

A New Criticism for the Visual Arts

The application of poetry's "New Critical" techniques may provide an answer to today's crisis in art criticism

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Seventy years ago, when Ezra Pound surveyed the community of English and American poetry, he saw a situation in some ways resembling that of the visual arts today. The critic of poetry focused on the historical and the biographical. His interpretation of the poem or, more frequently, his reaction to it was described impressionistically in vague language. The bases of criticism were shifting and subjective: a poem read by ten critics could be given ten interpretations and as many evaluations, often with bravado, seldom with confidence. Poets unread today rose to popularity, while poets now admired fought frustration and obscurity.

Pound responded by reviving the ancient dictum *look at the object* — interpret and evaluate the created object, the poem, by examining *it*, not the life of the poet, nor what the poet elsewhere says about his poem, nor the reader's miscellaneous feelings on the subject matter of the poem. Soon other critics were elaborating on the technique. In 1929 I. A. Richards' book *Practical Criticism* documented ten "critical difficulties" which interfere with the direct confrontation of reader and poem. Throughout the Thirties such critics as Allen Tate, William Empson and R. P. Blackmur helped to popularize the technique, while others applied it to the short story, the drama and (somewhat less successfully) the novel. In 1938 a college textbook, *Understanding Poetry* by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, made the technique available to everyone and challenged convincingly the accepted evaluations of many poems. And in 1941 John Crowe Ransom gave a name to the movement with his book title *The New Criticism*. Today, although the modern literary critic understands that a complete appreciation of any important work can be achieved only by taking many approaches, he realises that his basic understanding of the work must result from his own personal confrontation with the work — from looking at the object.

One would think that, for the critic of the visual arts, looking at the object would be the obvious, if not the only, approach. The concreteness of the object in almost every case is undeniable. A direct confrontation of work and audience would seem inevitable. Nevertheless, the contemporary art critic is beset not only with most of Richards' ten critical difficulties, but with several others as well. Later I shall list just three of Richards' ten and redefine them for our present purposes.

But let us begin with the **Intentional Fallacy**, discovered among readers of poetry by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley. It occurs when the critic tries to determine the quality and meaning of a work of art by referring to the artist's expressed or supposed intention in making it. Errors in judgement may then result from a confusion about the source of the critic's information: did the critic look at the object or at the aggregate of object and extraneous information? Thus, supporters of Concept Art often answer the observation that it looks like Dada by pointing out the younger artists' different intentions. Similarly,

the originality of a minimal painting of 1964 (which seems to the eye nearly identical to a Suprematist painting of 1914) is defended by referring to its brand-new reasons for having come about. In her essay “Is There a New Academy?” Elizabeth C. Baker has attacked “intentionally destructive comparisons, which are frequently set up to ridicule the superficial similarities among many works” (such as the target paintings of Johns and Noland) by telling us that “It is essential to read not only the forms but especially the artists’ differences of intent.” Finally, even the rare critic on his guard against the intentional fallacy would have difficulty concentrating only on Ad Reinhardt’s paintings after wading through Reinhardt’s effusive writings.

The art critic’s version of Richards’ **Stock Response** occurs when the viewer brings a charged mind to the art work’s trigger and praises or damns the artist for the resulting explosion. The modern critic often seems to have more creative energy than the modern artist and willingly slaves away on a review of a show into which the artist put only one small idea. Less work becomes more work as the critic, encountering another largely empty canvas, seizes the opportunity to write about his own mind. Minimalist sculpture is especially notorious for exciting stock responses from the well-informed audience: a critic might begin by describing how carefully Carl André arranged the boulders in one of his field sculptures and conclude by writing of stability, tranquillity and the shortness of human life.

Technical presuppositions await the viewer who encounters a work in a recognisable style or technique and makes the assumption that past successes or failures of the means continue in the present work. A critic seeing a great new painting on black velvet (let us assume for a moment that such a thing is possible) might well be overpowered by his remembrance of all the discount-store gypsies and tigers he has passed. Conversely, some critics might tend to associate the importance of a painting with its size because many important paintings of the recent past have been large. And there was a tradition of untidiness in painting stretching back to the Impressionists that until recently made some critics uncomfortable with a neat painting.

General Critical Preconceptions are responsible for some of the most serious errors made by today’s art critics. These difficulties intervene when the viewer applies theories about art to the work before him. Most art theories are simply incorrect; the rest are most often misapplied. A theory is a simplification of reality, and to be accurate it must be readjusted to fit every work to which it is applied. This process is risky enough when the theory is applied consciously; when the application is unconscious, reliable evaluation is almost impossible.

One theory which is often mistaken for fact is the idea that works of art may be classified reliably according to movements and that the movements together make up a mainstream that presumably is going somewhere, guided by a vaguely-conceived “Program”. This Program is usually thought of as moving in short, logical steps toward a more meaningful art than we have now. The fact, however, is that only the individual works have an unchallengeable objective reality, while movements, mainstreams and programs are at best pedagogic conveniences and at worst complete disrupters of the viewer’s response. The true, objective history of art is a chronologic list of great individual works. The rest is theory. Nevertheless, the contemporary work of art, when it is criticised professionally, is more often interpreted and evaluated by ascertaining its place in a scheme of classifications than by carefully

examining the work itself. Many works appear in chronicles of recent art, not because of their intrinsic values, but because the chronicler considers them “historically important.”

Many artists have taken advantage of criticism-by-classification by making what I shall call, (after apologising for creating one more classification), one-idea art. This is art which is designed to take one small step along the Program’s path, to be recognised easily by the critic-classifiers, and to be described completely in a brief review and summarised in one paragraph in books on recent art.

Artists who offer us one idea per work are thought of as unusually inventive. More often we are satisfied with one idea per one-man show. From a certain stripe painter we got one idea per career. Sometimes we get one idea per movement: one critic has written that the idea of orthodox Photo-realism is to break down our habit of seeing things in relation to traditional hierarchical composition. It might be that the first painting to offer this idea can be said to contain one entire idea, while subsequent paintings in this style contain no ideas at all. Or perhaps each painting in the movement contains a fraction of an idea equal to the reciprocal of the number of paintings.

Left out of the exchange between the classifiers and the one-idea artists are the creators of so-called “alternative” art. (I say “so-called” because if there is no mainstream, there can be no alternative to it.) Often this art responds directly to its times or to basic constants of the human situation but does not fit into the Program. The artist might be a primitive, cut off (along with most of the world’s population) from the urban and industrial influences which have supposedly determined the course of more easily classifiable art. Or he might be a sophisticated observer who deliberately rejects the Program because it falls short of his needs. To join the mainstream he would have to set aside too many of his abilities and ignore too much of his consciousness. Imagine the loss of individually excellent works if such artists as Lindner, Grooms, Hundertwasser, Nevelson, Paolozzi, Kienholz and Saul Steinberg had tried to force themselves into the Program. What we cannot imagine are the works that would have been created if more artists had held out. The fact that the proportion of unclassifiable works is increasing might seem to be a hopeful sign, but the classifiers have only to invent a new classification to “explain”, however imperfectly, the most visible of the new works, and nothing will have changed.

A general reform in art criticism is long overdue, but perspective reformers must not underestimate the resistance they will face. Criticism-by-classification is the method used by many of our most respected critics, teachers, chroniclers, and museum directors. The intentional fallacy corrodes the reliability of thousands of accepted critical judgements. Although among artists there are no universally recognised giants who must be toppled, many of the world’s most written-about artists have reached their positions, not because their individual works were carefully examined and found to be good, but because these works were found to be in the correct position in the mainstream.

But the basis for a new critical structure exists now. Some reviewers actually do look at the object, especially when they review work by unfamiliar foreign artists, primitive artists or older artists associated with movements of the past. The inventiveness, taste, humanity and intelligence of much contemporary work is often acutely perceived by reviewers. What is missing is the confidence which would spring, not from a new critical theory, but from

a realisation that evaluations were based on sound methods and stripped of the old critical errors. Excellence could then be praised more enthusiastically and shoddiness could at last be properly damned.

The path to this new confidence is long and must begin with humility. A study of the early masters of poetry's New Criticism, an appeal to today's literary critics for guidance, interdisciplinary courses - these would help. A new history of modern art, based on individual works instead of on movements, would help. Also needed is a large-scale, thoroughly documented examination of critical errors in the visual arts without the references to poetic criticism I have had to make. Errors based on fashion, peer pressure and the misuse of language need to be studied. Perhaps the most difficult and painful job must be a work-by-work re-evaluation of many artists whose reputations are based largely on judgements made in the Sixties, when the critical errors I have mentioned were particularly prevalent. Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Tony Smith and Robert Morris are some of the artists whose reputations would suffer most from a more objective criticism.

But the first step must be a subtle change in the attitude of the critic. If he tries to bring to each work the 'modern' mind, he will face the impossible task of renewing his mind each day. Let him instead bring the receptive mind. Here are two quotations, the first from Sam Hunter's *American Art of the Twentieth Century*, the second from Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading*. The reader may judge which one came from a receptive mind.

A cardinal rule of art history is that at any given period certain styles and prescribed pictorial means are more fruitful and productive than others, and that these engage the efforts of the most serious contemporary artists. In our own time the repudiation of illusionism, the rejection of the anecdote, a concern with pure pictorial values, all those tendencies associated with the collective visual revolution known as modernism, have acquired the status of a program for the most convincing artists.

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In general we may say that the deliquescence of instruction in any art proceeds in this manner.

I A master invents a gadget, or procedure to perform a particular function, or a limited set of functions.

Pupils adopt the gadget. Most of them use it less skilfully than the master. The next genius may improve it, or he may cast it aside for something more suited to his own aims.

II Then comes the paste-headed pedagogue or theorist and proclaims the gadget a law, or rule.

II Then a bureaucracy is endowed, and the pin-headed secretariat attacks every new genius and every form of inventiveness for not obeying the law, and for perceiving something the secretariat does not.

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