

THE CULTURE OF AESTHETIC DISCOURSE (CAD): ORIGINS,  
CONTRADICTIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Karen A. Hamblen

California State University

Art has long been accepted as comprising a visual language that communicates cultural values and qualitative meanings through its subject matter, functions, and stylistic characteristics. However, not until this century has visual art also been considered as a language system of signs and symbols amenable to systematic verbal analysis and evaluation. Consistent with this development, in recent years art educators have increasingly proposed that art instruction include various art criticism activities (Johansen, 1982). This author personally considers an interest in art criticism to be a positive development for the field of art education inasmuch as it offers a much-needed counterbalance to the now-predominant emphasis on studio production. Moreover, if art education is to be in the educational mainstream and to have an equal share of the budgetary pie, art instruction will need to have a strong verbal component that will render it fairly compatible with the goals and instructional methodologies of general education. Art criticism meets this requirement in that it depends on a specialized language code requiring formal instruction.

However, behind this author's optimism is the realization that this new focus on art criticism may prove to be a mixed educational blessing. Stepping into the mainstream of education cannot be done without incurring certain dangers and possible trade-offs. Assuming the role of art critic is not a value-neutral activity. Formal talk about art among experts is structured according to prescribed rules; it is based on a particular type of art historical knowledge and on specific assumptions as to what

constitutes artistic creation and response.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the value system art educators may be inculcating through the introduction of art criticism. The thesis will be developed that art criticism originated in response to the characteristics of modern fine art. Modern fine art, in turn, is embedded within the value system of Western modernity in which there is a reliance on expert knowledge and a positive value is given to the acquisition of abstract language skills. It will be proposed that art critical knowledge and analytical skills are, in Western societies, a form of cultural capital. By participating in art criticism, one becomes part of the Culture of Aesthetic Discourse (CAD) wherein class status is measured by analytical, verbal abilities, and art is considered inaccessible to those without such skills. In other words, in this paper, art criticism is not discussed as an activity, but rather as a social institution with positive value orientations toward self-referent, abstract knowledge; with a class structure based on the possession of analytical, verbal skills; and with cultural capital that consists of specialized knowledge applied to critical discourse.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ART CRITICISM

The source and even the need for art criticism can be traced to the inception of modern fine art during the early part of this century. Modern fine art, often nonobjective or displaying varying degrees of abstraction, was created, in part, as a reaction against the excesses of Victorian art. The official art of the Academies often depicted obscure classical myths or historical events that required lengthy titles and

verbose explanations in exhibition brochures (Rookmaaker, 1970, pp. 58-59). It appeared to some artists that an art style without an overt subject matter requiring special background knowledge could appeal to and be understood by all segments of the population. A so-called strictly visual art would allow for a free play of cognitive powers and be amenable to the universal structuring principles of the mind--or so the reasoning went (Jaffe, 1965, pp. 137-139; Kandinsky, 1912/1947; Segy, 1967, pp. 421-428). Ironically, the democratic ideal of an art which would not require or call forth associations contained the seeds of its own circumvention. As art became more separated from specific contexts and associations, it became more an object of study rather than an object of experience--and the more it required verbal explanations to be understood.

The twentieth century dependence on art criticism for artistic understanding is perhaps too easily attributed to abstraction alone. Modern fine art lost not only the mimetic image but also, more fundamentally, it lost symbolic associations. Art ostensibly no longer pointed beyond itself to life experiences nor was it part of social functions and daily usage. Rather, art was to be about itself; art was created for art's sake in order to explore its material qualities, and it was within those qualities that meaning resided. It was this artistic self-reference that the art critic attempted to examine, explain, and evaluate for an often bewildered, if not hostile, public (Hamblen, 1983).

Over the decades since the inception of modern abstract art, the bewilderment has, if anything, increased for much of the population, and the need for explanations and evaluations has escalated even among those within the art world. In an essay titled "The Painted Word," Wolfe (1975),

not altogether facetiously, prophesized that soon paintings would be the size of postage stamps and would require an accompanying display explanation the size of a normal painting. By the mid-twentieth century, artistic styles consisted of a series of visual philosophical treatises on the nature of art, wherein a meta-dialogue among the formal qualities of art was carried out on the surface of the canvas. Visual ambiguities, elaborate puns, and optical games were developed through a plethora of rapidly changing styles which served to problematize the philosophical parameters of visual meaning. "This is another way of saying that art has become part of 'language': it is a writing of sorts; and there is a growing difficulty in detaching the work from meanings of a literary and theoretical order" (Rosenberg, 1966, p. 198). Ironically, academic literary qualities in nineteenth century art and theoretical self-reference in twentieth century art have met full circle in their dependence on "the word."

There is also another irony which most succinctly told the general public that art had become the province of the art specialist: the art critical explanations themselves were often not easily understood. The obfuscation of meaning in modern fine art, both in its visual presentation and in subsequent written analyses, needs to be understood as symptomatic of Western value orientations (Hamblen, 1983). In the official institutions of modern society and of modern fine art one finds positive value orientations toward self-reference, theorization, artificial language codes, reflexive discourse, and abstract knowledge modalities, which, in total, are supportive of a reliance on expert knowledge. The institution of modern fine art and art criticism represents essentially a closed shop comprised of museum curators, academics, artists, buyers, historians, and

critics. These specialists have the art knowledge and language skills to participate in what this author terms the Culture of Aesthetic Discourse (CAD). Within the larger scope of modern society, they are members of the New Class (Galbraith, 1965), i.e., intellectuals who are engaged in a meta-knowledge discourse carried out within the parameters of self-referent, discipline-specific language codes. The analytical stance toward art, i.e., the continual need to examine and discuss, to analyze and evaluate, has its roots in Western modernity and indicates membership in the New Class.

#### CULTURAL CAPITAL IN THE NEW CLASS

While the Old Class of the nineteenth century depended on the accumulation of tangible goods for their capital, the New Class possesses educational credentials and abstract knowledge skills (Barzun, 1959, pp. 7-30). Gouldner (1979) has described the New Class as the Culture of Critical Discourse (CCD) wherein members as diverse as city planners, teachers, journalists, sociologists, film reviewers, and social workers have in common the possession of discipline-specific skills applied in reflexive discourse. Transmitted through education and socialization, discipline-specific verbal skills are a commodity, the possession of which, according to Gouldner, provides access to incomes.

The Culture of Aesthetic Discourse (CAD) discussed in this paper can be considered as a specific language community within the CCD. Unlike Gouldner, this author, however, suggests that art critical skills provide access to power and to the control that power gives rather than incomes, per se. In other words, certain types of knowledge, skills, and developed abilities are a form of capital in that they allow one to gain access to

a specific arena of social interaction. Participation within the CAD allows one entry into the world of modern art and to exercise a certain amount of power and control within that area. Incomes may accrue or the rewards may be increased social status and personal satisfaction.

Entry into the CAD, however, does not come easily. The appreciation of art has become heavily dependent on learned perceptual conventions and specialized knowledge about art. Moreover, in many instances, it would appear that these dependencies have actually been cultivated. Bell (1974) suggests that incomprehensibility has become "a prime social asset in a work of art" (p. 42). A class structure has been created in the art world, with entry and participation dependent on aesthetic capital. "Capital then is inherently an advantage; those having it are secured gratifications denied to those lacking it" (Gouldner, p. 25).

Much art criticism has been formalistic, dealing with such matters as whether paint is on the canvas or a separate entity from the surface, or whether the edge of a painting is the existential limits of a defined process and so on. Such concerns are, to say the least, esoteric and specific to art itself. Although the abstract elements of design are the very building blocks of the physical world and are continuously perceived, manipulated, and experienced in nonart contexts, art criticism tends to delegitimize such life experience associations. Art criticism as a speech community forms its own self-referent legitimation in a grammar that takes its structural cues from symbolic logic, linguistics, philosophy, and physics (Reichardt, 1974, p. 43). In the following excerpt, one might note how artistic choices and meanings are limited to the art world. In

this example, the social role of art and its functional meanings--those very aspects which are readily accessible to broad-based understanding--are not discussed.

Stella's subsequent rejection of the literalist interpretation of his early painting is consistent with his shaped color compositions after 1964. These developed into the brilliant logos of the protractor series starting in 1967, and have since become more and more bounded by a rectilinear format. What is radical about Newstead Abbey is that its three-dimensionality reinforces the illusionism of its objecthood. Irreducibly the painting represents contradictions inherent in all painting--this is the gap between idea and the physicality which totemism bridges. Newstead Abbey as an esthetic position is a cul de sac, so it is not surprising that Stella began to incorporate color and internal composition later on. (Burnham, p. 115)

This is knowledge about art which is created, controlled, and administered; it is discipline-specific and must be formally learned.

#### EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Formal talk about art can be found throughout written history in both Western and Eastern cultures (Osborne, 1970). However, in the past, the general population, for the most part, responded to and used art in the ongoing ordinary course of daily events with little conscious thought of this or that object being art--much less engaging in lengthy discussions on the merits of certain aesthetic qualities. A generally taken-for-

granted fitness of form, the pleasures of usage, and a culturally understood significance of meaning comprised a culture's knowledge of art.

The distinction needs to be made between the pre-twentieth century knowledge of art, i.e., the experience of art, and the twentieth century knowledge about art, i.e., talk about art. The New Class differs from other social classes in that it is specifically a speech community that embodies "an ideology about discourse" (Gouldner, p. 28). It is not enough to experience, enjoy, and appreciate art; art must be verbally prodded, probed, and problematized. Members of the New Class believe they have "the obligation to examine what had hitherto been taken for granted, to transform 'givens' into 'problems,' resources into topics: to examine the life we lead, rather than just enjoy or suffer it" (Gouldner, pp. 59-60). Art cannot just be allowed to exist as a part of human experience. Designed objects become Art with a capital A when aesthetic experience becomes a focus of study and art critical literacy becomes a prerequisite for artistic understanding. To paraphrase T. S. Eliot, not until this century have people needed to come and go, talking about Michelangelo. However, dealing with art as a visual statement to be verbally analyzed and critiqued is not without its inconsistencies, paradoxes, and untoward consequences.

Educating all students to discuss, analyze, and evaluate art is a democratic ideal, which concomitantly introduces students to an elitist, exclusive language community and mode of aesthetic experience alien to their everyday experiences in art. In moving art instruction into the mainstream of public education via art criticism, art education becomes enmeshed in the democratic paradox. Namely, knowledge must be made avail-

able to all citizens, yet accessibility must be limited or knowledge will lose its power.

The New Class . . . thinks its own culture of critical discourse best, which is to say that it lives a contradiction. On the one side, its CCD presses to undermine all societal distinctions and, on the other, believing its own culture best it wishes to advantage those who must fulfill and embody it. Its own culture, then, contains the New Class's "seeds of its own destruction." (Gouldner, p. 86)

The belief that art criticism will actually provide aesthetic understanding, sensitivity, and enlightenment is itself an elitist claim that imposes a class structure, limits participation, and ignores subcultural aesthetic preferences and experiences.

The culture of critical discourse of the New Class seeks to control everything, its topic and itself, believing that such domination is the only road to truth. The New Class begins by monopolizing truth and by making itself its guardian. . . . Even as it subverts old inequities, the New Class silently inaugurates a new hierarchy of the knowing, the knowledgeable, the reflexive and insightful. Those who talk well, it is held, excel over those who talk poorly or not at all. (Gouldner, p. 85)

Most public school education fosters various forms of linguistic conversions in which students are weaned away from the language of their everyday lives toward the CCD. Again, however, the democratic ideal is

foiled, inasmuch as it is the ordinary language and the ongoing experience which specifically has relevance for the student. This raises the question of whether it is necessary or even advisable to educate everyone to deal with art as a form of discourse.

Art critical discourse gives the student both an elaborated language code as well as a limited perspective on art. The speech of the New Class is calculatingly impersonal, theoretical, and autonomous. In having students discuss art as formal elements of design, in having them postpone value judgments, and in having them deal with art in terms of other art that has been produced, one is assuring that students are rising above the exigencies of personal taste and the particularities of time and space. By the same token, students are also being asked to abrogate their ongoing, nonverbal experiences of art to a self-conscious artificial speech code of analysis and evaluation.

The formalized culture of aesthetic discourse "distances persons from local cultures, so that they feel an alienation from all particularistic, history-bound places and from ordinary, everyday life" (Gouldner, p. 59). Aesthetic knowledge is verbally democratized at the expense of a loss of warmth, imagination, and spontaneity of subcultural art experiences. Discursive reflexivity ultimately destroys the free play of expression, replacing one's knowledge of art with an analytical knowledge about art.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The inclusion of art criticism in the curriculum needs to be qualified by certain cautions and a realistic view of what art critical dialogue can and cannot accomplish. The CAD gives access to a particular type of art knowledge which, of necessity, is a limited view of art.

However, art criticism instruction can be monitored so that the implicit elitism of learning an elaborated language code and the separation of art criticism from life experiences can be minimized. Toward those ends, two provisos for art criticism instruction are proposed. (1) All types of art forms need to be the subject of art criticism dialogues--fine, popular, folk, commercial, environmental, etc. This does not mean that one only starts, for example, with popular art forms for the purpose of initiating interest and then subtly moves toward an appreciation of fine art. Rather, in the spirit of Gans (1974), who has proposed that all aesthetic taste cultures have validity, the art teacher needs to consider the study of non-fine art forms as both a valid means and a valid goal of art criticism. (2) The self-referent and formalistic character of much art criticism needs to be tempered by the inclusion of socio-cultural and environmental considerations. The evaluative component of art criticism should be based, not solely on aesthetic criteria, but also on the functional uses and social consequences that are part of the ongoing experience of art.

The historical sources of the CAD and its value system are to be found in Western modernity. As such, the characteristics, inconsistencies, and paradoxes discussed in this paper appear to be endemic to the Culture of Aesthetic Discourse. Art educators, however, as members of the New Class, can problematize the very value system of which they are a part. This is the power of reflexive, critical discourse; it may also be the ultimate value of including art criticism in the curriculum.

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## AIM REVISITED

Jack A. Hobbs

In case you may have forgotten: AIM is the acronym for Art in the Mainstream, a statement of "value and commitment", authored by Edmund Burke Feldman. AIM first appeared in the March '82 issue of Art Education and then again in the September issue where it was the subject of a "mini issue."

According to AIM, art means three things: work, language, and values. Americans need to relearn the value of work, and art is the best way to do this. Visual imagery is a type of language, and, like any language, it needs to be learned. Finally, art and values are virtually identical; art education, therefore, is the same as values education.

In case you may also have forgotten: Feldman used to be president of the NAEA. Therefore AIM had the status of being a semi-official position of the whole organization. This is probably why it received so much attention. First, it was reviewed editorially and analyzed by several authors in the mini issue, the most interesting pieces being by Ralph Smith (Feldman's "loyal opposition") and Feldman himself (responding to Smith). Second, it was the subject of at least two panels, including one that I served on, in the Detroit conference last March.

Mainly, in this article I want to reflect on AIM, especially its implications. But before that I am going to talk around the subject.

Our field, more than any that I know of, is afflicted by rhetorical overload. One reason perhaps is because it is an educational field and, like all of education, art education is perennially on the defensive. Defending oneself often required heroic feats of rhetoric. Another reason is that our field is connected with art, a special world well known for metaphysical explanations. Still another reason is the history of our