when I make art, just why am I doing it and is it just some oddity in human nature. The latter is the suggestive commentary of the professor within the academy perhaps wishing to see the student venture further into self and meaning. As simple as these experiences seem in retrospect, they presented two kinds of questions, those that someone ask of you and the ones you ask yourself. How they integrate can be useful in more ways than just the matter of discussing artwork. Certainly they can evoke curiosity. What are the artist's role and intentions and in the case of the visual arts what are the role and intentions of the viewer. Context is always critical. Within the academy and the "art world", the agendas of both can often contaminate intentions or communication with standards and codification. Outside of these places of mind and matter, intention and language can stem from places in time when the word "art" was not necessary. Creating reached out beyond the boxy architectural spaces, galleries and museums, their exhibitions and critical reviews.

Considering that this essay is intended to serve the art classrooms and studios of the academy, I'm sharing my views about that environment, the participants within and their "particular roles" as students and teachers. This does not preclude artists working in and outside the academy in different community settings. I believe it will be evident that those practicing in that field will see connections. I use memory and storytelling because it has an important influence in my own life experiences.

The critiques in the art studios today are often of two parts, a subjective dialogue about feelings and intangibles relative to the work and the objective, generally what we actually see in the art, how it is made and what is tangible. More and more however, relativism has entered within these dialogues. To critique can be tricky, in fact the word "critique" is probably best when used least. It appears to inherently bring the sense of power and judgment to certain situations that are actually better at being considered conversation or discussion. I will not however, spend time here debating that so I will use all intermittently. Many factors do need to be considered such as why is the assessment necessary and to what extent does the event have worth. Both are useful for grading, outcomes such as skill building and knowledge of the field but beyond that they could enrich the inner self's willingness to continue do what naturally occurs in our creative processes, that unique sense to improve or change what we do to keep alive the evolving self.

First and foremost since most critiques take place in a classroom or studio, those spaces need to be an open environment for learning and much like a work of art itself; moving things around, trying this or that, investigating here or there and so on. People come from unique and different experiences that can make and shape their sense to create. To assume that in any classroom discussion a certain power must be in charge or that there is an expert is often a kiss of death to the creative process. Both student and teacher may meet on equal ground in the learning of things. The student voice is not less as an individual or as a group. The teacher can make the classroom equitable without sacrificing structure and order. Structure and order have history and are

recognized and perceived as stable. To truly be creative in this space, openness means to shift and change with new rhythms without sacrificing the beat of history. A student may express an understanding or reasoning unique to their history that is the embodiment of their work and not one with which the instructor or class is much familiar. Considering this in a critique would require some letting go and seeing what possibilities this student has brought and what it may mean to the creative classroom. The critique is not separate from this dance or else the classroom is an environment held hostage.

Once again as a college student, I remember struggling to understand how to read and comprehend “abstract art” as taught in chronological history relative to the Western canon. During that same period of time I also happen to be taking an interest in jazz music. It was in this shift that I realize that listening to the legendary jazz artist John Coltrane and what informed his music actually brought clarity to my understanding abstract works of art. It helped me to organize and articulate my own words when looking at art and discussing my own. I did not have to really sacrifice the art history course to begin to finally understand those works of art as well as how other cultures can inform. I learned that different creative structures formed in other places could better connect to my own “wiring”. I will never forget that shortly after that, I had a chance to meet the painter Helen Frankenthaler at a museum retrospective of her works and believe it or not as shy as I was then, I approach her and told her how I enjoyed seeing her painting *The Sound of the Bassoon* because I could hear it. She smiled and we both talked about being a Sagittarius. Years later as a teacher, I had my painting students

watch a video on Coltrane and they were privileged to hear the drummer Elvin Jones talk about playing in the John Coltrane quartet. Improvisation was nothing new to their sessions but history and structure was as well. That said, he talked about how in one live session why playing a composition Coltrane spiraled off on his saxophone in a lengthy direction that exceeded the recognized patterns and rhythms the other musicians were used to. Jones expressed how tense it was for everyone and they begin to wonder if Coltrane would come back to them, but he did again. Jones spoke about how great he was at pushing and extending the creativity in his music even while performing before a live audience.

This story brings to mind why I consider it important to encourage classroom participants to think laterally. Critical thinking affords us the examining of existing ideas and established criteria. By welcoming lateral methods we are open to shift those ideas to create new ones. This can be most useful during discussions with students about their personal artworks when the floodgates are open and change is hungry. This is where the teacher and student both can form a language that better serves the critique.

Of the many wonderful students I’ve worked with and had conversations about their work, I can think of several whom I believe had important experiences to share that bring a different discussion or critique to a classroom. All were of Asian ancestry living in the United States, studying and/or practicing their art. These talks were indeed about the structure and content of their work however; each was investigating and working separately while navigating through their own personal experiences of

being part of two distinct cultures. It was unique to hear each talk about their imagery as a duality of eastern and western culture and sensibilities. These ideas and aesthetics may be referred to as cliché to some however, I consider that more of an opinion that is not part of any creative process. Within these particular experiences, structural changes can be seen in the work without sacrificing parts of the unity of elements that are being driven by the artist's inherent cultural history and the becoming in a distinct experience of change in another. Certainly, it was encouraging to critique here since what is emerging will eventually become a history and that would be exciting to see artists work from. Why speak of this? The stories being shared by the artist in the discussions are actually part of a process that is beyond the art world. It is a signifier of events that may appear simply as residue from "globalization" yet arguably, there is no history of this scale of change recorded where the destinations in these cultural transitions may not result in seeing any major sacrifice of tradition. As we witness it we must consider what models we have to talk about it. They have to be made. I'm optimistic, and the creators are busy emerging and the codes are not stable.

Something I've notice in the art community is a tendency to use a certain terminology when talking about artwork and the processes used in making it. Some have referred to this as "art-speak". It is easy to know when you hear it as the intellectual atmosphere starts to shift. Sometimes where it goes seem to require a membership card to the "High Art" club. There is a good share of critics, historians, and curators who also appeared to be registered members and seem to appreciate members

using similar terminology when analyzing work and where it fits in the field. I have no strong objection to the use of this in the classroom and the critique however; I have notice that it can present a certain style of obscurity that leaves some students wrestling to try and measure up to it. The ability to articulate what is to be said need not be measured by the current style of language arts in the visual arts world. When in dialogue the verbal relationship between instructors, students and viewers can be a work of art in itself. It can be full of subjectivities and abstractions. Any of the cultural arts could be integrated to form different means of communication. Many different cultural experiences contribute to social dialogue. It is necessary for the instructor to keep the verbal pacing open and find the best method in getting all students contributing in the dialogue. This practice can help personal voice develop. Once comfortable, most will do less over thinking about what to say. Through patience and listening most artists will find the best balance in making art and being able to talk about it.

To measure my experience as a student, teacher, artist and responder to works of art, I consider the classroom communities both in and outside institutions an important tool. One is clearly defined by the quest for a degree that validates a consumption of knowledge and experiences largely acquired within the walls of the academy and the other is the classroom of neighborhoods and societies that are an eternal experience with the degree of wisdom the reward for having patience and understanding. I do not know any absolute best practice to be a critic nor am I an expert at analyzing or discussing works of art. I do know that in the time I have acquired a certain amount of knowledge that I

received from so many kinds of teachers, some who are actually enrolled in my class and are called students the others are enrolled as neighbors around the planet. Everything I've said in this essay is just ideas and experiences off the top of my head, maybe just a rooster doing what it does. As I've stated before, to critique can be tricky, so I don't have a stable formula. It is always shifting leaving me to evaluate things that work and don't work. It is a conversation done in different places, about things that hang on walls, lay on floors or is outside at some kind of site. It may also not be regulated to form. What is consistent is that the individuals and groups involved all have something in common and it is not just being called an artist. That is too easy and is lacks the effort of truly waking up and getting through to conversations of substance. I offer that understanding as the first thing to begin to recognize in the approach to respond to a work of art done by another. The rest of the methods will reveal themselves.



***“To critique can be tricky, in fact the word “critique” is probably best when used least. It appears to inherently bring the sense of power and judgment to certain situations that are actually better at being considered conversation or discussion ... To assume that in any classroom discussion a certain power must be in charge or that there is an expert is often a kiss of death to the creative process.”***

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## CRITIQUING WITH A PHILOSOPHER

*Dan Dudrow*

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Robert Bilensky

I’VE BEEN CRITIQUING ARTWORK (in a very basic sense, analyzing with prescriptions for improvement) at MICA for over 40 years. I was never “trained” for it. I picked it up by observing experienced teachers, trading war stories with colleagues over the years, and by never ceasing to be a student myself. I think I’m pretty good by now but I frequently find areas where I can improve.

There are different levels of critiquing. For example, in basic courses you steer more towards craft, discipline and the tools of the medium. In advanced courses you find yourself emphasizing the concept—or if you will, the “content” of the work. Everything in between you have to figure out on a case-by-case basis. Over the years, I’ve developed a few principles which, while not absolute, have been a fairly reliable guide for me:



*Your comments, no matter how brilliant, are worth little if the student doesn't comprehend them.*

*Each student deserves at least as much serious attention as he/she brings to creating the work.*

*An instructor must be empathetic.*

*An instructor must strive to be up on current developments and convey his/her love of the medium and of ideas in general.*

*The instructor must be perceptive and articulate, with the ability to express complex ideas in simple terms.*

All of the above is pretty self-evident to most instructors, though style and emphasis can vary. As for techniques of critiquing, each develops his/her own—though there's probably an overall similarity (I've critiqued with many other instructors over the years and thus had a chance to observe). An instructor's longevity, in this competitive age, is usually an indication that he/she has done a creditable job on most levels.

Having briefly laid all this out, and counting myself a pretty good instructor, I must say that my "principles" became somewhat turned on their head, or at least challenged in ways I had not foreseen, when I began to invite Richard Kalter into my classes in the early 1980s.

Here I must back up and describe Richard's arrival at MICA around 1980—that is, describe how it looked from my limited perspective at the time. I became aware, at some point, of an Episcopal minister in our midst, whose role was something of a

mystery (initially something of a mystery to him too, it turned out). At first I thought he was setting up some sort of campus ministry, a place where troubled or homesick students could hang out and seek solace. It turns out he did do that in an informal way but it was a small part of his overall impact on the College. For a while I heard about him here and there, that he was a nice guy and had some good things to say. By the time I was first introduced to him at a meeting I knew that he had earned a doctorate in divinity from Harvard and had taught for a time at Yale—an impressive pedigree. He wasn't a preacher per se, and some sort of arrangement had been made between his diocese and MICA that would make him available as an informal Philosopher-in-Residence (though his degree was in divinity, his first love was philosophy, as became quickly apparent). The hope, as I understood it at the time, was that he would provide some sort of bridge between studio activities and those of the liberal arts and generally raise the level of discourse. He taught no classes, had no schedule. And had no idea what to do—at first. Soon after our initial meeting he invited me out to dinner. He was networking, looking for a way to make his presence on campus worthwhile.

At dinner we hit it off immediately and I knew I had made a friend for life (he had this effect on many people). It seemed that his erudition was equaled only by his humility. He was generous, anxious to share his knowledge without being overbearing. And he had the glow of genuine kindness. So we began to see a lot of each other, just as he was connecting with many others in much the same way. Soon other instructors were inviting him into their classes but I was reluctant at first, cowed by his level of knowledge. My own experience with philosophy amounted to two courses in

logic at LSU in the late 1950s, plus having read Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy*. I didn't, on the other hand, have much of a sense of Richard's experience with art (a lot more extensive than I had guessed). But Richard's real expertise was ideas, in a way that transcended categories or labels, and he soon became a regular in many of my classes.

I must say that while his participation became invaluable to me it wasn't always easy. I deal in two types of critiques, group and individual. It was logical to make Richard available to the largest number, so the group critiques and/or slide seminars were the preferred venue (though it eventually became hard to book him because he was in demand all over campus). In my class there was no rigid structure for critiques; the imperative was to get everyone involved. The only ground rule was that criticism must be constructive. In this give-and-take, which was at first no doubt a little bewildering to an outsider, Richard quickly found his rhythm — which was not always in sync with mine, so I had to be flexible. He did not approach talking about art with an analytical plan but rather in its larger context: historical, existential, spiritual, even political. Phenomenology was Richard's area of expertise; Maurice Merleau-Ponty was his historical mentor. Most of us know little or nothing about that, but he had an uncanny way of conveying meaning even when his words seemed obscure. This was no doubt because from an early age he had embarked on a life of service and he had enormous reserves of empathy. The students picked up on this immediately. Also, the larger context he provided gave them a sense that this tenuous and often ill-rewarding endeavor they had chosen could have a larger significance after all. That was, I think, the essence of Richard's

message to the students, but it played out in myriad ways. Meanwhile, I had to endure his pace and rhythm, which often frustrated me, and occasionally try to rein in his verbosity, which seemed to bother me more than it did the students. Most difficult of all for me was when he would occasionally single out the worst painting in the class and rhapsodize over it because something in it spoke to his experience. I needlessly worried that his approach might undermine my own, but fortunately I kept my tongue. The only other real problem was Richard's sense of time, which was nil. He could go on and on (always apologizing afterward) and once expounded for almost 20 minutes on the subject of hermeneutics. Feeling it was my job to shepherd the process at an orderly pace, I often agonized over this, but everything always worked out in the end, and students invariably approached Richard after class, seeking to have further contact with him — which he never refused.

As I indicated earlier, Richard in his own way had a “feel” for art, especially as someone not trained in it. And during the twenty-plus years I worked with him, his understanding continued to grow as he sought to soak up all that the direct experience of art could offer. He became quite “hip” about the current trends, if still somewhat diffident about directly expressing a critical opinion of this or that artist. He developed an instinct for suggesting to a student which artist's example might serve as an inspiration for getting that student out of a particular difficulty. And he became quite conversant on the careers of certain contemporary artists. Richard's approach was rarely dialectical in the sense of sorting the good from the bad from the middling; rather, he wanted to inquire into the motivations, the struggles,

the internal dialectic of a given artist. I surmised this from countless museum and exhibition visits with him. We artists tend to look at another artist's work seeking what we can use in our own, or deciphering whether that artist's achievement confirms us in our chosen direction. Which is not to say we don't love and revere certain works, just that we do so from our own peculiar angle. Richard, having little or no hands-on experience with art, tended to see it as some art historians do—in iconographic rather than formal terms. His aesthetic sense was keen and genuine, though not given to sorting out the formal components that achieve the *gestalt* of a successful work. Instead he looked for what a work of art can tell us about the world, about the moment of its creation, about who created and consumed it. The *how* of art was not so much beyond him as beyond his words.

I am embarrassed to say that I put considerable less effort into deepening my awareness of philosophy than he did toward comprehending art. One Christmas Richard, no doubt overestimating my intelligence, gave me a copy of Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*—which I made a few valiant but brief attempts to read. It occurred to me that philosophy realizes itself within its own language, just as art does, and while the book was written in plain, eloquent words its meaning was elusive to me, lacking as I did any background in the subtle code of that language. But I probably gave up too easily. Richard forgave me for it.

Not that he was above being irascible. His occasional tirades were full of fire but not directed at anyone personally—not someone present in the room in any event. He could be like an

angry saint, incensed by injustice and ignorance and, most of all, he could not bear to see a talented student having to quit the College for lack of tuition money. This would usually energize him to pull every available string on the student's behalf—and occasionally he succeeded, or at least bought a little more time.

Richard's activities at MICA were much larger in scope than critiquing in classes. He established a visiting speaker program, convincing artists and scholars of high reputation to come to the College. He also hosted frequent seminars in his MICA-provided apartment for anyone who was interested in attending, and many did. He was the vital contact point between the College and the larger world of art, science, and philosophy. And within the College he was the main contact point between departments and disciplines. Many if not most of my colleagues in Fine Arts were like me in counting Richard among their closest friends. I periodically invited him to my studio to get his take on my new work. This is something we painters do for each other—normally it's infrequent but since my studio is in the same building with a number of colleagues whose work and intellect I admire, I'm inclined to take advantage of it. Such sessions often resemble an intricate verbal ballet: some colleagues, while supportive, are blunt in their assessment; with others you have to listen between the lines, as it were, to get a sense of just how much they like the new work. In Richard's case this ambiguity could be ponderous, even Byzantine, but was highly valuable once you learned to focus and glean. Richard was always reluctant to be judgmental. His instincts were supportive, and any reservations he might have were couched in layers of praise. But somehow I always had a sense of what he meant, and it was important to me—in life as well as art.

By the time of Richard's death in his 80th year, he had become the single most central and beloved personality at MICA. His deep friendships extended from the College's president down to the most scared and homesick freshman. He was available and totally generous to everyone, at all hours of the day and night. He and I were best friends who often traveled together to New York and even, in 1993, to Southern Italy as part of a MICA summer program. He officiated at my wedding in 2001 as he had at countless others in the MICA community. When he was gone there was no question but that he was irreplaceable. And in fact I've touched here on only a few aspects of his presence among us. A book could be written about it, and hopefully one day will.



**“He did not approach talking about art with an analytical plan but rather in its larger context: historical, existential, spiritual, even political. Phenomenology was Richard’s area of expertise; Maurice Merleau-Ponty was his historical mentor. Most of us know little or nothing about that, but he had an uncanny way of conveying meaning even when his words seemed obscure. This was no doubt because from an early age he had embarked on a life of service and he had enormous reserves of empathy. The students picked up on this immediately.”**

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## PRESENT TO THE MOMENT

*Jane Elkinton*

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A CUP OF TEA

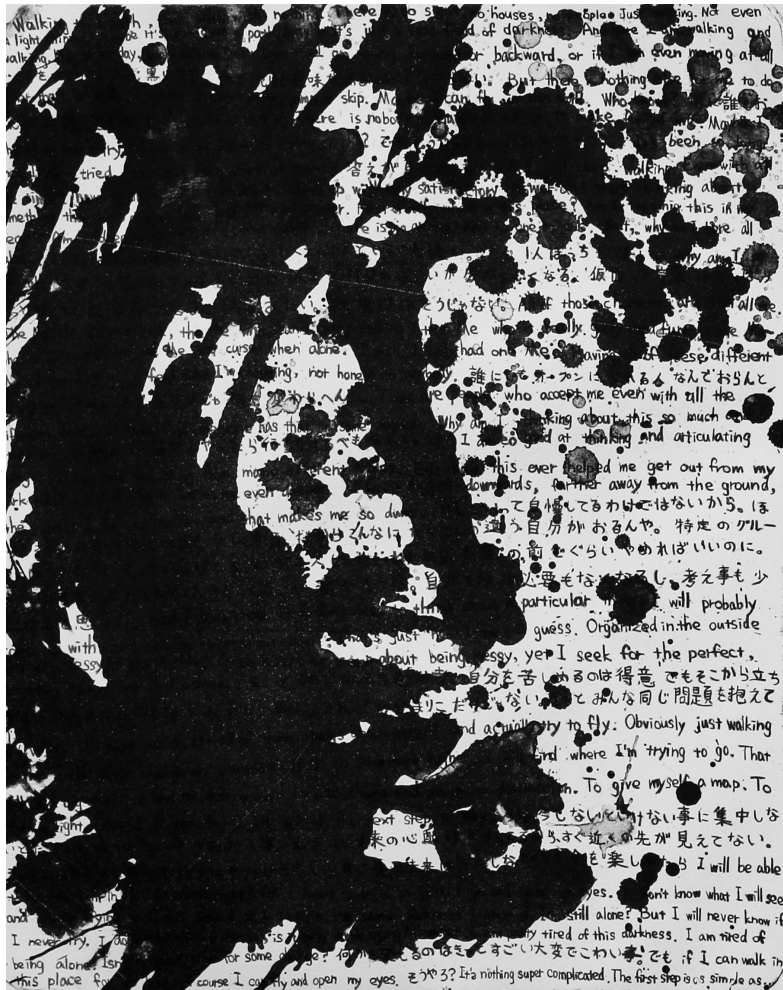
Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868-1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen.

Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself.

*"It is overfull. No more will go in!"*

*"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"<sup>1</sup>*

THE STUDY OF Japanese Zen Buddhism and its most sensuously diverse art form, *chanoyu*, the tea ceremony, offers distinct opportunities for art participation and critique.



Mariko Perry

My art history course Way of Tea was developed out of insights gained from teaching a Zen and Art class for over twenty years. The students clearly needed a course that introduced the Zen viewpoint and aesthetic from inside an art form and offered the opportunity to invite direct, intuitive experience while questioning the intellectual viewpoint. Students had taught me that they needed new experiences through which to empty their cups and allow repeated re-fillings. They hungered for ways to consider the qualities of an ordinary cup sitting before them.

In order to wrestle with Zen arts, students need earthbound, hands-on methods of inquiry and expression; they must learn to use the language of their hands, eyes, and ears to critique traditional forms and express their observations. For students who have drunk tea from a traditional Japanese bowl, wrangling wet clay into a bowl of their own is a rich experiential way to understand and critique that original vessel. A group discussion centering on the student bowls focuses on objects, and, even more importantly, on process, with each participant learning to gauge how well their criticism-in-a-tea bowl has fared.

My own education includes deep and varied cultural experiences from childhood to the present, having lived overseas for fifteen years, with five of those in Asia. I have ensured that my training as an art historian and ethnomusicologist has included, whenever possible, technical training in relevant art forms, such as Japanese *koto* (zither) playing, Indian dancing, Japanese *shodo* calligraphy, Chinese traditional painting, and Japanese *chanoyu* tea. Asian arts and thought serve as my muse—with special thanks to the rough-and-tumble, rule-

defying challenges of the anti-intellectual Zen art forms and their egoless power. I subscribe deeply to the principle of learning through doing as a way of embracing the outward forms together with their frequently ineffable contexts. My art historical teaching always incorporates opportunities for the student to engage in what I term “Talking About Art Through Art,” which has evolved out of forty years’ experience in teaching art students. If students can demonstrate to me, in an “Arts of Japan” class, for instance, that they can create a successful hand scroll (reading right-to-left) in their own style, but demonstrating key principles of composition common to the genius of traditional Japanese hand scroll design and can discuss the process, then we truly have something to talk about and, furthermore, I have a clear grasp of each student’s fluency on the topic. Students deserve experiences that open up their worlds and guide them with respect and generosity into new ways of thinking, working and perceiving the world around them, toward understanding and assessing their own and others’ work.

The traditions of Japanese *chanoyu* tea offer a pedagogical model that is clear in its intent: learn with the body and keep the intellect out of the way in order to experience directly. When studying in the Urasenke School tradition, note taking and memorization per se are forbidden, replaced by repeated experience. The natural process of learning with the body is valued for encouraging complete ownership of the methods. The focus of participation in *chanoyu* lies in being present to the moment—no distractions, no competing priorities, just a clear focus on the event as it unfolds. This quality of clear-minded presence is also the condition conducive to an effective

critique. In my lengthy tenure at Maryland Institute College of Art, I have known one person who brought that authenticity to the process of the critique. The late Philosopher-in-Residence, Dr. Richard Kalter, brought an egoless, guileless and receptive aura to critiques with students and faculty alike, and as a result he was much sought after for that role. I prepared tea for Richard many times and he was a natural in *chanoyu* — unaffected and clear-sighted, his bowl always empty.

True men of Tea are masters of the power of seeing.<sup>2</sup>

*Chado*, the “Way of Tea,” was birthed in mid-sixteenth century Japan, having evolved from the tea traditions of Zen monasteries and aristocratic practices. Zen Buddhism has continually shaped the way of tea, with its adherence to the moment, its distrust of words, its recognition of the Buddha-nature of all things, its rejection of dualistic thinking, its emphasis on seeking egolessness, and its basis in discipline, most especially that of meditation practice. A *chanoyu* event in its simplest form, the *chakai*, is a multi-faceted art form in which host and guest meet in a small space prepared for the event by the host. The host offers sweets and prepares and serves whipped tea to the guest who can request to inspect some of the objects used. Underlying the unique characteristics of the Japanese tea ritual is the condition that both host and guest are artists in the form, with the event defined by the contributions of each. The host prepares for and observes the actions of the guest who experiences and critiques silently all of the constituent parts of the event (setting, calligraphy, flower, sweet, tea, bowl and the sounds, scents, postures and movements). Responding to the guest’s subtle reactions, the host adjusts

each succeeding gesture. The guest has specific opportunities to observe and sometimes touch and inquire about the various objects presented. This is criticism through direct experience and intense focus; the few verbal interactions between host and guest are factual and predictable.

This is critique in a decidedly Japanese form — that is, beyond dualistic thinking. There is no concern with right/wrong, beautiful/ugly, art/non-art. The focus lies in reading the objects and actions for what they naturally and sincerely present. This requires the guest, as critic, to evaluate each event, object, sense perception within the broader context of which they are a part while re-informing that context as each new experience unfolds. A common misperception of *chanoyu* by newcomers is that it is a discipline merely governed by a rigid, traditional set of forms. This overlooks the key element of *hataraki*, or “creative adjustment,” which requires both host and guest to respond at the moment with any necessary or enhancing elements. This response requires both participants to be utterly present to the moment, single-mindedly available to each other and the proceedings.

For the “Way of Tea” course, I identified a variety of critique opportunities to enable the student unique experiences that relate directly to the traditions of *chanoyu*; we also utilize the studio critique process with which they are already familiar. In some instances it is an object being criticized, in others it is a gesture, a taste, a scent, a texture.

Please, have a cup of tea. The students' first experience of the semester begins by entering a prepared classroom the first

A man of intuition is one capable of always deriving fresh impressions from objects. Intuition is the power of seeing at this very moment..<sup>3</sup>

day of class, dropping off their belongings inside the door, walking past a quiet display of a single flower and calligraphy, rinsing their hands at a pitcher provided, and sitting quietly at a long table, with the kettle bubbling softly and incense scent surrounding. The message of the calligraphy displayed is 一期一会, "One Time One Meeting" which conveys a key Zen concept: the present moment is the only thing that exists. Tea is prepared, and after the first guest has been served, succeeding students select from a nearby table a bowl for the guest seated next to them. With each guest, I introduce one new guest procedure to follow. By the time the class has ended, the students have all been prepared for the next tea and its prescribed moments of assessment and appreciation, which they are encouraged to approach intuitively and naturally—present to the moment.

Early in the semester the students are introduced to the basic aesthetic principles that characterize *chanoyu* including *sabi* (beauty in the old, faded and rusty; carries a gentle sense of loneliness) and *wabi* (beauty identified by meager sufficiency). In subsequent classes in which *matcha* (whipped tea) is served, the students apply those principles as they engage in the following moments of criticism, some private, some shared:

Entering the tea space, the student silently critiques the flower and vase and the calligraphy selected by the host: is the flower displayed "as if growing in the field"? What is the message of the calligraphy? What does the brushwork of the calligraphy convey? How do the two relate? How do each/both relate to the time of day and the season? In what way do they convey the Now?

Having drunk the tea, each student in turn critiques the bowl in the traditional manner—set the bowl down and look directly down into it (seeing the clay, the glaze, the dregs of tea at the bottom), pick up the bowl, observe its sides and foot, set the bowl back down and have a last glance. The tendency of the novice is to spend too much time handling and turning the bowl—the students are encouraged to look at it with intuitive speed, as if photographing it—click, click, click. They will learn no more by looking at it longer. Remain as empty as the bowl and be ready to receive.

The students learn the formulaic questions to use in inquiring from the host about the utensils: what is the style of the tea container? Who made it? Who made the tea scoop? Does it have a name? And incorporate the answers into their assessments of the objects. The sincerity and simplicity of the questions and answers introduces the student to the Zen-related distrust of language: do not let language toy with you, be direct and simple with words and remain in their control. Know what they mean.



The student is encouraged to struggle with the tension between the experience of the tea and the separate and different description of the experience. “In the experience, you were one with the tea. There was no distinction between subject and object, and no discrimination.”<sup>4</sup> *Koan* for an art student: Can you critique without inviting dualistic thinking?

The class tea critiques involve both objects and time-occupied events. The group will discuss a particular tea event—what was the theme? How did the elements support that aesthetic thread? How did the incense, selected tea, selection of bowls, flower, and calligraphy support the whole? Recalling the minimalist injunction of the great 16th century tea master Sen no Rikyu that the goal of *chanoyu* is to: *just boil water, make tea and drink it*, could this event have been effectively changed?

Expanding into the art forms associated with the *chanoyu* tradition are ungraded in-class projects in flower arranging for *chanoyu* (*chabana*), and designing sweets (*kashi*). The students critique their own and others’ work in the class from distinct historical, cultural, or aesthetic viewpoints. They are encouraged to work within the traditional values and aesthetics of *chanoyu*. If the flowers, for instance, betray the fact that the student took no notice of the original tree or plant and the way the blossom presented itself in its natural state, no matter how clever or visual appealing the resulting arrangement, the student will have to account for the unnaturalness. The group is usually very surprised by the results of both of these in-class

activities and deal with each other in newly respectful and responsive ways. We always end these classes by having casual tea together so that the projects can be seen in a tea context, however abbreviated. Looking at all of the flower arrangements together, we ask ourselves: which flower arrangement would be the best company if one were enjoying tea alone?

The student is encouraged to engage in critique in a spirit that reflects the four principles of *chanoyu*: Harmony, Respect, Purity and Tranquility; constantly working to lessen the presence of ego, further freeing the intuitive voice. The students are guided to appreciate the *creative* role of the guest (co-creator, in fact) in the ongoing life, health, and spirit of the work at hand. The principles will have been discussed in class and the historical roots described, but for the 21st century American art student, the concepts present a difficult challenge and are continuously discussed and applied throughout the semester.

The course includes a trip to the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., a museum specializing in the arts of Asia. A ceramics department faculty member joins the group. The appointment time is arranged so that students are taken to the ceramics storage area where each student is allowed to select an object to handle. The group sits around a large table and each object is brought out by the curator and handed around the group, from person to person. The ceramics specialist entertains questions relating to ceramics techniques, I deal with historical and tea-related issues, but the most important experience for the students lies in the direct handling of 16 – 20th century objects. It is a critique of objects that perforce

takes on an awe-filled seriousness. The students realize that they are handling, feeling, *experiencing* objects of great uniqueness and honesty. This is the first direct confrontation the student has with the aesthetic of *chanoyu* that so profoundly expresses the beauty of the ordinary, the humble. As the students wonder about and judge each object you watch their ability to critique move from the head through the heart and right down into their hands with utter naturalness. At this moment I observe the process of non-verbal criticism—the eyes are focused, the hands hungrily touching, the minds emptying, ready to receive. The next week the students (many of whom have not handled clay since grade school) meet in the ceramics studio to be tutored in hand-building pots by a ceramics department faculty member and then plunge their hands into mud. Discussion and evaluation of the centuries-old bowls handled the week before continues in the studio as the students transform their critiques into the shapes of their own bowls.

The “Tea Bowl” assignment is the first of four formal, graded projects the student must complete, along with the “Calligraphy,” “Tea Space” and “New Tea” assignments. Each of these exercises conforms to the “Talking About Art Through Art” paradigm mentioned previously. The Tea bowl assignment begins the first day with the class *chakai* and handling the bowls, followed in a week’s time by a class lecture on tea bowls and introduction to two of the earliest tea masters, Sen no Rikyu and Furuta Oribe. The Freer trip teaches the students’ hands the qualities of great old bowls. Their fingers now own the memory of the weight and texture of centuries-old bowls and have even felt the finger-marks imprinted by those potters. Over the following

few weeks the students build their own bowls. When the bowls have been fired for the last time, the class meets for a full critique, presided over by ceramics faculty members. The critique is multi-faceted, which is an important element of my course design. The faculty members inquire and comment in relation to the formal and technical aspects of the bowls, while I attend to the bowls as tools of *chanoyu* and expositions of Zen positivism. The students also submit writing about their pieces and relate them to specific traditional Japanese bowls. The students are anxious to criticize and elucidate their own and others’ bowls, and they make frequent reference to the Japanese bowls from the Freer or elsewhere in relation to their own work. They are also eager to hear from ceramics specialists about their works. The critique concludes with the students drinking tea from their bowls for the first time. This last activity is casual in tone but is in some ways the key moment of the critique. The students have to look their bowls in the face (does it have a front face?), whip the tea with a bamboo whisk, see the effect of the frothy tea surface against the glaze, feel the bowl in their hands, and gaze at the remaining green sludge at the bottom. For many students, this is a moment of wordless critique, shared by user and bowl alone.

The “Calligraphy” assignment has the same basic parts: the students see original work from my personal collection that I bring to class, benefit from a lecture on the topic, and then produce their own samples. However, in this case the students have to engage in the “creative adjustment” of translating the in-your-face action art of traditional Zen calligraphy into English. This is a daunting task. Their greatest challenge lies in

throwing off their inhibitions, flinging down words as action, and baring themselves in that mark making. For the critique we are joined by a member of the graphic design faculty, who comments from the vantage point of the technical graphic design elements, while I inquire about issues of spontaneity and the selected themes. Every semester the students have used this critique as an opportunity to share enthusiastically with the visiting faculty member their interpretation of the Japanese works they studied while approaching their own project. As soon as space and placement is mentioned, it is the students who are instructing the visitor on their understanding of the Japanese space/time aesthetic of *Ma* with critical reference to traditional works. The visiting professor has always commented on the high level of commitment in the student works and on the undaunted freedom of form displayed.

The “Tea Space” assignment follows the same pattern, with the students presenting their two-dimensional-format designs in relation to the 16th century Tai-An teahouse by Sen no Rikyu. This time the visitor is an environmental design professor who brings the rigor of that discipline to the discussion. When possible, the group has been further prepared for this project by a visit to Shofuso: Pine Breeze Villa, a reconstructed 17th century samurai style dwelling in Fairmount Park, Philadelphia. Shofuso includes an intimate tearoom on view, and the group is also served a *chakai* in a larger, reception room. This experience allows them to feel the tatami mats as they sit, and to use their guest skills outside of the classroom environment.

The final assignment divides the 15-member class into two groups, which design and present to the other group a “New

Tea” event, a translation of the essential elements of traditional *chanoyu* into the forms and context of 21st century America. Each event is generously presented as a gift to the other group, while simultaneously and indirectly revealing what the members of each group have gained from the course. Following the two events, both groups sit and critique the presentations, taking a holistic view of the proceedings and all of the constituent parts in relation to their understanding of *chanoyu*. The end of the term provides the perfect moment to fully critique a complex, interactive whole. At the *chakai* on the first day of class, the students perceived the whole only as a succession of constituent parts; they now see the way in which the parts and the whole dance together. On this final day of the term the students have a heightened sense that the events, and, indeed, the semester was just “one time one meeting,” and they evince more discipline toward being present to the moment.

In a sense, this aesthetic activity [chanoyu] represents our entire world and life where the ruling principles are transience, insufficiency, imperfection, and accidents.<sup>5</sup>

Students who have had the opportunity to assess experiences and objects on the fly in the context of an event, or wordlessly discuss them through clay-covered hands, flinging ink onto paper or staring down the honest face of a small flower are beginning to confront experiences that expand their habits of art-talk. More than that, *chanoyu* offers them art encounters so similar to their ordinary lives that the conventional wall between the two can become much more permeable, allowing the language of assessment and evaluation to flow more naturally between life and art.

Throughout a semester in the “Way of Tea” course in which they have been exposed to the history and aesthetics of *chanoyu*, students have had a series of critique experiences that have specifically included: expanded historical and cultural issues, internalized and shared criticism, object and sense-experience critique within an art-experience context, intuitive and intellectual critique (with increasing awareness of the difference between the two), expression of art historical critique through art projects with follow-up written and oral presentation, and an awareness of maintaining control of words and using them as aspects of action. Students have had to become responsible for accommodating context, whether that is an event, a season, a time of day or other transient factor as well as considering the naturalness and the honesty of that which they critique. All of these participations point toward mindfulness and presence to this very moment and allow a gradual, experiential exposure to fundamental teachings of Zen Buddhism and *chanoyu*, all the while indicating the important world of ordinary things.

When we do not trouble ourselves about whether or not something is a work of art, if we just act in each moment with composure and mindfulness, each minute of our life is a work of art.<sup>6</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Paul Reps, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1957), p. 19.
2. Soetsu Yanagida, *The Unknown Craftsman*. (New York: Kodansha, 1982), p. 177.
3. Thich Nhat Hanh. *Zen Keys*. (New York: Doubleday, 1995), p.44.
4. Soetsu Yanagi, p. 155.
5. Yuriko Saito. *Everyday Aesthetics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 188.
6. Thich Nhat Hanh. *Peace Is Every Step*. (New York: Bantam, 1991), p. 40.

**“The traditions of Japanese *chanoyu* tea offer a pedagogical model that is clear in its intent: learn with the body and keep the intellect out of the way in order to experience directly.”**

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## WHAT CREATES RESPONSE

*Susan Waters-Eller*

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SO MUCH OF HOW we respond to art is automatic and neurologically based. Education builds the circuits for more sophisticated levels of response, but the basic overall act of perception is completed by the appropriate physical adjustment to it. Our inner state of readiness must match our outer circumstances and is always adapting to change. Though the physical shifts may not be perceptible we are always in a dance with the changes in the whole around us. Since feeling and emotions are the first awareness of some kind of inner movement, the felt impression of what we see is the instant unconscious assessment of what it means to us. When we have a strong response to art the inner adjustment reflects a resonance with meaningful inner patterns. These deep level abstractions reveal significant psychological relationships. Semir Zeki, of the Institute of Neuroesthetics at University College in London recognizes the value of art for showing scientists the structure of major abstractions in the psyche. On their web site he writes, “*Artists are, in a sense,*



Emily Schubert

*neurologists who study the capacities of the visual brain with techniques that are unique to them.*” This distillation of structural constants in how the brain evaluates wholes is particularly useful now that neuroscience has discovered how important spatial mapping is to the way the mind accumulates and stores knowledge. Though scientific method can analyze and observe the parts in detail, it can miss important qualities in larger systems and relationships that can’t easily be named or symbolized. Art integrates and synthesizes. Throughout time art has helped viewers recognize their currents of feeling, what it’s like to be human at a given time in history. Today it can also show scientists the meaningful pattern within the whole.

Historically artists have always used the science of perception and advances in optics to suit their own ends. The camera obscura revolutionized how artists depicted space. Today the science of the brain has uncovered much about perception that is there to be mined.

How the mind understands wholes was the subject of serious study by the gestalt psychologists of the mid-twentieth century. The work of Wolfgang Köhler, Max Wertheimer and J.J. Gibson offers a wealth of information about how visual stimulus is organized that artists can use to control how forms are grouped and attention guided. Their work led to Rudolf Arnheim’s application of the psychology of perception to composition in painting. He showed how expression in art depended on the mechanisms that organize visual stimuli. For artists, this enhances understanding of the effects of compositional choices. In his books, Arnheim analyzes the mechanisms behind these

responses, dissecting the composition of paintings and demonstrating how placement and changes in direction create certain reactions in the viewer. He underscores the importance of position in relation to gravity, even in a virtual space, as an unconscious determinant beneath the more evident relationships of the colors and forms. The underlying belief in a pull from below invests more potential energy in the forms as they rise higher in the picture plane. How the elements in a painting situate the viewer in relation to gravity, coupled with the overall balance of the composition, affect us as though it’s a place we occupy. The essential and primary perception of the danger or safety of the place is the beginning of the feeling of being there. Every perception includes a response as part of the circuit. Initially it’s experienced as a movement toward or away. Art is processed by the same mechanisms as the real world.

The importance of art for developing everyday human insight is a theme in the books of philosopher Susanne Langer. Her fascinating in-depth discussions of visual art as an extension of expressive gesture, underscores the importance of “qualia” and “relations,” how much information is in visual nuances. Her simple statement, “Art looks like feelings feel” articulates this fundamental truth. In her book, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, she writes:

*“Feeling is a dynamic pattern of tremendous complexity. Its whole relation to life, the fact that all sorts of processes may culminate in feeling with or without direct regard for each other, and that vital activity goes on at all levels continuously, make mental phenomenon the most protean subject matter in the world. Our best identification of such phenomena is through*

*images that hold and present them for contemplation; and their images are works of art.”*

The relationship between the complex dynamics of feelings and the structure of art make art the best way to learn about human emotion and to understand universal patterns of response. This complexity cannot be reduced to one variable at a time, since the meaning is in the whole and the dynamic relationships involved. There are correlations between the balance of our surroundings and the feelings we experience being there, and we seek out the visual structures that best express our own inner world. Art serves others by translating feeling into relational form that can help with recognizing obscure felt states. In a discussion of the mood of a piece in relation to composition and style, students start to realize just how concretely inner life can be communicated.

When any group gathers to discuss their art, amazing discussions evolve if the image hits a common chord. Our differences in background enrich the variety of responses evoked by the structure. As Jung said, “Image is psyche.” He was reflecting the fact that the archetypal relationships in the mind are revealed by images. It’s part of how we’re made as a species, thus a basis for how we understand each other. The science underlying the relationship between art and emotion illuminates many facets of human response. Understanding this aspect of brain function shows the universal qualities upon which art depends. Knowing that the same perceptual mechanisms that process external circumstance process the image leads to a cascade of insights into why art feels the way it does. The mysterious connection between people and their art is rooted in the psychological patterns upon which our emotions are structured.

We can apprehend the mood and significance in a scene even when the details are completely unfamiliar. This is the foundation of our connection across cultures. Whatever the specifics, the drama of being human is universal.

In the first discussion of art with any group, I quote Thomas Carlyle who wrote:

*“The chief value of any book is that it excites the reader to self activity.”*

The same can be said of visual art. Our conversation about the work is aimed at exposing the full range of ideas and feelings initiated by the structure and style of the work. As we talk, I introduce the relevant science, pointing out the compositional features that lead response. We experience ourselves within the space of the painting. How we feel about where we are depends on what’s above and below us, how orderly or chaotic, and its overall stability. Mostly horizontal motion will imply a state of rest. Verticals are more dynamic but still balanced. Diagonals are perceived as in motion. What’s in motion will get attention first since it may require reaction. EEGs show a spike when we see forty-five degree angles. Even if it just turns out to be a diagonal mark on the wall, we’ll automatically keep looking at it until it’s gone. Crossed diagonals show motion in conflict. In the overall structure, if the forms seem to be giving in to gravity, they will seem defeated, more associated with sad emotions, whereas if they ascend in spite of the unconscious assumption of gravity they will seem to triumph and be more associated with positive feelings and more potential energy.

As the eye is led around a composition how fast it changes direction will have very specific effects on how its experienced. The recent research showing friendly associations with rounded forms and less pleasant connections to spiky forms reflects the speed in the change of direction. Rounded forms change gently and spiky forms very abruptly and we feel the changes physically. These sensations occur before we identify what we're seeing. Understanding that compositional forces speak directly to the feeling centers of the brain shows the viewer that their responses are not purely subjective, that there are concrete reasons for the sensations evoked before the content is identified. How these structures communicate feeling demonstrates the universal constants of being human and how they translate into different life experience. The details are different but the feelings are common ground. A group with a wide range of backgrounds is unified by awareness of these central structures.

One of the most surprising new discoveries in neuroscience is the way we sort memories. The assumption that everything can be broken into categories results from the dominance of the brain's left hemisphere, where words, symbols and classification are the primary tools for understanding. This creates the impression that everything can be labeled and that what something means depends on the definition of the label. The right hemisphere responds to the gestalt, the entire scene, and represents its significance through feeling. As an instant assessment of overall meaning, the inner adjustment of our response reflects how it feels to be where we are, part of a pattern in a particular type of situation. So it makes sense that rather than sort memories by category as previously believed, our memories are sorted by what scientists call

“mood congruity”. Scenarios and events with the same felt qualities will be called to mind to clarify the meaning of the event. The feeling is indicative of our relationship to that pattern. Memories that match the mood of a circumstance will rise to support the feeling state and underscore its meaning. A work of art is an armature upon which one's own similarly felt experiences attach. This is why art can be such a great tool for self-awareness. By paying attention to the thoughts that follow a strong reaction to a work whether positive or negative, we can reflect on the underlying feelings and learn about emotional themes in our own psyche. Since feeling is an instant judgment of importance and an urge to act, these correspondences reinforce our sense of the significance of the situation, a quality that grows from our sense of balance and proportion. This is the foundation for discussion in my classes. It depends on collecting all the individual ways the group can connect to a particular visual structure. The full variety of reactions is essential for the artist to understand the range of implications triggered by their visual choices. I emphasize that if anyone's reactions are different than what has been said, it's crucial to speak up and express that view. Nobody knows which comments will be most meaningful to the artist and anything that emerged in relation to the piece is part of its effect. To not speak up distorts the full picture of what the art evokes. Sometimes just seeing a certain look on someone's face is enough to show they have something in mind so I'll ask them about what thought is behind that expression in hopes that will prompt them to share it. For artists to hear the effects of their decisions, how the work affects the viewer, is the goal of the discussion. It is then up to every individual to decide how that accords with their objectives. When all of the various



reactions have been heard, the artist then has an opportunity to ask the group questions regarding what they feel uncertain about in the work or what hasn't been addressed.

Neuroscience is pertinent to what is happening during the discussion as well. Knowing that the brain is created by how it's used, making and fortifying connections with new and repeated experiences that actually build up areas of the cortex, means that the act of commenting is changing the brain. The corpus callosum is the group of fibers between the two hemispheres, where the gestalt of the right side communicates with the analytical language and symbol oriented left. Making the difficult effort to verbalize the feeling that an image gives or the ideas it stimulates is a way of strengthening the connections between the two. By the transposition of a visual experience into a verbal description of the reaction, the physical link between the two hemispheres of the brain is fortified. The structure of the brain reflects this effort. Research has shown that more communication between hemispheres is associated with high intelligence. This means we're not only affecting the brain, we're making it smarter. This encourages everyone to make the effort. Becoming aware of the plasticity of the brain is enormously satisfying, to know that you have the power to increase your intelligence and build understanding. The conversations that grow from each artist's work strengthen the corpus callosum and build new connections that respond to the work as a new experience, as were all the ideas that grew from it. Because the ideas grow from personal experience, some are tempted to call it projection. Yet it was the particular structure and the feeling that went with it that called forth any given response.

Everybody uses the language of their own life experience to communicate their reactions.

Through the connection of art to mind sciences, great advances in our understanding of ourselves will be possible. Artists use their work to draw attention where they think it's needed. In a discussion where we respond with the thoughts their work initiates they get a sense of the life of the image and what thoughts and feelings it generates and can see something about how the mind works. The details of their response are less important than the connection to the larger pattern, but the range of different details shows how the universal plays out in different lives. The emotional archetypes are the same for us all. No identifiable content is necessary for feeling to be evoked from the composition. When figures are present then even more processes come into play. Mirror neurons have been shown to fire just witnessing an action performed, even having it described or depicted.

New work in brain science suggests a valuable role for art in the future. Contemporary neurologist Antonio Damasio has shown in his research that feeling actually leads thought. Far from the old belief that feelings and emotions were separate, that emotions interfered with thinking, feeling, as the assessment of the whole mind in relation to the whole picture, directs thought, is the first instant evaluation of importance and is essential to making choices. It points attention in the direction it's most needed. Since art speaks to the mind's understanding of wholes, it's uniquely positioned to offer insight into mental states. Decades ago Susanne Langer made this case. Neuroscience now confirms it. Neuroesthetics builds on this premise. Since any

composition abstracts the dynamics of a felt state, art could open new insights into the nature of human feeling.

The value of looking at art to improve intelligence is being used to help underprivileged schoolchildren. Building on the work of Rudolf Arnheim, Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine developed an educational system called “Visual Thinking Strategies” backed by experimental work showing that the thinking skills of children can be improved in other subjects by talking about art, describing what they think about when they look at a painting or photograph and why. They see improvement not only in observational skills but reasoning skills. Building neural connections between the feeling and thinking parts of the brain unifies felt assessments of significance with the generation of ideas that relate to the image, fostering self-awareness and liberating thinking from a need to be right. Without the contest for rightness, anyone’s views can be expanded by the range of other opinions. Where there are no wrong answers, creative thinking flourishes. In an article in *Family Medicine* (April 2005), Reilly, Ring and Duke recommend “communal viewing of artistic paintings as a modality to increase sensitivity, team-building and collaboration amongst medical trainees” additionally citing a study where it improved medical diagnostic skills. Moving beyond “the realm of right answers” led to more meaningful discussion and more thoughtful reflection.

As technology increases the visual quality of how people perceive information, beginning with the visual interface used to navigate the Internet and continuing in the way information is presented, visual literacy becomes important not just to artists but to the

general public. The value of sitemaps where choices can be seen and understood immediately enables people to find their way through mind-boggling amounts of information with relative ease. Looking at a city map that includes all of the places where crime has occurred, tells you in a glance where the dangerous places are. The word “infographic” is popping up more in conversation and is prized as the best way to comprehend the important relationships in complex information. This increasing conscious use of visual intelligence will evolve human minds as a whole due to the ability to assess significance quickly according to visual relationships. The importance of art should now be recognized as what educates the gestalt understanding of the right hemisphere. This is the side of the brain that needs cultivating to manage the complexity of the twenty-first century. Nothing is better for training visual intelligence than looking at and talking about art.





Marria Nakhoda

## 06

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# THE INTUITIVE CRITIQUE

*Whitney Sherman*

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### *ORIGINS OF A CRITIQUE STYLE*

*What does it mean to give an intuitive critique?* Henri Bergson defined intuition as “a simple, indivisible experience of sympathy through which one is moved into the inner being of an object to grasp what is unique and ineffable within it.”<sup>1</sup> I have been teaching for over 20 years. In this time, I have found my ability to understand things without a rationale has served as a reliable method for designing my critiques. It should be noted that this ability does not exclude the use of principles of art, rather the principles of art are at the foundation of my intuitive abilities. The importance of drawing, use of color, lighting, composition, and sound ideas are all pillars on which I rely, and are second nature to me when I look at student work. To further clarify, the language of these fundamental principles is the language used during the critique. This language allows for definitive directions to be given for improvement. Intuition enters the

picture when working to understand why a student says something or reacts to something said during the critique. Throughout this twenty year period, my abilities as a teacher have matured and my approach to critique changed radically even within the framework of intuition. In this essay, I hope to demonstrate how using one's intuition can foster greater student learning, and how the process of becoming an intuitive critic is organic not fixed. In addition, I have listed ten basics of an intuitive critique.

*Understanding what being critical can mean.* In my earliest years of teaching, I felt that college-level criticism required that I be very hard on students, that the bar be raised very high and that this bar constituted a standard for the classroom. I believed that through this boot camp-style of critique, I could find who was serious about art making and who was not. My theory held that some students were not emotionally prepared for college and for the rigors of artmaking. Only those who were serious about their time and emotionally prepared would be able to absorb lessons that would come from critique. This theory and system did work, though only for the most ready students, the most mature students. The middle of the road students are drawn up by the prepared and advanced ones, and that least experienced students this method of critique was not as effective as it could be. It was sufficient but did not fully realize the basis of this theory. It also intimidated certain students. The process needed to be more subtle and organic. It needed to maintain the aspects of "speaking critically," but moreover be perceived as less critical.

The word "critical" is an interesting one, its definitions of meaning "censorious" originates in the 1580's. Only later does "critical" bear a related and more intellectual meaning as the word "critique" springs to life in France in 1702.<sup>2</sup> More than ten meanings for the word exist and they range from derogatory connotations (inclined to find fault or to judge with severity, often too readily), to concepts of truth and value (skillful judgment as to merit), to describing situations of extreme importance (indispensable), and referencing massive shifts (quantity at which one or more properties of a substance or system undergo a change). Examining each of the meanings of the word gives some insight into the variables of critique.

Take meaning number three: "Involving skillful judgment as to truth, merit, etc.; judicial: a critical analysis."<sup>3</sup> Analysis is a key factor in an intuitive critique. The ability to be empathic, to get under the subjects' skin is vitally important to interpreting individual perspectives and the potential "new" vision of a student.

Or take meaning number six: "pertaining to or of the nature of a crisis: a critical shortage of food."<sup>4</sup> As teachers we are seeing students at an emotionally intense developmental stage of their lives. Whether they had been given room to learn from their moments of crisis, and be equally responsible for harnessing the emotional by-product of crisis is meaningful.

Or meaning number seven: "of decisive importance with respect to the outcome; crucial: a critical moment."<sup>5</sup> The critical moment can be in your classroom at any given time.

Being tough or critical has value, but it only fulfills part of what a critique can do. What is equally important is the message of permission: permission to trust, to be open within the critique environment. Teachers need to understand the “unique and ineffable” of each student thus allowing students to find the truths of their pursuit, in their own time, thereby understanding the world around them. By understanding the world better, students become better contributors—to their clients, to their own personal vision, to the work they wish to add to the body of art making history. With confidence, students become more open to commentary and receptive to unexpected challenges to their perspectives.

#### **SEEING ACROSS DISCIPLINES**

*Intersections of applied and fine arts.* My experience in teaching at MICA includes two different departments in more than six different courses at all levels. At other institutions, it includes graduate level studios in both applied (illustration or design) and fine art (studio arts) programs. I have found the intuitive critique creates an environment of inclusion leading to self-realization, a sense of community and the tools to rise to the next challenge.

My goal is to move students’ art making habits and idea generation forward, even in an incremental way. With this in mind I can cut through masks, veneers or other barriers presented by students in their moments of immaturity or insecurity. I am able to move the student from where they are to a place where they discover something new about themselves and their work. My background, artistic influences and goals as a teacher have contributed to the way I look at students work. Trained in a fine art academic

setting, majoring in photography taught from a fine arts perspective, self-taught in the applied arts of design and illustration, I emerged into my professional life with a pan-disciplined perspective. My critique perspective is rooted in what all disciplines have in common: what the artist is trying to say or do with the work, and whether that comes across in the work and their verbal presentation.

This perspective relies on intuition, on perception rather than the aspects of a designated major or class description. The intuitive critique considers the student first and foremost rather than the discipline. The critique is directed specifically at what the students needs at that time to develop further. Does the student need to be nurtured or challenged? Does the student have enough information about the critic to “believe” once confronted with assessments with which they may not agree? Is the student showing signs they are ready to hear a frank assessment? Or does it need to be couched in such a way as to encourage more honest critique once trust is established?

Assessing the student’s abilities via their work, their body language, their verbal presentation takes effort and practice, yet it is from this perspective the critic is able to go across disciplines and provide a perspective that is tailored to the individual rather than embody a uniform style or content. The critique then remains open to more than a single artistic approach or concern. Using this method, the goals of the student determine what is emphasized in the critique. This approach does not exclude contemporary theory, in fact contemporary theory becomes an aspect of the framework in which the student can be located by the critic. Generally speaking in applied arts,

the primary goal is to express communication through strong concepts. In fine arts, the goal is expressing personal vision. I enter a critique as an observer who uses empathy and experience to suss out some truths; not my truths necessarily, rather the truth of what the artist is saying against the product of their creative effort.

The intuitive critique respects essential difference inherent in applied and fine art efforts, yet understands that shared goals include merit in craft, expression of the marks and intellectual content. In addition, the intuitive critique addresses professional development issues of contracts, promotion and business relationships common to both.

#### **THE GARDEN METAPHOR**

*Challenge vs. nurture.* The garden is one of the world's best laboratories for learning about challenge, nurturing, growth, and loss. The gardener understands process, investment of labor and the intangibles of learning from failure. Everything in the garden starts with a seed. Not every seed sprouts, but if it does sprout it is a fragile object, susceptible to damage. For all the complexity of a seedling and its challenged growth to this point, the seedling is now outside the protective husk, exposed, with a modest supporting structure. Choices need to be made on which sprout needs more or less tending depending on their nature. In fact, the plant itself can have its say in this process. Not for lack of well-conditioned soil and ample water, I have had strawberry plants crawl from barrels to specific areas of the yard, places they prefer over the cultivated area I created for them.

Once a plant is established, with a solid root system, it may require and can withstand challenges to the direction of its growth. The primary challenge is pruning, snipping away at the leaves and branches, cultivating a shape, encouraging new growth. In more extreme cases, where a plant has become root bound, you'd severely chop the root ball, shocking the plant into a sudden spurt of new growth, both at roots and on the top. Pruning forces the roots of a plant to grow deeper in a more complex structure. The deeper the roots the more sustainable the plant. Ultimately, the gardener is a part of that equation, but the entire set of conditions is not within his or her control. The whole of the environment affects the outcome of each plant.

#### **CHOOSING A STRUCTURE: INDIVIDUAL, GROUP, OR PEER CRITIQUE**

*One on one.* The structure of the critique is determined by the level of the student and his or her perceived needs. Generally, for the less confident student individual critiques lead to a comfort level that gives students "permission" to be open with their doubts or questions. They are more willing to reveal themselves avoiding possible real or perceived censure by their peers. There is a benefit for the teacher as well in that they do not need to worry about keeping the entire group of students engaged while discussing the work of one student, especially one that may need more remediation. Additionally, the teacher may feel the ability to be more honest in an environment where the student's ego is not bruised. Lastly, an individual critique creates an intimate yet professional connection between teacher and student, and underscores the individuality of the student.

*All together now.* When I feel the student has reached a point where they need to grow toward maturity and individuality, I set up the critique with a series of statements about the work that observe its merits and ask the group for their thoughts, either in agreement or disagreement with my comments. I further ask for clarification and use the class body's commentary to drive deeper conversations on the work under critique. Additional comments by me are made where I can use the work to make a point I feel is relevant to the entire group, perhaps a technical evaluation or other relevant information. This causes students to build the "community" or group critique setting, rather than merely participating in one previously constructed. Several conditions are set out for the students in advance and are stressed as being important components of a group critique and influencing factors on their grades for the course: the expectation that they participate by offering positive, constructive suggestions; the expectation they speak up without prompting; the expectation they respond to the other students' commentary.

*A critique of their own.* In a peer group critique, I recommend an odd number of students, not exceeding 5 to 7 students. Peer critiques happen best when the students have chosen each other for their group, they have a good amount of experience in having received critique and they are emotionally mature (which translates to having developed their own level of empathy and concern for individuals other than themselves). My experience has shown that with these criteria, several wonderful things happen: students "own" their ability to activate networks, they develop their own language for expression derived from their past critique experiences, they understand the rigors of moving a

group into meaningful dialogue, and they voice their opinions with more authority.

### **TEN BASICS OF THE INTUITIVE CRITIQUE**

*Native intuitive abilities of the critic are very important.* Some teachers are born with native intuitive abilities, yet intuition can be developed and cultivated through self-trust and increased experience. I use the following criteria to determine the direction for the intuitive critique and provide a critique with meaning for the student:

- What are the origins of the work? Was it assigned or derived from independent interests?
- Am I a guest critic or an ongoing faculty in a class? Is there an outside critic involved?
- Is the critique independent of a class structure?
- What is the student's level, formally by grade level and level within that grade?
- What are the goals of the class?
- What are the goals of the student?
- What are the student's needs? Should they be challenged or nurtured?
- Is the student ready for serious critique or are they in need of a trust system?
- Does the student have varied experience in receiving critique?
- How much can I push a student outside his or her comfort zone?

In conclusion, being intuitivze means acting on a "truth" without conscious reasoning. For your consideration I have included four points to consider as you develop your abilities in the intuitive critique:

Be observant. Look for opportunities to engage the student. Note situational clues that can tell you about their abilities or insecurities.

Be organized. If you have a clear system for conducting your critique, you will eliminate distractions that can get in the way of revealing information about the student.

Expect communication, but allow for it to be expressed in a variety of ways.

Be interested. If you are not then no measure of intuition or empathy can help create a valuable critique experience.

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#### NOTES

1. Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), pp. 159-162.

2. Douglas Harper, *Online Etymology Dictionary* (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/critique>); accessed September 08, 2010.

3. [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)

4. Ibid

5. Ibid

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**“The intuitive critique respects essential difference inherent in applied and fine art efforts, yet understands that shared goals include merit in craft, expression of the marks and intellectual content. In addition, the intuitive critique addresses professional development issues of contracts, promotion and business relationships common to both.”**



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## THE “KONGLISH CRITIQUE”

*Mina Cheon & Gabriel Kroiz*

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### *TEACHING IN SEOUL*

The Ewha International Public Project for Artists and Designers is an international summer course offered by the Ewha Womans University, Seoul, South Korea and co-taught by artist Mina Cheon and architect Gabriel Kroiz. Having founded and co-directed the MICA Korea program from 2004 to 2007 which was a Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) summer program in South Korea, the collaborative artist and architect team Cheon-Kroiz created a new opportunity for international programming at Ewha, held between June and July, 2010. The unique course offering is a 6-credit studio that links a 3-credit fine arts course “Art in Seoul” and a 3-credit design course “Design in Seoul” as one larger international class, offered by the departments of Fine Arts, Design and the Global Affairs of Ewha. Participant students included invited art students from the MICA, architecture students from Morgan State University (MSU), and students from Ewha, totaling around 30 students.



Andrew Pisacane aka Gaia

This new type of international course offering was created in response to the economic times we live in as well as looking ahead, trying to create a new kind of curriculum for the 21st century that surrounds the idea of quality and sustainability based on research. Three aspects were key in making this possible: one was the international studies being affordable and requiring little to no project budget; two, the course being based on research for the students as well as faculty (hence project based curriculum); and three, visiting artists, professional development and networking for the students being an integral aspect to the dynamic.

Through the run of the course, participating students developed group projects as well as pushing through their own individual creative works, all of them, paying particular attention to producing work that has public and social relevance, and creating art as public intervention. With the diverse group of students, the public projects created were those that intersected between their fields of knowledge, that is between fine arts, design, and architecture, and culminated in various expressions of public installations, temporary installations, performances, events, new media work, social sculpture, and social interactions. The course took on a pure laboratory style in that the collaborative efforts and intercultural dynamics determined the outcome of the projects for the public.

One key factor that determined the dynamic of the group was the “Konglish” experience, which was perpetuated by the “Konglish critique,” where English and Korean speakers were active participants in the melting pot of intercultural exchange. The works that came out were spirited by the synergy of the exchange, yet reflective of the global time that we live in, and directly tied to the space of Seoul, Korea.

A unique element of the course was that both faculty and students were equal collaborators, creating a democratic space of sharing between teachers and students. The students were also given opportunities to network and make professional connections, pursuing their own international professional paths. Fieldwork was conducted as large and small groups all around Seoul, visiting sites of relevance to the content of the projects and integral to the research of groups and individuals.

#### “COMBAT”

We were looking at Seoul, and South Korea in a particular political light. As we are embarking on a new Korean era with the end to the unrealized age of the Sunshine Policy, “combat” became the overall theme for the public projects in order to respond and criticize the state of South Korea’s growing conservatism, which is generally disguised under the auspices of globalization. Combat, to combat, combating, battling, overcoming...conflict, strategy, sports, and military...it is almost impossible to consider South Korea other than in an erratic state of combat, especially at this particular time in history when the global media’s attention towards South Korea is that of a uniquely troubled nation. On one hand, South Korea remains a political segue into furthering North Korea as a global nuisance through its utter difference (South as good, North as bad), on the other, South Korea acts as a vital contributor to international competitive industries such as sports, witnessed specifically during the 2010 Winter Olympics with the sensation of gold medalist figure skater Kim Yuna and more recently, the 2010 FIFA World Cup where the fanatic soccer fan in all of us can think that we are actually united by rooting for the same soccer team.

North Korea's designation as "archenemy" of South Korea by President Lee Myungbak, continues the beleaguered narrative of name calling that recalls President George W. Bush's coining of North Korea as a charter member of "the axis of evil." South Korea stages itself as a global competitor, not only in sports, but also in technology, commercial industry, art, design, culture, and entertainment. While North Korea is considered the worst country of all, South Korea banks on being number one in everything. The Konglish preference for superlatives, best rather than good or better is manifest in South Korea's self image. Mina Cheon both celebrates and devalues the Konglish superlative by creating an art piece entitled "#1 Winner." The celebratory prize of hand-made ribbon with appropriated Combat Power ant killer scent box was awarded to each participant of the Combat public project in performance recitation of 71 designations ranging from #1 Artist, #1 Smoker of Cigarettes, to #1 Absentee of Class.

The course was framed by current events including the supposed sinking of the South Korean naval warship *Cheonan* by North Korea and the retaliatory cessation of trade and communication between the two countries that escalates each year. The global event stimulated internal political conflicts as the conservative class propagates nationalism through pro-American capitalist agenda and the liberals advocate a socialist agenda whose ultimate goal is unification. The irony is that while global media streams hours of Korean conflict and threats of war, everyday life in South Korea is unaffected. The performance value of the war threat surpasses actual danger.

On the surface of things, the fervor of the soccer fans in Korea

known as the Red Devils consumes the national spirit and presents a new kind of militant patriotism that is bound by media culture, entertainment, and sports. The fascistic mode of keeping a nation happy with sports, entertained with K-pop and Korean Wave cinema culture, coexists with the ongoing national conflict, one fueled by globalization.

With current events in mind, we conducted our research-based studio course informed by theoretical frameworks of postcolonialism and site-specificity as devices to look at space, culture, and people. Fieldwork was done to strengthen our research. Led by Gabriel Kroiz, we visited contested geopolitical sites in order for students to gain insight on how the construction of culture is bound to contemporary tourism agendas.

Some of the sights to which Kroiz has taken students over the years he taught in Korea have included the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that demarcates the South and North, Inwangsan which is a famous mystical mountain for shamans who are considered outcasts from modern Korean society, the restored Cheongaechun Stream beneath a former highway, Japanese occupation era Seodaemun prison, medieval markets, and more. These specific sites instill the historic and shifting moments such as from Chosun dynasty to colonization, post-war to millennial era, all of which influenced the creation of today's modern Korea. By discussing the hybrid nature of Korean culture, which includes this unique fusion of traditional and contemporary spaces all around us, students made connection between the physical surrounding, its historical relevance, and the contemporary experience of being in Seoul today.

By time Kroiz was researching the Yongsan U.S. Military Base in Seoul as his project research in relation to the theme combat, he discusses Seoul's projected future, and how over the next decade one of the most intense development in the world will occur on the swath of land stretching from Seoul's Mt. Namsan to the banks of the Han River that includes the Yongsan Army Base. The general theme arriving 60 years after the Korean War is one of "bread not bombs" in which this strategically located hillside will give up its military purpose in favor of parks, business, cultural venues, and luxury housing. A walk around the base, with its cheap gas and wide-open spaces, provides sharp contrast to the dense vertical reality of the surrounding megacity and suggest change is past due. The manner in which this change will take place is not without conflict. The most visible project to date, the "Yongsan Dreamhub" by Studio Daniel Libeskind, is occurring in a vacuum of public discourse in which communities, residents, and shops stand no chance in the face of the imperatives of global economic competition.

By honing in on exemplarily contested sites, looking at its geopolitical stakes and its cultural impact, connections between fieldwork and conceptual extension of "combat" took place. In investigating the word "combat" in lingual terms, in English, Korean, and Chinese, interpretive possibilities that came out of this research opened doors for a vast array of artistic opportunities for the projects. Combat in Korean is called *juntoo*, and the Chinese characters of *juntoo* has the meaning of fighting repeated twice, meaning that both *jun* and *too* means fighting, hence, "fighting fighting." Incidentally, "fighting" is also an everyday Korean slang meaning "cheer up," "keep going," "keep at it," and "do well."

The deconstructive possibilities in comparative language helped us to make new artistic connections with our projects, and became key in reconsidering space, site, and location, especially in postcolonial terms, the lens in which we were reading sites of colonization, imperialism, capitalism, and the cultural influences of neighboring nations such as Japan and China, as well as the modernization that occurred through the influences of the West. Seoul, as a prime condensed sample of South Korea included all of these multiple cultures and their clashes, simultaneously and residually in contemporary life, and the term combat seemed fitting to consider the experience of being in Seoul. In turn, we've included the educational criteria, making the city of Seoul into the classroom and all participants responding to the political and economic state of Korea in some way.

#### **THE KONGLISH CRITIQUE**

The most "combative" (or "clashing," is more like it) moments however were contained in the critique — combative in that group and individual projects brought out the cultural differences and individualistic preferences in artistic expression and thought processes. And, the way of speech was *Konglish*, hence the spirit of critique was also *Konglic*. Using Konglish, Konglic, Kongliculation, in order to communicate and work with each other, meant that as an international group, we communicated somewhere in between languages spoken (broken) in English and Korean. The critiques being in Konglish meant that there was no dominant language, no single voice, hence more chaos and some slight combativeness (competitiveness) – but all of this was with good will, faith, and spirit.

Konglish was spoken by Korean-Americans, Koreans living in America, Korean-Koreans who are ESL, and of course the American students were also speaking Konglish rather than English, which was chopped up slowed down Korean pronunciation of English with some doses of Korean slang in it. Of course, Konglish communication was not purely lingual since it provided large gestures, motions, almost signing, and a lot of drawings that went with it.

By the time the American students were speaking some Korean, they were words that were often English words turned Korean style, such as the word “fighting” gone “whiting.” One Ewha student named Lam Lee even changed her name to Ram, suggested by her new American friends. These were very nice intercultural moments that expressed the spirit of our time together well.

The course was driven by endless crits, from individual to small and large group crits that was with visiting artists, faculty or student-ran. We joked about it not being just marathons of critiques but that we were participating in “crit-ersize” like non-stop Olympic championship style. And with the combination of Konglish, it made for a hell of a crit where we knew that there was no stability to the system, but all open possibilities. This was rather refreshing since at the end, no one can say anything that is “wrong” and no one can make wrong. The priority of the crits vacillated between the difference of needs and desires within the range of these diverse students. For the Korean Ewha students, them speaking “good” English was important, for the American students, understanding Korean culture was important. Nevertheless, all of the students as well as faculty thought that it was a ripe opportunity to be fueled by the energy of exchange that comes from the variation of differences

and the desire to learn from one another. The crits helped combat language and cultural barriers.

Sometimes however, we feared that the entire class was operating with less than half of proper comprehension, but then was encouraged how that opened up more possibilities of interpretation in any given situation. Certainly miscommunication led doors to misunderstandings, which was understood as a possibility from the get-go, allowing the group to let go of inhibitions. The Konglish critique brought on a new set of critique criteria in so far as we didn’t and couldn’t rely solely on English, but rather distinctively becoming a product of a non-verbal process. One may consider this format more chaotic, but there was a sense of liberation in that everything was an open book, and there was a great deal of excitement for collaboration between multiple languages and in between languages and communication forms. Obviously, we valued diversity over cohesiveness in critique.

Included in the diverse ways of communication, students and groups also made use of both the virtual wall of Facebook and an actual pin-up wall in the studio to communicate their ideas and works in progress through idea sketches, statements, notes, doodles, and references. While the works developed through a process of criticism and revision, presentation, and documentation, each group performed public interventions out in the city then brought it back into the college’s Fine Arts gallery in some form for the final critique. All throughout the curriculum, the process was considered over the final product, allowing for experiments and failures, communication mishaps, and interesting intercultural moments to occur and influence what is being made.

**PROJECTS**

A key component that helped validate the dizzying exchange was how the cultural difference strengthened the theme “combat,” with the inevitable difference of interpretations of combat in conceptual formation of projects. Each student did work on an individual project and succeeded to present their personal interpretation of the term “combat” varying from cosmological to microbiological interpretation, from personal overcoming of language issues to confronting cultural bias or barriers that is either set by their environment, society, or even themselves through fears or lack of confidence. Moreover, students branched out and learned how to include the social commentary into art making and responded to the many narratives of combat such as Korean civil war, Korean sports figure under disguise during Japanese colonization, current state of divided North and South Korean nation, and even the violence of media proliferation such as games, anime, and manga, also influenced by Japanese cultural flow.

While the individual projects expressed varied ideas on combat, Korean students tended towards introverted expressions of personal interpretation about overcoming social pressures and constraints such as that of being a women in Korean society influenced by traditional Confucian standards while American students were more extroverted and interested in responding to either their language or cultural barrier with large artistic gestures, from indoor to outdoor installations and even street and mural art. They also were not shy to comment and critique the Korean architectural landscape, which was the first visible sign that showed how greatly Korea has gone Western overnight. There were other cultural clashes that showed up in the use of medium, between the

sensibilities and differences of fine arts versus design versus media, and as much as the language was Konglish, the forms of artwork produced also included the array of mixed and multimedia, non-object based performances and temporary installations.

It was more prominent in the group projects however, just how much the very intercultural and collaborative Konglish critique influenced the work. The groups were established according to the five directions of the Universe in Korean feng shui known as *Ohaeng*, thus we divided the students into large groups of East, West, South, North, Center. Dabbling with many different kinds of interpretations of combat, students migrated in and out of proposed projects, leading projects into the streets throughout the program. Teachers Cheon and Kroiz, assistant teacher Wendy Tai, and visiting artists and critics such as Intermedia and Fluxus performance artist Joshua Selman, fiber artist Annet Couwenberg, and contemporary photographer Joo Hwang expanded the dialog during critiques and the final, at times sharing their own research, and creating a democratic learning and critiquing space.

Near the end of the course, there were four distinct groups. The East/Center Group which included students Garrett Lee, Meen Choi, Soohyung Chung, Wonsun Choi, Sunmyung Choi, Jaeun Kim, Melissa Crisco, Hayeong Yi, worked on a group project “Pace of Seoul,” and dealt with “combat” in terms of taking hold of the fast-paced culture of Seoul. While their projects included a temporary public installation of a painted tromp-l'oeil photo-opt booth of a rest place that was moved around Seoul, it was the social interaction of people standing behind the booth and taking photos of each other and accessing the images via the Internet that created the artistic moment of actual resting place.

The West Group's project "Rip-Construction" responded to the governmental rehabilitation project at Chunggaechun Stream by holding a series of healing rituals known as shamanism gut and these students Clementine Jang, Christiana Duncan Augustt, Ram Lee, Sohyeong Lee, Yeawon Choi, Jihyeon Kim presented various ways of celebrating the energy and flow of the restored stream. The South Group, Andrew Pisacane, Colin Van Winkle, Daeun Lee, Eejin Choi, Suyoung Han, Sinyoung Park, did a series of "Happen-Stance" performances and photography documentation all around Seoul and organized found objects in the streets that seemed ubiquitously untouched, conceptually taking on the idea that they were "combating" art for the sake of life and having a great time with the Situationist shtick.

And, lastly, the North Group's take on combat was to protest against global corporate expansion by demonstrating in front of KFC in Seoul, with a chicken mask and video installation. The project "The Secret Recipe of KFC" was explored by Eunyoung Lily Ko, Nyasha Felder, Yein Son, Eunji Lee, Yeawon Choi, Yoonsu Lee. Indeed, all four groups were successful in responding to the criteria set for them, to consider the term combat in light of the city and people, as well as making art that is considered performative social activism rather than making art objects for exhibition.

#### **CONCLUSIONS AND YEARS AFTER**

Individual and group research helped generate more discussion amongst faculty and students; it gave us the opportunity to learn other people's projections and understanding of cultures. We as faculty also worked on individual projects on the same theme and shared it with the rest of the group during final critique, Cheon

working on her blog, performance, and objects for combat, and Kroiz continuing his research on the transformation of Yongsan American military base in Korea.

Throughout the years prior to 2010, many international architects, artists, curators, and critics participated in the projects that we led in Seoul in the summer; this year however (2013) was a pivotal year for us to understand what we were doing more fully. As the projects extended beyond the academic goals of the course into the realm of communication and working with the contemporary times and cultural trends, we realized that the program mirrored the professions of art, design, and architecture in our global times.

In terms of considering Korean students in the world, or even Korea's place in the world, while Korean students constitute one of the largest groups of students who study abroad, they have been challenged by the great cultural difference of Western countries and Western education programs. For Americans to be able to learn Asia by visiting Korea, and also learn more about Korean culture in Seoul, we are bridging the cultural gap that is evident in many interactions between Koreans and Americans. Beyond the Korean and American relationship however, since the program drew students from other cultural backgrounds, the cultural exchange and exposure to each other's cultures in the space of Seoul contributed to greater appreciation of cultural differences and what they offer.

If the goal is for meaningful cultural exchange, by placing *culture* at the forefront of the educational experience, allowing the artistic critique format to match the Konglish experience, other dogmas such as things from stationary classrooms to Western pedagogy had to be

removed, and the cultural context itself had to dictate the ways in which teaching and learning were to occur. Perhaps the course on “Combat” was to combat for artistic practice in the everyday and in public spaces and also to learn how to work together under the best and worst of circumstances, and under any cultural divergences.

In the following years, Cheon taught “Art in Seoul” without Kroiz in 2012 and based the course purely on research and publishing for artists and culturalists. After traversing the art scene of Seoul, a PDF art journal *JULY* (as a spoof on the famous *October* art criticism journal) was published on Artist Organized Art Press. By this year, with Chinese students coming to Ewha to study and working with Cheon, Konglish also started to mesh with “Chinglish” moments as well—it was lovely.

Most recently, this summer of 2013, Cheon and Kroiz collaborated again by teaching at Ewha jointly, working with students who varied in majors, and with a larger group of international students from the Global Affairs program at Ehwa. This year, students focused on two social projects, one on Korean “Place” and the other on Korean “Identity.” We called this the project about Korean place and people as a way to continue researching about Korean culture since the Combat project. Students gathered materials and presented artworks on the places of their choice such as Gwanghwamun, Seoul Station, Namdaemun Market, and Sungkyunkwan University and defining them through the Chosun, colonial, post-war, and millennial eras. They furthered their research by looking into specific Korean subcultures such as Indiebands, Gangnam style, mud festival participants, and the new cultural phenomenon of the homeless in Seoul.

We were reminded again how much interesting misunderstandings rise out of running a Konglish camp, and during Konglish crits. But it didn’t matter because we knew that students were getting an education that they can only get in such an international group and that Konglic mishaps were a sure sign that everything was going right.





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## THE ROLE OF STORYTELLING IN THE CRITIQUE PROCESS

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*John Peacock*

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*What's the relation between how work looks and what it means?*

*Does asking questions—before, during, or after making the work—help or hinder your own pre-critical, intuitive process?*

*What is the difference between thinking about your own work and talking with others about it in a formal critique?*

*What's the difference between what your professors and what your fellow students say about your work?*

TO ANSWER SUCH questions in critiques of their work, student artists sometimes stop analyzing or theorizing and begin telling stories about how they came to make the work, how they came to be artists, how they came to be the people they are. As a poet and professor of literature, I love to hear and tell stories, but I know from experience that opening the class to storytelling serves no useful pedagogical purpose unless some critical/aesthetic



Andy Vible

judgment—some *analytic* determination (you can't get away from it)—is made regarding *which* stories to emphasize. For example, a sophomore who was being groomed to be the most recent in a long and distinguished line of Pueblo potters brought in a catalogue raisonné of her famous grandmother's pottery, and told a riveting story about her own training—technical, historical, spiritual, commercial—to carry on the family tradition, including by majoring in graphic design rather than ceramics, for reasons she then went on to explain with slides of both kinds of her work. Her story and slide show set the bar so high for integrating personal narrative into the critique process that this is not the first time I have cited her to other students and colleagues. In this essay I would like to repeat two longer stories that I believe help *humanize* the sometimes intimidating critique process as a means of artistic self-discovery. I tell these stories in order to encourage students to stand in front of their work and to tell their own stories as artists and human beings, something I believe is one of the best things they can do for their work. Yes, they need to learn how to *see*. They need to learn how to *make*. Just as important, they need to learn how to *tell*. Seeing, telling, and making are inextricable in the creative process, whatever the art form or medium.

*i.*

The first story dates from my very first year teaching at MICA, 1986. In a freshman Introduction to Literature class, students and I were critiquing visual work that they made in response to James Agee's and Walker Evans' classic *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), when Wayne—an African American student

from inner city Baltimore—announced that he was not interested in reading or writing about the book. The only things that interested him were Walker Evans' iconic photographs of poor white Southern sharecroppers. Photographing people from other neighborhoods can be dangerous, Wayne said, sounding as if he was speaking from experience. "Are you interested in doing that?" I asked. Wayne looked at me. "Can I do that for *this* class?" he said, and I said, "I don't know, *can* you?"

Wayne had a car. He drove around looking for poor white farmers. Way outside the city limits, across the Pennsylvania line, he happened on a traditional Amish farming community. He pulled his car over, walked up to a fence where men were working the fields. "Mind if I take your picture?" he asked. The men looked at his low-riding pants. "It's a free country," they allowed, "long as you don't cross the fence." Wayne took some long shots of the men and brought them back to class for critique. He said he wanted to get into the community somehow and take intimate pictures like Evans'. The class batted around whether and how he should do this. One girl said forget trying to get into the community; just hide in the trees with a telephoto lens. Somebody else said print the best picture in large format, go back to the fence and just hold it up and *say wanna see your picture?* That's what Wayne did.

The men came over. "Pretty good picture," they said. "You can come over the fence, if you want. Take pictures of us, but don't take any of the women and children." Wayne took pictures of the men, but he wanted to take pictures of the women and children. The class critiqued the pictures and suggested which ones Wayne

should print and bring back to the men, who after a couple more go-rounds said okay, you can come next week when we have our market for the general public, and while you're there, you can take pictures of the women and kids. Wayne kept going to market every week and coming back later to show the Amish people the pictures the class picked out as the best ones. Eventually the Amish invited him to Sunday meeting. They invited him to the community school. Wayne kept taking pictures. He brought the best ones from the critiques to the community, and finally the community said, "These are great, and we would really like to have some, but we have a problem: We don't use anything made by machines." Well, that resulted in a huge philosophical discussion in the next critique about whether the camera was a machine or not. Finally the class decided it didn't matter what we thought; all that mattered was what the Amish thought. So Wayne went back to them and said, "You know, my major is photography, but I can draw. Show me the shots you like and I'll make drawings of them." That's what he did. And to this day one of those drawings is hanging in the Amish schoolhouse.

His fellow students urged Wayne to write the story of project, which he did, comparing his being accepted by the Amish with Agee and Evans being accepted by the sharecroppers — something Agee writes about extensively in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a very long book which Wayne finally read and came to know practically by heart. The last thing Wayne wrote — I'll never forget — was that the camera was just an excuse without which he would never have been accepted by the Amish. The Amish didn't accept cameras, but they accepted Wayne.

*ii.*

Story number two, an even longer story, dates from my second year at MICA, 1987. The setting is another literature class that included critiques of student visual work done in response to readings. This story is about one student's critique, not of his fellow students' work, but of my own practice teaching a particular book assigned in the course. The critique was not on a typical, anonymous end-of-semester student course evaluation. It was face-to-face, after class. I tell this story to further humanize the critique process as two-way and reciprocal between students and myself. This particular critique profoundly affected not just how I teach, but who I am.

Tony, an American Indian, from Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico, had not said a word in class all semester. The first time he spoke was after a class discussion of a novel called *Ceremony*, set in his pueblo, written by another Laguna Indian. Tony came up to me after class with something on his mind. He said his traditional elders would object to the ceremonial origin story described in the novel being discussed as literature. The Laguna origin story, he said, was sacred. Not sacred like Genesis in the Bible — simply an account of the origin of the world. The Laguna origin story was told only at the end of the harvest when the land was depleted; like a spark plug, the Laguna origin story jumped started creation for the next year; it was supposed to be told only at the end of the harvest, by a member of the clan responsible for passing the story down orally from generation to generation; to tell the Laguna origin story at any other time of year than at the end of harvest was to potentially start the seasons at the wrong time.

I didn't take Tony's word for all this, but checked his story out with American Indian elders both in and outside academia, because I wanted to find out not just whether Tony was right, which he was, but what I should do about it, whether I should stop teaching the book in which the story was written down, or not. Obviously there was some difference of opinion within the Laguna pueblo community about whether to tell the ceremonial origin story in a novel, since the author was Laguna, but other Laguna people objected.

Three Native American women elders I met at a conference completely redirected me. Forget about stories some Indians don't want discussed in your class and teach stories some white people don't want discussed in your class — stories about white people's past and present relations to Indian people. And so as not to become sanctimonious or self-righteously critical about white people's often not-so-great relations to Indian people, start with your own family, the women elders said — the story of your own ancestors' relations to Indian people. When I said I didn't think my family had ever had any relations to Indian people, the three women elders reminded me that any white family that had been in this country for long (as mine had) probably had had relations with Native Americans. The women elders suggested I might be surprised by what I found out.

The first thing I found out was that in 1954, when I was five, my paternal grandfather, a Washington, D.C. lawyer, unsuccessfully defended before the U.S. Supreme Court the timber rights of the Tee-Hit-Ton Indians of Alaska. The Court denied compensation to the Tee-Hit-Ton for timber rights that had been taken over by

a national park and then sold for clear cutting to a timber consortium. The legal defeat became a notorious precedent in Indian law until it was overturned in the 1970s. As for my grandfather's own compensation as the Tee-Hit-Ton's attorney, he would have made more if his clients had won, but he still made enough to put me through college. I went to Harvard at the expense of the Tee-Hit-Ton Indians of Alaska.

Turning next to my mother's side of the family, the only thing she would ever say about her past was that she had been born in Devils Lake, North Dakota, and later moved to Hampton, Virginia. To find out more, I visited the National Archives in Washington, D.C. and looked her family up in the North Dakota town censuses for the years after her birth in 1912. Finding nothing, I looked at a map of North Dakota and noticed that seven miles from the town of Devils Lake was the Devils Lake Sioux Indian Reservation. Could her parents have worked there, I wondered? I did a long, fruitless search of the Bureau of Indian Affairs personnel records, some of which happened to be catalogued along with tribal roles. Working in the archives late one night, frustrated and tired, I decided to take a break and satisfy my curiosity about what a tribal census roll looked like. These are taken every year to determine who on a reservation is eligible for land allotment, health and education benefits, and other benefits based on treaties that the tribe made years ago in exchange for giving up most of its ancestral land base and agreeing to live on a reservation.

Scrolling through a microfilmed 1929 Devils Lake Sioux roll, my attention was suddenly arrested by the names of my mother and her parents and siblings, all listed as half bloods on Indian land

allotment 862. Records as far back as 1880 confirmed the family's residence and enrollment on the reservation. Talking to my mother later, I learned that she was four when the family left North Dakota, for reasons she didn't remember. She put me in touch with a niece I had never met, who told me her father (my mother's brother), revealed just before he died that he had been sexually abused by a white priest at the Fort Totten Indian school on the reservation, prompting the family's move to Hampton, Virginia, where the Jim Crow laws at the time discriminated against all non-whites.

Maybe because my mother had lighter skin than some of her half-blood siblings; maybe because she was so young when the family left the reservation; maybe because she never attended Indian schools on the reservation—whatever the reason, she ended up being raised in Virginia and thinking of herself as white, telling me she remembered almost nothing about North Dakota. She grew up, became a nurse, enlisted as a first lieutenant in the Army nursing corps, rose to the rank of captain, and spent part of World War II in the South Pacific on the staff of a military hospital, where one of her patients was my white father, a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy. They married after the war and lived in a white middle-class, Washington, D.C. suburb, where he was from. Neither to my dad nor to my two brothers and me did she ever mention being Native American until my discovery.

I never knew her mother, my maternal grandmother, but once I learned her maiden name *Blackbird*, I found out that her sister, my great aunt, had a son, my mother's first cousin, who was still alive. I telephoned him. He invited me to the reservation. I had

never even been to North Dakota. I flew to Devils Lake, rented a car and drove to Turtle Mountain, where he lived. From the main road, I took a dirt road that went up into the green hills to his allotment. Waiting for me in lawn chairs outside were Peter himself, age seventy-nine, a retired bus driver for the Head Start program; his white-haired wife Dorothy, breathing with help from a small oxygen tank; and their fifty-year-old daughter Donna, who had pinned a tag-board poster to the side of their little bungalow with four generations of the family tree drawn in magic marker.

Unfolded on Donna's lap was a handwritten letter, dated 1916, about our mutual great grandmother Margaret Blackbird, from her daughter to the Indian agent, the white official in charge of the reservation: *Mama died of small pox, the letter read. She is lying out there yet on Raphael Martin's place. Our house was burned down. Pa died when we were small. We were four boys and three girls. I was taken in at Joe Allard's place. Ma used to wash for them . . . I want my mother to be in the cemetery like the others because soon maybe Raphael Martin will be plowing up those bodies. There are two lying on his land. If they sell my grand father's land, I want to have my share. I need help. The little ones, when they see me they don't know me. They all say my goodness who is this old Indian. I don't know if you will understand my letter. I don't talk good English like you. Put the letter in the fire as soon as you read it for my bad writing.*

When I got back to Maryland, where I live, my mother was so excited to hear I had found a first cousin of hers she never knew existed—the last surviving relative her own age—that she wrote the tribal chairman saying she planned to visit the reservation

herself. When I brought my mother back to the reservation the following summer, the tribal council, by unanimous declaration, re-enrolled her in the tribe, and enrolled me as her quarter-blood lineal descendent. The tribal education director asked me to help write a language revitalization grant and, when it was awarded, to help implement the grant by learning the endangered Dakota language myself.

I no longer read aloud and explain to my students the Laguna origin story that in the novel. But I do read a poem in Dakota and English based on the Dakota origin story, which I wrote with the help of traditional elders, and which, unlike at Laguna, there is no cultural sanction against telling any time, any place. An elder and I read this origin story at North Dakota State University a year ago with the result that the elder is now teaching that university's first Dakota language course for academic credit. In 2008 that elder was awarded an honorary doctorate in humane letters by the Maryland Institute College of Art.

### *iii.*

From there the class got into a huge debate about whether contemporary art was *degenerating into* or being *regenerated by* identity politics, after the minimalist debates over whether and how something that looked like a mere thing could still be art.

“What does this story got to do with *art*?” I asked.

“I wish I had an ethnic identity to make art from,” sighed a white male student.

“I feel some of my studio professors don't understand why

I *don't* make identifiably Korean art,” replied a young woman from Seoul. “They're like my parents not wanting me to date western guys.”

I reminded the class that I didn't look, act, or talk like what many people—including many American Indians—think of as a Native American.

“Why am I an Indian?” I asked.

Someone answered with the question “Why is anything a work of art?”

“I'm only a quarter blood,” I persisted.

“Is Obama black enough?” came the first reply.

Next: “What does Adrian Piper's looking more white than black *mean* for her art?”

Reply: “A lot more than whether what she is making is art or not.”

### *iv.*

Applying to this essay as a work of verbal art the questions with which I began:

*What's the relation between how this work looks and what it means?* This essay looks like two stories. Its meaning is that narrative sometimes makes for better essays than pure critical analysis—something to remember when stories come up in other contexts that seem to call for a lot of critical analysis, such as critiques of student art.

*Does asking questions—before, during, or after making the work—help or hinder your own pre-critical, intuitive process?* I wrote this essay because I'm interested in how to recognize stories that students and teachers tell that might be pedagogically useful in critiques. Writing part iii of this essay helped me begin to understand that a subset of the question *what is the difference between art and mere things* is the question of *all the stories that we tell, which can be artfully used in teaching?* Many people, myself included, tell stories intuitively, without a thought to how to use them, and are therefore understandably loath to ask such questions, less they derail them creatively. But just as not all stories are publishable, not all stories are useful in critiques, and, without making value judgments of the total worth of stories which are not (for that, too, can derail creativity), at some (usually late) point in the process one must choose. Experience making such choices eventually starts to affect the stories one tells in the first place.

*When does asking such questions make a positive difference to your own pre-critical, intuitive process?* Throughout the entire process of writing this essay, I have not ceased to question its appropriateness as a contribution to a book on the critique process. I imagine other essayists specifying particular methods and techniques for getting students to participate effectively in studio critiques, and I don't excuse myself from doing likewise on grounds of being a poet and professor of literature rather than a studio artist involved in this process, since there are wonderful writings such as Liz Lerman's *Critical Response Process: A Method for Getting Useful Feedback on Anything You Make, from Dance to Dessert*, that apply across the spectrum of visual,

verbal, and performing arts. The decision of whether, when, and how to tell a story is such an intuitive decision that one could very well bracket storytelling altogether as not really well suited for critiques, which are after all supposed to introduce, if not pure analysis, then at least something other than pure intuition into the art making process, after intuition has done at least part of its work. Reflecting as I am now on the recursive relation between my initial questions and doubts, the stories I've told here, and the essay in which I have told them reminds me that even when I am not telling stories in critiques, my suggestions to young artists about their work are usually sparked first by intuition and then winnowed through my years of experience, just as my decisions to tell stories are. Doubts and questions remain, of course, and a good thing: they have made such a positive difference in adding to my store of experience that I can really imagine having written this essay without them.

*What is the difference between thinking about your own work and talking with others about it in a formal critique?* In addressing readers in this formal essay on critique, not only am I still unable to answer all questions that writing this has raised in my own mind; I have raised questions than I had not thought to ask before writing this. For example: how to properly integrate studio and liberal arts, in general? What is the right mix? This essay argues that storytelling can *humanize* two of the most intimidating poles of art school education: critiques and theory. At both these poles I have come to value and model for students my storyteller skills as a poet and literature professor. However, storytelling is no substitute for the theoretical or technical training that visual artists need. Those are ends. At best storytelling can be a

pedagogical means toward those ends for visual artists. (Of course it is also a verbal art form in its own right.)

*What's the difference between what professors and students say about my work?* To this question, I can give a short, definitive answer. Wayne and Tony were two of the most challenging students I have had in thirty-five years of teaching; I've learned as much from them as I have from any of my own teachers or colleagues.



***“The last thing Wayne wrote — I’ll never forget — was that the camera was just an excuse without which he would never have been accepted by the Amish. The Amish didn’t accept cameras, but they accepted Wayne.”***



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## SEEING CRITIQUE THEORETICALLY

*Margee Morrison*

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Jen Yu

ALTHOUGH AT AN art college like MICA one probably must assume that the primary critiques of work occur in studios and studio classrooms, theoretically speaking at least, “critique” really is a form of reading/writing that everyone participates in. From the perspective of reader response theorists, like Jane Tompkins (18ff and 201ff), and others in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Poststructuralism*, and from other theorists, like Roland Barthes (especially in such books as *S/Z*, where he discusses “readerly” and “writerly” texts; e.g., 4-6), when we critique texts or artifacts of any kind, we are critiquing out of our own, unique contexts and from our own, unique perspectives in specific times and places. Thus, no two critiques can be the same. That is exactly what makes the possibilities on the occasion of each specific critique such rich possibilities where students, teachers, and other participants with varying degrees of experience can exchange different views on each artifact in a kind of ongoing

conversation, in which each participant implicitly acknowledges, not Truths, but uncertainties. Though I'm not always completely successful in any measurable way, in each of my classes I aim to create occasions for these ongoing, critiquing/critical thinking conversations, to which everyone (or nearly everyone) is capable of adding something and moving the conversations along. (Etymologically speaking, the word "discourse" itself comes from the Latin *discursus*, conversation, which comes from the past participle *discurrere*, to run back and forth, to speak at length, or to run in different directions.)

In the act of reading each artifact, each "critiquer" or "critter," each "reader" of each artifact, "writes" or interprets that artifact differently from the critter standing next to him or her in the room. It's true, of course, that all (or almost all) the critters in a critiquing group share the same codes of representation, with which they interpret or read an artifact and write or communicate their interpretations to the others in the room. The primary codes of representation are the language codes, which help us shape the chaos around us. But in an art college, like MICA, critters also often use language codes to interpret visual codes of representation (or use visual codes to prompt language codes to interpret visual codes verbally) so that when we critique in a studio or studio classroom with language codes of representation, we are interpreting visual codes of representation; we are representing others' representations, twice removed from what Jacques Lacan called the "Real." The "Real" is the world, others, and ourselves that we can no longer reach directly, except through representation, once we enter language as infants. Language mediates everything in our worlds, in our interaction

with other subjectivities ("subjectivity is intersubjectivity," according to Lacan), and in ourselves. We can never get to the thing itself (or the "thing-in-itself," its essence); we can only get to a representation of that thing. Our power to use language and images, our power to represent, of course, also is what distinguishes us from all other animal species.

These ideas are important to poststructuralists (who, like many modern and contemporary theorists, wrote partly in the tradition of Nietzsche) because they suggest to those who agree with them that there is not any absolute Reality (or First Cause) to which all of us have equal access, a Reality all of us could interpret the same way. The varieties of artwork at any MICA senior thesis show, for example, testify vividly and decidedly to the undecidability of artists' experiences of reality. This undecidability, in turn, points to the importance of critiques as catalysts in opening the doors of students' perception to possibilities of experiencing differently from their own perspectives, of moving in new directions outside the permeable boundaries of their own contexts. In a "Critical Inquiry" class (MICA's foundation-year humanities course), for example, when a student responds visually to a short story, like Haruki Murakami's "The Elephant Vanishes," say, with a drawing, and other students in the class critique that drawing response verbally, the critiquers or "critters" are interpreting another's interpretation of an artifact or "text." What each one of the critters says about the drawing will be different, then, not only because each will interpret the drawing out of a different context—their own, unique context—but because each has also already interpreted the same artifact, Murakami's story, with language from their individual contexts.

As the preceding paragraphs suggest, language is very complex, and, therefore, critiquing, using language to interpret an artifact from one's unique perspective, is also complex. But it's also important to see that theory/theories themselves, like these, do not represent the Truth. Theories represent questions that we ask, and the questions change from specific times and places to other specific times and places. None of us holds the Truth of you or me or of our artifacts. Some of us might relish the power, the illusion, that we hold the Truth and the sense of control that gives us. But, really, the "foundations" (or First Causes) implicit in the notion of any absolute Truth have always been all cracked and crumbly—so mythical—under us. (There is no "under" under our standing.) But many still do not know, indeed, have never known, that that's okay: it's okay to have cracked and crumbly [non-] "foundations." As I have suggested, it is an illusion that language itself is rooted in an absolute permanence, a transcendental signified—for there are no linguistic foundations at all. "It's turtles all the way down" ['infinite regress']," one of Plato's characters said, in referring to that thing to which one reaches out for support that is never there (Cathcart and Klein on Plato 1-2, 199-200).

When, years ago now, I discovered that "foundations" were all cracked and crumbly and not really under me at all, a sort of madness gripped me. How could there be no real Reality or real Truth that one searched for? Isn't that what one sought in seeking meaning in life? Wasn't seeking meaning what everyone did?

In this "madness" of life's uncertainties, I nearly died of the flames running through the desert sands along which I crawled

nakedly, or such were my fantasies as I struggled to make sense of this new poststructuralist world. "Hope is the thing with feathers," Emily Dickinson had written. I certainly believed that. I found solace in writing and writing and writing some more, usually a lot of nonsense, but also poems that puzzled over the meanings of words and how words were simply sound concepts, and I read poems and just about everything else I could get my hands on. I was locked into this madness, I knew that; not even my shrink seemed to know what I was going through. She could not understand why, day after day and year after year in her little office, I could not speak. She could not understand that I despaired of ever being able to communicate any of my thoughts to anyone. No one seemed to understand, nor could they—really. Were there not huge gaps between my contexts and yours, your perspectives and mine? But, despite the pain of this madness, this alienation, this whatever-one-would-call-it, which, I know now, many suffer from, I could not stop pursuing this puzzle, and, though the pain was real, in near-manic moments, I also felt joy, and I seemed to see intensely and to be sensitively, almost euphorically, attuned to all the life around me in its particularity, in its beautiful minuteness and delicacy and strength. Of course, I understood the contradiction, and sometimes I thought that I really must be some crazy chick.

Thus, for a while I concluded that my many contradictions were, indeed, a part of my madness. But, then, after many years, some 30 or maybe even 40 years, this kind of thing really has no date, I began to realize that my contradictions, my mad jostlings from one end of the spectrum to the other—sanity, madness, sanity, madness, blip, blip, blip, fire, ash, joy—as I imagined it, my

constant falling into and escape from Pele's bottomless pit (Pele, the Hawaiian fire goddess or goddess of volcanoes, with their concomitant and contradictory destruction and construction)—really had some sort of connection to the queerness of life itself. For contradictions and all that they did not deny, including pain and death, were necessary to comprehend life. But, then, again, everything and everyone around me, or so it seemed, kept suggesting that this view of mine really was a delusion. At some point in this long, long process, I lost confidence in my idea. That must be it, I told myself. Aren't these experts, the psychiatrists, the academicians, the politicians, the parents, and other authorities really right? Don't they have the keys to the kingdom of Truth after all? Perhaps it was I who was wrong all along. The authorities have studied their books and cases for a long time. Great institutions have grown up around experts on madnesses like mine, institutions like the so-called Ships of Fools, the Great Confinement, Bedlam, Tuke's and Pinel's country retreats for the mad, the PTSD shrinks for guys coming back from Vietnam, even the cures in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s for queers that shrinks called "sickos" (Foucault, especially 3-65, 241ff).

Of course, I then sought answers among the experts—for a while. I needed to make my own sense of the nonsense. But, gradually, I thought, "That was it, wasn't it." I depended on the nonsense; I needed nonsense; I needed the madness of contradiction—to live, to make, to write—yes, and even to critique. I needed to make my own meaning, not go in search of someone else's meaning. I needed to make my own truths, my own realities, not depend on others' truths and realities. What others and I shared was a similar symbol-making system, language, but that was

enough to convey something at least, however small, of the meanings each of us was making out of our individual contexts.

The maddest of all those I had been encountering on the long and dusty word roads was Nietzsche. In "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense," he had discovered what I was discovering, only long before I did:

The various languages, juxtaposed, show that words are never concerned with truth, never with adequate expression; otherwise, there would not be so many languages. The 'thing-in-itself' (which would be pure, disinterested truth) is also absolutely incomprehensible to the creator of language and not worth seeking. He designates only the relations of things to men, and to express these relations he uses the boldest metaphors. First, he translates a nerve stimulus into an image! This is the first metaphor. Then the image must be reshaped into a sound! The second metaphor. And each time there is a complete overleaping of spheres—from one sphere to the center of a totally different, new one. ...

...What is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short, a sum of human relations which were poetically and rhetorically heightened, transformed, and adorned. ... Truths are illusions about which it has been forgotten that they are illusions, worn-out metaphors without sensory impact... to be truthful, i.e., to use the customary metaphors, or in moral terms, to lie collectively in a style that is mandatory for everyone. Now, of course, man forgets that this is his situation; so he lies in the designated manner unconsciously and according to centuries-old habits—and precisely by this unconsciousness, by this forgetting, he arrives at his sense of truth...

...Only by forgetting that primitive metaphor-world [a world we make with language], only by the hardening and rigidification of the mass of images that originally gushed forth as hot magma out of the primeval faculty of human

fantasy, only by the invincible belief that this sun, this window, this table is a truth-in-itself [the word having a direct correspondence to the thing], in short, only in-so-far as man forgets himself as a subject, indeed as an artistically creative subject, does he live with some calm, security, and consistency. (Nietzsche in Gilman et al. 248-249, 250, 252).

Nietzsche seems to be suggesting that, if we make truths themselves out of metaphors and language itself is a metaphor, arbitrary sound concepts or words that, over many centuries, we have come to associate with objects metaphorically and, thus, opaquely, not transparently (i.e., words represent objects — or, really, the world, others, and ourselves — but have no direct or absolute connection to them) and that we make into patterns or shapes we call reality or truth, those truths and realities are of our own making, and we become habituated to them unconsciously.

From the chain of thinking that comes down to us from Nietzsche, Derrida seems to have derived some of his ideas, like *differance*: [1] that meaning depends upon difference — binaries — because we can only define through the negative (since our ancestors chose our words arbitrarily and words are not attached to anything absolute, a transcendental foundation, but are only sound concepts we have come to associate with things or all that each thing is NOT and so approximately IS but never exactly IS — though these associations or meanings are different in each specific time and place and are loaded with residues or traces of meanings that have come before); and [2] that final meanings are perpetually deferred. For, in the same essay, Nietzsche writes:

... Every word becomes a concept as soon as it is supposed to serve not merely as a reminder of the unique, absolutely individualized original experience, to which it owes its origin, but at the same time to fit countless more or less

similar cases, which, strictly speaking, are never identical, and hence absolutely dissimilar. Every concept originates by the equation of the *dissimilar* [my italics: by which he means that we define through the negative, through binaries]... (Nietzsche in Gilman et al. 249).

With the aid of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and other thinkers who succeeded Nietzsche, Derrida was able to make use of what Nietzsche had taught him about rhetoric to indicate that language has meaning because each signifier is different from the one next to it in chains of signification, but that those chains of signification are simply afloat in the ocean of language we enter as infants, and final meaning is perpetually deferred along those chains — exactly because people have arbitrarily assigned sound concepts denotative meanings. Thus, the tail of the mongoose is always just disappearing from the picture; the trace of meaning is always just disappearing from the picture. Every word also masks its emptiness or the fact that it is but jostling up against other arbitrarily assigned denotative sound concepts — words — and using the friction from the jostling (the sparks of desire, the fiery flames, the pains and pleasures both), the associations, the connotations, to spark meanings, the meanings we need as symbol-making creatures to get on with our lives, each of us making those meaning differently, interpreting those sound concepts from our own complexly created contexts that deliver their own beautifully woven fabrics of perceptions. None of these words or sound concepts is rooted in some kind of absolute meaning, a Truth, a Reality; each one is just a sound that has come down to us through thousands of [unconscious] years of use to denote something, and each of us human beings, as I've suggested, enters a huge ocean of language at infancy and gradually, marvelously discovers our own vocabulary

with its denotative words that have connotative meanings (Derrida 278ff).

In a sense, I had been discovering some of these same things myself through my reading but, compared to Nietzsche, going at it backwards. I was mad, then made my discoveries—in part about and through my madness; Nietzsche made his rhetorical discoveries, then went mad. To paraphrase him, language is but a traveling group of metaphors, sort of at loose ends, like the traveling blues musicians after the Civil War, much earlier than Derrida, like Robert Johnson who courted the devil himself, or so he thought.

That language floats without an anchor, except for the illusory anchors we fantasize, is a marvelous thing. This means that language is opaque, like paint, and that we “paint” and shape the world with language much the same way a painter does with paint. But we often do not recognize the opaqueness of these words floating in that ocean that surrounds us and that we enter as infants and never leave again. We forget about what we are in close/closest proximity to and that we are more familiar with than anything else, language itself—and the ways we use it habitually and blindly. We use word tools to order and smooth over our lives and to eliminate death and disorder and chaos and madness from our lives because we have to move on to do the things important to us without such obstructions to our happiness. So we repress our madness, live neurotically, repress our deaths, live fearfully, repress the chaos that surrounds us, surrounds our words, and try to “purify” everything of the trash, the shit, the waste, the dust and darkness of our lives—the madness. We

send everything dark and painful out on those Ships of Fools; we repress them. But, as we all know, the repressed always returns; it never just disappears, out of sight, out of mind. The Ships of Fools return to haunt us. In slips of the tongue, they bite us; we break into laughter. With words we suddenly break into song. With paint we suddenly break into squeals and chatter. With critique, we suddenly toss everything into the air and watch it land into new configurations. For a moment we are mad; madness speaks us through language or paint, images and words; madness through language and paint jerks us around, very temporarily breaks up the binaries. We see the world differently; madness shakes us out of our delusions of safety, the illusion that something is propping us up, that we have something secure that will keep our lives from jostling constantly among our contradictions. Yes, death is constantly among us: the black snake eats the Phoebe chicks in their nest in the rafters. We mourn the loss of the Phoebe babies, but the black snake moves on, and the Phoebe mom returns to nest again the following spring with the bugs she has killed in her mouth, bugs that feed her new chicks. The process is a process of constant renewal. And our contradictions are very much a part of it.

This is one meaning of Plato’s *pharmakon*: it can cure and it can poison. This is one reason my madness drives me; and this is one reason critique both cures and poisons but is necessary to learning and growth; like Pele’s fire or the fire of my madness, it both destroys and creates at the same time, ideas, new interpretations from among the members of the class, new stimuli that might dash expectations but create new avenues simultaneously. Each critiquer, each critter in the class, has fresh ideas, fresh approaches,

fresh contexts to share: that's the marvel of critique. Each person comes to the class with his or her own experiences in the arts, in images, in language, in oceans of words with different meanings, with different triggers to meaning, and with differently repressed or marginalized darkneses ready to spring out along the tongue to surprise everyone. The scene of critique is a scene of brainstorming, of educated, experienced observation; the scene of critique is a scene of sharing, of communities speaking, where anything can happen and no one is excluded because of some mad idea s/he genuinely expresses. The object of the critique — a painting, a poem — must, in the end, juggle those ideas and give them up or incorporate them, use them to extend itself and grow or to die and take root again elsewhere. No one is right or wrong, mad or sane; one just has ideas to share that might be full of all those things, madness, sanity, rightness, wrongness, and everything in the in-betweens, from which something may slip and activate the tongue and eyes and hand to paint or write.

Of course, nothing is pure or ideal, and “authorities” with their Truths often creep into conversations. That's where the grain of salt comes in, where we learn to take these “authorities” and “experts” with a grain of salt. The “authorities” often try to hinder or to train or “manage” conversations in an orderly direction that supposedly gets us all somewhere, and sometimes “authorities” do have a few good ideas. But final Truth is an illusion, and those who think they speak it often are arrogant and delusional in ways they are not yet aware of — but may be some day. And even these ‘authorities’ do add to the marvels of creativity, and the discoveries that come with critique come with those marvels. (And I am not pointing the finger here: who has

not occasionally thought that s/he was an authority on something!) This does not mean that the processes of creativity, lined with many critiques, are not run through with distraught emotions and moments of piercing joy — soon dashed again, of course. Both critiquers and the critiqued often feel hurricanes of emotions.

But one must also be capable of laughing shrilly, madly, with all the contradictions, with all the jostlings and gyrations back and forth across the life/death spectrum. I laugh loudly; I laugh until the hallways rock. It's not something I try to do. The laughter slips; it happens and surprises me. It's my madness in its deepest and most honest form. (I say that because I often feel it come out of that place in my chest from which wrecks and sobs seem to originate.) It's tightly braided, beautifully braided, into the fabric of everything I do. And if I am anything at all, I am what I do; I am changing constantly with everything I do. But, of course, as I am saying here, I also use the tools of theory and critique, the tools of psychoanalysis, Nietzsche's aphorisms, Derrida's ideas, and the ideas of so many others I am indebted to, to help drive the engines of the madneses that drive me, to drive all the discourses that run me along my word roads.

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[Lynn Huffer also has an interesting new book that, in part and very broadly speaking,

indicates some of the connections between Foucault's poststructuralism, madness, and queerness as generators of something else more than binarisms; Lynne Huffer. *Mad for Foucault*. NY: Columbia UP, 2010.]

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**“But it’s also important to see that theory/theories themselves, like these, do not represent the Truth. Theories represent questions that we ask, and the questions change from specific times and places to other specific times and places. None of us holds the Truth of you or me or of our artifacts.”**





Christina Howland

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## 10

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### OUTSPOKEN

*Nancy K. Roeder*

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THE CRITIQUE is the soul of art education. Although it has always held a revered place in our pedagogy, the advent of technology and the subsequent onslaught of information it provides students have changed the face of higher education in a fundamental way forever. The emphasis shift from dissemination to synthesis has rewritten the job description of people teaching visual communication. We still teach techniques and history, etc., but students come to us with much more “information” (research involves more than the first five Google hits) and, perhaps, less ability in terms of how to use it (they sometimes seem overwhelmed with brain traffic). They are better imitators than they are thinkers. And the ubiquitous sensationalism, titillation, and eye candy they see every day distracts some. As teachers we must help them wade through the present clutter of culture to find their authentic voice. Each student has unique needs and there is no right or wrong, only their intention as touchstone.

The critique is an act of intimacy in, potentially, the purest of human relationships—that between student and teacher. Ideally the pursuit of excellence should be the only motive. There is

nothing more rewarding than talking with a student about their work and having them come back the following week with something a thousand times better than what you had imagined they were capable of. This type of exchange is what gets me out of bed every morning and has kept me in education.

In the studio there are many aspects of creative problem solving to critique. The formal issues can be easy and obvious. I've noticed over the years this is where visiting artists frequently start. Color, scale, materials, craft, construction, presentation, etc. are tangible and sometimes absolute (physics, engineering, etc.) The more intangible qualities like motivation, concept, and psychology are richer territory to mine. And although both the formal and conceptual must be addressed, I've found discussions concerning the latter yield interesting conversations of depth about "intention" (not always solely their own as with a project).

During a critique when I was an undergrad a professor made an insightful comment to one of my peers who had recently returned from Vietnam. His work was angst-laden with graphic atrocities he had witnessed. It was little more than the headline photographs we all saw daily. The professor said, "There's a difference between screaming and singing the blues. Everyone can scream." The discussion that followed explored individual intention, how we as communicators must intelligently anticipate how our work will be interpreted, and that "transcendence" might be the single feature that distinguished "art" from anything else.

Critiques can take many forms and the players can assume many different demeanors. The process often gets a bad rap as being a

negative experience. Part of this may be simply human nature. Few of us get in our cars each the morning and say "no flat tires". Most of us only think about tires when there is a problem. I have also witnessed teachers and students alike who believe intimidation is a powerful tool that will get attention. One memorable occasion was during my first semester in college. Our 2-D Design instructor had invited the chair of the Graphic Design department to our crit. He was an imposing character, the quintessential professor—pipe, tweed jacket with leather elbow patches. He strolled the length of the pin board and plucked most of the pieces from their pushpin anchors, let them drop to the floor and walked on them. What theater. The class was in awe. Four pieces remained on the wall, one of which was mine. He spun on his heel and said, "The work on the floor is garbage. The remaining pieces are dreadful, but I am prepared to tell you why." I didn't hear a single word he said after that. I was terrified. To this day I always make an effort to acknowledge what is working and what could be improved. Both are equally important. Only "positive" or only "negative" is only half a critique.

I had an anthropology professor in undergraduate school that would not allow us to take notes in class. He said, "Anything you need to remember I will make memorable". He was right. And during a critique one must consider the nature of the individual and the work and try to make it memorable in a way the student understands, to play by the rules they've adopted.

While in graduate school I was asked by one of the drawing professors to do a critique for an undergraduate class. It was the seventies, a time when curricula could be little more than a

free-for-all and “drawing” could mean almost anything (like hot dogs skewered by fresh daffodils on a butcher’s tray). For this particular project the students were asked to come up with three rhyming words they would use as a catalyst. A group of three students decided to work as a team. And just as the crit was about to start they asked everyone in the studio to remove their left shoe or boot. As the group critiqued the other students work the team sat in the corner wrapping our footgear in Christmas paper as they softly sang Christmas carols. It’s important to mention here that this was an evening class, in Michigan, in December.

When it was their first turn they ceremoniously took each package and threw it out a second story window into three feet of snow. As the rest of us looked down we could barely make out the tell tale holes where their bombs had landed. There was a collective “What??!!” I sensed that the too-cool-for-school trio had done work like this before and the class was fed up with their antics. The professor told everyone to take a break. One of the students borrowed a boot and trudged through snow and darkness to retrieve the packages while another guided him with a flashlight from above.

When it came time for their second “performance” the class sat quietly as one climbed an eighteen-foot ladder to the ceiling where there was what looked like a pillow dripping water. From the hallway a second student emerged strutting to a silent wedding march in an exquisite Strathmore 400 paper wedding dress embellished with delicate water marker line work. She walked over to ladder and the other student wrung out the

water over her as the marker drawings ran. She then left the room as ceremoniously as she had entered. She then returned to class without the dress. One of the other students asked what their three rhyming words were. Collectively they said they couldn’t talk about it. That was it. It was as close as I’ve ever come to someone throwing a punch in a critique. And I was in charge. While the rants were going back and forth I asked the instructor if he knew what the words were and he said yes, “tableau, trousseau, rainbow.” I asked one of the students if I could see the dress. It was, as I guessed, made from a Vogue pattern and very well made considering it was paper. I then proceeded to gently fold it as the student cringed, pulled out my Bic lighter, and said, “tableau, trousseau, rainbow, inferno,” lit the dress and threw it out the window in a blaze of glory. The rest of the class were on their feet applauding squealing praises as the student artist screamed, “I didn’t take a slide of it!” There was no need to talk about it. The next morning when I went to check my mailbox at school it was filled with lighters and requests to do critiques. Amazingly, I didn’t get into trouble and I’ve never done anything like it since. But I still believe critiques are not solely the purview of wordsmiths and have experimented with other forms.

No individual knows everything obviously, so we must speak honestly about what little we do know and trust our instincts. When I first started teaching several colleagues and I were asked to jury an undergraduate exhibition. Among the submissions were several fashion illustrations, which to my eyes were pretty unremarkable. Knowing next to nothing about this discipline I went along with the others in an attempt at diverse representation.

After the exhibition opened several faculty from the Fashion Department were upset that such mediocre work represented their department. Lesson learned. Quality supersedes disciplines. No matter what the circumstances it is a professional obligation to identify quality as we see it. I always encourage students to consider the source.

There are occasions where honesty can appear as tough advice. Those are difficult calls to make. In one of my classes students are asked to do a piece about rites of passage. Hardly a cutting edge topic, its primal importance yields beautiful insights. One semester a student of mixed race did a small elegant mixed media piece. It was visually engaging, well crafted, etc. But it wasn't until the class discussion that its full impact was realized. This student had grown up in a totally white environment. It wasn't until she started school that she realized how small her world was. In the first grade she developed a crush on a boy in her class (unknown to him, of course). He approached her in the coatroom one day and with her heart fluttering, he asked, "How does it feel to be the only black kid in school?" It had never occurred to her that she was black, that she was different. Innocence was truly lost. The class was absolutely silent.

The following week I got to class a little early and several students were sitting around quietly. I confessed that the previous week's critique had haunted me ever since. With that, they all started talking. They had all had the same experience. Her story was so moving. We spent the next hour discussing why we weren't as moved by her collage. She was a competent painter, but she was a brilliant storyteller. She graduated that year and decided to go to graduate school for creative writing.

As educators all we can hope to do is encourage our students quest for an authentic voice with honest feedback and the encouragement of intelligent questioning to better prepare them for the bigger world, not unlike a defense attorney prepares his client for cross examination. We must keep an open mind and, at the same time, speak ours. The ultimate critique will be the viewer's inability to shed the impact of experiencing a work of art, a quality difficult to measure, but one that we all know. Hopefully, in that way, our students will change the world.





Delney Carbon

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## QUESTIONING THE CRITIQUE

*Dennis Farber*

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*No thought, no reflection, no analysis, no cultivation, no intention;  
let it settle itself...*

THE DISCUSSION IN critiques often has little to do with the reason to have a critique, that is, to speak directly and specifically to the work being presented. Almost immediately after an artwork is displayed, talk quickly turns from what is being looked at to what is being said. At this point the artwork recedes and language advances. Somewhere between the two is where critique resides; in the space between the viewer and the viewed. Between language and the involuntary response.

Most often conversation revolves around what a student did not do, what they might have done, could have done, if only they had done, and the full range of “what if” questions. Those remarks refer to images that don’t exist and couldn’t be seen, no matter how hard one tried.

Each person in the room is imagining those permutations differently from everyone else.

Intention is a favorite topic that arises very quickly, and understandably, given the work displayed is often in response to an assignment, though it comes up quickly even when the work viewed has no relation to assignments. Intention is a central topic in the Academy.

Can any of this be avoided and would it make a difference in the efficacy of a critique? My answer is yes and yes. I ask my students if they know of any artists whose intentions are clear and visible. We have yet to come to a consensus on anyone. We also talk about intention comprising many layers, some conscious, some not. And what about serendipity? Have any of them started with one well-defined intention and ended up with that intention no longer considered or legible?

They all have had that experience and the discussion usually proceeds with intention a secondary or tertiary concern, an afterthought, but not dismissed. This broadens the discussion, gives the critique a chance to go beyond the boundaries of intent and often somewhere to which no one had given any thought. Students can now acknowledge an involuntary response to what they are seeing, one for which neither imagination nor education has prepared them. This expands the critique's usefulness on many levels, some of which they struggle to articulate, which expands their vocabulary, but also ones they don't feel the need to defend.

As for discussing the shift from image to language or what isn't seen, beyond the only formal, what follows is often the most interesting conversation. Attention now shifts from the maker to the viewer, which dilutes, if not dissolves, the tendency to take comments personally. Students are encouraged to slow down and take the time to muse and allow thoughtfulness to lead to more individual responses and language.

It's rare that a student's intentions are formal, disconnected from social, political and/or cultural ideas and concerns. "What does it mean?" is a common question during a critique. Students are quick to deny meaning in their work, especially anything substantial or "deep." Most often they say something like, "It's whatever the viewer thinks," which is both true and an attempted, if unintended, dodge around the question.

"Content" and "meaning" are elusive terms in the best of circumstances. *Trivial Pursuit*, TV's *Jeopardy*, academic textbooks are all long on content, but not necessarily meaningful. And meaning can be no less an illusion than geometric perspective. Yet, meaning and content are most often the focus and topic of a critique.

Art lacks neither content nor meaning, but neither can be managed, unilaterally assigned or "fixed." It seems unlikely, if not unreasonable, that students could articulate either, given how little time they have to reflect. Why one color or shape, texture or image *et al.* is chosen over another doesn't necessarily have a conscious origin. If there are answers, time and reflection are necessary. However, in the academy both content and meaning beyond the perceptual and formal are encouraged, if not required,

and also rewarded. Students quickly realize there is good content/meaning and bad content/meaning and that they really aren't free to explore whatever they want. That is, there are biases, institutional values and standards that envelop critiques. As open an environment as we like to think we create, disapproval, even censorship lingers just out of sight. Critiques position us in the complicated territory of value systems, personal, collective, institutional and others.

*Critique raises the question of audience and the obligation artists feel towards their viewers. If one feels no obligation to an audience frees them to be more creative, what is the point of critiquing? There is no critique without an audience.*

The nature of institutions, especially the academy, is to establish and propagate standards. And standards are necessarily set so they can be achieved. At the same time, knowledge is flexible, malleable and changing; as times change, ideas and discourses change. But institutional standards, ideologies and methodologies, once set, tend to become static while times and ideas are dynamic. Institutional standards then begin to promote mediocrity and conventionality. One of the paradoxes of the academy, especially art school, is creativity has no allegiance to standards or convention. Rather, creativity and growing as a student artist (and as a person), involves a degree of openness, accident, risk, even anarchy, none of which adhere to a canon.

Winston Churchill characterized success as “moving from failure to failure without a loss of enthusiasm.” Western art has a legacy that challenges the accepted and trashes tradition. This guarantees failure, at least as it is commonly defined, as part of one's process

and progress. One role of a student is to openly question most everything, to not be driven by consensus. In this context, authoritarian attitudes discourage the possibility of failure, seeking one's potential and encourage the reward of approval. Given the values of a teacher's generation and education are unlikely to mirror those of their students', ideas and conventions from another time understandably anchor a critique.

George Kubler, in his book *The Shape of Time*, talks about “entrance,” the time at which a fledgling artist's ideas about art and becoming an artist are being formed, and how that particular time shapes and affects them and their work. We are all children of our generation through a mixture of accepting and rejecting the prevailing ideas of the time we were coming to consciousness as artists. Excluding biology (for now), teachers, institutions, the visible and invisible art world, museums, galleries, periodicals, history, media and more, like class, race and privilege, all shape who we become, how we experience culture, what we do and make. There is always an inter-play between the possibilities a culture offers and those it is willing to accept. Art history is full of examples of art being excluded for reasons having little to do with the images or objects being produced, and everything to do with the dominant ideology. Vermeer's paintings sank out of sight after his death. That same work regained its lost visibility some time later when it fit into a category that assigned it value.

What do teachers and/or the institutions of official culture, the counter culture, peers, the art world and/or the media value, promote, reject, ignore or reward? In the United States, proud of its melting pot history and freedom of expression, it was not

until the late 1960's into the 1970's that the art world finally allowed voices that introduced gender, politics, identity, the social and cultural into all forms of art. That permission and inclusion richly expanded ideas around creative research and expression, challenging the canon, mired in convention, into reassessing and expanding its traditional models, language and value system(s) that were the basis of talking about and judging art.

There is a wide range of variables at work in a critique, not to mention the importance of class dynamic. The interaction between a class and instructor is fragile and fluid, so establishing trust is a key component in a critique's efficacy. There are also givens that shape a critique. What time and where (geographically, what schools) were the instructor's ideas about art formed? Has the instructor been active in her or his practice and/or an art community outside the academy? Have they involved themselves in the many (or any) discourses, theoretical or otherwise, of the academy and beyond? Is theory privileged over practice, practice over theory? There are certainly no correct answers, but love or disdain all or part of the above, they combine to create the context in which discussion takes place. It also matters how effective an instructor is at clearly articulating their ideas and opinions. And, perhaps more importantly, what are their social and leadership skills, as personality cannot be ignored, for better or worse, in communicating what each instructor has to offer their class. Some try to quiet or banish their biases during a critique. Not only is that unlikely or impossible, the value of a class and a critique is the particular, unique instructor with all her or his biases, knowledge and value system. How things are said is at least as important as what is said. Language is the

bedrock of critique and no less important than shape, color, space and what is represented.

*If everyone in a critique acknowledges their own limitations, and agrees on sharing constructive intentions, critique becomes a powerful tool and learning experience.*

Critiques carry with them a great deal of responsibility. There is a body of technique and craft as well as some common knowledge, which is actually information, to offer students, and most faculty talk about one or the other or both. Nurturing a student's coming to consciousness as an artist is a delicate process. If trying, diligence and venturing into the unfamiliar are valued and desired goals, what happens when success is rewarded and failure punished? What about the student who willfully repudiates both institutional and the instructor's values?

Dave Hickey in his article, "Bob and Wendy Teach Art" remarks on different styles of looking at and talking about art. One example is the critic Robert Hughes, portrayed as pronouncing judgments. The other, dispensing mercy, is Sister Wendy. Of course, critique is not as binary as this comparison implies. There must be space for all the gray areas where most student work resides. Schools and teachers can embrace a more holistic approach that is neither wholly intellectual nor emotionally based, or a well defined set of rules for all to follow. Still, what Hickey addresses is particularly important, more so with young students who are continually urged and encouraged to step out of their comfort zones. Students, not unlike the rest of us, are vulnerable to judgments, which in turn can make them cautious about taking risks, a stated goal of most all art classes and



programs. Art schools make claim to promoting freedom. Yet that freedom carries costs for students (and faculty). Sartre suggested there is no freedom as long as there is “concern for the judgments of others.” Critique is an examination of points of view, styles, and philosophies. In that sense it is discussion and debate, not pronouncements, though not immune from them. And if faculty show resistance in a critique to expanding their conceptual boundaries and retreat into the familiar, it is the instructor’s comfort zone, not the student’s, that is the issue. It is easy to create a false sense of freedom given educational systems are cultures of approval.

Participating in a critique is where students focus and hone their looking, critical thinking and language skills, all of which are inseparable. Critiques are also a learning experience by listening. No one in the room knows what’s good (an unfortunate word), what does and doesn’t “work.” That’s a discussion, at times an argument, which provides important opportunities and lessons for students, helping them form their individual ideas by challenging their preconceptions and values and those of everyone participating. There is no final word on a work’s success or failure when it comes to the arts. Instructors who have the ability to speak their mind while remaining supportive and encouraging are invaluable models for students to emulate. Listening is as important as talking.

This group of essays is being generated, compiled and presented by MICA’s Cultural Expansion Committee, so it seems particularly relevant to touch on critique in the context of students who are considered “others.” Otherness can be visible or not, race, ethnicity,

gender, age, sexual orientation, biology and the full range of possibilities measured against the norm. Given everything discussed in critiques is in the context of value systems, this group of students is particularly sensitive, important and vulnerable. The most dramatic in-class example of value systems colliding is when viewing their work. These students, especially early in their education, when showing work often find their classmates (and themselves) struck mute, not because they have nothing to say, rather by self consciousness and fear. Their concern is to not be considered rude, offensive or uninformed, and suddenly their education fails them. Or they try to match the image presented with their projection of the student presenting. Either, of course, accentuates “otherness” in its own unintended way. The opposite is also possible; the romantic notion that real creation depends on getting outside familiar cultural conventions. In either case, the discomfort in the room is palpable, and the instructor is left to navigate the sensitive territory of feelings and cultural differences. There are no easy solutions. Patience and sensitivity are obviously helpful, and these uncomfortable situations are unique learning opportunities, especially when students are reminded their reticence, instead of avoiding their projections, promotes otherness, and neither party nor the instructor ought to adhere to their own cultural values as if they were absolute truths.

Students’ not talking in a critique is an issue with which all instructors grapple. Prodding and cajoling participants to speak up, that it’s just a statement, one that can change the next second, are often for naught. Unfortunately, the self confidence to think critically and offer opinions seems to drop with every year a student progresses through the educational system, until

now. It's not unusual for a student's confidence and exuberance to be squashed by the very system meant to support its growth. This is where critique has enormous potential far beyond discussing artwork. That is, to provide an environment that not only encourages, but also supports behavior and exploration without fear of failure, disconnected from approval systems; that it might feel much better to be creative than correct.

Critique is at the core of art school education. Instructors help students find their unique voice and ways to give it expression. Critique plays an integral role in the success or failure of that process. Einstein said something like, "If you can't explain it simply, you don't know what you're talking about." That may be setting the bar too high for those of us who are not Einstein. Still, what we say and how we say it matters.

*"As soon as you open your mouth you're wrong."*



***“It’s rare that a student’s intentions are formal, disconnected from social, political and/or cultural ideas and concerns. “What does it mean?” is a common question during a critique. Students are quick to deny meaning in their work, especially anything substantial or “deep.” Most often they say something like, “It’s whatever the viewer thinks,” which is both true and an attempted, if unintended, dodge around the question.”***



Clara Kohn Marquez & Skye McNeill

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## “TEACHING” GRADUATE STUDENTS

*Maren Hassinger*

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I’VE READ Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress*, a paen to Freire, and Liz Lerman’s book based on her experience as a dancer/choreographer. AND I have spoken to 14 years of graduate sculpture students. Taken as a whole, these might be meager qualifications, yet I would like to share my experiment with you in the hope that education can be served.

First, my students know more than I do about what it is they are doing.  
 Second, my students know more than I do about what they are doing.  
 Third, etc.

### **I.**

The main thing is asking searching questions calmly.

*What is this about?*

*Where did this come from?*

*Why this form?*

*Why this material?*

*Why this placement?*

*Is this a performance? Inspired by the performative?*

**2.**

*Would this be better as a... ??? What else might this be?*

*What to you wish the audience to share?*

*Would you do (or re-do) it again?*

*Is this part of a series?*

*What are you referencing here?*

*What are your references?*

*Who are your references?*

*Have you considered looking at the work of “Artist X?”*

*Did you research aspects of this project?*

*Do you think art can “do” something for others?*

*How does art fit into your idea of culture?*

*Can you tell me what you’ve read recently?*

*How does this current reading relate to the art you’re making?*

*Can it help somebody? How?*

*What is the difference between a studio artist and a project artist?*

*Which one are you? Why?*

*What is a community artist? How might sculpture be used in this concept?*

*Matisse said, “I want to make works for the tired businessman,” or words to that effect.*

*Who is your audience?*

*And, what of the spirit?*

You ask so many questions, one is bound to provoke a genuine response. Bound to open up a serious discussion which the student can own. But what you’re really looking for are the student’s questions. Otherwise how will you know how to direct your responses?

**3.**

Critiques are after all just good conversations with give and take from all sides. Finally, you support the varieties of human experience and praise them—one and all. You’re not looking to give advice.

The idea here is to provide an ear. A gentle, supportive approach is called for, while at the same time helping the student assess the value of their work. No avenue of investigation is blocked, but the student realizes some choices and that commitments need to be made.

The idea is that the support provided encourages an authentic response by the student to the world in which we reside. The student’s definition of her/his art is developed via this process. Hopefully....



# CONCLUSION

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*The scholar seeks, the artist finds.* –André Gide

THE ESSAYS IN this book demonstrate the centrality of the critique as educational practice, at the Maryland Institute College of Art and art and design colleges like it. The notion of discourse, between artists and artists-in-training, as a means of understanding and improving artistic practice is a powerful one, and such face-to-face interplay is seen as essential—even irreplaceable—in the development of the creative mind.

The contributing authors represent decades of combined teaching experience at MICA, in both the studio arts and the humanities, as well as a plethora of approaches to the notion of critique. Clearly, there is not one right way to employ the critique within the context of the classroom setting, nor is there one preferred method or theoretical framework. From “intuitive” critiques, to those informed by psychological and neuroesthetic theory, the authors here lay out not a rigid set of best practices, but rather a variety of pathways, leading to common goals.

Though each essay is different, there is a common thread woven through many of them: the importance of personal experience, and the use of anecdote to communicate the uniqueness of each critique. Every one has their own stories of important critique experiences, or their first critique. I remember, as a new faculty member at the Institute in the spring of 1995, being asked to attend a foundation critique by instructor Jan Stinchcomb. As an archaeologist and art historian I had no practical knowledge of the process; I knew it was important at MICA and in artists’ studios, but I had never been to one or



Eli Sobel

participated in one. Like many art historians, my knowledge of art was principally theoretical: I had no studio classes in college, and just a few drawing classes that had focused on skills like draftsmanship and object/artifact drawing. We did not “crit” our work with other students — the professor told us if it was right or wrong; that is, if the drawing conveyed the information (he thought) it ought to convey. As a guest in this new environment I was nervous, in that I was unsure what I was going to say or how I was meant to participate. I didn’t want to sit in a corner silently, but I also didn’t want to look a fool.

I also remember having some skepticism as to the critique process. It all seemed a bit “airy-fairy” to me; I suppose I had bought into the stereotype of art and design students speaking about their work, and the work of their peers, as matter of opinion and taste only. “I like this, I don’t like that,” etc. As such, it seemed to me less a pedagogical process, and more a way to vent or to stroke egos.

So it was that I was surprised at what I discovered in that first crit. Certainly, there was plenty of “I like this” talk; the students were freshmen and young and inexperienced, feeling their way into the process. I suppose for some, it was their first critique as well. But as we progressed I noticed two things: first, that many students were using their work as a way of “thinking through” a problem or experience; and second, that the discussion fostered in critique seemed to constitute, for some, feedback that they intended to incorporate in a revised version of the piece being critiqued, or

alternately, in future work. This struck me, though I would have been hard pressed at the time to articulate just why.

Later, as I became more familiar with pedagogical practices in arts education, I began to make connections between art making, discourse, and notions of “research.” This was aided by reading I was doing in the social sciences — especially those dealing with “materiality” — but also with my experiences working alongside studio faculty and students at MICA. Like most academics, I was trained in a system that separated “creative” and “research” approaches. This is reflected most clearly in the dichotomies that are typically set up in Western institutions of higher learning, where art history and studio art programs are seen as distinct entities — related, certainly, but different and divided. While most studio artists have taken plenty of art history courses — art history can be seen as the discipline-history of studio art, after all — relatively few art historians are trained in art making or design. At MICA, this dichotomy exists as well; but there are always people attacking these walls and seeking to break them down, on both sides. Artist-scholars, academics who write poetry and exhibit photographs, interdisciplinary courses and “linked” curricula abound — at least, relative to more “typical” or traditional American colleges. Boundaries are more blurry here. And I came to understand not only that many of the artists I was working with were some of the smartest people I knew, but also that they approached the world through their art and design in ways similar to how scholars in art history, archaeology, and other “materially” based disciplines approach research historical problems: they think problems through with things.

“Thinking with things” is a phrase that is well-known to art historians and archaeologists, even before the seminal work of George Kubler (*The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*) and Esther Pasztor (*Thinking with Things: Toward a New Vision of Art*) helped to revolutionize the field in the second half of the 20th century. The notion that one can use physical objects to research aspects of human experience is in fact a relatively recent idea, most thoroughly formulated only in the middle of the 18th century. Then, thinkers like Winckelmann and Hegel posited the radical notion that complex information was “locked up” in the physical objects created by human beings—what social scientists now call *material culture*. Before this period, only contemporary historical documents were seen as useful in this task—the ancient and medieval annalists, for instance, and of course the Bible. But Enlightenment (and mostly German) scholars advanced the notion that an artifact or art object is like a text; that is, it can be “read” and contains information about the people who made it. This, of course, is the very bedrock on which art history, anthropology, archaeology and related disciplines are founded. But it also suggests something else: the role of makers—artists and designers—as “encoders” of knowledge.

The importance—indeed, the *centrality*—of art has become obvious to many writers recently. No longer conceived of as an “optional extra” of the human experience, art and design as intellectual practice, as systems of visual communication, as a way of seeing the world, have come to the forefront. Art historians like Nigel Spivey have suggested that the developing ability of human beings to communicate complex ideas through

images and made objects had the effect of actually altering the species (*How Art Made the World: A Journey to the Origins of Human Creativity*). Social scientist Ellen Dissanayake is a constant, alternative voice, arguing that art and object making are connected to human intimacy, community, and development as a species group, in important works like *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began*, and others. So-called “new materialists” like Ian Hodder stress the centrality of human relationships with made objects, focusing on the processes by which individuals, groups and societies become “entangled” in systems of producing and maintaining material things (*Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things*). And artists like Patricia Leavy—as well as several colleagues here at MICA—have developed the notion of “arts-based research”: a methodology that adapts the tenets of the creative arts and design disciplines in order to address social research questions in truly engaged, and engaging, ways. Arts-based research is holistic, builds coalitions and fosters community, is politically and socially aware, promotes dialogue, and is still rigorous when practiced systemically and conscientiously. By contrast, Leavy argues that the average peer-reviewed academic research article is read by between eight and ten people, with educational backgrounds and credentials similar to the author, and then sits on a shelf for most of the rest of its existence.

All this came to a head for me, however, when I read Colin Renfrew’s thought-provoking *Figuring It Out: The Parallel Visions of Artists and Archaeologists*. Renfrew is a social scientist, anthropologist and archaeologist—but also an academic administrator. One of his duties, as Master of Jesus

College at the University of Cambridge, was the organization of a series of exhibits, showcasing the works of contemporary sculptors and artists, mostly British, in the College Close, which is the famous quadrangle there. Renfrew was not really, at that time, a connoisseur of modern sculpture, although not completely unversed. He did notice, however, and was indeed struck by the seemingly “superficial” relationships between the aesthetic of sculptors like Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy, on the one hand, and the “feel” of archaeological excavations and remains with which Renfrew had great expertise, including and especially the so-called “megalithic” monuments of the Neolithic and Iron Ages in the British Isles and Western Europe. Renfrew began to explore the relationship between artists and social scientists, their “parallel visions,” and concluded that many artists are posing the same fundamental questions as anthropologists and archaeologists—questions about human experience and behavior. *D’où Venons Nous—Que Sommes Nous—Où Allons Nous*, Gaugin famously asked. Social scientists ask these questions as well. Renfrew posits that the contemporary artist/designer “seeks to understand the world by acting upon it,” a kind of “research strategy” that parallels those of many scholarly disciplines. And it occurs to me that the critique plays a role in this strategy, as a kind of “peer-review” process, perhaps, that the artist/designer uses to change, improve, and advance his or her research. This may not describe the working methods and goals of every artist, but I have become more and more aware of it, and have been struck again and again by this notion of the “parallel vision,” playing itself out not in the pages of scholarly journals, but in studio classrooms.

Going back to that first crit of mine: I was very unsure what to do, what to say, and how to behave; I saw connections between

the work of one student and that of American painter George Bellows, so that enabled me to bring my art historical knowledge to bear and participate positively. Over the years, I have become more comfortable with the critique—and more aware of “the parallel vision.” Thus, artists and designers don’t seem so foreign to me, so “other;” many of us work towards similar goals and this strange practice we call “the crit” is in fact a research method I can understand: to me, a way of critiquing, improving and expanding research into the human condition.

### *Joseph J. Basile*

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### *About the Authors*

#### **JOSEPH J. BASILE**

Joe Basile received his BA in Archaeological Studies from Boston University in 1987, and AM and PhD in Old World Archaeology and Art from Brown University in 1990 and 1992, respectively. In 1994, he came to MICA to teach ancient art in the Department of Art History. Since then, Dr. Basile has been art history department chair, and is currently Associate Dean of Liberal Arts. He has written on such diverse topics as prehistoric European sculpture, Greek vase painting, the art and archaeology of ancient Petra, and the use of plaster casts of Classical sculptures in American art colleges.

#### **MINA CHEON**

A Korean-American new media artist, Dr. Cheon divides her time between Baltimore, where she is on the MICA faculty, NYC, and Seoul, S. Korea. Her book *Shamanism + Cyberspace* was adapted from her doctoral thesis done under the guidance of Avital Ronell at the European Graduate School. Represented by Ethan Cohen Gallery in New York, she exhibits her "Political Pop Art" internationally, with solo exhibitions at the Sungkok Art Museum and Insa Art Place in Seoul, Maryland Art Place and C. Grimaldis Gallery in Baltimore, and Lance Fung Gallery and (upcoming) at Ethan Cohen Gallery in New York. Her work is in the collections of many museums including a new acquisition by the Smith College Museum of Art.

#### **JANE ELKINTON**

Trained as an ethnomusicologist and art historian, Dr. Elkinton has taught courses on Asian Art since 1972 and served as the Chair of the Art History department at MICA for ten years. Her approach to critique is informed by her study of the Chanoyu tea ceremony. She lived in Japan

for three and a half years one of which was as exchange professor to Osaka University of Arts. Dr. Elkinton also curated and wrote the catalogue for Sister States Fifth Annual Exhibition that traveled from Maryland to Kanagawa Prefecture. Her work includes a book on the Buddhist deity Jizo.

#### **DAN DUDROW**

A Yale-Norfolk Scholar and participant in the RISD European Honors Program, Dan Dudrow has been on the MICA faculty since 1970 and has won the Trustees Award for Excellence in Teaching three times. Awarded a residency in France, he's been in numerous solo and group shows in the United States and Europe.

#### **DENNIS FARBER**

Currently teaching in the Foundation Department and the Associate Dean of Foundation at MICA, Mr. Farber also served as Director of the Mt. Royal Graduate School of Painting while at MICA. His work is included in collections at the Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum and the Jewish Museum in NYC, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Photography at Tokyo, Japan, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, TX.

#### **MAREN HASSINGER**

With a BA from Bennington and a MFA from UCLA, Ms. Hassinger is currently Director of the Rinehart Graduate School of Sculpture at MICA. She's been Artist-in-Residence at the Studio Museum of Harlem, the MacDowell Colony, and ASAP and received grants from the Joan Mitchell Foundation, the Gottlieb Foundation and Anonymous Was a Woman. She's been exhibiting her work since 1973 and has shows coming up in NYC's Museum of Art and Design, the Reginald Lewis Museum in Baltimore and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

#### **KEN KRAFCHER**

A member of the MICA faculty since 1985, Krafchek received MICA's Trustee Fellowship for Excellence in Teaching in 1998. Since 1987, he has placed college students in a variety of after-school and community-based art programs serving the local Baltimore area. As Director of MICA's Office of Community Arts Partnerships (CAP), he supervised its creation in 1998 and led the ongoing development of new expanded programming. He also supervised the creation and design of MICA's MA and MFA in Community Arts and serves as the first Graduate Director for both programs.

#### **GABRIEL KROIZ**

Gabriel Kroiz, the Undergraduate program director of Morgan State University's Architecture and Environmental Design program, is an award winning designer and preservationist, with interests in urban sustainability. His firm, Kroiz Architecture, has completed projects in the United States and Korea including Ssamziegil in Seoul and Green-HAB, a building systems prototype in Baltimore. Kroiz earned his B.F.A. and B.Arch from the Rhode Island School of Design and M.Arch from the University of Maryland.

#### **FLETCHER MACKEY**

After receiving his MFA from Cal Arts, Mr. Mackey returned to his native Houston, where he was active in developing the Public and Civic Art strategies, co-creating the "Bayou Show" that ran from 1982-6. Several permanent installations of his work can be seen all over Houston. He has taught at Southern Texas University and Rice University and was Cultural Program Director at Project Row Houses. Now at MICA where he won the 2010 Unity Award, he teaches in the Foundation and MA/MFA in Community Arts.

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Influenced by growing up on the island of Maui, Hawaii, Dr. Morrison got a BA in Fine Arts for Sculpture, then went on to graduate work in literature and post doctoral work in Rhetorical and Critical Theory. Her seventeen years of teaching include George Washington University, University of Texas and North Carolina Wesleyan College as well as at MICA.

**JOHN PEACOCK**

With a BA from Harvard and a PhD from Columbia, Dr. Peacock is a former Andrew W. Mellon Fellow, a Fulbright Scholar and grantee of the American Philosophical Society. A professor of Humanistic Studies, and Critic-in- Residence for the Rinehart Graduate Program in Sculpture at MICA, he is also an enrolled member of the Spirit Lake Dakota Nation. His poetry in the endangered Dakota language is included in several publications as are his essays, fiction and poetry in English.

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Teaching full time at MICA and Virginia Commonwealth University for the last thirty years, Ms. Roeder has had a primary role in developing the First Year curriculum. Twice receiving the Trustees Award for Excellence in Teaching, she was chair of the Foundation Department for ten years, giving a presentation on it at the Foundation Art Theory and Education Conference. "The Critique" was the title of the presentation she gave at the Graphic Design Educators Conference.

**WHITNEY SHERMAN**

Photographer, art director and Illustrator, Ms. Sherman has been Illustration Department Chair at MICA since 2000 and won the Trustees Award for excellence in Teaching in 2009. Now Director of the MFA program in

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**SUSAN WATERS-ELLER**

On MICA's faculty since 1978, Ms. Waters-Eller has won the Trustees Award for Excellence in Teaching three times and the Unity Award in 2009. She has lectured on the relationship of art to emotions in diverse venues ranging from an International Art and Technology Conference to a group of prisoners at Maryland House of Corrections. Her paintings are included in Contemporary American Oil Painting, published by Jilin Fine Arts, People's Republic of China. Her writing can be found on her blog, <http://seeingmeaning.blogspot.com>.

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