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PRACTICAL ART CRITICISM

"The Critical
Process"

13p

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PRENTICE HALL

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THE CRITICAL PROCESS

ATTENDING TO VISUAL FACTS

Critics are often accused of being arbitrary and subjective—too imaginative for their own (or the artist's) good. To counter these accusations, we stipulate that a critic must attend, first of all, to the visual facts. Why is this important? It is important because a critic's interpretation should originate in what is objectively there, because fairness to the artist requires that we give highest priority to what he or she has made, and because anything a critic says should be based on what someone else can verify.

What are the visual facts? For the critic's purposes, they are the physical features of an artwork that another person can see. Thus, we can see faces, figures, trees, rocks, colors, shapes, and textures. But we cannot see linseed oil or molecules of paint even though we know they are there. For art criticism, the visual facts are the "gross," or perceptible, manifestations of an artwork. We know that the chemical analysis of a paint film and the geological analysis of marble fragments can

yield valuable information for archaeologists, connoisseurs, and restoration experts. However, the critical enterprise relies on the way the human organism processes information it has gained *through its own optical apparatus*. That is, we care mainly about the way artworks are seen with the naked human eye.

Another stipulation about the visual facts is that they should be given priority over words. Better stated, words about an artwork should be considered valid only to the extent that they can be confirmed in the critic's visual experience. This rule is important for two reasons: (1) it saves us from confusing discourse *about* art with art itself; and (2) it prevents us from claiming another person's experience as our own. Having said this, we must admit that spoken or written commentary is often useful: it can direct our attention to what might have been overlooked, it can tell us what someone else considers interesting, and it may contain hints about the overall meaning of a work of art. Our wariness about words does not mean we advocate literary ignorance; however, critics should use words as "pointers" rather than as aesthetic facts.

Clearly, we have a "hidden agenda" in attending to the visual facts. As mentioned earlier, seeing a work truly and well *takes time*. Not only that, it calls for considerable effort. In other words, we want to trick the critic into doing three things he or she might not have done: (1) we want the critic to *see* more than he or she might have seen, (2) we want the critic to *invest* more of himself or herself than he or she might have invested, and (3) we want the critic to *delay* the closure of his or her experience. That delay or *postponement of closure* will turn out to be beneficial because it creates time for several good things to happen: the critic begins to "see" really well, the critic's imagination comes into play, and the critic's "creative juices" are given a chance to flow.

A final point about attending to the visual facts should be noted. Many critical disasters are caused by (1) failing to see the work completely, and (2) premature closure of the critical process. Premature closure, in turn, leads to what I call "abortion" of the aesthetic experience; it is usually caused by the critic's impatience, prejudice, or unwillingness to suspend judgment. That is, the critic knows *in advance* that the work is bad or good and hence will not give it the benefit of a thorough examination. This is a common sin in criticism. To defend against this error, we have our critical discipline: attend to the facts, analyze the facts, interpret the facts, and judge the whole

work afterward. By following this sequence, a critic will avoid a great deal of embarrassment.

NAMING AND DESCRIBING THE FACTS

Art criticism begins with an information gathering stage; and, as indicated above, attending to the visual facts is its key feature. In the process, we also admit the sort of information one gets from museum labels—that is, the name of the artist; his or her country, perhaps; the medium and date of the work; and its title.

Now, titles are important in criticism; whole books could be written about them. For the purposes of practical criticism, let us say this: some title are obvious, some are vague and mysterious, some are purely literary exercises, some offer hints about subject matter, some describe technical objectives, some are unintentionally misleading, and some are calculated to throw us "off the scent." Our rule is as follows: when a title seems to make sense, use it to form an hypothesis (see pp. 32–35) about the meaning of the work. But if the title conflicts with the visual facts, do not use it.

Naming what an observer sees is part of the overall process of description. With realistic works of art, the task is easy enough: adults can do it almost as well as children! What we aim for is a list or inventory of the principal things that are *there*. And, we want that inventory to be noncontroversial, so we do not characterize the things we see (persons, places, and objects)—we just name them. That seems to make children very happy. Adults, however, want to tell us what they think or how they feel about what they see. *This must be discouraged*. At the naming stage of criticism, we should employ neutral, unloaded, value-free language.

When it comes to *describing* the things we see—especially in an abstract or nonobjective work—we simply fall back on the language of *line* (straight, curved, jagged, and so on), *shape* (square, triangular, and circular), *color* (red, blue, green, and so on), and *texture* (smooth, coarse, and grainy). Again, our language is unloaded, and, while we may have feelings about these "things," we try to suppress them. The critic's purpose here is to build an inventory that is reasonably complete and uncontaminated by moral, emotional, and cognitive associations. Thus, description—which is a fairly simple operation—has two sophisticated objectives: one is to *encounter* the surface of an artwork

honestly and without preconceptions, and the second is to *know* the work as immediately and directly as we can.

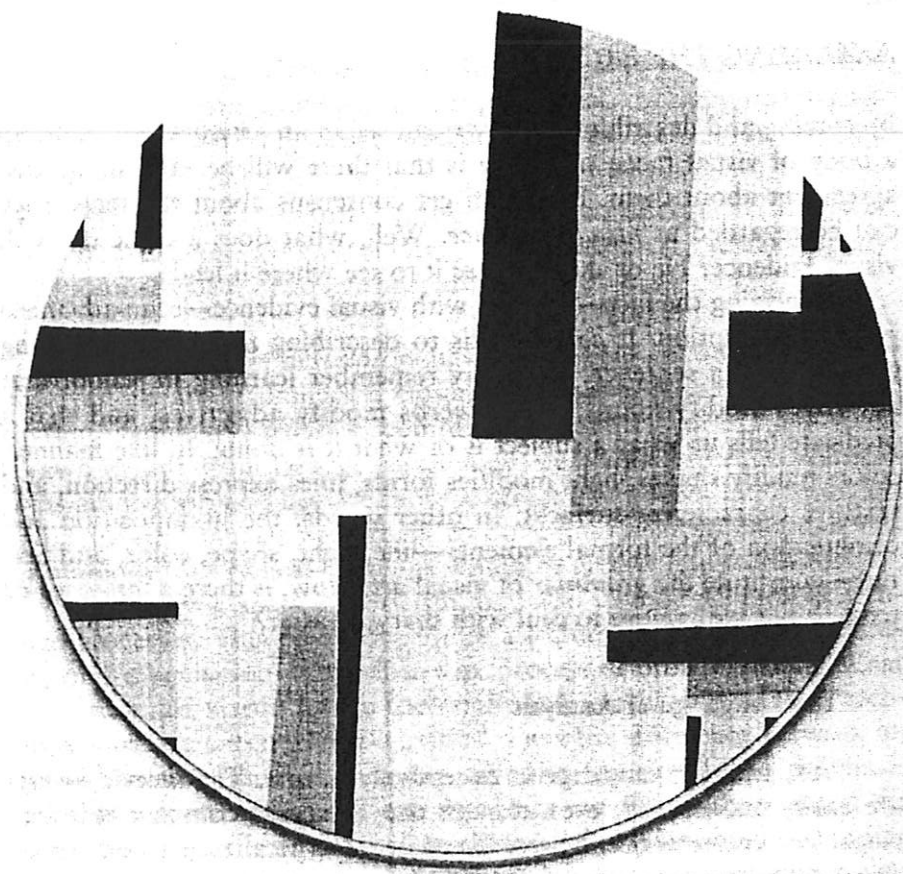
Naming and describing visual facts is an important operation because it *slows down* and *concentrates* the critic's perception. Lord Clark says "description has a further value, that it makes us look at a work of art far longer. 'We must look and look' said Mr. Berenson 'til we live in a painting and for a fleeting moment become identified with it.'"¹ Normal or everyday perception is usually very fast—fast enough to perform the tasks of practical life. Aesthetic perception, on the other hand, aims at the *intensification of vision*, by which we mean the fullest possible involvement of a critic's sensory and cognitive equipment. The process of describing encourages a critic to dwell or concentrate on the work of art; in John Dewey's words, it enables the critic to "have an experience."

We should realize, too, that describing visual facts does not mean translating lines, colors, and shapes into words. Of course, some writers and critics try to paint with words. But we know that words cannot be the optical equivalents of visual forms; words are used to name or identify the things we can see. Paradoxically, we employ verbal language to call attention to an artwork's *nonverbal* features—the visual qualities for which there are no words. In addition, verbal description gets the ball rolling, so to speak; it initiates a critical game whose goal is the defensible interpretation and evaluation of a work of art.

Description has another important function: it helps us to achieve critical consensus. Many controversies among critics are caused by the fact that they are working with *different sets of visual facts*. Of course, critics have a right to differ in their interpretations, but the public has a corresponding right to know whether the critics have seen the same work of art. Now, what is that "work of art?" It must be the set of facts the critics have named and described. But suppose the critics will not disclose the facts supporting their critiques? Then we have two options: one is to guess what they saw; the other is to find a better critic!

Notice, finally, that description in art criticism corresponds to decoding ciphers in cryptography, or sounding out letters and pronouncing words in reading. A reader may be able to say a word and may know what it means; however, that reader may not understand the overall significance of the word in the sentence where it appears. Decoding words in a sentence is not equivalent to *comprehension*—understanding the sentence as a whole. In English, at least, word

¹ Kenneth Clark, *Moments of Vision* (London: John Murray, 1981), p. 84.



FRITZ GLARNER, *Relational Painting Tondo #20*, 1951–54. Oil on Masonite, diameter 47 3/8". The Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1972. Photographed by Lee Stalworth.

Without describing the forms and their action, we cannot understand their overall meaning. Notice, for example, the tapering shapes in this composition. Where do they begin and end? Do they just meet or do they pass beneath each other? Notice, too, that there seems to be some shifting and squeezing among the forms. Are they wedges? Why are the smaller ones located near the circle's edge? Is this work about splitting or weaving or fabrication? Is it a random assortment of forms about to settle into a system? Does it represent the outer edge of things? Maybe this is a picture of the place where chaos turns into order.

placement and sequence determine comprehensive meaning. And, the same is true of the lines, shapes, and colors in a work of art: location is crucial. In other words, art has a grammar and syntax which critics must be able to "read."

ANALYZING THE FACTS

By naming and describing what we can see in an artwork, we build up a body of visual facts; our hope is that there will be little or no disagreement about them. If we can get consensus about the facts, they can be regarded as *visual evidence*. Well, what does a critic do with visual evidence? He or she *analyzes* it to see where it leads.

Analyzing the facts—dealing with visual evidence—is an advanced type of description. It corresponds to describing the relations among the words in a sentence. You may remember learning in school that adjectives modify nouns, that adverbs modify adjectives, and that a predicate tells us what a subject is or what it is doing. In like manner, colors modify shapes, light modifies forms, lines express direction, and textures characterize surfaces. In other words, the juxtaposition and combination of the formal elements—line, light, shape, color, and texture—constitute the *grammar* of visual art. Now, is there a *language* or terminology we can use to deal with that grammar?

The Language of Analysis

Yes, and that language is deceptively simple. The words we use are easily understood, even though they describe complex relationships. For convenience, I have listed some typical terms and paired them under the categories of visual form.

1. *Line*: straight/curved, thick/thin, horizontal/vertical, open/closed, sharp/dull, hard/soft, flowing/jagged, continuous/interrupted.
2. *Light*: day/night, natural/artificial, clear/shadowy, weak/bright, high source/low source, frontal/lateral, focused/hazy, glaring/dim.
3. *Shape*: round/angular, cubical/cylindrical, triangular/conical, flat/stout, solid/broken, measured/irregular, concave/convex, geometric/organic, loose/dense, positive/negative, stable/unstable.
4. *Color and Temperature*: hot/cold, warm/cool, complementary/analogous, primary/secondary, high-key/low-key, mixed/pure, saturated/diluted, advancing/receding, rich/neutral.
5. *Size and Quantity*: great/small, many/few, tall/short, wide/narrow, equal/uneven, heavy/weightless, massive/little, swollen/shrunk, dominant/subordinate, prominent/inconspicuous.

6. *Space and Location*: left/right, high/low, close/distant, above/beneath, first/last, central/peripheral, overlapping/intersecting, shallow/deep, tangent/adjacent, empty/full, limited/boundless.
7. *Surface and Texture*: smooth/rough, hard/soft, dry/wet, coarse/fine, glossy/matte, wrinkled/even, grainy/filmy, porous/sealed, opaque/transparent.

After these *form descriptors* have been used, we can make further observations about similarity, closeness, contrast, sequence, direction, rhythm, symmetry, balance, completeness, and closure. These terms (drawn mainly from Gestalt psychology) deal with *perceived relationships* among forms. They are more abstract than words like “straight” and “curved,” but we need them to do formal analysis. Without this terminology, our critical language would be greatly impoverished.

The analytic stage of criticism may also include mention of technical processes. This does not require a lecture on egg-tempera painting, or a disquisition on the lost-wax process of bronze casting. What the critic must attend to are the observable marks and signs of technique—artistic execution. If a critic knows the difference between an etched (bitten by acid) line and a drypoint (directly cut in the plate) line, that’s good. If the critic can *recognize* the difference, so much the better. But the differences between these kinds of line should be *visible* if we want to use them in our commentary. Again, visual facts rather than antecedent knowledge should govern discourse at this stage of criticism.

A further hint about the technique of visual analysis. To do it well, the critic must execute a simple psychological maneuver: switch from left-brain to right-brain thinking. For example, when looking at a tree painted by John Constable, we try to forget Joyce Kilmer’s poetic line: “Only God can make a tree.” Instead, we concentrate on the size, shape, color, and texture of Constable’s *painted* tree; we consider how he has located that tree in relation to the land, sky, farmhouse, wagon, and other trees in the picture. In short, we try to see the tree in *visual* context before writing a high-flown piece about English farming life or the presence of God in unspoiled nature. By employing right-brain thinking we may be able to do justice to Constable’s tree; otherwise, we shall find ourselves trapped in Kilmer’s poem forever.

Finally, it is important to realize that formal analysis has limitations: it does not reach comprehensive meaning, although it may come

close. Our observations of size, shape, and color relationships are semantically suggestive. The critic notices that these relationships seem to manifest behaviors such as aggressiveness, submissiveness, resistance, cooperation, pride, anger, shyness, and so on. Of course, a color by itself may not look bold or angry, but combined with size and shape and seen against other colors, it can embody the very soul of aggression. In other words, formal relations are emotionally and intellectually potent. Sometimes a well-turned analysis of form delivers its own aesthetic judgment, as in this devastating critique of Thomas Benton's painting: "Benton's ideas about 'the hollow and the bulge,' the rhythmical distortion of bone and muscular structure, made his human figures weirdly overdetermined, like lanky dummies with cartoon faces...the very clouds in his landscapes flex their muscles."²

Accordingly, before interpreting an artwork as a whole, a critic must consider its formal relationships and their associated feelings and ideas.

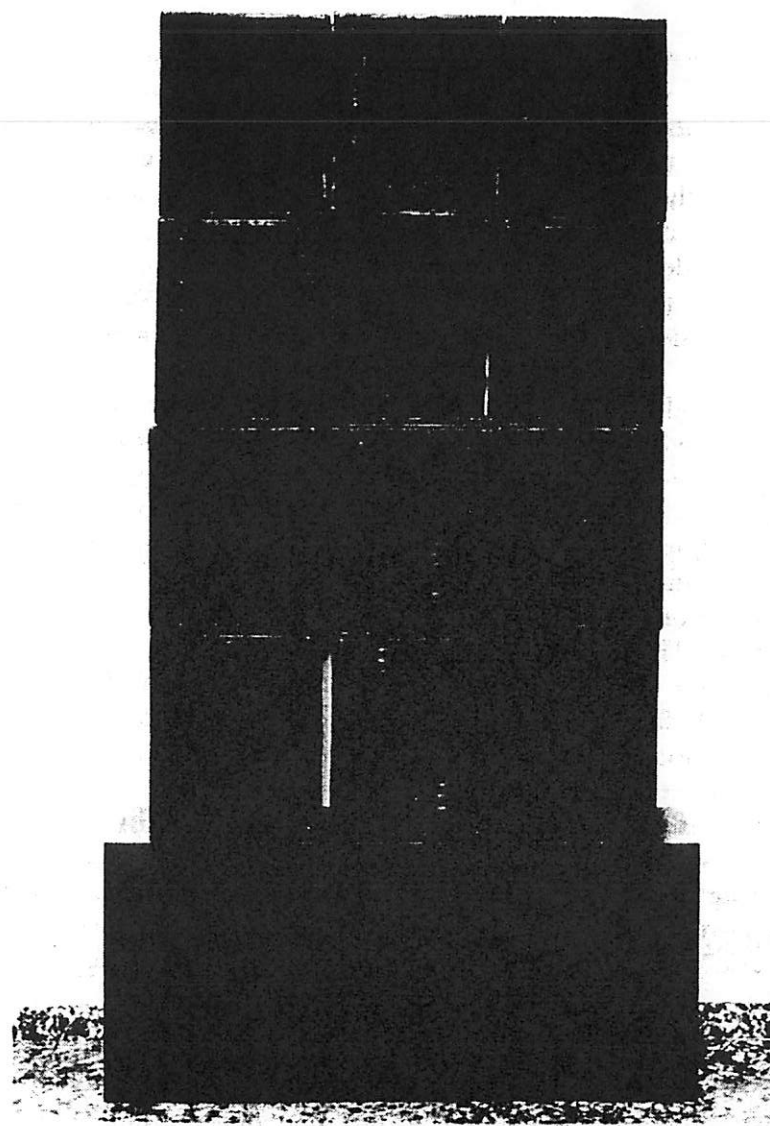
INTERPRETING THE EVIDENCE

Interpretation is the crucial third stage of art criticism: this is the point at which our search for meaning reaches a climax. And, while interpretation is difficult, it is also rewarding: our patient critical inquiry finally receives its "payoff."

What is an interpretation? It is a statement—spoken or written—which makes our descriptive and analytic observations "hang together," or cohere. A good interpretation has the effect of "making sense" out of the separate, disjointed, and partial meanings we discovered in the course of our critical exploration. When an interpretation is completed, when it "clicks," we think we know what a work of art means. That knowledge, accompanied by an agreeable sense of certainty, may be a psychological illusion, but we like it and believe we've earned it.

Now, there is an imaginative or creative "leap" from the accumulation of visual evidence to the construction of an interpretation. That leap may feel like jumping into a bottomless pit, so how do we get ready to make the jump? First, we need audacity and a willingness to take chances. But if we feel less than audacious, there are ways to gather one's forces before diving into space.

² Robert Hughes, "Tarted Up Til the Eye Cries Uncle," *Time*, May 1, 1989.



LOUISE NEVELSON, *Black Wall*, 1964. Wood construction painted black, 64 3/4" x 39 1/2" x 10 1/8". The Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966. Photographed by Lee Stalsworth.

The aesthetic evidence consists of twelve black boxes of wooden disks, newel posts, balusters, chair legs, and jigsaw carpentry. What can these odds and ends mean? Perhaps the box contents will never give up their secrets, but their overall shapes add up to a wall—a wall made of carefully formed parts that were lost or discarded and then found and reconstructed. Can this be the story of our houses and cities? Perhaps it is the real image of our lives.

A Critic's Hypothesis

To build courage, a trial leap, or *critical hypothesis*, is very helpful. What is a critical hypothesis? It is an educated guess about the meaning of the work under scrutiny. Why do we call it an "educated guess"? Because we have already studied the work, assembled the visual facts, developed some "hunches" about pieces of the work, and formed some tentative ideas about the work's overall significance. So, our hypothesis is hardly a "shot in the dark"; it has a foundation in fact.

A critical hypothesis also serves as an adaptation device: it tries to reconcile what we have seen with who we are, where we have been, what we have done, and what we think we know. At best, an hypothesis facilitates several processes of human growth: it forces perceptual change without too much pain, it encourages the assimilation of new experience, and it helps enlarge the viewer's world.

An hypothesis is also a way of testing or "trying on" an idea to see if it fits. That is, it has to suit us and satisfy the visual evidence at the same time. Now, where do our test-ideas come from? They derive mainly from the intuitions and hunches that accumulated during the descriptive and analytic stages of criticism. Happily, those intuitions came spontaneously; we simply set them aside for use at a later time. Now that time has arrived.

But even with hunches and intuitions, a critical hypothesis does not spring to mind fully formed. Here we can use some questions whose answers can get us into the right frame of reference, the right "ballpark." Following are a few that might be tried while looking at the work:

- Where in the world, or out of the world, is this happening?
- Who lives here? What do they do? Why do they do it?
- Is anything growing? Are these forms dead or alive?
- Are the represented events (forms, creatures) real or potentially real?
- Was this place (form, object, creature) seen, remembered, or invented?
- Where are we situated in relation to what we see?
- What happened before we arrived? What will happen afterward?
- If all this were real, how would our world be changed?

Here is another device which may help in the formulation of a critical hypothesis. Pretend the artwork is a person who has "designs" on you. Then ask yourself one or more of the following questions:

- What is the work trying to sell me?
- What does it want me to admire?
- Whom does it tell me to emulate?
- What does it ask me to do?
- What does it want me to think?
- How does it want me to feel?
- How does it ask me to act?
- What does it expect me to know or believe?

The following set of questions tries to get at the implied public for the work:

- Who does the work think I am?
- Was this work made for a special person? Was I supposed to see it?
- Does the work address me by my age or gender?
- Does it address me by my race or nationality?
- Does it address me by my religion or politics?
- Does it assume I am rich or poor?
- Does it think that I am ignorant or educated, naive or sophisticated?
- Am I supposed to grieve or rejoice? Was this created for winners or for losers?

A final set of questions deals with what might be called "inside baseball."

- Is this work about the artist's life?
- Does the work "talk about" other artists?
- Does the work "talk about" art history?
- Do I recognize the art-game being played?
- Is the work about an old art style? About the birth of a new style? About the death of all styles?

- Is someone being denounced? Is the work competing with something we do not see?
- Is this a demonstration of skill or technique or process? Is it about the making of art?
- Does the subject matter really matter?

You may think of better questions and other devices to stimulate the critical imagination. Their purpose should be the accumulation of hunches that might be helpful in forming an interpretation. I have found that playing hunches or waiting for "flashes" of insight often involves listening to one's body in the presence of the artwork. You can ask, does the image "hit" you in the eyes, the mouth, the scalp, the throat, the stomach, or the knees? In other words, what part of your physical person does the work seem to be aimed at?

Consider your immediate feelings, too. Does the work make you angry, nervous, calm, sleepy, light-headed, anxious to leave, ready to fight? A critic assumes these feelings have sources in the artistic image, sources one ought to revisit. Remember that we are looking for an idea that can explain the total work of art; searching for its emotional engine might pay off.

Artworks also seem to generate sounds; this is especially apparent during visual analysis. At the interpretive stage, the critic can focus on those "sounds" and ask where they come from. For example, do they originate in nature, music, machinery, the city, an empty house, or human voices? Now, critics who hear voices while looking at works of art are not necessarily mad; those voices may be telling them something important, or they may be asking questions that call for answers. Here we should bear in mind that critical interpretation is very difficult. We need all the help we can get, and aid from invisible sources is quite acceptable.

A final source of interpretive ideas comes from the critic's "looks like," "feels like," "sounds like" and "reminds me of" reactions. I believe these half-formed impressions, memories, and associations represent a subliminal effort to *connect* with a work of art. They ought to be trusted or, at least, followed up. How do we "follow up"? We do so by checking our hunches against the visual facts and hoping one of the hunches works out. Perhaps the main difference between good and bad critics is that the good ones have confidence in their intuitions. They know there must be a reason why they feel, think, or remember

as they do while looking at an artwork. And, they are not afraid to use *all* their resources to get what they need.

What is a Good Interpretation?

The answer to this question is superficially easy: a good interpretation fits all the facts together. In practice, that rarely happens. The visual facts are almost infinite in number; our hope is to explain *most* of them.

If perfect interpretations are virtually impossible, can we produce *good* ones? And if so, can they be recognized? Yes. In my opinion, a good interpretation will exhibit many of the following traits:

Completeness: most of the facts have been explained; important features of the work have not been left out.

Persuasiveness: the critic's argumentation is logical and it *feels* convincing; it makes us want to say "yes."

Personal Relevance: the critic appeals to *my* experience rather than inside knowledge or outside authorities.

Durability: the critic's interpretation "makes sense" over time and many viewings.

Emotional Power: the critic's interpretation communicates at the viewer's deepest levels of feeling and awareness.

Intellectual Force: the critic's interpretation makes valid connections between the work of art and the world of ideas.

Insight: the critic's interpretation explains why the work is, or is not, enjoyable to the viewer.

Visual Responsiveness: the image of the work is felt or remembered throughout the critic's explanation.

Originality: the critic's interpretation discovers fresh meaning in the work as it relates to the world we know and the life we have led.

Finally, of course, a good interpretation agrees with the one we have already formed.

To sum up, interpretation has been called the *creation* of meaning, which is true in a sense: critics use imagination, they make original discoveries, and they shape their language artfully. However, critics do not invent out of nothing. An interpretation may be a

"story," but it is a story *about* something that exists; namely, a work of art. The rule we should observe here is that a critical interpretation has to be *confirmable* by other viewers. The best way those viewers can confirm *my* interpretation is by examining the work that I saw. Even then, they may disagree, but at least we shall have considered the same visual evidence. That ought to satisfy the artist, it may give comfort to the critic, and it should serve the public interest.

JUDGING WORKS OF ART

The fourth and final stage of criticism is the evaluation of whole works of art. This sort of judging may seem presumptuous, or perhaps it is downright foolish. There is a sense in which every work of art is one-of-a-kind, and therefore incomparable. But if that is true, we should stop right now: criticism without comparison, or *implied* comparison, seems to me worthless.

Happily, there is another position which maintains that judging a work of art means estimating its value *in relation to* other works of art. Thus, critical judging becomes the business of making intelligent comparisons among objects which are in some sense alike.

"In some sense alike": For us, that implies comparing a work of art with other works of *similar meaning or purpose*. Why is this approach to judgment recommended? Because it is what most people do when they make judgments in everyday life, because it encourages critics to compare art with art instead of art with concepts, and because comparative judging gets us out of the swamp of pure subjectivity, or mere liking. Best of all, comparative judging saves us from saying, "It's good or bad because I say so."

The Comparison Problem

Most shoppers know that we cannot compare apples with oranges. Both are fruit and both are round, but they don't taste the same. Likewise, works of art have much in common, but they don't taste the same, either. So we need a rule that will let us compare art apples with art apples. That is, we want to compare works which belong to the *same art classification*. Art can be classified by period, place, style, medium, culture, religion, subject matter, meaning, and purpose. In art criticism, it is best to classify by meaning and pur-

pose. In this connection, Seitz compared art critics with dog show judges: "As dog fanciers (who do not judge poodles against Pekinese) know better than art critics, each genre has its own criteria of value. Valid comparative judgments can be made only between similar entities."³

Of course, any art classification is useful if it is based on objective facts and if it helps reduce our confusion. The virtue of *classification by meaning* is that it cuts across many of the categories cited above. We have already defined criticism as a search for meaning, and we have taken considerable trouble to reach the stage—interpretation—that tells us what an artwork means or says. Thus, when it comes to judging, we should not abandon the meaning-values we have struggled so hard to discover and create.

As for *classification by purpose*, it simply means that comparing a bronze portrait with a watercolor landscape, or a Zuni pot with a Persian carpet, makes very little sense. Notice that these art forms differ in material as well as purpose—indeed, their different purposes may explain their different materials. To compare a pot with a carpet, we would have to ignore their distinctive visual qualities, which would lead to a denial of their artistic identity. My point is that classifying art by purpose is a powerful way of organizing the critic's work in the task of judging.

Let me be more specific. A Zuni pot may say that its maker wants the gods to fertilize her fields with rain and sun and make the corn grow. A Persian carpet, on the other hand, may say that the tribesman who sits on it has been transported to a garden where he receives a foretaste of paradise. Clearly, the meanings of these art objects are different because they have radically different purposes. Thus, it would be unwise to compare them, to say that one is better than the other.

We must establish *similarity of purpose* before we can engage in comparative judgment. And the best way for a critic to know the purpose of a work of art is to figure out what it means. That "figuring out" is called interpretation. When we have interpreted a work, when we know what it means, we are in a position to compare it with similar works. In other words, we are ready to evaluate.

³ William Seitz, in *Quality: Its Image in the Arts*, ed. Louis Kronenberger (New York: Atheneum, 1969) p. 73.

GROUND OF JUDGMENT

Once we have interpreted the work of art, we think we know its meaning, and that has helped us to understand its purpose. But how does that enable us to judge or evaluate? Interpretation directs us toward the *ground of judgment* which seems appropriate for the work we have examined. What is a ground of judgment? It is the type of argument a critic uses to justify his or her opinion of the goodness or badness of a work of art.

What are the main grounds of judgment? That is, what are the categories into which similar works of art can be placed so that they can be fairly compared? I have identified three grounds: *formalism*, *expressivism*, and *instrumentalism*. Needless to say, other critics use different terms and typologies. What matters here is inclusiveness: we need a set of grounds that has a place for everything. Furthermore, our grounds of judgment should not be biased for or against any period, style, or mode of cultural expression. This final requirement may be the severest test of any set of categories we could devise.

Our first ground of judgment is *formalism*, which corresponds in older philosophies of art to the requirement of beauty or harmony. Today this criterion of art is closely associated with Clement Greenberg, described by Barbara Solomon as "a stubborn defender of 'formalism.'" He sees the art of the past century as a search for pure form, a systematic stripping away of subject matter, illusion and everything else he feels is extraneous to art. Driven by an internal, inevitable logic, painting evolved to the point where it finally discovered it wasn't about story-telling or even an artist's feelings, but rather about its own qualities, such as the 'flatness of the canvas.'⁴

According to formalism, an artwork is good to the extent that its parts cooperate, reinforce each other, and join to form a perfect unity. What makes a formal unity perfect? Three aspects of the answer to this question are (1) it is complex but not confusing, (2) it is balanced but not boring, and (3) it is finished but not overdone. A formalist unity, moreover, is not tainted or compromised by associations with practical life, personal needs, or social concerns. One of the founders of formalist doctrine, Clive Bell, put it this way: "For, to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions."⁵

⁴ Deborah Solomon, "Catching Up With the High Priest of Criticism," *The New York Times*, June 23, 1991.

⁵ Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1913) p. 25.

Ultimately, formalist excellence depends on the artist's ability to experience the world with great sensitivity, to render what he or she sees or feels with subtlety and skill, and to exercise discriminating taste in choice of themes, materials, and modes of expression.

Formalism also requires sensitivity in the critic; he or she must be able to make the same subtle discriminations as the artist. Indeed, artist and critic need to be closely attuned. Their ability to see, feel, and appreciate the same qualities is due, presumably, to similarities in their backgrounds, temperaments, and education. In other words, formalist critics can recognize and judge formalist excellence because they share the outlook of formalist artists. There is a certain circularity here, which is the main defect of formalist criticism.

Nevertheless, despite its overtones of elitism and narrow frame of reference, the formalist ground of judgment is exceedingly influential. Why? It is influential because it has a foundation in artistic reality: every work of art can be seen as a formal arrangement. Also, many critics share the formalist conviction that pure visual relationships represent the highest type of aesthetic value. However, formalist doctrine also excludes many works of art from serious consideration. By denying the aesthetic validity of religious, political, and utilitarian art, formalism creates an impossible situation for critics: we must deal with art in all its varieties. Accordingly, we need alternate grounds of judgment.

For an alternative, *nonformalist* ground of judgment, I have coined the term *expressivism*. According to this standard of value, an artwork should be judged by its capacity to communicate feelings and ideas honestly, vividly, and forcefully. An expressivist critic is not especially concerned with pure form or abstract visual relationships; he or she cares instead about the *validity* and *persuasiveness* of the message conveyed through visual form.

How does an expressivist critic know whether the "message" of the forms is any good? The critic arrives at this knowledge by determining whether it portrays life "like it is," by deciding whether the work stirs the emotions honestly and truly, and by asking whether the artwork "says" something new or important. In addition, the critic judges whether the message has immediate relevance for the critic, for his or her public, or for society as a whole.

A good example of expressivist criticism appears in John Russell's biting critique of Richard Estes' photorealist painting: "What Mr. Estes has to tell us about the Upper West Side, we know already. What his pictures have to offer is the kind of simian mimesis

that passes for cleverness among people who resent the difficulty of high art."⁶

It would seem that an expressivist critic must *trust* the artist. That is, a successful work of art should look like a truthful report of the artist's feelings and experience. Somehow, the artist has to persuade the critic that "this" actually happened, that he or she was really there, that these emotions are not faked. Expressivist critics have to be shrewd judges of the validity of their feelings in the presence of an artwork; hence, the artwork must "ring true." Without that sense of assurance, the expressivist cannot invest his or her emotions, the experience miscarries, and the work fails.

Notice that expressivist critics regard form as a *means to an end*, and that end is truth rather than beauty. To be sure, beauty is a good thing *provided* it does not overlook the facts. The same principle applies to goodness: it cannot be won at the expense of truthful expression. We might say that expressivist critics are mainly impressed by the importance of genuine feeling and adherence to high standards of artistic integrity in visual communication. In short, expressivists refuse to separate intellectual and moral values from aesthetic values.

Instrumentalism is the ground of judgment that locates the goodness of an artwork in its capacity to serve an institution, an institution that is more important than ART. Thus, instrumentalists tend to ask these questions: How effectively does this work promote a religious doctrine, advance a political agenda, satisfy a physical need, or successfully sell a product? Again, form is a means to an end, but this time, the end is the agenda of a church, a government, a political party, or a business firm. Diego Rivera stated the instrumentalist case very clearly: "I want my art to be a weapon . . . In order to be good art, art in this country [America] must be revolutionary art, art of the proletariat, or it will not be good art at all."⁷

Of all critics, instrumentalists seem to have the easiest job of judging. Institutional needs and interests are known in advance, so it is not difficult to decide whether an artwork serves them well. In this context, market research may represent an important adjunct to art criticism: "sales" determine excellence. On the other hand, most of the

⁶ John Russell, "An Unnatural Silence Pervades Estes Paintings," *The New York Times*, May 25, 1974.

⁷ Diego Rivera, "The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art" (1932), in *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon*, ed. David Shapiro (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973) pp. 64-65.

world's art has been created to serve institutional interests, and much of it is very good indeed. Perhaps instrumentalism is just a better way to stimulate competent artistic production.

Finally, we might ask whether instrumentalist critics are fundamentally hostile to formal values. The answer is yes, if those values are meant to exist for themselves alone, and no, if those values support a "higher" purpose. Perhaps the instrumentalist philosophy of art can be summed up in the folk saying: "Handsome is as handsome does." Instrumentalists are very pragmatic; they will not judge an artwork apart from its ideological, political, or economic effects. On the other hand, instrumentalists are made like the rest of us: they cannot be immune to the intrinsic appeal of visual forms. In other words, some of them may be formalists in instrumentalists' clothing.

One practical problem remains. Are the grounds of judgment mutually exclusive? Can a work of art be appraised according to more than one standard of value? Yes, of course, it can. Does that create difficulties for the critic? It does not, unless the purity of the artist's intentions and the neatness of my categories are at issue. Remember that criticism is a search for meaning: if our search can be advanced by using more than one ground of judgment, so much the better. But as former U.S. President Reagan said, "First, verify the facts."

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