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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Terry Barrett (1994) *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary***  
 Mountain View: Mayfield Publication Company.  
 200 pages. ISBN 1-55934-147-5 (paper) \$14.95

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John H. White Jr.

Terry Barrett's newest contribution to critical practice, *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary*, Mountainview, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co. 1994, provides the fields of art criticism and art education with a much needed and long overdue practical introduction to contemporary art criticism. The boundaries within which Barrett is developing this critical mapping are marked by a receding Modernism and an emergent site constructed in relation to Postmodernism, Feminism and Multiculturalism. In this text Barrett judiciously combines two elements that less skillful authors have failed to bring together; a verbal and presentational style which is accessible to incoming undergraduate students and a diverse sampling of engaging contemporary ideas embodied in works of art and critical writing. *Criticizing Art* succeeds in defining a pragmatic base for critical inquiry without collapsing into reductive method.

Barrett offers an invitation to his readers to join a community of people who obtain pleasure through their conversations around and about contemporary works of art. The author guides his audience into this critical community through a range of techniques that are present in all great teaching—clarity of purpose, rich examples, meaningful ideas, identifiable structures, non patronizing language, and empathy with his audience. As an experienced teacher, Barrett recognizes that to convert his readers to the value of critical conversations he must demystify the critical act. He must address our students' doubts, including their fears of the critical, the contemporary and the art world that many bring with them to this text. As an activist, Barrett hopes to change his readers' beliefs as he skillfully assures them that the critical community into which they are invited is not the alienating and competitive space that they might fear but a place for infinite fellowship, growth and pleasure.

In both the long and short runs of education, showing rather than telling makes classrooms work. For Barrett to merely tell us that criticism is not negative is by itself not a convincing strategy. Consequently to gain the readers' trust Barrett, in effect, conducts a house tour of the society of critical inquiry into which they are to be initiated. The critical structure that Barrett uses to ground this community is Morris Weitz's operational functions of description, interpretation, judgment and theory. Each of these inquiry processes forms a chapter into which we are led. The author simultaneously develops the implications of each operation in relation to specific works of art, critical passages, and theoretical connections. For example in chapter five, *Theory and Art Criticism*, we are introduced to Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism and Multiculturalism through the art work of Sherrie Levine, The Guerrilla Girls, Richard Deagle and Victor Mendolia, Fred Wilson, and Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds, and through the critical voices of such theorists as Arthur Danto, Philip Yenawine, Mario Cutajar, Karen Hamblen, Lucy Lippard, Harold Pearce, Hilda Hein, Kristin Congdon, Elizabeth Garber, Griselda Pollock, Michael Kimmelman, David Bailey and Douglas Crimp. Barrett's section on Feminist theory is particularly well developed.

Although Barrett uses Weitz for the structure of this text in an explicit way, he is careful to let us know that Weitz's operations are not programmatic. He is fully mindful of the problems that taxonomies in general and method in education in particular have perpetuated. Keeping this in mind, it is revealing then that it is Barrett's skillful guidance of his readers through the carefully selected quotations of contemporary art, artists, critics and art educators not Weitz's operations, that really does the work of this volume. These quotes are dense sites which refuse to be fully reduced into Weitz's operations and subsequently link most directly to the reader's own voice. Consequently Barrett reveals Weitz's categories to be markers contingent upon their usefulness as tools, not dogmatic rules or natural law.

In the last chapter, after a look at each of Weitz's operations in relation to artists, critics and art educators, Barrett again reassures us that the critical community is open to all who wish to enter through a variety of formats, including student papers, professional publications and casual conversation. In this useful appendix-as-last-chapter, Barrett provides some practical advice including two rich examples of student writing and a do-it-yourself breakdown of pitfalls and procedures. This closing reads effectively but differently than the previous chapters, much like a pedagogical book of manners or tips from a wise uncle to aid our students in their further encounters.

All texts occupy an ideological location in relation to other texts and this is no exception. For those readers that would like to see a more radical break with the traditions of Modernism, Barrett's dependence upon Weitz's categories comes across as being tied to a positivist methodology in which criticism "discovers" the "it" of its object. In contrast, those readers who seek a definitive method, Barrett's extravagant use of quotations and explicit attraction to post-structural, Feminist and Multicultural theory allow the reader a wide range of option for their own interpretive ventures. Barrett himself clearly is in sympathy with pluralist forces in culture and theory.

It is consequently interesting to note the degree to which the quotation, a device not mentioned by Weitz, is a most pervasive and persuasive element in this volume. Much of the text is comprised of quotes. Some of the text in the theory section's discussion of the work of Sherrie Levine specifically speaks of the artist's own theoretical concern with quotation. But quotation in art criticism never truly emerges from the shadows of Weitz's critical process. Critical inquiry in general and Modernism in particular are so tied to the act of framing the objects of their gaze, that quotation is perceived as a neutral act and unconnected to description, interpretation, judgment and theory. But in grounded inquiry, which shapes much of what is useful in post-structuralism, feminism and multiculturalism, it is the fore grounding of those quotations that can be identified as components of our own communal selves that locates those spaces where change might occur.

While these questions do help to reveal how Barrett's own practice pushes the boundaries of theory, for instrumental reasons they are best reserved for Barrett to resolve in a subsequent, more theoretical text. In the meantime, this volume serves as a reliable, long awaited and uniquely pleasurable introduction into critical inquiry, providing theoretical structure, rich examples and a reassuring voice for our yet-to-be-initiated students of art.

**Leslie Weisman (1992)**  
*Discrimination by Design:  
 A Feminist Critique of  
 the Man-Made Environment.*

Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press,  
 190 pages. ISBN 0-252-01849-6 (paper) \$11.95

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Joanne K. Guilfoil

The scholarship and sensibility in Weisman's *Discrimination by Design* are clearly inspired by but are not limited to the consciousness of the women's movement. The author unravels complex social problems and identifies power struggles involved in the building and controlling of space. She proposes a new structure for understanding the spatial dimensions of not only gender, but also race and class. Her framework is based on extensive research in settings such as the skyscraper, maternity hospital, department store, shopping mall, nuclear family house, high rise public housing, public parks and streets. She traces social and architectural histories, and documents how each setting embraces and communicates privileges and penalties of social caste. The author presents feminists' themes from a spatial perspective and introduces us to the people, policies,

architectural innovations and ideologies that are shaping a future in which all people have a place.

The introduction describes her interpretation of the spatial dimensions of feminism. Her story begins over twenty years ago when seventy-five women realized that the allocation of space was a political act and that access to space was inherently related to status and power. They took over an abandoned building owned by New York City for the purpose of creating a women's shelter. These women also knew that change in appropriation of space was fundamentally related to change in society.

However, despite these past achievements, Weisman says we understand little about the spatial dimensions of women's issues, or how knowledge of these dimensions could be used to chart the mental and physical course of struggle for human justice and social transformation. I believe we need a greater awareness of how the built environment shapes our relationships with other human beings. We all could better understand the experiences in our daily lives and the cultural assumptions in which they are immersed.

According to Weisman, the problem is most people see the built environment as somewhat neutral background for their activity. The built environment is actually an active shaper of human identity and experiences, and is not neutral or value-free.

Weisman explains how our use of space contributes to the power of some groups over others and to the continuance of human inequality. Space (the built environment) is socially constructed and spatial arrangements of buildings and communities mirror and support the nature of gender, race and class relationships in society. She defines architecture as "a record of deeds done by those who have had the power to build. It is shaped by social, political, and economic forces and values embodied in the forms themselves, the process through which they are built, and the manner in which they are used. Creating

buildings involves moral choices that are subject to moral judgement" (p. 2).

The cultural conflict between designer/developer and the users is what Weisman is attempting to expose and change, through a feminist analysis of the male-made environment. Within this social context of built space, feminist criticism and activism have a key role to play. As an example of such criticism, Weisman clearly explains how the acts of building and controlling space have been male prerogatives and how our built environments reflect and maintain that reality. She also demonstrates how everyone can and must challenge and change forms and values embodied in the male-made environment, therefore supporting transformation of the sexist and racist conditions shaping our environmental experiences. Weisman addresses these concerns in five chapters, with explanations of how buildings and communities are designed and used, and how they reflect and reinforce the social places held by various members of society.

In chapter one the spatial caste system is defined as a deliberate, conscious approach to architectural design for social inequality. Terms such as "dichotomy" and "territoriality" reappear later in other chapters, but are introduced and explained here as theoretical spatial devices which have been used to construct and defend the patriarchal symbolic universe. Weisman identifies and uses several spatial terms from ordinary conversation, such as "political circles", "take place" to remind us of the framework we establish and use for thinking about the world and people in it. Less familiar terms such as "cognitive maps" (mental pictures we carry in our head of the world around) are used to illustrate how gender roles, race and class influence attitudes toward, perception of, and experiences in the environment. She concludes these discussions with the idea that women design and evaluate buildings with values and concerns to architectural form that are very different from those of men. The degree to which the reasons are biological or social raises other questions, which she says will require a greater self-knowledge and understanding of history and culture than are now offered by contemporary theories. In art education, we should continue to include the notion of architecture as a

translation of social power and status and present these ideas to our youngest students.

In chapter two on public architecture and social status, Weisman discusses public and private settings. She explains how gender, economic class and related social power and status are translated into spatial organization, use and visual appearance of various settings. Large scale public buildings such as skyscrapers, department stores, shopping malls are analyzed. I wish she had included public schools, institutions of higher learning and nursing homes in her analysis of the hierarchy of oppression. I believe age of the user, as well as gender, race and class must be figured in any analysis of how social power and status are translated into spatial organization, use of space and visual appearance. The voices of our youngest and our oldest citizens often remain unheard, and they desperately need a place in this architecture of inclusion. I believe art educators should help students in preschools, public schools and nursing homes understand the use of space, spatial organization and visual appearance of the buildings they occupy, and continue to work toward change or redesign when necessary to their well being.

In chapter three Weisman talks about another kind of change, that is the private use of public space. With her examples of porno strips, skid row, and the neighborhood park, we see how these public spaces are claimed, controlled and experienced differently according to a person's social position. Young children, women and the elderly eventually learn that public streets and parks by design, belong to men. However, these vulnerable citizens do have the right of safe access to the cities in which they live. Art educators should support the development of criteria for guidelines and standards for all buildings in the city, especially humane emergency shelters and transitional housing for the homeless and permanent low cost housing. The politics of public space belongs on the art education agenda as much as it does on the feminist agenda, especially when the streets are becoming the home place for too many of our citizens.

In chapter four Weisman discusses how the social caste system, our patriarchal society, is designed to separate women and men, black and white, servant and served. We see how this plan is encoded in floor plans, image, and domestic architecture in private houses and especially in public housing. Weisman sees our public housing policy as a form of social control that supports and reinforces the patriarchal family. She says residents are heavily influenced by the power of their public landlord and by the architecture built for their rehabilitation. Residents are stripped of their privacy, choice and dignity, and as a result often feel frightened, outraged, depressed and powerless. Weisman believes that subsidized housing through its design becomes not a gift from society but a humiliating punishment for being poor.

In chapter five, Weisman redesigns the domestic landscape. She demonstrates how the dichotomization between private housing and public workplace coupled with today's diverse households have created misfits in conventional housing and neighborhoods, all due to the changing conditions of work and family life. Instead, our housing must become spatially flexible, changeable over time to accommodate household size and composition. "Spatial variety is essential for supporting household diversity" (p. 125). People will need to learn how to adapt their living space to suit their needs much like one redesigns a piece of sculpture or a stage set for a play. Weisman ends the chapter with examples of housing that works for single parents and a hint at the future – designing for diversity: the need for flexible architecture. "One of the first changes we must incorporate in socially responsible housing is spatial flexibility. Our domestic architecture should be a stage set for various human dramas. It must be demountable, reusable, multi-functional, and changeable over time" (p. 149). Weisman says "the biggest obstacle we face in developing pluralistic, flexible housing is not design, technology or even the profit motive. It is our own attitude. If we are to implement new ideas, we will just have to recognize how conceptually disadvantaged we are by the immutable social and architectural preconceptions we have about our housing and our households. Then we will have to find ways to free ourselves of the inhibitions they cause" (p. 156).

In the last chapter Weisman speculates about home places of the future and the nature of dwellings, neighborhoods, cities and workplaces. She presents two different views of the future, one whose built environment supports the development of human potential and relationships of equality, and another based on the development of technology and the perpetuation of social inequality. Weisman concludes the book by explaining the role women should play in designing a society that honors human difference and in shaping an architecture that will house those values. Art educators should also play a role in forming new attitudes that honor human difference relative to the built environment that includes developing in students an understanding of the various influences of architecture on human social behavior.

In summary, we all should read this valuable and pioneering contribution to the understanding of the socio-political issues of our time: health care, homelessness, racial justice, changing conditions of work and family, affordable housing and preservation of the environment. Weisman provides a readable and practical guide for educators, policy makers, architects, planners, and housing activists. We should add ourselves to this list, and like the others, become motivated and use our expertise to benefit women and other groups who are socially disadvantaged – by the design of our built environments.

**Robert Hughes (1993)**  
*Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America*

New York: Oxford University Press.  
 210 pages. ISBN 0-19-507676-1 \$19.95

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Patricia Amburgy

In his latest book, *Culture of Complaint*, Robert Hughes examines the increasingly strained relations between culture and politics in American society. Hughes argues that in contemporary society victims have become our heroes, and victims' complaints have become a means of political power. Every group imaginable has begun to lay claim to the status of victim, even white heterosexual males. Hughes criticizes both the left and the right for this state of affairs. He criticizes the left for promoting cultural separatism and the right for promoting what he calls "monoculture," arguing that both have significantly diminished the possibilities for an American society that is grounded in commonality as well as diversity, what is shared as well as what is different among groups. The major point of contention between the left and the right—and an issue on which they also converge in significant ways, according to Hughes—is the idea of multiculturalism.

Hughes's analysis of current disputes over multiculturalism is mixed in quality. His book is a mixture of fresh insights and conventional reactions, thoughtful reflection as well as superficial jerks of his mental knee. Hughes is at his best in

setting out some of the general dimensions of the issue, showing in principle where the extreme left and the extreme right converge in their positions and where, in principle, there are sensible positions between the two extremes. He points out, for example, that extremists on both the left and the right tend to conceive multiculturalism as cultural separatism. On the left there are those who, with respect to, say, writing history, "take the view that only blacks can write the history of slavery, only native Indians that of pre-European America, and so forth. They are proposing, not an informed multiculturalism, but a blinkered and wildly polemical separatism." Hughes notes this view is shared by extremists on the right in that "separatism, in the main, is what conservatives attack as 'multiculturalism'" (pp. 129-130). In contrast to this false conception of multiculturalism, an idea held by the right as much as the left, Hughes argues that multiculturalism and cultural separatism are not the same thing; in fact, the two are opposites. True multiculturalism, he claims,

asserts that people with different roots can co-exist, that they can learn to read the image-banks of others, that they can and should look across the frontiers of race, language, gender and age without prejudice or illusion, and learn to think against the background of a hybridized society. It proposes—modestly enough—that some of the most interesting things in history and culture happen at the interface between cultures. (pp. 83-84)

Hughes is most convincing in passages such as this one, where he discusses multiculturalism in general terms; it is in the details that his analysis falters. An example is what he calls a "therapeutic" view of art. Throughout the book Hughes argues that in many of the current debates over multiculturalism, there is an underlying assumption that works of art are (or ought to be) therapeutic in nature. Disputes over the literary canon, the emphasis on public education in American museums, much of the political art that is currently produced by American artists, and recent attempts by conservatives such as Jesse Helms to regulate government support of such art—all reflect an assumption, according to Hughes, that art has or ought to have therapeutic effects on people. This might have been an interesting

point if what Hughes refers to as the "therapeutic" effects of art were, in fact, more or less distinctively therapeutic, but they are not. As Hughes uses the term, having a "therapeutic" view of art means nothing more specific than believing, in some broad and general way, that works of art have (or should have) good effects on people. He repeatedly conflates a therapeutic conception of art with a broadly moral conception, as if believing art has (or should have) therapeutic effects on people is the same as believing art has (or should have) moral effects.

It is not. Nor is a moral conception of art as simple as Hughes makes it out to be when he characterizes "the idea that people are morally ennobled by contact with works of art" as a "pious fiction" (p. 177). Both a therapeutic and a moral conception of art are much more complex and interesting ideas than Hughes suggests in his account of them; more importantly, the social issues that turn on them are more complex as well. The superficial treatment of these and other ideas tends to function as a kind of name-calling in Hughes's analysis. Sometimes he calls out "therapeutic" in reference to others' views of, say, the literary canon or the work of contemporary artists, while at other times he calls out "Marxist" or "feminist" as a way of discrediting others' views. Instead of carefully examining the diversity of others' ideas or the full complexity of current issues, his analysis proceeds all too often by simply flinging out labels.

One of the clearest examples of this is his discussion of the 1991 exhibition *The West as America* at the National Museum of American Art in Washington. Although Hughes praises some aspects of the show, he notes that at the time it opened he had reservations about the "late-Marxist, lumpen-feminist diatribes" (p. 189) that characterized the catalog and the wall labels. He notes, too, that he was amazed by conservatives' reaction to the show at the time, especially since the legendary history of the West had been under attack for years by social historians, and in that respect, the show was nothing new. He goes on to say that having weathered this conservative "murk of rightwing censoriousness," the director of National Museum of American Art, Elizabeth Broun, "decided to do a little correcting of her own." A month later Broun, in "a transport of political

correctness," tried to ban a work by Sol LeWitt from a show at the museum on the grounds that LeWitt's work caused viewers to look at images of a naked woman in a sexist, voyeuristic manner (p. 190). Hughes concludes by remarking on what he sees as the lesson of the two shows:

Good censorship—no, let us call it intervention-based affirmative sensitivity—is therapeutic and responds to the advantage of women and minorities. Bad censorship is what the pale penis people do to you. (p. 191)

This kind of unreflective, superficial treatment of ideas and issues is but one of the details on which Hughes's analysis falters. Another is his choice of examples. Examples of what he sees as being wrong with the contemporary artworld include the recent flurry of attention surrounding the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, someone Hughes has "never been able to think of ... as a major photographer" (p. 159), and the "exhausted and literally de-moralized aestheticism" displayed in defense of Mapplethorpe's work by critics such as Janet Kardon (p. 183). Other examples of what is wrong with the artworld include two works from the last Whitney Biennial, one "a sprawling, dull piece of documentation like a school pinboard project by Group Material called *Aids Timeline*," the other "a work by Jessica Diamond consisting of an equals sign cancelled out with a cross, underneath which was lettered in a feeble script, 'Totally Unequal'" (p. 186) which, according to Hughes, exemplify the point that activist art is often badly made. He chooses the performances of Holly Hughes and Karen Finley as examples to show that "the abiding traits of American victim art are posturing and ineptitude" (p. 186). Turning to recent attacks on conventional conceptions of quality in art by contemporary critics and historians, Hughes selects (as "one example from a possible myriad," he says) a passage from a catalogue essay by Eunice Lipton (p. 194). He notes that "it now seems that the pseudo-heroics and biographical panting that critics like Lipton deplore in the treatment of the likes of Michelangelo or van

Gogh, however repressive and hegemonic when applied to whites, are positively desirable for blacks" (p. 195), and he goes on to discuss critics' treatment of the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat as an example.

Hughes often selects the work of women, people of color, homosexuals, and members of other nondominant groups as examples when discussing what he sees as being wrong with the contemporary artworld. When it comes to what is right with the artworld, however, he often selects the work of white European males as examples or—perhaps even more telling—the work of people from nondominant groups who are working within white male European traditions or whose work has been significantly influenced by dominant traditions in some way. Hughes argues, for instance, that Homer's *Odyssey* continues to have meaning for contemporary readers (p. 111) and he cites *Omeros* by Derek Walcott (a black Caribbean writer, winner of the 1992 Nobel for literature) as an example. Similarly, he selects the work of Anselm Kiefer and Christian Boltanski as examples of laudable work in the visual arts. In contrast to the "posturing and ineptitude" of much of the "victim art" exemplified by the performances of Holly Hughes and Karen Finley, Hughes describes Kiefer and Boltanski as examples of political artists "of real dignity, complexity and imaginative power" (p. 186).

Do Hughes's choices in selecting examples, his superficial name-calling at times, and other problematic details of his analysis outweigh its general merits? Other readers will decide for themselves, of course, but I did not find *Culture of Complaint* to be a convincing analysis of contemporary issues. Rather than analyzing current problems in art and politics, Hughes's book seems to me to exemplify many of them.



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