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Studies in Art Education, Vol. 32, No. 3. (Spring, 1991), pp. 171-177.

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The Critical Writings of Lawrence Alloway

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The study of professional art critics' lives and works raises issues and provides subject matter which can ultimately enhance the teaching and learning of art criticism in the classroom. This particular study focuses on the published art criticism of Lawrence Alloway, the late, internationally known critic of contemporary art. It finds that his criticism was journalistic, primarily descriptive and interpretive, about a wide range of artists and movements, and politically pro-active in its inclusion of under-represented populations of artists and its placement of art works in historical and cultural contexts.

This study of Lawrence Alloway is drawn from a larger investigation of several art critics (Lee, 1988). It is part of an on-going program of research to enhance art criticism in art education (e.g., Barrett, 1988, 1989, in press). In taking a metacritical approach to art criticism, it is in sympathy with others' efforts to elucidate this art-related activity (e.g., Geahigan, 1983; Weitz, 1964). In the public school art classroom, methods associated with art criticism are often used to structure critical activities for learning more about making and responding to art. If art criticism is to be a significant area of content in its own right, however, art education will need an increased body of substantial literature to support credible instruction and curriculum development in this area. Lawrence Alloway (1926-1989) was a prolific writer and important critic of contemporary art. We believe the following description and analysis of this influential art critic's work contributes information and identifies issues that will be needed to enhance the teaching and learning of art criticism in art education.

We first present a brief biographical sketch of Mr. Alloway and then analyze his critical writings by attending to his conception of art criticism, the critical activities in which he engaged, his artistic preferences, and what other critics have said about his criticism of art. Finally, we discuss all of this in light of teaching art criticism in art education contexts.

A Brief Biography of Lawrence Alloway

Perhaps Alloway is best known for his pioneering writing about Pop art – he invented the term in the late 1950s – and his early and continual critical analysis and approval of the work of such artists as Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist, Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, and Jasper Johns. But, he has contributed considerably more to art criticism than this.

Alloway was born in London, England, on September 17, 1926 (Bowker, 1989). He never held a university degree. At the age of 17, however, he began attending evening art history classes at the University of London and soon after began writing art reviews for *Art News and Review*, an art journal for British art in England. His main interest was American art, but he continued to write about British art for *Art News and Review* and later, in the 1950s, for *Art International*.

Alloway visited the United States in 1961 and accepted a one-year teaching position at Bennington College, Vermont. He was a curator of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum from 1962 through 1966. At the Guggenheim his exhibitions included William Baziotēs' "Memorial Exhibition," Barnett Newman's "Stations of the Cross," "Systematic Painting," and the work of John Dubuffet. In 1968, he accepted a teaching position at the State University of New York at Stony Brook where he taught 20th-century art and was a professor of art history until 1981.

Alloway was a contributing editor of *Artforum* from 1971 to 1976 and also wrote art criticism for *The Nation* on a regular basis from 1968 to 1981. He received the Frank Jewett Mather Award for Art Criticism in 1971. Alloway's several books include *American Pop Art* (1974), *Topics in American Art Since 1945* (1975b), *Roy Lichtenstein* (1983), and *Network: Art and the Complex Present* (1984a), the latter appearing in Donald Kuspit's prestigious series of anthologies of critics' writings. Some particularly informative articles by Alloway that will enhance the teaching and learning of art criticism in art education are: "The Expanding and Disappearing Work of Art" (1975a), "The Uses and Limits of Art Criticism" (1975c), "Women's Art in the Seventies" (1984c), "Women's Art and the Failure of Art Criticism" (1984b), and "The Renewal of Realist Criticism" (1981). His most recent articles include "Andy Warhol: A Collage of Appreciation from the Artist's Colleagues, Critics and Friends" (1987). Mr. Alloway's failing health restricted his travel in his final years, but he continued to write articles and books until his death in 1989.

Alloway's Concepts of Art and Criticism

Alloway understood art in terms of society as a whole: how art is used in a society and how it affects that society. He looked for the broader, dynamic, social meaning of the work, and asked: Is this art representative of our time? Believing art to be a current event which becomes history, he especially looked for "topicality" in art (Alloway, 1975c, p. 258), that is, he looked for new information and new topics which were previously undiscovered within art. Donald Kuspit, another influential contemporary critic, claims in his "Preface" to Alloway's (1984a) *Net Work: Art and the Complex Present* that Alloway tied the topicality and historical origin of art to a social matrix and was looking for the broader social character of art because, for him, art was "more social than personal" (p. xiii). Alloway sought connections between art and society, and he "never thought that art could be isolated from the rest of culture" (Alloway, 1974, August). He also appreciated the diversity of art, rejecting what he considered to be Clement Greenberg's overly restrictive insistence on abstraction in art as well as his tendency to isolate art criticism from larger cultural considerations (Alloway, 1974, August).

Alloway (1975c) defined the art critic's task as "the description, interpretation, and evaluation of new art" (p. 251). Stressing the importance of description, he wanted to maintain "a balance between describing and the act of

evaluating" (Alloway, 1973, July). For him, the critic's function was weighted more toward "description and open-mindedness rather than toward premature evaluation and narrow specialization," and he wanted "to stay away from saying good and bad" (Alloway, 1974, August). He understood art criticism to be "short term art history," "objective information available at the moment," and "a distribution of information" (Alloway, 1974, August).

Alloway (1975b) stressed the new: "The subject of art criticism is new art or at least recent art. It is usually the first written response" (p. 11). He suggested it was "the closeness in time of the critical text and the making of the work of art [which] gives art criticism its special flavor" (p. 11). "Though critics enjoy the art of the past, their publications on it are less likely to be decisive than those of art historians" (p. 251). He attended to cultural newness and became known for his requirement of topicality.

Alloway felt the need to include under-represented art for critical attention, especially works by Black, Puerto Rican, and women artists, and he insisted that art criticism include all types of art. He made every effort to expand the spectator's attention into a variety of environmental spaces and objects, and to provide discussions of visual culture which were broader than those traditionally included in the history of art.

Alloway's Activities of Criticizing Art

Alloway (1975c) called his critical activities "mapping procedures" (p. 251). These mapping procedures included articulation of his overall impression of an art work, metaphorical description of the work, and information about the artist's images, including that gleaned from other published accounts of the work. In addition to identifying the subject matter, media, structure, techniques, and processes used in the artwork, Alloway considered the work's origins, both in terms of art history and in terms of social and cultural movements and issues. He looked for relationships between the new work and its conceptual and stylistic antecedents, often comparing the new work to the artist's previous work and to the work of other artists, past and contemporary. He established intellectual context for an artwork by relating the issues it raised to issues raised by other works, present or past. For example, in treating the work of Sol LeWitt, Alloway (1984a) asked such questions as these: What antecedents can be found for LeWitt's early formulation of Conceptual art? In the 1960s, what does the term "Minimal art" mean? Where did LeWitt's use of the grid form come from?

Alloway's mapping procedures also included a search for a work's meaning. For Alloway (1984a), this was to be found in "the interaction of the artist's intention and the spectator's interpretation" (pp. 8-9). For his interpretive explorations, Alloway drew upon several sources including the overall structure and specific formal aspects of the work, its title, the social origin of the artist, the artist's ideological sources, and the conceptual development apparent in the artist's work. In his interpretive efforts, Alloway also considered statements about the work made by other critics and artists. Although he utilized the artist's own statements and relied on the artist's stated intentions when he interpreted a particular work, he was in agreement with Marcel Duchamp "who has proposed that the function of the audience is to determine the meaning of the work when it is out of the artist's hands" (p. 7).

Regarding correctness of interpretation, Alloway (1984a) insisted on "flexibility to singular meaning and absolute standards" (p. 9). He asserted that "it

goes against all one's experience of art to presume that exhaustive interpretation is possible" (p. 9) and held that flexibility of interpretation "is preferable to dogmatic avowals of singular meaning and absolute standards" (p. 9).

And finally, Alloway's mapping procedures included evaluation of the artwork. When evaluating art, his primary criterion was its communicative impact. For example, he (1974a) praised Pop art on the basis of its "translatability and commonality" of "themes from popular culture" (p. 9). Similarly, he (1981) praised New Realist art because of its "wealth of iconographic relationships," "personal references," and its references "to objects and conditions outside a work's formal limits" (p. 110). Alloway championed much women's art because it addresses "the social experience of women" (p. 110).

Alloway's Preferences in Art

Alloway is identified with Pop art and Realism. Although he wrote about Abstract Expressionism and Adolph Gottlieb, De Kooning and Jackson Pollock, Allan Kaprow and Happenings, Op art, the Earthworks of Robert Smithson, and the Conceptual art of Sol LeWitt, he was more comfortable with representational imagery. He seemed to dislike emotionally expressive styles and to prefer controlled styles, best illustrated by his critical response to Pop art.

In his "Preface" to Alloway's (1984a) *Net Work: Art and the Complex Present*, fellow critic Donald Kuspit identified Alloway's preferences with "the unresolved, 'nobody wins' dialectical play of the opposites" (p. xvii) and claimed that Alloway favored such artists as Alex Katz, Roy Lichtenstein, and Philip Pearlstein because they were "cool" rather than "hot," like De Kooning, whom Alloway mocked. Kuspit thought that Alloway preferred a style that takes a repressive, controlling attitude to subject matter, rather than a style that explosively expresses.

Critics of Alloway's Criticism

Donald Kuspit has honored Alloway by including him in the four series of anthologies on Contemporary American Art Critics, which were published by UMI Research Press: Lawrence Alloway (1984a), Donald Kuspit (1984b), Joseph Masheck (1984), and Robert Pincus-Witten (1984). Kuspit (Alloway, 1984a) praised Alloway for rethinking the meaning of a work by regarding it as a current event and re-posing it in terms of history. Kuspit admired Alloway for his ability to exhibit an understanding of art based on a profound sense of its social character and its relationship to society as a whole.

Kuspit, however, has also judged Alloway's journalistic and descriptive method to be too simple. In his essay, "Art Criticism: Where's the Depth?," Kuspit (1984a) said that "Alloway's approach is the best for producing the evidence itself—I know of no other critic today who so admirably produces such a wide range of evidence—but not the range of possible conclusions about it" (p. 78). Kuspit (Alloway, 1984a) admired Alloway's acceptance of plurality but thought he had "written seemingly randomly about an enormous variety of artists, many of whom are conventionally understood to have 'fallen below standards'" (p. xiii).

Robert Pincus-Witten (1973, July), another influential art critic, has understood Alloway's art criticism to be journalistic criticism in the tradition of Diderot and Baudelaire. Pincus-Witten praised Alloway as one who chronicled his impressions, presenting a vivid, on-going response. But Pincus-Witten agreed with Kuspit that Alloway did not provide enough depth in his analysis of art. Alloway (1973, July) himself admitted to being perplexed by looking at so

many examples of art, what he called the "population problem" regarding artworks.

Discussion

Alloway was interested in the art of his times, and he understood that his words would be some of the first written about a new work. He wrote Apollinaire's kind of criticism from "straight journalistic motives, describing a complex art scene" (Alloway, 1975c, p. 255). His style of writing was fluid, conversational, and written to be understood. He considered a wide variety of new works in a variety of environmental spaces, and he placed them within cultural and historical contexts. He argued that art historical study within education should be broadened to include "visual culture." He was politically pro-active in his inclusions of the art of under-represented peoples, especially the work of women, Black, and Puerto Rican artists. Alloway rejected the use of preconceived aesthetic standards for criticism, preferring "flexibility" over "singular meaning and absolute standards."

Although it would be remiss to draw hard and fast conclusions for the teaching and learning of art criticism on the basis of one professional's critical writings, some observations for art education are pertinent. Alloway's specific mention of "the description, interpretation and evaluation" of new art as the task of the critic reinforces the activities long upheld in art education literature and practice (e.g., Feldman, 1973).

Alloway's writing remains exemplary in many ways and could be a model for students for several reasons. He was self-taught as a critic, not tutored through the British university system, and he succeeded without a college degree. He was self-motivated to write about art, and he educated himself about art and criticism. His motivation and determination are inspiring: Critics need to be informed but not necessarily through formal education.

Alloway was open to and excited by a wide range of new art works, and he tried to make them understandable to a wide audience of viewers. He made them understandable by placing them in a context for his readers; that is, he described what he saw, providing as fully as he could information about where the pieces emerged from. He placed the work within historical time and cultural place. He traced the artist's stylistic and conceptual developments from the past, drew connections between an artwork and the artist's other work, and the work of other artists which relate to it. He included in his discussion what an artist had said about a work and what other critics had said.

Description was essential to Alloway's method of art criticism, and this should reinforce the value placed on description in art education literature and teaching. He also minimized the critic's role as judge, stressing description and interpretation over evaluation. His emphasis on critical understanding rather than judgment is consistent with the views of several art educators who have written on criticism (Barrett, 1988; Feinstein, 1989; Feldman, 1973).

Although Alloway by no means ignored aspects of the work itself, his conception of description was very broad. It included the context in which the work was situated and the context from which it had emerged. His inclusive conception of description provides a counter-balance to conceptions of description which are limited to the immediate physical presence of the work of art.

Alloway considered comments by artists about their work, in his attempts to interpret their work. This makes his writing vulnerable to flaws of the so-called "intentionalist fallacy" – what aestheticians have referred to as a major prob-

lem in criticism (e.g., Beardsley & Wimsatt, 1954)—but in his favor, Alloway used artists' intentions intelligently and not simplistically; that is, he took them not as the ultimate truth about the work, but as contextual information, as some words about an artwork which might illuminate it. In classroom and studio critiques, art students have an urge to seek the authoritative pronouncements from an artist to assure correctness when interpreting his or her work. Alloway's cautions may serve as a correction to this understandable but misguided urge: "Contact with the artist can produce information of an accuracy impossible to achieve in another way, but it can also inhibit writers from taking the discussion in directions that the artists resist or have not thought of" (Alloway, 1984a, p. 7).

Alloway had explicit preferences for certain kinds of art. That is not to say that he judged art according to his idiosyncratic preferences, but that he had certain affinities to certain styles, that he had more interest in certain artists than in others, and that he chose to write about some art and not about other art. Preferences in art seem a good thing for this critic, and perhaps we should encourage our students to develop tolerance for diversity in art while fostering their special affection for certain art of their choosing. With Alloway as a model, however, we might also encourage them to sample carefully many kinds of art by many kinds of artists in several situations before narrowing their preferential choices.

With his insistence on "flexibility" of interpretation and evaluation, and his rejection of "absolute standards" for evaluation, Alloway can serve as a corrective to dogmatic interpretations and evaluations of art. He is also exemplary in his expression of humility about his work: He understood that the critic is in the difficult position of writing first words about new work. Alloway's criticism was criticized by other critics, he was aware of the criticism, and he himself admitted vulnerability as a critic. That criticism can be, is, and should be criticized is an important lesson for anyone.

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