TERRY BARRETT: AN EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER SIX OF CRITICIZING ART: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEMPORARY

THIS FINAL CHAPTER EMBODIES the ultimate purpose of the book: to help you write and talk about art better than you were able to do before you read it. Many art critics have been quoted throughout so that you would have many positions to consider, several literary styles to read, different ideological positions among which to choose. You should now be in a position to develop a critical voice of your own. Do you want to further feminist criticism? Would you like to publish in the popular press and influence large numbers of people? Are there certain types of art or aesthetic issues about which you feel passionate and about which you want readers to know?

The chapter assumes that you are serious about learning and writing. If you are not, you are likely wasting your time and that of anyone who has to read what you write. The writer Annie Dillard advises anyone who writes to "write as if you were dying. At the same time, assume you write for an audience consisting solely of terminal patients. That is, after all, the case."

Each chapter has included a large number of references, and there is a lengthy bibliography at the end of the book. These references are provided in order to credit properly all the authors whose ideas were examined and, especially, to encourage you to read further. The quotations are brief and are used as examples to make various points. If you are intrigued by any of the quotes, pleased with the way someone writes, find the source in the library and read the critic's whole piece. Let these professional critics inspire your own critical thinking and writing.

Art critics are good models for those who want to engage in serious thought and writing about the art of our times. You probably identified with some critics, preferred some styles of writing, and felt closer to certain critical positions than to others--and now you can begin to articulate why. Because you have heard many voices, you are in a better position to further develop your own.

Choosing What to Write About

If you are going to write art criticism, you have to have something to write about. You may be able to choose what you want, or you may have an assignment given by a professor or an editor. The critics quoted throughout the book work both ways: Some choose what they write about; others are given assignments or cover certain important exhibitions out of a sense of responsibility to their readers. It is usually easier to write about something you choose--you can avoid art you don't know enough about or aren't interested in. If you can choose, choose something you are passionate about or at least interested in. You might choose art that you love or art that you hate. You might choose art you know a lot about, or art you know little but want to learn more about.

If you are given an assignment by an editor or a professor that you are not interested in, ask for a change by suggesting more interesting alternative topics. Your professors may be more flexible
than you think. Professors want students to learn, and if you can convince them that you can learn more from your chosen topic than their assigned topic, they may be willing to accept your proposal. If your request is denied, you need to motivate yourself. You might even examine your lack of interest as a premise for the piece. And once you investigate the assigned topic, your initial reactions might change. Your changed feelings could be an organizing theme of your writing: Begin by describing your initial lack of interest and then explain how and for what reasons your feelings changed. If your initial reaction doesn't change, you might write a piece that is primarily negative, giving convincing arguments for your position. The point is you want to be emotionally and intellectually involved and committed to what you are expressing. Do whatever helps you to motivate yourself to write honest and committed criticism.

SINGLE WORKS OF ART
Are you writing about a single work of art, an exhibition by one artist, or a group show of several artists? Each of these presents its own challenges. If the assignment is to write about a single work of art, then get to know that work of art very well. A single work of art is often part of a much larger body of work, and it is always embedded in a cultural context. The larger body of work and the culture in which it was made will inform you about that one piece.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS
Many of the critics quoted in this book were writing about exhibitions, often analyzing single pieces to support their larger thesis about an artist or the exhibition. Critics usually write about exhibitions or large bodies of work. Historians are more likely to concentrate on a single work of art, trying to determine who made it and when, or what it might have meant to the people who saw it during the time and in the place in which it was made and shown. The critics quoted in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 have concentrated on bodies of work made by such artists as Dale Chihuly, Deborah Butterfield, Romare Bearden, Frida Kahlo, and Martin Puryear. They had the advantage of being able to write about more than one work of art. It is an advantage because they had more to consider and could choose which pieces to examine and which to ignore. They didn't have to write about every piece or limit their comments to one artwork. They could compare and contrast several works by the same artist. However, they also had the challenge of making summary interpretive and evaluative statements about the lifelong careers of artists and whole bodies of work.

If you are writing about an exhibition by a single artist, you will probably want to provide an overview of the artist's accomplishments, pointing out stylistic similarities among the pieces that make the work distinctive. You might also consider whether the exhibition is a retrospective of a whole career of a living or deceased artist or an exhibition of works made during a particular period in the artist's career. You can determine if the artist's style has changed over time and, if so, describe how it evolved. Tell your reader if the work is by a professionally young or mature artist. Consider whether the work is a transition from or a continuation of a previous direction by the artist.

GROUP SHOWS
Group shows can be very challenging, depending on the number of artists in the exhibition. Some exhibitions may have fifty or more artists represented by one or two pieces each. Unless you are writing a very long paper or a book, writing about every artist and every piece would be impossible. Even to mention the names of all fifty artists would consume too much space. You will have to choose which artists and which pieces to concentrate on. Here are some strategies that may help: Look for interpretive themes that unite individual works; write about the best and the worst; describe the range of expression in the exhibition.

If the group show includes fewer artists, say six, then you are probably obligated to write something about the work of each, concentrating on those you feel to be most important or most interesting. If the number of artists is up to ten and you have a limited word count, then you will probably mention all but, again, concentrate on a few. Explain why these particular artists were brought together at this time in this exhibition, how they were selected and by whom. Include the exhibition's title if it has one and any explicit theme. If there is no explicit theme, make a conjecture about why these works are being shown together. Always inquire whether the exhibition curator has written a catalog or provided some statement of explanation. If the artists themselves chose to show their work together, you can consider how the works relate to each other.

Include and comment on the written opinions of curators and artists when they are available. Consider interviewing artists and curators. Unless you are doing a news story, however, your writing should be more than just quotations of what the artists and curators think about the work. Use their thoughts to provide context, but keep in mind that it is your own point of view about what they say that is of interest and importance.

**Describing**

Remember from Chapter 3 that description is criticism, not merely a prelude to criticism. Your readers may never see the art you are writing about and your description may be their only access to it. You cannot count on having a photograph accompany your piece, but you always have your words. The main task in describing a work of art is to tell what it looks like. Describe accurately and with vivacity. Make the work come alive for your readers--give them a verbal image they can see. If you describe thoroughly and passionately, description may be all you need.

Chapter 3 discusses two major sources of descriptive data: internal and external. Internal information is based on what can be seen in the work itself and can be divided into three categories: subject matter, medium, and form. Subject matter refers to those recognizable people, places, or events in a work--the nouns of the work. The medium is the material of which the work is made. Form is how the artist shapes the subject with the medium. In nonobjective and nonrepresentational work, medium and form may be predominant, with no identifiable subject matter. Chapter 3 includes good descriptive examples of writing from many critics on many different types of art forms from performance art to glassmaking. You may want to refer to these.
External contextual information includes data about the time in which the piece was made--its social and intellectual milieu--other works by the same artist, and works by other artists of the same period. You can also place the work within a setting for your readers. Describe the gallery, the general tone of the exhibition, the dates during which the work was shown, and the number of pieces in the exhibition. Provide accurate information about titles, sizes, media. Provide information about who curated the exhibition and whether the work is for sale and in what price range. If biographical information about the artist would be helpful to your readers or helpful in defending your thesis about the work, then provide it. The test of what to include in description and what to ignore is relevancy. Relevancy refers both to what your readers need to know and to what you need to tell your readers so your thesis makes sense.

If you are assigned a descriptive paper by a professor, know whether you are expected to be descriptive only, or if you are allowed to color your descriptions with your preferences and values. If you are only to describe--not to make value judgments--then take care to avoid implied evaluations of positive or negative worth. If you are given free rein, let the reader know that you like (or dislike) the art. Also know if you can include external information.

**Interpreting**

Recall from Chapter 4 that interpretation of an artwork can be based on two types of information: internal evidence and external evidence. Internal evidence consists of what is in the work itself; it is drawn from a description of the work. External evidence consists of relevant information not within the work itself: the artist's other works; the artist's biography, including gender, race, age; and the social, political, and religious milieu of the time and place in which the work was made. If you are assigned an interpretive paper to write, ask whether your interpretation may go beyond what is in the work and include external sources.

The basic premise of interpretation is that works of art are about something. When you interpret, you present your understanding of the work in a way that is convincing, both by how you write and by the evidence you provide. You want to make the work as interesting to the reader as the work allows. Always present an artwork in its strongest rather than weakest light.

In a sense, all art is about other art--that is, influenced by and in dialogue with other art. At the same time, all art is affected by the culture in which the artist lives and, in turn, affects the culture in which it is shown. The interpretive goal is to make the art meaningful to your reader in terms of the art itself, the artist's other work, all art, and culture.

If you are writing about a new artist, you have advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is that any true thing you write is a contribution because you are one of the first to do so. A disadvantage is that you are starting the dialogue without benefit of an ongoing conversation about the artist. Much has already been written about an established artist, and your challenge in this case is to add something to the discussion.
If you are writing about the work of an artist who has already been written about, you can consult these other writings or develop your own interpretation. There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches. Working on your own, without reading others' thoughts on the same topic, requires a certain amount of self-confidence and a willingness to take risks. If you trust yourself and trust that your insights are worthwhile, you will probably contribute to ongoing thought about the work. If you consult other writers, then you will need to go beyond what they have already written and contribute to the conversation. If you take the latter approach, you can add the points of view of these other critics to your own, thus giving your readers options among interpretations. And if you do take this course, be sure to fully credit all the others.

Throughout this book, we have examined several interpretive and ideological perspectives: psychoanalytical, semiotic, feminist, neo-Marxist, poststructuralist, modernist, postmodernist, and idiosyncratic worldviews. When you select art to write about, you might decipher the ideological basis of the artwork itself and adapt your criticism accordingly. If the art is clearly postmodern, for example, you can explain it in those terms and enlighten your reader about postmodernist theory. If you disagree with the ideology of the art, first explain what it is and then resist the ideology with reasonable arguments.

Judging

Responsible judgments include a clear assessment of the worth of an art object and reasons for the assessment based on reasonable criteria. Critics disagree about which exact criteria are appropriate for judging art. Types of criteria are realism, formalism, expressionism, instrumentalism, and combinations and variations thereof. As stated in Chapter 5, you need to decide which criteria or criterion you are going to use. You may let the art itself decide by which criteria it should be judged: If it is obviously a political work, for example, then instrumentalist criteria would apply. If it is a formalist work, then you might apply formalist criteria to it. This is a generous and accepting approach that allows you a wide range of tolerance for many types of art.

You may, however, want to hold more narrowly to a particular set of criteria and judge all art, no matter what it strives to do, according to your chosen criteria. For example, because of the severe social problems in the world, you may want to measure all art by instrumentalist criteria, favoring only that art which attempts to make the world a better place in which to live. Thus, you might reject formalist work as socially irrelevant and a waste of human energy and natural resources.

These are difficult choices: You may err on the side of aimless and contradictory eclecticism or narrow rigidity. Or perhaps you will be able to find some amicable middle ground.

When you judge art, you are not giving advice to artists but rather articulating to readers why you think something is good or not and on what basis. To judge is to risk the possibility of being demeaning to the artist by assuming a superior role or attitude. Such an approach will likely set
you against artists, and them against you, in an antagonistic way. Antagonism is not in the spirit of good criticism. Criticism is meant to further rather than to end discourse about art; you want to further the discussion by inclusion rather than dismissive exclusions. Most often, critics' judgments are positive, informing readers why a work of art is meaningful and enjoyable. Resist finding minor faults in works of art--fault finding is petty--and argue for larger issues. Be generous to artists in your considerations of their art and be enthusiastic for your readers. The spirit of this book is one of curiosity because the purpose of criticism is to arouse curiosity and sometimes satisfy it.

**Considering Assumptions**

Infer the ideological basis of the art you are considering, and know and identify your own. What constitutes good art for the artist you are considering? What constitutes good art for you? Can you list your ten commandments of good art? Are there contradictions in your set? Are your assumptions and beliefs in consort with the art you are considering, or in conflict with them? Can you make both clear to your reader?

If the brief consideration in Chapter 2 of theoretical topics interested you, you would do well to take courses in aesthetics within a department of philosophy. You might also look into courses on recent literary theory and criticism, film theory and criticism, and women's studies, all of which are affecting art theory. You may have a penchant for writing feature-length articles of theoretical criticism rather than reviews of particular exhibitions. You may want to write social theory based on artifacts. Some critics are concerned with larger issues and use works of art as examples of their theories. Others are content to write art journalism, or news about artists, rather than criticism. There is room for many approaches. Try several, find what you are comfortable doing, and do it as well as you can.