Criticizing Art

Understanding the Contemporary

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CHAPTER 3

Describing Art

ALTHOUGH A POPULAR MISCONCEPTION about art criticism is that it is primarily judgmental and negative in tone, in actuality, most of the words written by critics are descriptive and interpretive rather than judgmental, and positive in tone. Critics seek to provide readers with information about artworks, and describing these artworks, many of which will not be seen by their readers, is one of their major activities. *Describing* is a kind of verbal pointing a critic does so that features of a work of art will be noticed and appreciated. Descriptions are rarely evaluatively neutral: If a reader looks closely at a critic's descriptions, the reader can infer the critic's approval or disapproval of the work being described. Written descriptions are also heavily inflected by what the critic thinks the work is about.

As a mental process, description is a means of gathering information about the work; then the critic sorts the information (which can be substantial), writes distilled descriptions for readers, and formulates interpretations and judgments of the work. If the critic's descriptive information is inaccurate or woefully incomplete, any ensuing interpretation or judgment is suspect.

With careful observation, descriptive information can be gathered from within the work—"internal information." For teaching purposes, internal descriptive information is sometimes grouped under three topics: subject matter, medium, and form. These are defined with examples in the following sections.

Critics also provide descriptive information about aspects not visible in the work—that is, contextual information such as facts about the artist or the times in which the art was made. This is "external information" and examples of this are given as well.

Critics rarely describe artworks without also interpreting and evaluating them, and one's theory of art significantly affects what one notices and then chooses to

describe. Overlaps of description and interpretation and evaluation and theory are examined at the end of the chapter. The chapter begins, however, by discussing separately the three areas of description, defining relevant terms and concepts with the help of brief examples. Then it examines in greater detail the descriptive activities of critics through their writings about several contemporary artists working in different media.

SUBJECT MATTER

Subject matter refers to the persons, objects, places, and events in a work of art. In the following bit of critical writing, Dana Shottenkirk provides a succinct overview of Nancy Spero's works of art: "Spero represents the historical nightmare that constitutes women's relationship to culture. Her representations of victims of medieval torture, Nazi sadism, and sexual abuse are hand-printed and collaged onto empty white backgrounds next to pornographic images, prehistoric female running figures, and defiantly vulgar women; it's the story of power struggles played out on the bodies of women."[1]

There is a lot of information in Shottenkirk's two sentences. The first sentence is an interpretation rather than a description. It is an interpretive generalization about all of Spero's work. The second sentence is more descriptive. Here, Shottenkirk describes Spero's subject matter as women—more specifically, women who are victims of medieval torture and Nazi sadism and sexual abuse, pornographic images, prehistoric female running figures, and defiantly vulgar women. In the first sentence, Shottenkirk can be said to be defining the artist's subject—and now we can make a distinction between *subject* and *subject matter.* According to the critic, Spero's subject (or theme or main idea or recurring topic) is women's nightmarish relationship to culture. To convey this general subject, the artist uses particular imagery, such as the prehistoric female running figure. This imagery is the subject matter of the art. To identify a theme is interpretive; to name subjects is more straightforwardly descriptive.

Some scholars make a distinction between *subject matter* and *content* rather than *subject matter* and *subject*. However, *content* is a combination of all that is in a work of art—subject matter, the handling of media, form, and intent. When an artwork has no recognizable subject matter, the form itself is the subject. *Content,* however, needs to be interpreted and may include, for example, the artist's expression of individuality.

Besides identifying the subject and naming the subject matter of Spero's art, Shottenkirk goes on to characterize the artist's treatment of her subject matter: "Spero adopts the role of loud-mouthed raconteur, telling this tale of horror that others would like to ignore." The critic also describes Spero's media—hand-printing and collage—and mentions the formal characteristic of empty white backgrounds. Shottenkirk concludes with a further interpretation of what the works mean: "The

result is a melange of images of female victimhood, extending back into pre-recorded history. The costumes change; the politics don't."

MEDIUM

Sometimes the term *medium* is used to designate a general grouping of artworks, such as the medium of painting or the medium of sculpture or video. The term is also used to identify specific materials used by an artist, such as acrylic paint or polycoated resin. *Medium* is singular; *media* is plural.

When writing about Magdalena Abakanowicz's choice of fibers as her medium for some of her sculptures, Wendy Beckett offers this: "When the Nazis invaded Poland, Magdalena Abakanowicz saw drunken troopers fire at her mother, leaving her mutilated. It was then that the realization came to her that the body was like a piece of fabric—that it could be torn apart with ease. Years later, as an adult artist, it has been her deliberate choice to work in fibre, the humblest of materials, fragile and yielding. The very softness was a challenge to her. She felt a terrible need to protest against the comfortable, the useful, the compliant, the soft."[2] In these sentences, Beckett provides us with external information—namely, historical facts about the Nazis invading Poland and biographical facts about the artist and the tragedy of her and her mother. Beckett then connects this contextual information with Abakanowicz's use of fiber—"the body was like a piece of fabric." Beckett further describes the medium of fiber as humble, fragile, and yielding.

In a second example, David Cateforis writes about the "sheer physical power" of Anselm Kiefer's paintings—"covering entire walls, their surfaces clotted with not only paint but also straw, sand, bits of metal, molten lead, gold leaf, copper wire, ceramic shards, photographs and scraps of paper. The magnitude and material density of Kiefer's surfaces have led more than one critic to identify him as the aesthetic heir of Jackson Pollock."[3] Here, Cateforis is mixing observations about the form of Kiefer's paintings (covering entire walls, the aesthetic heir of Jackson Pollock) and the particular materials he uses such as paint, straw, gold leaf, and so forth.

Another writer, Waldemar Januszczak, is especially effective in describing Kiefer's medium and how it affects the viewer: "Kiefer's large fields of scorched earth—his most-often-recurring image—look like slabs of blasted heath itself, danced over by devils, driven over by panzers, tortured by the weather, then screwed to the wall. They seem plowed as much as painted. Many of the furrows have straw embedded in them. Some are visibly blackened with a welding torch. Others have things attached to them—bits of old farm equipment, sheets of lead, charred fence posts, mysterious numbers."[4]

The medium of drawing seems simple and straightforward enough. However, critic Michelle Meyers shows us that this seemingly simple medium can be complex. In his *Men in the Cities* drawings of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Robert Longo used charcoal, pencil, and ink on paper. Meyers describes the subject matter

of the drawings as "men in contorted poses, frozen in a moment of either forceful play (slam dancing) or violent death."[5] She tells us that Longo derived the subjects for his drawings from fashion photographs of the 1950s and that the models are Longo's friends. The artist projected photographs of his models onto large sheets of paper and "drew the figures, omitting details of personality and place and often replacing the body parts of one model with those of another. Working through the intermediary media of photography and advertising and the cinematic practices of photographic manipulation and editing gives Longo great control over his chaotic images." Thus, the critic informs us that Longo's medium of drawing is also based in the media of advertising, photography, and cinema.

FORM

All works of art have form, whether realistic or abstract, representational or nonrepresentational, meticulously planned or achieved spontaneously. When critics discuss the form of a work of art, they provide information about how the artist presents subject matter (or excludes it) by means of a chosen medium. They tell of the artwork's composition, arrangement, and visual construction. "Formal elements" of a work of art may include dot, line, shape, light and value, color, texture, mass, space, and volume. How formal elements are used is often referred to as "principles of design," and these include scale, proportion, unity within variety, repetition and rhythm, balance, directional force, emphasis, and subordination.

When writing about Nancy Graves's *Cantileve,* 1983, a large bronze sculpture with polychrome patina, Wendy Beckett tells us of the effects of Graves's formal treatment of her materials: "The real joy of this gigantic work, over two meters high, is the miraculous marriage of lightness and weight. It seems to float, airily suspended, both supremely confident and infinitely frail."[6] Thus, the formal elements the critic wants us to notice are size, space, and mass, and the principles of design are scale (it is gigantic), directional force (it floats), and emphasis and subordination (it is supremely confident and infinitely frail).

Just as critics mix interpretations and judgments with their descriptions, they also freely mix comments on subject, medium, and form and draw upon both internal and external information: "Miriam Schapiro, one of the leaders of the pattern-and-decoration movement that emerged in the '70s, continues to delight us with paintings and mixed media works that combine active, dynamic figures, rich brushwork, and lively patterns. Flat, hard-edge figures covered with painted or collaged patterns dance on brightly painted surfaces—usually a rich lyrical abstraction of splattered, splotched, and squiggled acrylic."[7] In these two sentences, Ruth Bass describes subject matter (dynamic figures, lively patterns), media (paint and collage), and form (a rich lyrical abstraction), relying both on internal information (all the things she notices in the paintings, such as hard-edge figures, splattered, splotched, and squiggled acrylic) and on external information (the pattern-and-

decoration movement that emerged in the 1970s). It is also clear, though not explicitly stated, that the critic approves of the work.

In the following pages, more extended examples of descriptive writing are provided to continue examination of the very important critical activity of describing works of art.

A SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS ABOUT DESCRIPTION

It should be clear by now that description is not a prelude to criticism—it is criticism. Given the rich descriptions provided by critics, we come away with a knowledge and appreciation of the art they are describing. Description, then, is language to facilitate understanding and appreciation of works of art, and so is criticism.

Lively Writing

It should also be clear by now that although descriptions can be clinically accurate and scientific sounding, as with the language quoted earlier describing a Chihuly

piece—"Glass, clear greyish tinted, with coloured glass inclusions; an eight part assemblage consisting of one large 'container' in the shape of a wavy-edged shell with six smaller forms . . ."—they are rarely this removed, unemotional, or so coolly intellectual. When critics describe, they often do so quite passionately. Recall the more typical descriptions of Chihuly's work: "flamboyant corsages," "clustered like bunches of fantastic flowers," "sheer gorgeousness," and "the spectacular manner in which they seem to spill into the room."

Critics' descriptions are lively. Critics write to be read, and they must capture their readers' attention and engage their readers' imaginations. Critics want to persuade their readers to see a work as they do. If they are enthusiastic, they try to communicate their enthusiasm through their choice of descriptors and how they put them together in a sentence, a paragraph, and an article. If Golub's work frightens them, they want us to experience the chill: "The whole scene feels like the memory of a bad dream, recalled through a haze of paint and sweat as if we had just bolted upright, wrenched from our otherwise peaceful middle-of-the-night slumber."

In this chapter, the academic distinctions of subject matter, medium, and form were used. Professional critics make these categories come alive. Anselm Kiefer's paintings often use the subject matter of burnt fields. In good descriptive writing, however, they are not just burnt fields; they are "large fields of scorched earth [that] look like slabs of blasted heath itself, danced over by devils, driven over by panzers, tortured by the weather, then screwed to the wall." Deborah Butterfield's subject matter is horses, but it is also "the tilt of a head, the swing of a tail, the bend of a knee." This is insightful and engaging descriptive writing.

The medium can be oil on canvas, but it can also be wax, or—more interestingly—"smelly beeswax" or 750,000 pennies laid on a honey-coated floor that form "a shimmering copper surface that resembled the overlapping scales of a gigantic fish." Medium may also be costuming, but not just a costume, but rather "a white minimalist/hippie gown" and "punkish sci-fi suits" and "all out glitz." When writing about the performances of Laurie Anderson, art critics had to come up with terms for her music and wrote of her "elegiac mood," a "quality of mourning," and "lush opulence."

In subdividing form, the elements of dot, line, shape, light and value, color, texture, mass, space, and volume were mentioned. Again, this is an academic list, useful in teaching and in learning to notice and describe details in a work of art. However, in professional critical description, color is not merely the name of a hue, but rather it becomes "a high-tech spectral blue" or a "perversely sweet palette." A good critic does not simply describe one of Golub's canvases as dark; rather, she writes: "One searches these dark yet luminous surfaces for clues with the alert vigilance with which one concentrates on discerning the outlines of figures in the street to distinguish a mugger from a passerby." In lively critical language, texture becomes "laying on the paint thickly, then dissolving it and scraping it down with a meat cleaver. The eroded colors and surfaces of Golub's paintings are raw, dry, and

irritated, setting us on edge, increasing our discomfort." And paint is not simply acrylic; it is "splattered, splotched, and squiggled acrylic."

Internal and External Sources of Information

Critics describe what they see in a work of art and also what they know about the artist or the times in which the art was made. The critics describing Chihuly's work felt a need to provide a history of the glass art movement. Critics usually know a lot about the artists whose work they are writing about and they offer it to their readers. Sometimes critics need to do research in libraries to find external information that will enable them to better write about an artist or exhibition. To prepare for an interview with Anselm Kiefer, because of the many literary references in his paintings, Waldemar Januszczak tells of "scampering from the librettos of Wagner to the musings of Heidegger, from Nietzsche to Jung, from the short stories of Balzac to the epistles of Eusebius of Caesarea, from Goethe to William L. Shirer, from image to image, from quote to quote, in a kind of marvelously addictive game of Nontrivial Pursuit."[42] Information about art and artists is endless, however, and the ultimate test for the critic whether to include or exclude such descriptive information is relevancy: Will this information help or hinder an understanding of the art, the flow of the article?

Truthful Descriptions

In theory, descriptions are said to be true or false, accurate or inaccurate. That is, when a critic makes a descriptive claim about a painting—points to something in it and names it—we should be able to see it and agree (or disagree) with the critic's observation. Description is said to deal with facts, and it does. However, all facts are dependent on theory, and all descriptions are interwoven with interpretation and evaluation. As we have seen, the descriptions quoted in this chapter are not independent of how the critic understands the piece of art. Critics could write descriptions in a painstaking way so as not to reveal their preferences and biases; and such an exercise in critical writing might be valuable in learning to write descriptively and in learning to identify value-laden descriptions. Critics' descriptions, however, are rarely value-neutral because critics are writing persuasively. When a critic approves or disapproves of a work of art, this approval or disapproval comes through in the critic's descriptions of the work. Interpretations are more speculative than descriptions, and judgments are more argumentative than descriptions. Interpreting and judging art are the topics of the next two chapters.

CHAPTER 4

Interpreting Art

INTERPRETATION IS THE MOST IMPORTANT activity of criticism and probably the most complex. This chapter is built around critics' interpretations of the work of three contemporary artists: William Wegman, an artist who makes photographs, videotapes, and paintings; Jenny Holzer, who works with language; and Elizabeth Murray, a painter. The purpose of the chapter is to help readers understand what interpreting an artwork entails, to explore different strategies of interpretation used by critics, to examine the similarities and differences of a variety of interpretations of the same work, and, ultimately and most importantly, to derive principles of interpretation that will enable readers to read interpretations more intelligently and help them formulate their own interpretations of works of art. A number of such principles are derived from the criticism samples that follow, and then they are listed and defined in the final section.

PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

Artworks have "aboutness" and demand interpretation. This is the fundamental principle on which this chapter depends. It is very basic and readily accepted by critics and aestheticians, but it is sometimes disputed by artists, an occasional art professor, and, more frequently, art students who hold that "art speaks for itself" or "you can't talk about art." All the examples of interpretations in this chapter disprove the latter position. Even art that seems readily understandable, such as Wegman's, can and does sustain interesting interpretations that would not readily

emerge from merely viewing the work. That art is always *about* something is also a principle around which whole books have been written—Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art* and Arthur Danto's *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*,[43] for example. Very briefly, this principle holds that a work of art is an expressive object made by a person and that, unlike a tree or a rock, for example, it is always about something. Thus, unlike trees or rocks, artworks call for interpretations.

Interpretations are persuasive arguments. This principle might better be written as two separate ones: Interpretations are arguments, and critics attempt to be persuasive. Because critics attempt to be persuasive, their interpretations rarely jump out as logical arguments with premises leading to a conclusion. One clear example of an interpretive argument is Ken Johnson's argument concerning what he sees as the sexual content of Murray's paintings. He argues that *My Manhattan* is a painting full of symbols referring to sexual intercourse. His evidence is a list of persuasive descriptions of aspects of the painting. He notes a cup and a hugely swollen, weirdly flexible spoon. He writes that the spoon is turgid and unnaturally fluid. The spoon's handle is serpentine and winds around the canvas's edge and enters the cup from below. The spoon's handle does not end as on a normal spoon with a broad end, but rather it turns into a knob with a hole in it. The knob penetrates an actual hole in the shaped canvas. At the point where the spoon splashes the liquid in the cup, giant droplets shoot out from the cup.

If Johnson's interpretation were put into a logical argument, his descriptions of the painting would be his premises leading to his conclusion that the painting is about sexual intercourse. Criticism, however, is persuasive rhetoric. That is, the critic would like the readers to see a work of art the way the critic sees it. And there is more than one way to be persuasive about an interpretation. One could put forth a formally logical argument, with premises and a conclusion—a syllogism, for instance. Critics, however, are much more likely to be persuasive by putting their evidence in the form of lively writing, using colorful terms in carefully wrought phrases, to engage the reader with the critic's perception and understanding so that eventually the reader will be likely to think, "Yes, I see what you mean. Yes, I agree with the way you see it." The well-written summary paragraphs in the discussion of Murray's paintings are good examples of such persuasive critical writing. Critics do rely on evidence in their interpretations, evidence from observations made about the artwork or from information about the world and the artist. But they present their interpretations not as logical arguments, but as persuasive literary essays. Interpretations can and should, then, be analyzed as arguments to see if they are persuasive because of both the evidence they present and the language in which they are written.

Some interpretations are better than others. This principle defends against the often heard objection "That's just your interpretation," by which is usually meant that no one interpretation is better than any other, and further, that no interpretation is more certain than any other. On the contrary, all interpretations are not equal.

Some interpretations are better argued, better grounded with evidence, and therefore more reasonable, more certain, and more acceptable than others. Some interpretations are not very good at all because they are too subjective, are too narrow, don't account sufficiently for what is in the artwork, are irrelevant to the artwork, don't account for the context in which the artwork was made, or simply don't make sense.

Good interpretations of art tell more about the artwork than they tell about the critic. Good interpretations clearly pertain to the work of art. Critics come to a work of art with a history, knowledge, beliefs, and biases that do, should, and must affect how they see a work of art. All interpretations reveal something about the critic. But critics should show the reader that her or his interpretation applies to what we all can perceive in and about the art object. This principle guards against interpretations that are too subjective—that is, that tell us more about the critic than about the art.

None of the interpretations quoted in this chapter are too subjective. However, it is easy to imagine an interpretation that tells us more about the interpreter than the artwork. Naive viewers of art sometimes offer subjective information about artworks. For example, if shown Wegman's photographs of dogs, young children might tell about their pets at home and how they once dressed up their pets. These remarks would inform us about the children and their pets and not about Wegman's photographs of Man Ray and Fay Ray. Their remarks would be true, might be insightful, and probably would be amusing, but they would not be directly informative about Wegman's work.

If we cannot relate the critic's interpretation to the work of art, the interpretation may be too subjective. If it is, it will not be enlightening about the object, will not be valuable as an interpretation of the artwork, and hence should not be considered a good interpretation.

Feelings are guides to interpretations. Amid this discussion about reasons and evidence and convincing, persuasive arguments and the desirability of objectivity over subjectivity in interpreting art, we may lose sight of the fact that feelings are important to understanding art. A person's ability to respond to a work of art is emotional as well as intellectual, from the gut and heart as well as from the head. The dichotomous distinction between thought and feeling is false; on the contrary, thought and feeling are irrevocably intertwined.

If a critic has a gut feeling or strong emotional response, it is important that he or she articulate this in language so the readers can share the critic's feelings. It is also important that the critic relate the feeling to what is in the artwork. A feeling that is not referred back to the artwork may be or may be seen to be irrelevant. The connection between the gut feeling and what in the artwork evoked it is crucial. Without an expressed correspondence between feelings and the artwork, the critic is in danger of being irrelevantly subjective.

There can be different, competing, and contradictory interpretations of the same artwork. This principle acknowledges that an artwork may generate very

many good and different interpretations. Interpretations may also compete with each other, encouraging the reader to choose between them, especially if they are contradictory.

This principle also encourages a diversity of interpretations from a number of viewers and from a number of points of view. It values an artwork as a rich repository of expression that allows for a rich variety of response. Amid the many interpretations of the art of Wegman, Holzer, and Murray, one critic has noted something that another has overlooked or has not mentioned. One critic has presented an interpretation that contributes to another critic's previous interpretation. These enrich our understanding of a work of art. They also enrich our appreciation of the responding human mind.

Despite this appreciation of diversity, it may not be logically possible for one to hold all interpretations about the artwork if those interpretations are mutually exclusive or contradictory. We ran into such a situation with interpretations of Holzer's work. Some critics said there was nothing to interpret; others found much to interpret. We could not logically hold both positions simultaneously. We could, however, sympathetically understand contradictory interpretations if we understood the beliefs of the critic, or in ordinary language, understood where the critic was coming from.

Interpretations are often based on a worldview and a theory of art. We all move through the world with a more or less articulated set of assumptions about existence and art, and it is through these that we interpret everything. Some critics have a more finely articulated and consistent worldview and aesthetic theory, based on a study of philosophy or psychology, for example, than others. They may operate on the basis of psychoanalytic theory or offer neo-Marxian critiques of all works of art they encounter. This chapter includes a psychoanalytic interpretation of Wegman's work, a semiotic interpretation of Holzer's work, and a sexual interpretation of Murray's paintings. Sometimes critics make their basic assumptions explicit; more often, however, they leave them implicit. Once the critic's worldview is identified, by either the critic or the reader, we need to make a choice. We can accept the worldview and the interpretation that it influences or reject both the worldview and the interpretation; we can accept the worldview but disagree with how it is applied to the artwork or reject the general worldview but accept the specific interpretation it yields.

Interpretations are not so much absolutely right, but more or less reasonable, convincing, enlightening, and informative. This principle holds that there is no one true interpretation of an artwork and that good interpretations are not so much "right" as they are compelling, original, insightful, and so forth.

Interpretations can be judged by coherence, correspondence, and inclusiveness. A good interpretation should be a coherent statement in itself and should correspond to the artwork. Coherence is an autonomous and internal criterion. We can judge whether an interpretation is coherent without seeing the artwork. Either the argument makes sense or it doesn't. Correspondence is an external criterion that

asks whether the interpretation fits the artwork. A coherent interpretation may not sufficiently correspond to the work being interpreted. For instance, regarding Wegman's humorous videotapes and Polaroids of dogs, Robbins interprets them as angry and argues that Wegman employs humor that masks the artist's genuinely subversive aims. This interpretation is coherent, but does it correspond to the pictures? Are you, the reader, convinced that Wegman is a very angry radical who wants to subvert society? This principle also protects against interpretations that tend toward unleashed speculation by asking them to adhere to what is actually in the artwork.

The demand for inclusiveness ensures that everything in a specific work is attended to, or that everything in a body of work is accounted for. If an interpretation omits mention of an aspect of an artwork, that interpretation is suspect. If an interpretation *could* have accounted for that aspect, it is not as flawed as if the interpretation *could not* have done so. The critics in this chapter and throughout the book usually discuss several of an artist's works, not just one. When interpreting Wegman's work, for example, they deal with his early videotapes as well as his later Polaroid photographs; they try to account for both and for the changes that have taken place in his art making. It is risky to arrive at a confident interpretation of one piece of art without knowing something of an artist's other works.

An artwork is not necessarily about what the artist wanted it to be about. Minor White, the photographer and photography teacher, once commented that photographers frequently photograph better than they know. He was cautioning about paying too much attention to what photographers said about their own work. Because of his experience in leading many photography workshops, he felt that photographers' works were often much different from what the photographers thought them to be—and better than they knew them to be. Thus, he minimized the importance of the artists' interpretations of their own work.

We can probably all agree that the meaning of an artwork should not be limited to the artist's intent. Its meaning might be much broader than even the artist knows. The critics of some of Murray's paintings were quite able to derive relevant meaning from the paintings even though they were unaware she was referring to her dying mother. They correctly saw the paintings as more generally about dying and loss. It is reasonable that these paintings not be limited to the artist's specific reference.

Some artists do not work with specific, conscious intentions to express particular and definite ideas. Some are quite comfortable having no specific intent while they are working. About making her paintings, Susan Rothenberg, for example, says: "The results are a way of discovering what I know and what I don't, what I didn't know I knew, and what I want to learn—which are things that seem close to unpaintable, which is why I love painting, which is not quite like the donkey and the carrot, but close."[44]

An artist's interpretation of his or her own work of art (if the artist has one and expresses it) is only one interpretation among many, and it is not necessarily more accurate or more acceptable just because it is the artist's. Some artists are quite articulate and speak and write insightfully about their work; others do not. Still others

choose not to discuss the meaning of their work, not wanting their art to be limited by their own views of it.

This important principle actively places the responsibility of interpretation squarely on the shoulders of the viewer, not on the artist.

A critic ought not be the spokesperson for the artist. This is to say that the critic should do much more than transcribe what artists say about their work. It demands that critics criticize.

Interpretations ought to present the work in its best rather than its weakest light. This principle is in the spirit of fair play, generosity of spirit, and respect for intellectual rigor. A critic's dismissal of an artist's work is a contrary example of this principle.

The objects of interpretations are artworks, not artists. In casual conversation about art, it is artists who are often interpreted and judged rather than the work they make. In criticism, however, it should be the objects that are interpreted (and judged), not the persons who made the objects. This principle does not exclude biographical information. Over and over again, the critics quoted here have mentioned the lives of the artists. This biographical information, however, is ultimately meant to provide insight into the work. That Elizabeth Murray wears no makeup and has graying hair may be interesting to the reader wanting to know about her, but facts about her training, for example, are more relevant to understanding her work.

Biographical information reminds us that art does not emerge apart from a social environment. The critics of Holzer's work, for example, discussed her midwestern upbringing and how it is reflected in her artwork. In a few sentences in *Artnews*, critic Curtia James provides a good example of how biographical information can be interpretively informative. Regarding a sculptural installation by Beverly Buchanan: "Buchanan's *Shack South: Inside and Out* was a full-size shack patched together out of cedar, pine, tine, and cardboard. Buchanan is from Athens, Georgia. As a child she traveled with her father, a professor of agriculture who documented the lives of black farmers. She saw many shacks like this and perceived how each inhabitant put his or her own stamp, or imprint, on the dwelling, an imprint that identified the individual in the community. Buchanan's loving ability to capture that individual imprint made *Shack South* an image of humble nobility."[45]

There is a caution, however, concerning what might be called biographical determinism. Artists should not be limited to their pasts, nor should one argue that if someone is of this race or that gender or this historical background, then their art must be about such and such.

All art is in part about the world in which it emerged. Donald Kuspit reinforced this principle when he discussed his study of psychoanalysis and its effect on his criticism: "I began to feel that the artist is not exempt from life. There is no way out from seeing art as a reflection or meditation or a comment on life. I became interested in the process, including the artist's life. I became interested in how art reflected the artist's life as well as how it reflected life issues, or existential issues with which we are all involved."[46] Another critic, Pamela Hammond, reminds crit-

ics of the importance of this principle, especially when interpreting the art of artists from a different culture. When she writes about the sculpture of ten Japanese artists showing in America, she informs us that traditional Japanese art does not recognize "sculpture" in and of itself. When interpreting the massive, shaped timbers of Chuichi Fujii, she informs us that Japanese tradition teaches that material possesses a life force equivalent to that of a human and that "the dualistic Judeo-Christian view that nature defers to man opposes the belief of Eastern cultures rooted in the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, life and death, good and evil."[47] The critic's knowledge of traditional Japanese aesthetics informs her interpretation and our understanding of the work.

All art is in part about other art. The critics quoted in this chapter noted over and over again the artists who influenced Wegman, Holzer, and Murray; they also discussed whose art the works of these artists could be commenting on. Art does not emerge within a vacuum. Artists generally are aware of the work of other artists, and often they are especially aware of the work of certain artists. Even naive artists, or artists who have not been trained in university art departments or academies of art, are aware of and influenced by the visual representations in their societies. This principle asserts that all art can be interpreted, at least in part, by how it is influenced by other art and, further, that in many cases, some art is specifically about other art.

Wegman's art, for example, has been interpreted by several critics as being funny in response to other art being serious. Holzer's art has been characterized as being different from much other art because it is much more concerned with the political world than the art world. Murray's work has been interpreted as being about both the history of art and the trials of daily living. Art can be about life, about art, and about both. An important guide to interpreting any artwork is to see how it relates to and directly or indirectly comments on other art.

No single interpretation is exhaustive of the meaning of an artwork. This chapter has provided numerous examples of this principle: the many interpretations of the same works of art. Each interpretation provides subtle nuances or bold alternatives for understanding. According to this principle, one comprehensive but exhaustive interpretation is not a goal of interpretation.

The meanings of an artwork may be different from its significance to the viewer. Any artwork may be more personally significant to one viewer than to another because of connections that viewer makes with the work. Finding personal significance or meaning for one's life in a work of art is one of the many benefits of contemplating art. This principle cautions, however, against assuming that personal interpretations are, in fact, communal.

Interpretation is ultimately a communal endeavor, and the community is ultimately self-corrective. This is an optimistic view of the art world and scholarship that holds that critics and historians and other serious interpreters will eventually correct less-than-adequate interpretations and eventually come up with better interpretations. This happens in the short run and the long run. Essays in exhibition

catalogs of contemporary art can be seen as compilations by scholarly critics of the best thinking about an artist's work to that point. An exhibition catalog of an historical retrospective of a deceased artist is a compilation of the best thinking about that artist's work to that point. Such an historical interpretation would give more plausible interpretations and reject less informative ones.

In the short run, interpretations might be very nearsighted. This principle asserts that eventually, however, these narrow interpretations will be broadened. Feminist revisionist accounts of historical art made by women are a case in point. Scholars for years and for centuries have ignored the art of many women, and it is only now, through work begun by feminist historians, that the historical record is being repaired. This is a good example of the scholarly community correcting its own mistakes, however belatedly. Chapter 5 expands on this notion with the example of Frida Kahlo, whose work is now being given more serious consideration than when she was living and making the work.

Good interpretations invite us to see for ourselves and to continue on our own.[48] This principle follows the previous one as psychological motivation for getting involved with meaning in art. It might also serve as a goal for interpreters: Be friendly to readers by drawing them in and engaging them in conversation, rather than halting discussion with dogmatic pronouncements.

CHAPTER 5

Judging Art

THIS CHAPTER EXAMINES the critical activities involved in judging works of art. It proceeds similarly to Chapter 4, on interpreting art, because the two sets of activities are very much alike although their results are different. Making interpretations and judgments are both acts of making decisions, providing reasons and evidence for those decisions, and formulating arguments for one's conclusions. When critics interpret works of art, they seek to determine what the works are about. When critics judge works of art, they seek to determine how good the work is or isn't and why and by what criteria. Judgments of art, like interpretations, are not so much right or wrong as they are convincing or unconvincing.

In this chapter, the art of Frida Kahlo, Martin Puryear, and Romare Bearden is examined in light of how critics have judged it. Any number of artists and their critics could have been chosen, and the selection of these three artists is somewhat arbitrary. They were chosen because they make interesting art and because they represent a diversity of ages, races, ethnicities, and genders. They are three artists of color, two African American men and a Mexican woman. Puryear is professionally young; Kahlo has been long deceased but her work is enjoying renewed interest; Bearden recently passed away, and his work is in retrospective exhibition. Two of the artists work in two dimensions, and the third in three dimensions. Consistent with previous chapters, this one examines judgments from many critics, not all of whom agree with one another. The chapter then discusses criteria for judging art and related concerns.

TRADITIONAL CRITERIA

Art is judged by many different criteria, and, although it is an oversimplification, these criteria can be separated into four categories, or theories of art: realism, expressionism, formalism, and instrumentalism. These theories predate postmodernism. Realism, expressionism, and instrumentalism can be thought of as premodern, and formalism is synonymous with modernism. Although we inherit these theories from the past, they can still be useful in thinking about contemporary art. Contemporary artists continue to make art within these traditions, and critics continue to be informed by traditional theories of art, even as both critics and artists update them with postmodernist influences.

Realism

A critic advocating realism as the major criterion of art would hold that the world, or nature, is the standard of truth and beauty and that the artist can do no better than try to accurately portray the universe in its infinite variety. Realism is as old as the ancient Greeks, backed by the authority and knowledge of Aristotle, rejuvenated during the Renaissance, and embraced at various times and places throughout the history of art.

John Szarkowski, a former and influential curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, wrote that the basic premise of realism is that "the world exists independent of human attention, that it contains discoverable patterns of intrinsic meaning and that by discerning these patterns, and forming models or symbols of them with the materials of his art, the realist is joined to a larger intelligence."[34]

Linda Nochlin, perhaps best known as a feminist art historian, identifies and specifies realist criteria when she contemplates Chuck Close's painted portrait of Nancy Graves, *Nancy*.

> This is a realist image in that it testifies at once to the existence of the subject in the "real" world beyond the painting and, at the same time, to the concrete, material

Chuck Close, *Nancy,* acrylic on canvas, 108 1/2" × 82 1/4", 1968.
Milwaukee Art Museum,

> presence of the acrylic on canvas: a testament to the labor that created this nonvirtuoso display of the artist's patient handwork. The austerity of the production—its lack of color, its stark presentation of image, its refusal of painterly self-indulgence or "personal sensibility"—is also part of the realist ethic. And its exactitude, the unflinching depiction of hairs, wrinkles, askew glance, the gleam on a random tooth, reminds us of the origin of portraiture in magic and memorial.[35]

Nochlin's understanding of realist criteria is consistent with Szarkowski's. According to Nochlin, realist work has these characteristics: It acknowledges something outside itself in the world (its concerns are not limited to self-awareness, and it is not overly self-referential, as are many formalist works); the handling of materials is not overly self-indulgent (as can be the case with expressionist work); the artist's technique is subservient to the subject of the work; and the work is exact in depicting the subject (not a criterion for instrumentalist work).

Janet Fish is a contemporary painter working within the realist tradition, and Vincent Katz, a critic reviewing one of her shows, places her work within the realist tradition, seeing its affinities with Dutch seventeenth-century painting. According to the critic, the artist seems to feel comfort in "working in an established format, reflecting an accustomed way of thinking about the world." In *Up in Smoke* (see Color Plate 14) Fish depicts a Fourth of July picnic. "Everything is rendered in detail"—salad, potato chips, cupcakes, and strawberries in plastic wrap. Katz also sees affinities with art of the baroque and brings expressionist criteria to her work, admiring Fish's bravura handling of paint and her lushly painted tableaux and how "she infuses Baroque energy into every surface by a barrage of active strokes."[36]

Nancy and *Up in Smoke* both honor the real by attention to detail—hairs and wrinkles and cupcakes and plastic wrap. *Nancy*, however, is restrained in drawing attention to its use of and the artist's ability with paint, whereas *Up in Smoke* celebrates its vivid painterly expression, inviting us to feel the drama the artist has felt, as expressionists do.

Expressionism

Szarkowski contrasts realism and expressionism and writes this about expressionism (although he uses the term *romantic*): "The romantic view is that the meanings of the world are dependent on our own understandings. The field mouse, the skylark, the sky itself do not earn their meanings out of their own evolutionary history, but are meaningful in terms of the anthropocentric metaphors we assign to them." Expressionism favors artists and their sensibilities rather than nature. Artists' inner lives are potent and their feelings about experiences are the source of their art. They use medium and form and subject matter to express their inner lives. It is their business to express themselves vividly so the viewer may experience similar feelings. Intensity of expression is much more crucial than accuracy of representation (see Color Plate 15). Certainly expressionists are sensitive to form, but whereas the

formalist sees art as being primarily about itself and other art, expressionists embrace art about life.

Art critic Barbara Rose praises Anselm Kiefer's paintings (see Color Plate 16) for being "conceptually and technically brilliant," and her criteria are expressionist. She refers to Kiefer's concentration on Nazi Germany: "This is history painting that equates man the builder with man the destroyer; its epic sweep and cosmic energy deny the importance of the individual and negate the concept of the hero." She tells her readers about Kiefer's process of using sand and clay mixed with acrylic and shellac, and she draws interpretive inferences from his vivid use of media: "The grains of sand are numberless. Millions? How many millions? This century's tragic death toll eludes statistics."[37] In his comments about a different exhibition of Kiefer paintings, critic Ken Johnson emphasizes the experience of viewing the work, an essential measure for expressionists: "Kiefer is indisputably a master of the awesome effect. The enormous bulk of his works, the vast scale of their imagery, the elephant-skin surfaces, the grand allusions to history and mythology, the profound brooding on death—all this can combine to produce a thrilling experience."[38]

Robert Berlind, a critic reviewing a 1999 exhibition of Leon Golub's paintings, also uses expressionist criteria. He interprets the subject of the paintings to be "Golub's massive complaints about the inevitability of pain, aging, indignity and death." In the critic's treatment of *Infuitabile Fatum* (see Color Plate 1) he identifies the subject matter and the form of the painting, but more significantly for an expressionist, he tells of their emotional effects, approximating the painting with his emotional use of language: "The dog and skull on the right side, under FATVM, were drawn with white lines on roughly scumbled blacks, then subjected to an intense, tattered layer of red that feels like the sharp flicker of irritating neon light and declares: blood! mayhem! Before we detect the particulars—man, dog, skull—we know this to be an image of some sort of hell. Even those distressed Roman letters with the V for the U, count as much for their style as for their translated meaning: they are *late* Roman, the complete devolution of all classical order. The whites are not neutral here, given the linen ground's warm tan, but deadly cold."[39]

Formalism

Formalism is a theory of "art for art's sake," and the term *formalism* should not be confused with *form*. All art has form. The theory of formalism, however, asserts that form is the only criterion by which art should be judged. Formalists hold that aesthetic value is autonomous and independent of other values: According to them, art has nothing to do with morality, religions, politics, or any other area of human activity. In this view, the realms of art and social concerns are by their natures distinct, and the artist is alienated or separated from society.

The theory is new to art, introduced in this century, primarily through the writings of Clive Bell in the 1930s. To Bell it would not matter a hoot whether a cruci-

fixion painting is of Jesus Christ or John Smith: It is not subject that counts, but form. For formalists, narrative content in art is a distraction from the aesthetic and should be ignored, and politics as the content of art is anathema. Formalism was given new impetus in the 1950s and 1960s by the influential criticism of Clement Greenberg, who championed abstraction of certain sorts, particularly minimalism. Formalist criticism grew up alongside New Criticism in literature and as a reaction against the excesses of biographical criticism, psychological criticism, and any other type of criticism that was thought to take primary attention away from the artwork or piece of literature itself. Formalism may well be viewed by future historians and critics as *the* contribution of the twentieth century. For example, in a tribute to Ad Reinhardt, a contemporary of Jackson Pollock and a preeminent formalist, *Interview* magazine praised his minimalist and austere monochromatic geometric abstractions and wrote: "Looking over his career, you realize that it's not simply as an influential abstract artist that Reinhardt will be remembered. He is something of a myth—his work is a vital sign of this century's art."[40]

Jackson Pollock is the preeminent formalist. After fifty years of familiarity with the work, Michael Fried was still stunned and awed while walking through the Museum of Modern Art's retrospective showing of Jackson Pollock's paintings. *Enchanted Forest,* one of the first drip paintings, is Fried's favorite, and his reasons are based in formalist criteria: "There is something inexpressibly lyrical, even uncharacteristically happy, in the boldness with which the dripped black paint arcs, loops, pounces, and dribbles across the picture surface, to be thereafter punctuated, and in places effaced, by bursts and smudges of white and drips and splatters of red." What Fried most admires about Pollock is the artist's desire for pictorial intensity, which, in the drip paintings, resulted in every square millimeter being filled with energy, paintings in which every bit of surface "competes for presentness" with every other, giving viewers no choice but to accept or reject the whole. For Fried the paintings Pollock made between 1947 and 1950 are not only the high point of Pollock's art but "one of the unexceedable summits of twentieth-century painting."[41]

Agnes Martin is a contemporary painter working within the strictures of formalism (see Color Plates 17 and 18). She articulates her criteria for her work with these thoughts: "My paintings have neither object nor space nor line nor anything—no forms. They are light, lightness, about merging, about formlessness, breaking down form. You wouldn't think of form by the ocean. You can go in if you don't encounter anything. A world without objects, without interruption, making a work without interruption or obstacle. It is to accept the necessity of the simple direct going into a field of vision as you would cross an empty beach to look at the ocean."[42]

Gerrit Henry discusses Agnes Martin's paintings with formalism in mind; the critic faults her work for being too concerned with form and leaving out feeling: "Martin's work was, as always, lovely to look at, and even delicious to contemplate, but its overbearing neatness . . . made it, on reflection, seem unsatisfying, even contrived. As with so much Minimal art, the search for perfection of an almost saintly

sort excludes feeling and enshrines form. Where, as a popular song once put it, is the love?"[43] Perhaps Henry strictly adheres to expressionist criteria and would say this about most formalist work, or perhaps he accepts formalism but is dissatisfied with this specific body of work.

Formalism should not be confused with form: Formalism is a theory of art, whereas form is a property of all works of art. All artists, realists, expressionists, and instrumentalists as well as formalists, are concerned with the form of their artworks, but formalists are exclusively interested in form. All art critics, whatever their theoretical assumptions, discuss the form of works of art, but formalist critics are concerned primarily with form, whereas an instrumentalist critic, for example, might look at the form of a work and judge its form by its effectiveness in moving one to political awareness and action. Critics who hold formalist views might opt to write mainly or exclusively about formalist work, or they might write about many kinds of work but apply formalist criteria to all of them, regardless of the intent of the work. As we have seen in Chapter 2, Hilton Kramer, for example, adheres to formalist criteria; he does not wish to write about art that is political, and when he does write about political art, he faults it because it is political. Michael Fried is a formalist critic, and when he writes about art that has not been made within the formalist aesthetic, premodern art, for example, he nevertheless is most interested in its formal aspects.

Instrumentalism

For instrumentalists, art serves values larger than the aesthetic and issues bigger than art. Instrumentalism rivals realism in longevity. Plato argued that it is necessary to restrict the artist in the ideal state on the grounds that art affects human behavior. Art that produces undesirable behavioral consequences must be excluded, and art that yields good behavioral consequences should be produced for the benefit of the populace. Leo Tolstoy, the Russian novelist and theorist, upheld this view. For him, art was a force that should elicit the loftiest ethical behavior. For both Tolstoy and Plato, ethical and religious ideals determined aesthetic value. Marxist critics are instrumentalist. Lenin argued that any art that does not serve the common cause should be condemned. For him, art was a tool, a shaper of political attitudes, and its function was social. An artwork's real value, Marxists insist, depends on its function in its social setting. Feminist criticism is largely instrumentalist.

Instrumentalism plays prominently in much of today's art, particularly politically activist art. Douglas Crimp writes about the importance of considering audience when making art that is to influence change within society: "Success within the art world is not the primary goal of artists working within the context of AIDS activism, and communicating only to an art audience is a limited accomplishment. Thus, cultural activism involves rethinking the identity of the artist as well as the role of production, distribution, and audience in determining a work's signifi-

cance."[44] Ann Cvetcovich, also writing about AIDS activism, stresses the need for persuasive art, arguing that if an artwork is only true and not persuasive, it will not be effective. AIDS activist artists must "not only provide information about safer sex, but eroticize it, acknowledging that telling people to use condoms may be useless if the presentation doesn't address the fear that safer sex interferes with sexual pleasure. AIDS activism thus questions not only whether the truth is represented but how truth is represented, and suggests that to be effective information must be both true and persuasive to its audience."[45]

Sue Coe is an artist who is clearly instrumentalist (see Color Plate 19). Her work emerged in the East Village of New York City in the 1980s, concerned with such issues as apartheid in South Africa, racism in America, poverty, police brutality, rape, and abuse of animals. *The Pit,* completed in 1999 consists of thirty-three mixed-media drawings, including three mural-size allegories. It follows her *Porkopolis* series, published in 1996 under the title *Dead Meat,* a thorough critique of the meat industry "to expose the corruption of an entire system, its exploitation of workers, its destruction of the environment and its contamination of the food chain. The message was simply that a system which chews up living beings will finally not draw a line between the human and nonhuman." According to her sponsoring gallery, "*The Pit* is essentially a study in the nature of human collusion. Why, Coe wants to know, do people ignore their better natures to abet evil? In *The Pit,* she offers a number of possible answers: because church and state have for millennia conspired to enforce a hierarchy of being in which men have dominion over all weaker creatures; because the institutionalization of cruelty progressively inures people to pain; because those who go along with the system are rewarded and those who refuse are punished or simply passed over."[46]

Critics often bring instrumentalist criteria into play when they are writing about the work of underrepresented artists, such as that by African American and women artists. Writing about the exhibition "Contemporary African Artists," Frances DeVuono argues, "This was a long-overdue show. It was big enough and good enough to disabuse any remaining art chauvinists of the idea that contemporary art is the sole preserve of the developed nations of the West."[47] Similarly, Curtia James writes in *Artnews* that "in a show of three installations, Maren Hassinger, Beverly Buchanan, and Mel Edwards did a remarkable job of demonstrating the vitality of African-American artists to a society that is vastly ignorant of their achievements."[48]

Curators conceive and mount some exhibitions for instrumentalist ends, such as "Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710–1940," curated by Guy McElroy for the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C.: "How did portrayals of blacks reflect the prejudices of the society at large? Were better artists able to transcend stereotypes, or, like their lesser-known peers, did they only propagate them further?"[49] In the exhibition catalog McElroy argues that "it's important for everyone—but especially for blacks and women—to become more sensitized to the insidious ways that images can work. That's the big point."

Other Criteria

These four major categories do not exhaust the range of criteria available to critics. Originality, for instance, is an honored criterion of recent art. A critic compliments the paintings of Susan Rothenberg, for example, because the artist has managed to do something new and different with a very used subject: "Until Rothenberg revived it in the mid-70's, the horse had fallen out of favor as proper subject matter for painting. Its connotations were classical, monumental and entirely too mythic for the late 20th century. Its ability to symbolize martial values and nobility of spirit had been rendered obsolete; as an esthetic device it seemed, at best, corny. But Rothenberg's horse paintings worked—in fact, they worked remarkably well."[50]

Craftsmanship is another criterion that is frequently used. For example, Michael Kimmelman, writing about the work of Bruce Nauman, says: "You see in Nauman's art the value he places on the inventively made object. This is clear in the odd and unhidden carpentry of some of his installations and in his waxworks, whose cast lines he leaves to show the process of their making. There is a sense in his work of labor as art, an oddly American notion of do-it-yourselfism that is clearly not about esthetic bliss but about the beauties of science and craft."[51] How Nauman makes the work is an essential part of the work and its meaning. We have also seen in writings about the work of Puryear that his craftsmanship is praised because it is not excessive and fussy. Craftsmanship is not an absolute quality for many critics, but a relative one; they look for objects that are appropriately crafted, and the appropriateness is contingent upon the expressive purposes of the objects.

CHOOSING AMONG CRITERIA

The critics quoted in this book are not of a single mindset about criteria for judging art. Peter Plagens, for instance, has written that "political art ends up *preaching* to the converted—and preaching is the key word here."[52] Certainly, he is not an instrumentalist. Eleanor Heartney seems more tolerant of instrumentalist art, but she too has difficulty with it. In a review of an installation about the homeless by Martha Rosler, Heartney asks: "How, for instance, does the socially concerned artist avoid merely estheticising the victims of homelessness?"[53] Heartney ends up supporting Rosler's noble intent and attempt but concludes: "As it was, the gallery setting, with its preselected audience and social isolation, provided a constant reminder of the continuing gap between art and life. The real problems and the real solutions remained, and remain, out there—geographically only a few steps beyond the gallery door, but in practical terms, on another planet."

Donald Kuspit has also struggled with criteria for socially concerned art. In a review of Sue Coe's paintings, he writes: "Granted, the world is a rotten, inhumane place. Blacks are oppressed and brutalized, the meat industry manipulates us almost as much as the military-industrial complex, and the United States is a neofascist aggressor; yet it is not the message in Sue Coe's art that interests me. All of her char-

acteristic complaints would be propagandistic dross if it wasn't for her visionary esthetic, which eloquently conveys the suffering she is at bottom obsessed with."[54] Thus, Kuspit accepts Coe's value positions and accepts her expressionism but praises her for her use of form. Her intellectual insights are not enough, nor is her passion; but when her insights, passion, and aesthetic vision combine, Kuspit admires her work. "Coe, I think, is torn between a wish to communicate instantaneously to as large an audience as possible, and thus to use a public and invariably clichéd language, and a desire to make 'high' art, that is, art so dense with visual substance and subtle meaning that it cannot be exhausted at first sight. When she manages to balance these impulses, she takes her place among Expressionist masters, but when she makes images for 'the cause,' her works dwindle to militant cartoons, lacking even the saving grace of Daumier's wit."

Jan Zita Grover writes of a conflict over criteria with other critics on a state arts council while they were awarding grants to artists.[55] Grover was defending what she calls the "subcultural work"—the photographic work of Lynette Molnar entitled *Familiar Names and Not So Familiar Faces*. It is a series of photomontages of the photographer and her female lover stripped into existing reproductions, such as a Marlboro cigarette ad, and the Ward and June Cleaver family of *Leave It to Beaver*. Grover writes that Molnar's "montage is deliberately not very convincing: it is quite obvious that the two figures have been imported from some other world and pastiched into these mainstream settings. The scale and repetitiveness of the same figures embracing in a variety of commercial settings enforce the artificiality of the insertion, producing a sense that this is an act of defiance, a clumsy and not altogether successful fusion of two different universes. Anyone living the life of an informed outsider will recognize that this is precisely the position we occupy—culturally and politically, if not economically. Molnar's work struck me as a clever objectification of both the aspiration and reality of the uncloseted lesbian." The other two jurors objected in terms of what lay within the frame—namely what they considered technical flaws, formal deficiencies. Grover defended the montages because "these seeming limitations became challenges and virtues, given the paucity and distortions of most images depicting lesbians." Another juror responded that "we're judging photographs, not social revolutions." Grover was working from within an instrumentalist frame of reference while the others were appealing to formal criteria such as craft.

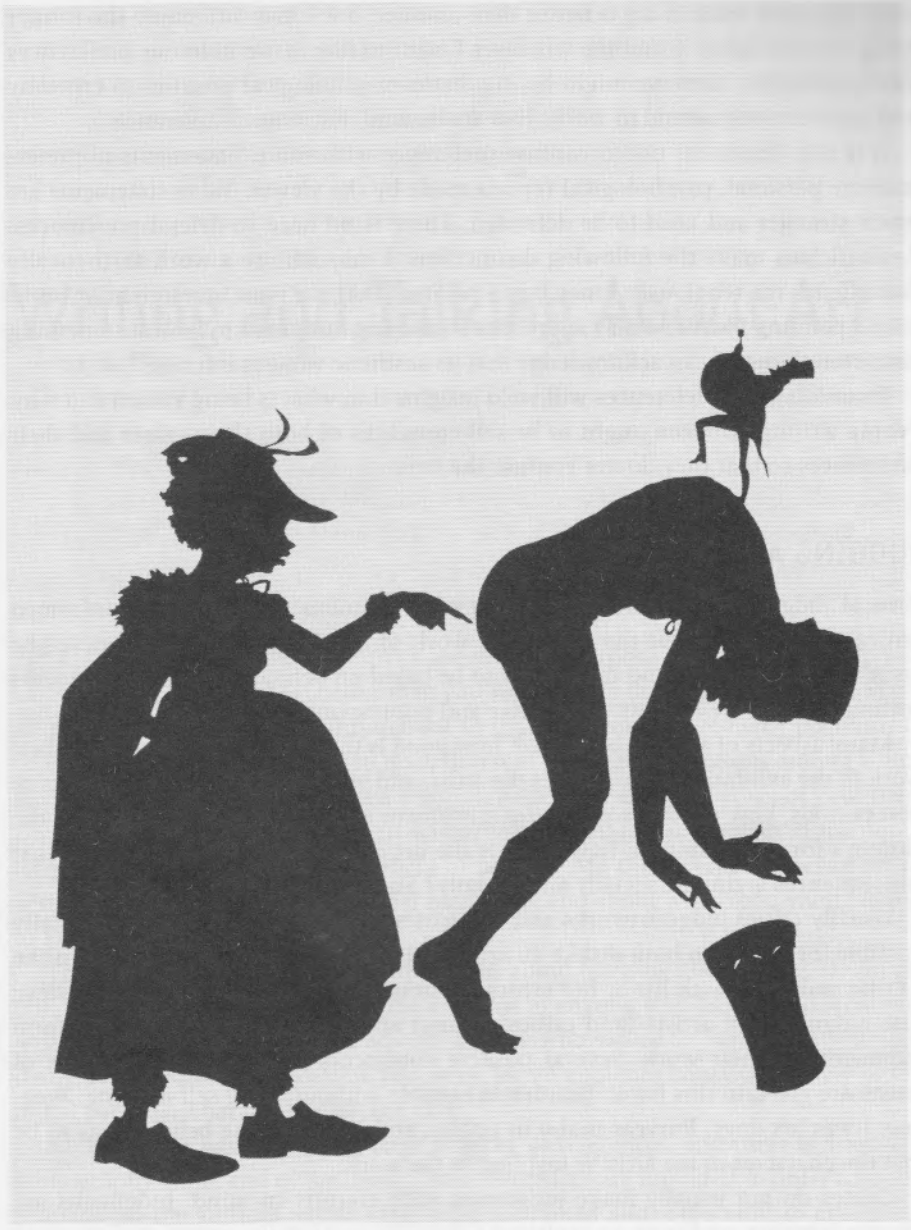
With so many criteria, how is one to choose among them? The choices are difficult, but they must be made. One could hold an eclectic position and accept them all, but some of the criteria are contradictory or mutually exclusive. It would not be logically possible, for instance, to hold to both formalism and instrumentalism. Formalism holds art to be autonomous, a world unto itself, separate from the social world and outside of moral parameters. Instrumentalism insists that moral issues are very pertinent to art making. This is not to say that instrumentalist critics would not have any formal demands on art. They would, but form alone would not be enough.

When one accepts particular criteria for art, further choices remain. An instrumentalist, for example, might see art that is clearly instrumental in purpose but still fault it on instrumentalist grounds. Such is the case with some art based in racial issues made by artists such as Kara Walker and Michael Ray Charles (see Color Plate 20). Both artists are African American, and both deal aggressively with issues of race. Walker, for example, makes wall-size silhouettes of lurid ante-bellum scenes inhabited by what she calls "pickaninnies and nigger wenches." Charles paints minstrels, Aunt Jemimas, and Sambo images, one of which dribbles a basketball under the words "The NBA is tantastic." For the artists who make these images, they are clearly satiric. Charles says that his imagery critiques the marketing of Shaquille O'Neal as a man-boy, Michael Jordan's *Space Jam,* and Dennis Rodman as a modern-day minstrel. Most art critics understand them to be satiric: Ronald Jones, writing in *Artforum,* for example, sees them as "radically reinventing monstrous form to betray racism by its own hand."[56] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., an African American social critic, defends the works by arguing that they are clearly postmodern critiques of the racist originals and that only the visually illiterate could mistake them as realistic portrayals. But others also note the danger of such images reinforcing rather than subverting the stereotypes. Betye Saar, an African American artist whose work also challenges stereotypes, sees Walker's work as reprehensible because she thinks it is a case of black self-degradation. Saar pointedly asks, "Can you imagine a Jewish artist doing satirical art about the Holocaust?"[57] Thus, even when viewers agree that art is clearly instrumental and that it should be judged on instrumentalist grounds, arguments will still ensue over the social effects of that art.

One might choose to be pluralistic and accept an artwork on its own grounds. That is, one would let the artwork influence which set of criteria should be used in judging it. A feminist work of art would be judged by instrumental criteria; a formalist piece on formal grounds; and so forth. The advantage to this position is that one would be very tolerant of a wide range of artworks. Many naive viewers of art hold only to realist criteria, and they very narrowly dismiss most of the art of this century. This is unfortunate. If they were taught a broader range of criteria, they might be able to enjoy a wider range of artwork.

Some critics, however, are informed about and have considered many criteria for judging art but are still staunchly committed to a point of view and will hold only one set of criteria. Some critics will remain formalists, for instance, despite the severe limitations of formalism, which postmodernist writers have made apparent. Any critic who assumes a single critical stance has the security of a single point of view and a consistent way of viewing art. The danger for these critics, however, is one of rigidity. For a student of criticism, it would probably be wise and beneficial to try on and try out many different criteria on many works of art before deciding which criteria to embrace.

Maintaining a distinction between preference and value can be liberating. That is, a work I like may not be as good as another artwork I don't like. I may under-



Kara Walker, *Beat,* cut paper and adhesive on wall, 65″ × 66″, 1998.
Wooster Gardens, New York City.

stand that one work of art is better than another, but I may still enjoy the former more than the latter. I can like whatever I want to like. If we hold our preferences with confidence, then we might be in a better psychological position to critically and appreciatively attend to works that are beyond our range of tolerance.

It is also important not to confuse preference with value. Statements of preference are personal, psychological reports made by the viewer. Value statements are much stronger and need to be defended. There is no need to defend preferences. Aestheticians make the following distinctions: I may admire a work aesthetically that offends me religiously. I may buy a painting that is a poor investment or profit from a painting I loathe. I may appreciate something but prefer to look at something else, even though I can acknowledge that its aesthetic value is inferior.[58]

Examining our preferences will yield insights into what is being valued and why. People writing criticism ought to be self-conscious of both their values and their preferences so that they do not confuse the two.

JUDGING ART: A SUMMARY

Critical judgments are much more than mere opinions. Judgments are informed critical arguments about the value of a work of art. Judgments should never be given without reasons, and they ought to be based on definable criteria. Judgments without reasons are both uninformative and nonresponsive.

Many aspects of art may be judged: how good is the exhibition; which is the best work in the exhibition; how good is the artist, and what are his or her best works or best periods; how good is a particular movement or style; how good an idea is the curator's for an exhibition; how good is the art of a decade or a century; of what consequences is this art socially and morally? Should any art be censored?

Usually critics judge artworks and not artists. It is logically and psychologically possible for people to both dislike an artist and value the artist's work, or to dislike a critic and agree with his or her critical positions. Some people, however, believe that judgments of artists (and critics) cannot and should not be separated from judgments of their work. Several positive comments about the personalities of artists are given in this book: Bearden is humble without being self-effacing, Wegman loves his dogs, Puryear is shy in public, and so forth. The belief seems to be that the character of the artist is instilled in the work.

Critics do not usually make judgments with eternity in mind. Judgments are usually tentative and open to revision. Critics know that the criticism they write may be the first words written about a work of art, and most realize they cannot afford to be dogmatic or doctrinaire in their judgments of it.

Critics judge art for an audience of readers, not for the artist who made the work, and they wish to persuade the readers to appreciate (or not appreciate) the work as they do and for their reasons. They would have us see as they see, have us enjoy as they enjoy.