CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING IN ART

CANDACE JESSE STOUT

Critical Thinking and Writing in Art

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The University of Georgia

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LAWRENCE, Jacob.
"One of the largest race riots occurred in east St. Louis". Panel 52 from The Migration Series.
(1940–41; text and title revised by the artist, 1993).
Tempera on gesso on composition board, 12 x 18".
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. David Levy.
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We need some imaginative stimulus, some not impossible ideal such as may shape vague hope, and transform it into effective desire, to carry us year after year, without disgust, through the routine work which is so large a part of life.

from Marius the Epicurean

Walter Pater

For Sam and my brother Troy

Preface

Throughout several seasons of semesters, the voices of my students have brought this book to life. It was their underlying critical spirit and their vocal desire to think things over for themselves that prompted me to open the door and widen the range of possibilities. The writing exercises in this text are for those students who relish the open-ended richness of the visual arts and who realize that understanding in the truest sense grows out of the habits of asking critical and creative questions, experimenting with new ideas, and giving persistent consideration to alternate perspectives.

I wish to express my appreciation to several individuals whose support was invaluable in writing this book. Thanks go to the staff of West Publishing Company and to my editor Robert Jucha. I am most grateful for his encouragement, his patience, and the wisdom in his editorial advice. From the outset, he recognized the need to nurture critical thinking and understood the potential that experimental writing has for enhancing individual understanding and appreciation in art. Thanks also go to those individuals who reviewed my manuscript. Their suggestions for change and improvement helped keep me on track.

I owe a great debt to Dr. Richard Paul of Sonoma State University. His inspiring lectures and publications (especially his book *Critical Thinking: How To Prepare Students For a Rapidly Changing World*) and his organization and personal participation in decades of International Conferences on Critical Thinking have convinced me that deep thinking, higher order thinking, in short, critical thinking can be taught and nurtured in all content areas, from kindergarten through graduate school. His propensity for exploring new perspectives and his unwavering commitment to educational reform have given me the courage to experiment and to look in other directions for alternate ways to encourage students to exercise their own thinking and to participate more genuinely in the construction of their own knowledge. Among a wide variety of scholars in critical thinking and writing, I have been influenced, too, by the writings of Garbriele Rico. I have learned much from her approaches to encouraging creativity and fostering writing confidence.

Thanks, too, to my friends and colleagues who provided much-needed professional support during the writing of this manuscript: Dr. Thomas L. Good, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Arizona; Dr. Lezlie Laws-Couch, Department of English, Rollins College, Florida; Dr. Michael E. Parks, Department of Art Education, Buffalo State University College; Dr. James Rogers, Department of Art, Florida Southern College; Gerald C. Mead, Curator of the Charles Burchfield Art Center, Buffalo State University; Donna Loyd, Director of Writing In The Content Areas, Columbia, Missouri Public Schools; and Dr. Patricia Crown, Department of Art History and Archaeology, University of Missouri.

As always, appreciation goes to my husband Sam who offered assistance in the technical preparation of the manuscript, along with unending academic encouragement and spiritual support.

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction: Exploring Directions of Your Own

To see is itself a creative operation, requiring an effort. Everything that we see in our daily lives is more or less distorted by acquired habits, and this is perhaps more evident in an age like ours when cinema, posters, and magazines present us every day with a flood of ready-made images which are to the eye what prejudices are to the mind. The effort needed to see things without distortion takes something very like courage.

Henri Matisse, artist [1]

This book is all about what Matisse calls the "creative operation" of seeing. Everything centers around improving your capacity to see and to form your own understanding and appreciation of art. The emphasis is on thinking critically and writing creatively about art, processes that take effort, and in Matisse's words, "something very like courage." The focus is on *your* thinking not the textbook's, not your instructor's, not the thinking of the experts in the library or museum. You need not be an art historian, a critic, an aesthetician, or an artist to enjoy success in these writing activities, but you will need some experience, some foundation in

understanding, appreciating, and responding to art. It is not a how-to text containing facts and information that add up to answers. In fact, you may generate far more questions than you will find answers. The writing activities contained in Chapters 4 through 8 are designed to provide you with a set of personal opportunities, what we might call "occasions" to think and re-think, to look at things from a different angle, develop your own ideas, and advance your own critical thoughts about art.

Though it is a small volume containing only 91 pages, you will have to slow down. Rather than seeking out, defining, and examining the paths of someone else's thinking, you will be discovering, inventing, and exploring directions of your own. As you work through these writing exercises, you may find yourself asking new questions, making connections, and drawing parallels where none have been drawn. Your intellect will cooperate with your imagination and your emotions. The door will open to the realm of the hypothetical and you will find yourself asking, "What if?"

As you browse through the assignments and ponder the problems that require your consideration, it may be of some comfort to know that all of the writing exercises in this text have passed the youthful scrutiny of more than 500 college students, a kind of critical acceptance not easily obtained. With good-natured intent, tempered by a shrewd, critical eye, students in a variety of visual arts courses have analyzed and probed and pried into these assignments. They have questioned, argued for and against, and speculated upon them. Each writing activity has been examined for clarity, relevance, and fairness; and finally, each has passed the test against boredom, as far as any professor-created assignment can. In one way or another, every last sentence has been filtered through the minds of students who have been asked to explore the ideas, address the problems, and answer some of the questions that demand reflection and imaginative thinking in the visual arts.

It may be of further interest to know that most of these exercises were stimulated by the writings and class discussions of my students. With surprising frequency, they drew from their own stores of knowledge in wide-ranging subject areas and called upon their own experiences. As they asked unique questions and

evoked different ways of looking at artists and issues, it occurred to me that the substance of my students' reflections was worth further consideration. Over a period of time, common themes emerged in the way they approached visual arts learning, so in this volume, I have collected my students' ideas and created activities that focus on their ponderings about art.

To provide authentic models and help guide your practice, in several instances, I have included student writing samples. Perhaps equally important, I have chosen to include these writings because of the enjoyment most students experience from reading the words and sharing the varied viewpoints of their peers.

Chapter 2

The Indispensable Collaborator: A Respondent's Responsibilities

. . . the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contributions to the creative act.

Marcel Duchamp, artist [2]

Though you will be experimenting with media, practicing technique, molding, constructing, capturing and shaping images, no paint or clay or film, no brushes or smocks or darkroom will be required as you work through this text. You will expend a high level of energy and invest a great deal of imaginative and intellectual effort, but the outcome of all of this will not be a finished canvas, a cast bronze, or a photograph ready for exhibit. Rather than creating art objects, your energies will be focused on sensitive observation, critical reflection, and insightful response to art.

The underlying assumption guiding this text is encapsulated in Marcel Duchamp's opening quotation: ". . . the creative act is not performed by the artist alone." There is an equal responsibility on the part of the spectator to decipher and

interpret. It is the same in all of the arts. In music, consider the composer whose symphony begs for a sympathetic ear. In dance, consider the choreographer who depends upon the agility of the audience's eye. Carry the parallel to literature, where novelist Kurt Vonnegut reminds us that "literature requires those who enjoy it to be performers." If we can assume that the artist has a responsibility in communicating an idea, a value, an emotion, or in offering up an experience of some significance, we might also expect an equal effort from the respondent. Without the participation and the receptivity of, in Vonnegut's words, the "indispensable collaborator," meaning is lost. Once an artist has made the last brush stroke, the responsibility shifts to the respondent, whose role is as complex and as vital as the artist's. In attempting to communicate with an artwork, in reaching for understanding and appreciation, the observer must draw upon a sophisticated network of intellectual, imaginative, and emotional processes. Like the artist, the indispensable collaborator engages in an act of construction, experimenting and practicing, shaping and molding, playing with ideas and images until they make significant sense.

The assignments in Chapters 4 through 8 are experimental, creative exercises to provide practice in active viewer participation. In Chapter 4, the first group of writings is called "Critical Commentaries." Here you will be asked to generate artful description, probing analysis, insightful interpretation, and reasoned evaluation of particular artworks. In Chapter 5, your efforts will be focused on "Micro-writings." As the name suggests, these are very small writings that emphasize the importance of drawing parallels, making connections, and recognizing various kinds of conceptual relationships. The next group of exercises in Chapter 6 is comprised of "Improvisations." Each of these exercises is in narrative form and presents a problem or a "situation" to be examined and puzzled over. Some assignments concern individual artists, their style, philosophy, or personality. Others are about an issue of debate or a fundamental question with which scholars in the visual arts continually grapple. A few simply raise a whimsical query and ask you to "suppose . . . ." Chapter 7, on the dialogue journal, introduces journal writing as an inclusive forum for synthesis, for putting all of your ideas about art together. The final chapter provides an occasion for reflecting on

the significance of your experiences in writing about art. In the introduction to each of these chapters, the rationale for the exercises is explained and in certain instances, student writing samples are provided to give you a kind of jump-start.

Chapter 3

Some Critical Conversations About Art

Meanings don't come out of the air; we make them out of a chaos of images, half-truths, remembrances, syntactic fragments, from the mysterious and unformed.

Ann Berthoff, scholar of language and rhetoric [3]

As we mentioned in Chapter 2, most artists anticipate a kind of conversation with an intelligent observer. In moving from passive observation to active collaboration, in stretching the boundaries of response, the viewer becomes a sensitive participant, a partner to a dynamic visual dialogue. Within the first few moments of encountering an artwork, the conversation begins easily enough. The difficulty, however, comes in sustaining a meaningful dialogue. To do so, the respondent must have a sophisticated understanding of the intricacies involved in playing the role of visual collaborator.

To define this role, first it may be helpful to describe what it is *not*. The role of collaborator in the visual dialogue is not like the role of a contestant in the Jeopardy Game, where, whether the category is Art or Artichokes, nearly all responses depend on association and recall. All answers are single words or phrases. All

begin with Who? What? When? or Where? The contestant's response is either right or wrong. No equivocation. Everything happens within a few prescribed seconds and the job is complete. Plainly, the stuff of Jeopardy would not sustain a visual conversation.

Response to art is quite different. To uphold the responsibilities necessary for visual dialogue, the respondent needs the time, the skills of observation, the mental strategies and academic knowledge, as well as the personal inclination to go beyond memory and association. A familiarity with art history, art criticism, aesthetic issues, and production techniques is essential to an appreciation of the complexity involved in understanding art. Unlike an answer on the Jeopardy Game, meaningful response to art focuses only secondarily on the Who? What? When? or Where? Paintings, photographs, sculptures, and the aesthetic qualities of skyscrapers are only fully understood according to the visual qualities they display, coupled with the context within which they are embedded. In other words, the richest understanding and appreciation of art come both from sensitive observation and from careful consideration of how the artwork connects with the world around it.

Since one of the most effective routes to learning is through illustration, following is a working example of how one individual collaborates with and responds to one painting. Before we begin, however, there must be a note of caution. It is essential to realize that response to art is a highly individualistic and complex endeavor, but we should also understand that complexity should not be interpreted as something negative. Things can be complex without being unpleasant or overwhelmingly difficult. To explain, the quality of collaboration we carry on with a Frida Kahlo painting or an Andy Warhol print is strongly dependent upon our own receptivity. Involved in this are the ability and willingness to think independently and to form our own reasoned perspectives. Those things that help shape such perspectives come from the emotions and the reason, from both the personal and academic experiences we bring to the visual conversation. Granted, there are complications in all of this, but they are intricacies with a vitality, with possibilities that present intellectual, emotional, and imaginative challenge. Most