

Responding to Art: A Life of Engagement
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I grew up an anxious kid in a small town about an hour west of Chicago. When I was born, dad was in the Battle of the Bulge in World War II: He told mom, “we lost lots of men.” I imagine he was in post-traumatic shock. He worked long hours. Mom ran the household and 5 kids.

My older sister was not enthused about having a brother who messed up her dolls. She was also designated the smartest one and I inherited the family’s belief that I was not smart enough. There were no children my age in our neighborhood and I tried making my two younger sisters into play pals, but our age gaps and genders were limiting.

I learned to appreciate the subtleties of nature in the midwest. I found happiness in digging underground forts in a nearby prairie, climbing the cherry tree, roleplaying, and drawing and coloring but I also pestered mom about having “nothing to do.”

Mom’s solution was to enroll me in school a year younger than allowed, with no preschool beforehand. I was afraid of the unknown people and the place. I was nudged out of the house while crying about stomach aches and was told, “Pray to your guardian angel.”

I also embraced *The Little Engine That Could*, the story of a small locomotive struggling to pull a long train over a mountain while repeating the phrase, “I think I can, I think I can.” When it rises to the top and begins its descent it says, “I thought I could.” The moral remains a theme of my life.

At Holy Trinity grade school, while learning religion, penmanship, and reading, I absorbed fears of public-school kids and anxieties during the Cold War about Communists who might take over the country and remove crucifixes from our classrooms.

I left home at thirteen and joined a seminary to study to become a priest. For a Catholic boy and his family, there was no higher aspiration. I thought I had made the choice and later came to realize I was manipulated into it. I was uncomfortably self-conscious and shy, but I liked being away from an emotionally chaotic home and had happy teenage years. I was told that I wrote well, discovered that I had a propensity toward art, and began to think that maybe I was smart enough.

During the next three monastic years, two of which were Ireland, I lived a life of reflection, study, and meditation, immersed in the beauty of Gregorian chant. I took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Obedience was normal for a kid raised Catholic. Monastic poverty was liberating to me: I owned nothing but had everything. However, loneliness accompanied the vow of chastity.

After Ireland, I was sent to Webster College, a progressive Catholic women’s school in St. Louis that had just turned co-ed. I majored in art and outside of coursework found a fascination with photography that continues today.

It was a turbulent time during the psychedelic “Age of Aquarius,” free love, free speech, feminism, and the anti-war and civil rights movements. After a typically stimulating day and evening with mostly female friends at Webster College, I returned to the monastery and changed into my robes in time for evening prayers. Then after chapel, I changed back into street clothes and with a more experienced classmate snuck out to Gaslight Square with a fake ID to drink and ogle women who were dancing on top of platforms in go-go bars to “Hang on Sloopy.”

I realized that the monastic life, as worthy as it was, was too restrictive and lonely for me. With a churning stomach, a \$50.00 stipend, and too few life-skills I left the monastery. I am very grateful for those monastic years, the discipline, silence, and the contemplative life. Now I am living with less certainty, more dedicated to earth than heaven, and determined to “be here now” (Dass, 1961).

I graduated with a degree in art and philosophy in the middle of an academic year during the height of the Vietnam war or the American War as the Vietnamese call it. I was opposed to the war but was very likely to be drafted into it. Teachers, however, were exempt from the draft. I became an art teacher and have been teaching ever since.

I think I can: The only teaching job open to me was at a large all-Black public high school in the heart of the ghetto in St. Louis in 1968, one year after the Detroit race riots, and the year Martin Luther King was assassinated. Sumner High School had about 2000 kids, 100 teachers, and everyone was Black except for 3 white teachers. Two Black male friends, a poet, and a musician, had gone to Sumner and when I told them I had accepted a job there, they broke into a guffaw and said they wouldn't even teach there. I had no preparation for teaching, no course work, no student teaching, I had not been interviewed for the position and had not even been to the school.

I was so afraid of the job that I arrived late my first two days. The first day I found a parking space on the street not yet knowing that there was a teachers' parking lot behind the school. As I walked up the steps and into the main entrance, a large Black man in a suit (the assistant principal and basketball coach) stopped me, asked who I was, and then told me that they had just introduced me during the assembly. He let it go at that. The second day I was late he confronted me. I told him that my roommate had messed up the alarm clock. He told me that my roommate was jeopardizing my career. I was not late after that.

I was hopeful of being of some possible help to the civil rights movement; however, I had grown up in white suburbia and had absorbed a fear of Blacks. Driving to the school, I saw Black people on billboards for the first time in my life. I had already heard too many stories of whites mistakenly driving into Black neighborhoods in Chicago and getting beaten and having their cars stripped. No one I knew had had any such experiences, but urban legends abounded including the story that Black men carry sharp knives. My immediate family spoke kindly of Black people, but we didn't know any.

Yesterday and today too many of us white people render Black people as “other,” different, alien, scary. At about age 5 mom and dad and an aunt and uncle treated my sister and me to an afternoon at Riverview, the Chicago amusement park with wooden roller coasters. Soon after entering, I stood aghast in front of two Black men sitting in raised cages who taunted onlooking white folks to buy tickets to throw baseballs at targets which when hit would dump the men into tanks of water. The amusement was called “Dunk a N_____” (Smith, 1992). This atrocity is indelible and just as troubling was that no one of us said anything about it but just moved along in silence to the carnival rides. Such silence about race matters is still too common.

I bought a subscription to *Essence Magazine* to learn more about popular Black culture and read books that supported civil rights such as *Black Like Me* (Griffin, 1959), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960), *The Fire Next Time* (Baldwin, 1963), *Soul on Ice* (Cleaver, 1968), and books about failures in urban schools including *Up the Down Staircase* (Kaufman, 1964), and *Death at an Early Age* (Kozol, 1967). Currently, I'm moved and inspired by such titles as *Between the World and Me* (Coates, 2015), *The Underground Railroad* (Whitehead, 2016), *Educated* (Westover, 2018), *The Reckonings* (Johnson, 2018), and *Luster* (Leilani, 2020).

At the high school, I built a trusting rapport with the students in my classes but felt threatened outside of the art room where some students called me a white mother fucker. Returning to the art room after a break in the faculty lounge one day, I found my grade and attendance records floating in a sink of water above which someone had scrawled the Black Phantom. I shrugged, appreciated the humor in sympathy with the unknown culprit, but I was too afraid of authority to tell anyone about the incident. I somehow felt it was my fault. It happened in the spring, so I faked my records for the remainder of the school year. My teaching life would have been easier had I confided in the Black teachers and administrators I worked with and I now wish that I had.

I taught Modern Art to the high schoolers, mostly abstraction by white artists. The students went along with it: It was novel, I kept things active, and they knew I cared about them. In my only art history class, I showed some African art as it was represented in art history books of the time. I wanted to support positive views of being African-American, but the students were embarrassed by the African art in their textbook that included exotic masks, fertility figures with pointed breasts, or erect penises. Afraid of doing more harm than good, I dropped the subject of African art. Had I known more, I might have had the courage to show the students art of the time by Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar, and others who fostered Black pride and resisted racism.

Looking back at those years now a few months after the white policeman suffocated George Floyd on the streets of Minneapolis, and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, I know too little has changed in society. If I were teaching school now I would try to team up with art educators of color, examine the whiteness of our curriculum, decide who should teach what material to whom and how, and build resources to be more effective with all students.

I think I can: With only a Bachelor's degree, I then accepted a tenure-track position at Ohio State University to teach photographic media. To fill the void of all that I didn't know about art education, I quickly began work on a Master's degree on my own time and learned about the work of Manuel Barkan (1955), Vincent Lanier (1969), Edmund Feldman (1970), Elliot Eisner (1972), Laura Chapman (1978), and June King McFee (1977).

After reading these esteemed educators, I began taking art education more seriously because I began to envision how powerful it could be. After my son was born, I also became more demanding of art education students, asking myself if I would want this student to teach children.

While writing my Master's thesis on photography criticism, Arthur Efland suggested that I look at what Morris Weitz had written about criticism. Weitz, the aesthetician best known for developing the "open definition of art," wanted to know what critics did when they wrote criticism. So, he analyzed all the published criticism of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. He concluded that critics described, interpreted, judged, and theorized about the work. They did one or more of these activities in a variety of ways and in no necessary order, allowing us to start wherever we like in the process. Most important to me was Weitz's conclusion that judging art was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for criticism. We don't have to judge everything we see!

My interest in art criticism began with the first college course I taught. In Newer Media for Art Education, grads and undergrads made black and white art photographs, slide-tape shows, and narrative Super-8 films. We explored what could be done expressively with lens-based media. We had group critiques for every project. I could *show* them technique, however we had to *learn* together to talk intelligently about the content and consequences of photographic

imagery. A long interest in studio critiques had begun and eventually resulted in *CRITS* (Barrett, 2019) that I finished after retiring from full-time teaching.

I exhibited art photographs, wrote about photography and education, and was granted tenure. I later earned a doctorate writing photography theory and designed new courses in photography criticism and art criticism. The Art Department extended a joint appointment and I worked with art majors and participated in MFA committees and critiques.

People who have taken art courses in college and have been in studio critiques tend to confuse and conflate critiques with all of art criticism. This is unfortunate: While critiques and art criticism have some things in common, they are very different in kind, purpose, and outcomes. Critiques are generally held for artists who made the works; art criticism, however, is written for readers interested in learning about the works. Critiques are spoken within small groups, but criticism is published for large audiences. Critiques are often in the form of advice to artists to make their art better; criticism is about larger concerns.

I think critiques could be better all-around if they were similar to published art criticism: An artist whose work is being critiqued could listen to how we see it, understand it, what it means to us, and then decide whether or not to change their work and how. We would thus be encouraging independence in artists rather than their dependence on instructors making judgments and offering advice.

I've made art intermittently throughout my life, have had it criticized, have written art criticism, and have taught art-making to people of all ages. Having both an insider's and an outsider's view in each of these activities is expansive. Eventually I chose to spend the majority of my time with aspects of art criticism.

Four of my books are about what professional critics do, how they do it, and why. *Criticizing Photographs* (1990) was my first book. I combined the literature I had read with experience in teaching and wrote the book with students in mind. I believed that I had something to say but that I could and did write a book was a delightful surprise to me.

Encouraged by the acceptance of *Criticizing Photographs*, I wrote *Criticizing Art* to reach more than photography students. I had to learn a lot of new material for the book. I asked twenty-nine art colleagues which living artists and art critics they considered important and then made a list of artists and critics. I happened upon a student sitting in the corridor near my office who was diligently reading a recent art book and I asked her if she'd like to make some money doing library research. She took the list of critics and artists and Xeroxed everything she could find and in a month brought me stacks of articles. Similar to Weitz, I read them and asked what critics did when they wrote art criticism. I found compelling answers in the now familiar categories of description, interpretation, judgment, and theory.

With *Interpreting Art* (Barrett, 2003) I furthered my dedication to the importance of interpretation, asking viewers to reflect on, wonder about, and respond to works of art. It features a chapter on Magritte, a depiction of Beyoncé and Destiny's Child on a cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine, a newspaper cartoon by Gary Larson, a historical painting, a temple in India, contemporary abstraction, and controversial art. The central question is what does an artwork mean: What does it mean to a historian, to the artist who made it, to an ordinary viewer? Multiple answers give us many ways to understand and better appreciate any work we are considering.

With *Why Is That Art?* (Barrett, 2008) I faced my hesitations about judging art and began asking: What is a work of art, is it good, by what criteria. The major conclusions are that judgments by art critics are usually positive rather than negative. Judgments of art are not

subjective, they are intersubjective, eventually accepted, more or less tentatively, by a community of well-intentioned and well-informed people including critics, curators, collectors, artists, educators, and the interested public. Judgments are more than preferences: They are assessments of value based on criteria of realism, expressionism, formalism, and postmodern variations of these three sets. An underlying theme is that you don't have to like what others do, but you might be missing a lot by not expanding your criteria and range of preferences. You may not approve of an artwork, but it is probably beneficial for you to understand why others value it.

The larger idea of these books in the context of art education is that the artist is not the only model we can use to teach about art. As Barkan and others proposed in the 1960s (Mattil, 1966), we can learn from an array of people dedicated to art including artists as well as critics, historians, as well as critical theorists such as feminists, postcolonialists, and other writers.

Writing each of these books was a new and risky challenge for me. I had to recognize and resist doubts about my abilities. I wrote *Criticizing Photographs* for the photography community, about which I felt an outsider. I was aware of the general distrust of art educators by artists but faced it and proceeded to write *Criticizing Art*.

When I began sending manuscripts to editors, I worried about getting a response of "major rewrite" or "reject." I learned, however, that reviewers can be most helpful: If the work passes, I gain the assurance that others think the writing is worthwhile, and if they suggest changes, those changes can make the work better. Of course, "rejects" are immediately disappointing, but they provide time for pause and more reflection. I am especially grateful for editors of manuscripts and for Susan Michael Barrett (Barrett & Barrett, 2018) who has carefully considered and improved drafts of everything I've written since we married in 1997.

I said yes to a novel opportunity that broadened my experiences. I accepted an invitation from the Ohio Arts Council to be an art critic as part of their artist-in-the-schools initiative. I accepted opportunities to work with children in preschool, elementary, middle school, and with teens in high schools, seniors in community venues and assisted living homes in rural, urban, and suburban settings. I facilitated them in talking and sometimes writing about art by such artists Rene Magritte, Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, Sandy Skoglund, Martin Puryear, Barbara Kruger, William Wegman; and magazine advertisements and TV commercials, as well as work that the participants had made (Barrett, 1997).

I've had the joy of sitting in a circle on a carpeted floor with squiggly preschoolers while they delighted in examining their stuffed animals. They were both *criticizing* and *not-criticizing* their creatures. They were not *judging* their creatures, and they certainly were not finding fault in them. But they were engaged in art criticism by looking closely at the animals and telling each other what they saw. They noticed the variety of eyes the animals had and pointed out their different noses and ears. They thought about how a sometimes ferocious animal like a grizzly bear could be made into something cuddly that they wanted to hold and hug. By examining their animals and their feelings about them, they came to know them better and love them more, and I left with a new respect for the thinking of young children.

I enjoyed an artist-in-residence opportunity in the Netherlands engaging future art teachers in teaching art criticism. We explored what we could accomplish when interpreting some contemporary works by Dutch artists with different groups in schools and communities. For one project we used a work called *The Carpet Told Me* by Jeroen Kooijmans, a video loop of continuous duration that he made in 2007. It looks like a still photograph of a Persian carpet mysteriously floating on a tranquil pond of water in the countryside, but it subtly moves in a

gentle breeze, and birds and sheep can be heard in the distance. After quietly watching the piece, we asked viewers, "What does the carpet tell you?" These are some of the insights from viewers in Holland about *The Carpet*.

A Dutch 10-year-old said: "The carpet told me you must have hope and believe in yourself." Another youngster wrote:

The carpet told me
there will be thunder
there will be nightfall
don't worry.

A young teenage boy with autism offered this provocative insight: "It's about nature and culture." From there he and his classmates shared insights about integration and assimilation referring to the clashes, sometimes violent, resulting from the immigration of Middle Easterners into Holland. Two college art students also saw social implications. One said, "The carpet tells me that foreigners can't integrate into the Dutch culture very easily," and a classmate added, "Cultures have to work together to let miracles exist." These two claims offered us much more to consider and discuss about the artwork and society.

Some of the college students took the video to their homes to see what responses they could get from family, friends, or neighbors. Anne reported this:

After I showed the video to my parents and my little sister, I asked them what they saw in the picture. My little sister said, "freedom because the carpet is floating on the water." My father said, "a flying carpet because the carpet is not connected to the water." My mother saw it as "a fairy tale" because the scene is so unnatural. I like it as a "fantasy" because I have never seen such a perfect landscape.

Anne's experience of engaging family members in a discussion was positive and beneficial. They saw that they were able to talk about a work of contemporary art new to them. They enjoyed talking about the artwork. They were able to look at the same thing while amicably having different responses to it. It was also a pleasant experience for Anne. Her family saw her in a new light, getting a glimpse of her as an art teacher. She became excited to do more and I was encouraged by what she was able to do.

From these different practices of engaging people in interpretive art criticism, people learned that they enjoyed looking at and talking about contemporary art. By sharing what they saw and thought and felt, they arrived at multiple points of view that enhanced their experience of art and the world. They realized that people see the same thing differently which can lead to an appreciation of other people and views of life that may be different than their own.

I learned the importance of selecting which artworks to explore, with what groups, when, and how. If I wrongly chose an image or object not right for any particular group, monotony or disruption might follow. Relevance became my major criterion: Was this work of interest to me, to them, and of importance educationally and societally?

When works of art became controversial, we looked at them and talked about them rather than censoring them (Barrett & Rab, 1990). When faced with work some found deeply offensive, I showed the work, and asked them to anonymously and honestly "free-write" anything that came to mind about the image. I collected the writings and read them back to the group anonymously and without comment. Uninhibited writing permitted people to feel what they felt and to express it in words within a safe educational environment. Everyone in the group heard many different points of view about artworks and beliefs and learned that their view was not shared by all. People felt that they were heard. Frank and honest conversations followed and

when sessions ended participants realized that they had talked about difficult subjects without rancor and name-calling.

Throughout my adult life, I have benefitted from psychological counseling through sessions in individual and group therapy. From these experiences I learned and practiced skills that are beneficial to teaching: listening carefully, speaking honestly, confronting fears, and developing empathetic interests in people's life stories. Irving Yalom (2005), the founder of existential psychotherapy, has much to offer art educators.

After surviving life-threatening cancer (Barrett, 2011), I began to incorporate personal interpretations and began asking: "What does this artwork mean to you and for your own life?" Students can learn what a painting means to the professional art community, but perhaps more importantly they can also discover what it might mean to their lives. This is one example of what I mean by forming a personal interpretation in response to a work of art. Melissa, an art ed student about to graduate in 2011, wrote a paragraph about a painting by Rufino Tamayo called *Children Playing with Fire*, 1947.

I am scared of destroying children. I am passionate about teaching, but it is like "playing with fire." Teaching is a gamble. I fear I won't be able to get through to the students or I will teach them all the wrong things. The dark figures represent challenges like diversity, language barriers, socioeconomic differences, learning disabilities, behavior issues, and being a first-year teacher.

Melissa's passion for teaching and concerns for her future students inspires me.

Here is another personal interpretation by Lila, a ninety-four year old woman in an assisted living home, about *Brick and Ivy* by Stephen Althouse, 2003, a black and white photograph of ivy growing on an old stone.

This photograph makes me realize the fragility of our life spans--it also impresses me about the durability of the stone contrasted with the ivy and changing life cycles. The human spirit's ability to withstand and overcome some of life's trials as well as the blessings, as expressed by the light as well as the dark: sunshine, shadow, hope and despair, optimism versus pessimism. The overall feeling is one of antiquity and eternal life.

Lila's response reminded me that thinking about art can be a lifelong endeavor. It also gave me hopeful courage to face old age in my life.

Throughout the years I have remained curious about works of art and what they mean to individuals. Early on I realized that there is just too much to teach. I decided that I could neither adequately know it all nor teach it all. I became selective and taught what I knew best and loved. Keeping myself mentally challenged while teaching and writing for different groups was essential. Any theory I learned I tested in practice and if I could not make an idea relevant to people, I let it go; any practice that worked well I incorporated back into theoretical considerations. Research was teaching for me, and teaching was research, and I view both as service to a larger community. Art is about life and through artworks, reflections, discussions, and listening carefully to one another, I believe we can make a difference, that we can contribute to a better society especially during troubling times.

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