

Principles for Interpreting Art

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Teaching interpretation within art criticism is probably the most difficult aspect of teaching criticism because interpretation is perhaps the least understood and most often confused of critical activities. Interpretation is also the most important aspect of criticism because a responsible interpretation necessarily includes description, and because a thorough interpretation of a work of art, which results in an understanding of that art, renders judgment much easier and perhaps superfluous. Judgment of a work of art without interpretation, however, is both irresponsible and irresponsible.

This article is written to guide art teachers in engaging their students in interpretive dialogue about works of art and to provide criteria for assessing their interpretations of art. The following principles of interpretation derive from the writings of aestheticians, art critics, art educators and the author's experience in writing criticism and teaching others to interpret art. These principles are not exclusive of other possible principles; rather, they form a relatively comprehensive, complementary and useful set of principles for guiding and assessing interpretive discussions.

Artworks have "aboutness" (Danto, 1981) and demand interpretation. This is the fundamental principle identified by aestheticians (e.g., Danto, 1981, Goodman, 1976) and readily accepted by critics (e.g., Alloway, 1975; Kuspit in Van Proyen, 1991). It is sometimes disputed, however, by artists, an occasional art professor and more frequently art students inclined to hold that "art speaks for itself," or "you can't talk about art." Whether art seems confounding or readily understandable, it has potential for provoking and sustaining interesting interpretations. A work of art is an expressive object made by a person and, therefore, unlike a tree, a rock or other mere things, it is always about something; thus, unlike trees or rocks, artworks call for interpretations.

Responsible interpretations present the artwork in its best rather than in its weakest light. This principle is in the spirit of fair play, generosity of spirit and respect of artists.

Interpretations are arguments. Intelligent critics' interpretive arguments entail premises which lead to conclusions based on reason and evidence. For their arguments, critics draw evidence from a variety of sources: what they see in the artwork, what they know about the artist's other works, and their knowledge of the times in which the work was made and to which it might refer. Because good critics are generally persuasive and write in an engaging literary manner, their interpretations rarely reveal themselves as logical arguments based on premises that result in a conclusion. Criticism usually needs to be read carefully to determine a critic's interpretations of art.

Interpretations are persuasive. Criticism is persuasive rhetoric; that is, the critic would like the reader to see a work of art the way the critic sees it. A critic tries to engage the reader in

a similar perception and understanding so that eventually the reader will be likely to think, "Yes, I see what you mean", "Yes, I now see it the way you see it." Interpretations should be analysed as arguments to see if they are persuasive by the reasons they offer as well as by their colourful terms and carefully wrought phrases.

Some interpretations are better than others. This principle defends against often heard objections by those not knowledgeable about criticism—"That's just your interpretation" — by which they usually mean that no one interpretation is better than any other and, further, that no interpretation is more certain than any other. This is a form of intellectual relativism that is somehow tolerated more in the arts than in the humanities and sciences. This principle, on the contrary, holds that all interpretations are not equal, that some interpretations are better argued, better grounded in evidence, and therefore more reasonable, more persuasive and more readily acceptable.

No single interpretation is exhaustive of the meaning of an artwork and there can be different, competing and contradictory interpretations of the same artwork. Any given artwork may receive several different interpretations, each providing subtle nuances or bold alternatives for understanding. A single, comprehensive but exhaustive interpretation is not a goal of interpretation. Since an artwork may generate a variety of plausible interpretations, interpretations may compete, encouraging the reader to choose among them, especially if interpretations of the same work of art are contradictory.

This principle encourages a diversity of interpretations from a number of viewers and from a number of points of view. It values an artwork as a rich repository of expression that allows for a rich variety of responses. Any one critic may note something that another has overlooked or has not mentioned. One critic presents an interpretation that contributes to another critic's previous interpretation. These enrich our understanding of a work of art. They also enrich our appreciation of the responsiveness of human beings.

Although this principle allows for and encourages a variety of interpretations of a work of art, it may not be logically possible for one to hold all interpretations about the same work of art if those interpretations are mutually exclusive or contradictory. One could, however, sympathetically understand several different and contradictory interpretations if one understood the beliefs and values of the critic.

Interpretations imply a world view. We all move through the world with a more or less articulated set of assumptions about existence, and it is through these that we interpret everything, including works of art. Some critics interpret art on the basis of less articulated theories. Others have more finely articulated and consistent world views, based on study of philosophy, psychology and other disciplines. Through these they interpret works of art. They may operate on the basis of psychoanalytic theory, for example, or offer neo-Marxist critiques of all works of art they encounter.

Sometimes the critics make their basic assumptions about art and life explicit; more often, however, they leave them implicit. Once the critic's world view is identified, choices follow. One can accept the world view and the interpretation that it influences or reject both the world view and the interpretation, accept the world view but disagree with how it is applied to the artwork, or reject the world view but accept the specific interpretation it yields.

Good interpretations of art tell more about the artwork than they tell about the interpreter. Good interpretations must clearly pertain to the work of art. Critics come to a work of art with a history and a world view and these do, should and must affect how they see a work of art. All interpretations reveal the critic, but the critic's primary challenge is to direct the reader to better perceive and understand the art object in question. This principle guards against interpretations that are too subjective, those that tell us more about the critic than the art the critic is interpreting.

If one cannot relate the critic's interpretation to the work of art the critic is discussing, the interpretation may be too subjective. If it is, it will not be enlightening about the object, and will not be valuable as an interpretation of the artwork, and hence is not a good interpretation.

Interpretations are not so much absolutely right, but more or less reasonable, convincing, enlightening and informative (Hampshire in Kennick, 1975). This principle holds that there is no one true interpretation of an artwork, and that good interpretations are not so much "right" as they are compelling, original, insightful and so forth.

Good interpretations have coherence, correspondence and inclusiveness. A good interpretation should be a coherent statement in itself and it should also correspond to the artwork. Coherence is an autonomous and internal criterion. One could judge whether an interpretation was coherent without seeing the artwork; that is, the argument either makes sense or it doesn't. Correspondence is an external criterion that asks whether the interpretation fits the artwork. A coherent interpretation may not sufficiently correspond to the work being interpreted. This principle also protects against interpretations which tend towards unleashed speculation, by asking the interpreter to adhere to what is actually in the artwork.

The demand for inclusiveness ensures that an interpretation accounts for all that is in an artwork. If an interpretation omits mention of an aspect of an artwork, that interpretation is suspect. If the interpretation leads one to believe that it has the capacity to account for the omission, but that capacity has for some reason not been used, the interpretation is not as flawed as when an interpretation cannot account for what it has ignored.

Feelings are guides to interpretations. These principles do not suggest or imply that the critic's or any viewer's feelings are not important to understanding art. A person's ability to respond to a work of art is emotional as well as intellectual, from the gut and the heart as well as from the head. This principle rejects the dichotomous distinction between thought and feeling; on the contrary, it asserts that thought and feeling are irrevocably intertwined. To be successfully interpretive, however, the critic must articulate feeling and thought in such a way that readers may share them and see how they are related to the artwork.

It is interpretively risky to arrive at a confident interpretation of one piece of art without knowledge of any others by the artist. To interpret a single new piece of art by an unknown is very difficult. Critics usually have the benefit of knowledge of several artworks by an artist when they interpret any one of that artist's artworks.

An interpretation of an artwork need not match the artist's intent for the artwork.

The meaning of an artwork should not be limited to what was intended by the artist. Its meaning might be much broader than even the artist knows. Some artists do not work with specific, conscious intentions to express particular and definite ideas. Some are quite comfortable with their lack of specificity of intent while they are working. About making her paintings, Susan Rothenberg (in Marshall & Mapplethorpe, 1986), for example, says: "The results are a way of discovering what I know and what I don't, what I didn't know I knew, and what I want to learn--which are things that seem close to unpaintable, which is why I love painting, which is not quite like the donkey and the carrot, but close" (p. 94).

The artist's interpretation of his or her own work of art, if the artist has one and expresses it, is one interpretation among many, and it is not necessarily more accurate or more acceptable just because it is the artist's interpretation. Some artists are quite articulate and speak and write very insightfully about their work; others do not, and some choose not to discuss the meaning of their work, not wanting their art to be limited by their own views of it.

Very importantly, this principle actively places the responsibility of interpretation squarely on the shoulders of viewers, not on artists. However, a critic ought not to be the spokesperson for the artist. This is to say that the critic should do much more than transcribe what artists say about their work; rather, critics must interpret.

The objects of interpretations are artworks, not artists. In casual conversation about art, it is artists who are often interpreted—"He's just trying to shock us." "She's an angry woman."—rather than the work they make. In criticism, however, it should be the objects that are interpreted rather than the persons who made the objects. This principle does not exclude biographical information. Oftentimes critics provide information about the lives of artists. Such biographical information, however, should be used to provide insight into the work. Biographical information reminds us that art does not emerge apart from a social environment. In a few sentences in *Artnews*, critic Curtia James (1990) provides a good example of how biographical information can be interpretively informative regarding a sculptural installation by Beverly Buchanan: "Buchanan's *Shack South: Inside and out* was a full-size shack patched together out of cedar, pine, twine, and cardboard. Buchanan is from Athens, Georgia. As a child she traveled with her father, a professor of agriculture, who documented the lives of black farmers. She saw many shacks like this and perceived how each inhabitant put his or her own stamp, or imprint, on the dwelling, an imprint that identified the individual in the community. Buchanan's loving ability to capture that individual imprint made *Shack South* an image of humble nobility" (p. 203).

There is a caution, however, that concerns what might be called "biographical determinism." Artists should not be locked into their biographic pasts, nor should one argue that if someone is of this race or that gender or this historical background, then their art must be about such factors.

All art is in part about the world in which it emerged. Donald Kuspit (in Van Proyen, 1991) reinforced this principle when discussing his study of psychoanalysis and its effect on his criticism of art: "I began to feel that the artist is not exempt from life. There is

no way out from seeing art as a reflection or mediation or a comment on life. I became interested in the process, including the artist's life. I became interested in how art reflected the artist's life as well as how it reflected life issues, or existential issues with which we are all involved" (p.19).

Another critic, Pamela Hammond (1990), reminds us of the importance of this principle, especially when interpreting the art of artists from a culture different from that of the critic. When she writes about the sculpture, often Japanese artists showing in America, she informs us that traditional Japanese art does not recognise "sculpture" in and of itself. When interpreting the massive, shaped timbers of Chuichi Fujii, she informs us that Japanese tradition teaches that material possesses a life force equivalent to that of a human, and that "the dualistic Judeo-Christian view that nature defers to man opposes the belief of Eastern cultures rooted in the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, life and death, good and evil" (pp. 201-202). Her critical knowledge of traditional Japanese aesthetics informs her interpretation and our understanding of the work.

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All art is in part about other art. Critics state over and over again who influenced a particular artist and about whose art the artist's work may be commenting. Art does not emerge within an aesthetic vacuum. Artists are generally aware of the work of other artists and often they are especially aware of the work of certain artists. Even untrained artists are aware of and influenced by the visual representations in their societies. This principle asserts that all art can be interpreted as to how it is influenced by other art, and that in many cases, some art is specifically about other art. Art can be about life, about art, or both. An important guide to interpreting any art is to see how it relates to and directly or indirectly comments upon other art.

Interpretation is ultimately a communal endeavour (Parsons, 1987), **and the community is eventually self-corrective.** This is an optimistic view of the art world and scholarship that holds that critics and historians and other serious interpreters will eventually correct less than adequate interpretations and eventually put forth better interpretations. This happens in the short run and the long run. In the short run, interpretations might be very nearsighted. This principle asserts that eventually these narrow interpretations will be broadened. Essays in exhibition catalogues, for example, are often compilations by scholarly critics of the best thinking about an artist's work to that point. Such compilations put forth the most plausible interpretations available at the time and omit less informative ones.

Feminist revisionist accounts of historical art made by women are a case in point. Scholars for years and for centuries have ignored the art of many women, and it is only now, through

work begun by feminist historians, that the historical record is being repaired. This is a good example of the scholarly community correcting its own mistakes, however belatedly.

Good interpretations invite us to see for ourselves and to continue on our own (Eaton, 1988). This principle reasserts the openness of interpretations and encourages the viewer to get involved with the meaning of art. It opposes "right" interpretations that end interpretive discussions, and it provides the viewer with individual freedom to meander intellectually through fields of thought. It might also serve as a goal for interpreters to be friendly to their audiences by drawing them in, engaging them in conversation rather than halting discussion by dogmatic pronouncements.

Implications for Teaching

These principles are general and should hold true no matter what the age of interpreters, but some of the principles will not make sense to some students, depending on their stage of intellectual development. Nonetheless, the principles can provide direction for teachers in leading interpretive discussions and for assessing the learning of students regarding the interpretation of art. Third graders, for example, can arrive at a simple and adequate interpretation of William Wegman's photograph *Dressed for Ball* by seeing it as a humorous *double entendre*; the dog is dressed for the tennis ball above its head and for a formal dance. Karen Atkinson, a senior art student at Columbus Alternative High School, however, has written this more insightful interpretation: "People often get dressed up for some big social to-do, as this dog has. However, that social to-do may be inflated in significance. In reality, what seems too important may in fact be as ordinary as the bouncing ball. The significance of the event is extrinsic—created by the people who think the event is important."

In an ideal interpretive discussion by advanced art interpreters, every principle would come into play, but these would be hard to track without a verbatim transcript. Teachers may wish to concentrate on and reinforce one or another principle in a given lesson, while they are generally guided by all of them. To teach that interpretations are arguments, for example, students can be led in a close reading of a piece of published criticism appropriate for their level of development and be helped in listing on a chalk board the critic's premises that lead to a conclusion.

They can look for evidence the critic supplies for the interpretation and identify persuasive uses of language. Similarly, after the students have interpreted a work of art, they can reiterate their own premises which led to their conclusion.

These principles should hold true for interpreting children's art as well as art made by mature artists. Too often in classroom situations we ask the child artist to be the interpreter and spokesperson for his or her own work. This common activity diminishes the responsibility of the viewer to thoughtfully respond to works of art and runs counter to the interpretive principles offered here.

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These principles are extended with examples of the writings of professional critics regarding their interpretations of photographs by William Wegman, the word pieces of Jenny Holzer, and paintings by Elizabeth Murray, in Chapter 3, *Interpreting Art*. Barrett, Terry, (1994), *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary*, Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.

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