
Book Review

Art Criticism and Art Education

Wolff, T., & Geahigan, G. (1997). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
352 pages, ISBN 0-252-02314-5.

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An early impetus for art educators to move to a discipline-based perspective was Bruner's (1960) proposal that educators look to methods employed by experts in related academic fields. This redistribution of authority from curriculum specialists to disciplinary experts affected both the form and the content of curriculum materials and texts. Projects initiated by the Getty often met this challenge by pairing discipline practitioners, artists, critics, historians, and philosophers, who provided the aura of disciplinary expertise, with art educators, who worked to translate disciplinary forms into pedagogical practice.

One result of this pairing of discipline expert with art educator is *Art Criticism and Education*, the fifth book in the five-volume series, *Disciplines in Art Education: Contexts of Understanding*, edited by Ralph A. Smith and sponsored by the Getty Center for Education in the Arts. This book is a rich and wonderful addition to art education's conversation about the role of art criticism in curriculum. Its wonderfulness, however, is not found in the pairing of a discipline expert with a curriculum specialist nor in the authority of the discipline expert, Theodore F. Wolff, art critic for the *Christian Science Monitor*. The merits of this text proceed from the eloquent writing and perceptive ideas of a curriculum specialist, George Geahigan, professor of art education at Purdue University. Reflective readers should consider not only Geahigan's substantive insights concerning critical inquiry as classroom practice but also the limitations of an educational agenda that concedes authority to discipline experts rather than curriculum specialists.

Geahigan reclaims authority for the curriculum expert with the assistance of his contextualist perspective and pragmatic philosophy. Pragmatists are not univocal but they arguably present the most useful philosophical context for understanding American values. The cool and analytical C. S. Peirce can be contrasted with the social activism of Cornel West, and the speculative Richard Rorty. The pragmatist who most wholeheartedly embraced the arts was John Dewey and so it is right that Geahigan, American, art educator and contextualist, chooses Dewey as his philosophical mentor.

Interpretation is the key to contextualist criticism so it is understandable that Geahigan interprets both Dewey and art criticism in ways that

correspond to this historical moment. At different times, other art educators have interpreted Dewey and art criticism through their own historical perspectives. Dewey's ideas provided the basis for Ecker's (1963/1966) discussion of the similarities between the problem solving in studio art and scientific inquiry.

The conflation of art criticism, curriculum, and inquiry related to the sciences has a respectable history in education which parallels the development of discipline-based art education (DBAE). Science as epistemological model was directly connected to Bruner's ideas. With one eye on objectivist practices drawn from the sciences and another on the rhetorical style of art critics, art educators such as Feldman (1973) and Barrett (1994) identified art criticism with a critical process that relies upon description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment. These educators share Peirce's (1955/1878) reasoned opinion that to relieve our doubts we should turn to methods identified with the sciences, even our doubts about the meaning and value of artworks. Geahigan does not reject this tradition but rather suggests that it precludes a consideration of the many ways that students actually enter into critical dialogues with the world.

Educational conversations such as the ones surrounding DBAE tend to develop their own momentum. They develop into forms unforeseen at their inception. One important consequence of the discipline-based initiative is the contextualist interpretive position that Geahigan endorses. Much like the way change took place in Western aesthetic values as the Modernists appropriated African images, opening art education to disciplinary perspectives facilitated an understanding that artworks inextricably share a historical context with other symbolic forms such as language. But language develops from a wide range of critical conversational contexts, such as folk, commercial, academic, ethnic, and familial. This suggests that the initial emphasis of art criticism as something done by professionals requires a radical reinterpretation.

Critical inquiry rather than artifacts identified with art criticism provides the foundation for Geahigan's pedagogy. This move allows the author to explore a broader context for inquiry than is present in traditional formalist criticism. Geahigan introduces the reader to contextualism through a historical account of the evolution of art criticism, a well-developed rationale for his perspective, and an articulate explanation of the concepts and the practices that facilitate its use. He is concerned with art criticism as a mode of inquiry rather than as a specific form of writing or speaking.

Geahigan is quite thorough in his explication of what contexts are important when considering curriculum. First, he identifies the artist's intention, aesthetic understanding, and personal significance as three kinds of meaning that are relevant to the interpretation of art works. Second, he lays out a range of general methods and classroom strategies designed to facilitate the interpretation of art works in schools. Third, he

discusses the implementation of art criticism in the curriculum. For many classroom teachers the sections on methods will be the most appealing sections of the book.

John Dewey lives in Geahigan's identification of critical inquiry as the "pursuit of meaning and value in works of art" (p. 145). He continues, to develop a connection between Dewey and critical inquiry:

Critical inquiry starts with the personal experience that students have with a work of art and with reflection upon the adequacy of that experience. Reflection, in turn, begins when students confront what John Dewey called a problematic situation. Works of art are potentially problematic because they can be understood and evaluated in different ways. (p. 146)

This perspective, which extends Ecker's qualitative problem solving to include a broader personal context, asks teachers to implement classroom strategies that promote the discovery, development, and justification of different interpretive positions. Interpretation involves two contexts, the artwork and its histories and the viewers and their beliefs. This is inquiry as a proactive process, latent in all people's encounters with artworks. Geahigan's ideal teacher helps the student build personal strategies to resolve the doubts revealed through encounters with artworks.

Geahigan cautions the reader to avoid the conflation of inquiry processes and presentational forms. He values a wide range of personal responses, aesthetic understandings, and intentional conditions that inform interpretations. Ideal classrooms use these to develop rich interaction among students with different perspectives. Meaning and value are derived when initial responses are considered in relation to subsequent frameworks including the responses of others, other art works that share aesthetic properties with the original, provocative art works that initiate controversy, cultural contexts, and aesthetic knowledge. Geahigan provides the reader with a range of presentational forms that can be used to facilitate and evaluate critical inquiry.

Wolff doesn't fit neatly into Geahigan's persuasive model. He introduces the reader to art criticism as literature and to various art critics, thus providing a historical overview of professional art criticism. He also articulates a humanist's concern for honoring the aesthetic perspective of the artist. For Wolff, good critical essays move the reader/critic toward an empathic connection to the artist. Perhaps this emphasis originates in his acknowledged bias as a practicing artist. This might account for his application of honorific terms, such as *imagination*, *individuality*, *creativity*, more readily to artists and artworks, than to critics and art criticism. For Wolff, art criticism provides opportunities for students to share the creative process of the artist. Given that, the reader might wonder why these students don't just make art. Why share when you can experience creativity directly?

Geahigan makes no such presumption about the limits of critical inquiry. As his mentor Dewey (1934/1989) claims, interpretation of art is not just a taking in, but also an act of making. Readers might consider analyzing *Art Criticism and Education* through the critical approach suggested by the authors. For Wolff, art criticism is primarily a tool for translating the original act, artmaking, while for Geahigan, art criticism is a reflective process that has its own benefits for its practitioners. For Geahigan criticism is something people do and can learn to do better. Such distinctions can be used by readers to clarify their own positions. Geahigan's critical inquiry will help them reconcile the authors' differences with each other, with other writers about art criticism, and with the relative merit of appealing to discipline experts for solutions to curriculum issues.

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