INTRODUCTION TO ART CRITICISM

KERR HOUSTON, MARYLAND INSTITUTE COLLEGE OF ART

ABSTRACT/OVERVIEW, LEARNING OUTCOMES, AND REQUIREMENTS

This course was designed – along with Art History and its Methods – as a junior-level seminar intended to give art history majors both a close familiarity with the history of a relevant discipline and a degree of experience in producing original critical writing. It is also open, however, to non-majors, and it has three further aims: to introduce all students to the history of Western art criticism since 1700, to familiarize students with some of the central tasks and goals of art criticism, and to provide students with relevant tools and experiences in crafting their own art criticism. The various assignments, which include a wide range of readings, several reading responses, group presentations, and a series of writing exercises culminating in a 1,000-word review, are designed to fulfill these aims. By the end of the term, then, students in the class should be comfortable discussing art criticism as a field and as a practice, and will have experience in authoring their own criticism.

I. REQUIRED TEXTS

All required readings, materials for group presentations, and class documents will be posted on the class Moodle site at http://classroom.mica.edu. I will introduce you to the site in the first class; you can use a personal or any public computer to access Moodle. In addition, a few supplementary materials will be handed out during class meetings.
II. POLICIES

GRADING

For all written work, expectations will be spelled out in detail in advance of the assignment; for the group presentations, the basic instructions on the syllabus will be supplemented by in-class direction. In general, all work will be graded as follows: an A will indicate truly exceptional work, a B superior work, a C average work, a D below average work, and an F failing work. The semester grade will be calculated as follows:

- Attendance/participation 20 percent
- Two Moodle posts 10 percent total
- Descriptive exercise 10 percent
- 250 word reviews 10 percent total
- 2-page reading response 10 percent total
- First group presentation 10 percent
- Second group presentation 10 percent
- Exhibition proposal 5 percent
- 1,000-word review 15 percent

Please note, too, the several optional extra credit assignments; by doing any of them, you may earn up to a maximum of 5 points on your final semester grade.

ATTENDANCE AND LATE WORK

Attendance at class meetings is required, and participation in class is expected; if you’re curious about the formula I use in computing the attendance and participation component of the grade, just ask. Four unexcused absences will result in failure of the course, as stipulated in the Academic Bulletin; if you are ill, however, please do not attend class, but do let me know and get a doctor’s note, and I’ll be happy to count the absence as excused. Any work that is late and without a valid excuse will be marked down ten points per week (or fraction thereof), with a maximum penalty of 40 points. This is a rather stiff penalty, so please try to get all work in by the due date – but, even if it is several weeks late, do make sure you still hand it in at some point. And, if you foresee any problems in turning work in on time, I’ll be happy to grant extensions as long as you let me know a few days in advance of the due date.

HOW TO SUCCEED IN THIS CLASS

Always do the reading before the class meetings; in fact, since many of them are rather short, reading them twice is a terrific idea. Take notes as you do the reading, and bring the notes to class. During class, try to participate regularly (I’ll give you lots of chances, by asking a range of questions), and if you have a question, shout it out. Always try to begin writing assignments well in advance of the due date; I’ll be happy to read drafts and to offer feedback – or use an obliging roommate, or friend. I’d also encourage you to make an appointment with a tutor in the Writing Studio – which is just down the hall from our classroom – in developing the more substantial written assignments.
III. COURSE CALENDAR

WEEK ONE: INTRODUCTION

What is art criticism? What is its prehistory?

WEEK TWO: DESCRIPTION

Read: Terry Barrett, Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary, Chapter 3.

Barrett’s book, written in 2000, is a standard introduction to art criticism. In this chapter, he focuses on the act of description. Most of his examples are drawn from the 1980s and 1990s, but many of his general observations can be applied to any period. As you read, focus especially on the ways in which description can overlap with interpretation and judgment, and on the specific word choices that critics make in crafting their descriptions. Is it possible, do you think, to offer a totally objective description of any work?

Descriptive exercise: After reading Barrett’s chapter on description, spend some time on the ground floor of Fox, looking at part of the current Foundation Exhibition. Then choose any one piece in the show, and write a close, informative, and engaging 500-word description of it. (You will be graded on the accuracy and conciseness of your description, and on the thoughtfulness and appeal of your prose). In your description, try to avoid openly interpretive or judgmental language (as Barrett notes, on 86, doing this “might be valuable in learning to write descriptively and in learning to identify value-laden descriptions”). You do not need to do any research at all for this exercise, and you are welcome to focus on purely internal evidence, if you want. Do try, however, to be as exacting as possible, and do aim for the sort of lively, engaging writing applauded by Barrett. In short, your central goal is to be both neutrally descriptive and interesting. The paper’s due at the beginning of class; I’d prefer that you e-mail me the file in MS Word, but you can bring a hard copy, if you’d rather. And, by the way: all word processing programs come with a word counter function, so you don’t have to do the counting yourself.

Optional extra credit: One of the most famous descriptions of a work of art ever written appears in John Ruskin’s Modern Painters: it’s a description of J.M.W. Turner’s The Slave Ship, and is about a page long. For up to two extra points on your final grade, read it (it’s posted on the Moodle site as a link to a scanned document: read the only full paragraph, which begins with “But, I think…” and continues on to a second page) closely, and then write a two-page analysis in which you discuss the aspects of his description that strike you as particularly effective. What does he describe, exactly, and how do his word choices contribute to his description? And, additionally what does he leave undescribed?

WEEK THREE: CRITICISM TAKES SHAPE. DIDEROT AND BAUDELAIRE

Read: Excerpts from Denis Diderot, The Salon of 1765 and The Salon of 1767, and from Charles Baudelaire, The Salon of 1846.

Diderot is widely viewed as the father of modern art criticism. In a series of reviews of Salons written for a secretive journal (intended to avoid censorship) with an exclusive international
mailing list in the 1750s and 1760s, he offered lengthy, thoughtful analyses of hundreds of works of art – and often leavened his writing with a dry humor and an occasional anecdote. I’ve chosen several excerpts from two of his most famous Salons; as you read, keep the following questions in mind. In the first excerpt (pages 3-7), how would you describe his voice? In the second, on Carle Van Loo (7-10), what sorts of things does he focus on in commenting on the paintings? The third excerpt (22-27) deals with Boucher, who is widely respected today as a Rococo painter. But Diderot can’t stand his work: why not? On the other hand, he claims to enjoy Greuze’s painting of a girl with a dead bird (96-100). But how does he interpret it – and is his reading convincing, and/or useful? Finally, the last excerpt, on Claude-Joseph Vernet (86-91), is an especially famous one, in which Diderot imagines that he is actually moving through the scenes represented in the paintings. Is it an effective tactic, in your view? Why, or why not? By the way, note that some of the images that he discusses can be found online, and we’ll look a few in class – but remember that his readers would not usually have had access to reproductions of most of them.

Baudelaire wrote nearly a century after Diderot, and was thus confronted with a very different sort of art: the loose, bold, colorful work of Delacroix and other Romantic painters offered an alternative to the traditional academic and Neoclassical emphasis on line and on finished surfaces. Like Diderot, though, Baudelaire was an engaging writer; in 1943, Margaret Gilman wrote that “The Salon [of 1846] is extraordinarily good reading today; it is youthful, eager, vigorous.” You may or may not agree, but it certainly established Baudelaire’s reputation as a critic. In the first section (pages 44-5), he outlines some of the functions of criticism. What is good criticism, for Baudelaire, and does his ideal appeal to you? The second section (52-68) is dedicated to Delacroix, whose Dante and Virgil had created an outcry when it was first shown in 1822. What does Baudelaire admire about Delacroix? Next, turn to his criticism of the work of Horace Vernet (93-6; Horace was the grandson of Claude-Joseph, whose work was discussed by Diderot). What does Baudelaire find objectionable in this work – and do any of his charges strike you as particularly legitimate? Finally, the last excerpt (116-120) discusses what Baudelaire calls the heroism of modern life – a theme that he developed much more fully in a later work. What’s his basic idea here? And can you think of any later parallels, or echoes?

Optional extra credit: Read Diderot’s discussion of work by Madame Therbouche (from his Salon of 1767, 221-7), and write a two-page analysis, in which you examine his view of the female painter. As you may know, women were rarely allowed access to the live model the in 18th century – a fact that often crippled their chances of becoming celebrated artists. How does Diderot seem to view her sex as a factor in evaluating her? Or, to what extent does her sex shape his views and actions? Worth up to two points on your final grade.

WEEK FOUR: RUSKIN AND THE CHALLENGE OF MODERN ART.


Begin by reading Steinberg’s piece, which was based on three lectures he delivered in 1960. In it, he thinks about the way in which contemporary art has, for more than a century, frustrated, alarmed, or even disgusted a range of viewers. But how does he recast this as an active and
positive process? What is the public, for Steinberg, and what does contemporary art often demand, in his view, of the public? And, once you've gotten his main points in place, think about this: what role does the critic play in such a scheme, and what role might common standards, or criteria of excellence, play? Such questions were important ones in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when artists repeatedly challenged established ideals.

This leads us, in turn, to Ruskin. Ruskin was deeply affected, as a young man, by the work of J.M.W. Turner, whose loose handling of paint struck many as scandalous, or without merit. In an attempt to defend Turner, Ruskin wrote *Modern Painters*, a tome whose first volume was published when he was only 24 but which nevertheless immediately established him as one of England’s foremost authorities on art. Ruskin was, for much of his life, a deeply religious man who also believed in the sanctity of nature; Turner, to him, was the most talented landscape artist in the history of painting. But why? And can you see any parallels between – or meaningful differences between – Steinberg’s claims and Ruskin’s arguments? Admittedly, Ruskin’s prose can seem difficult at first – like Edgar Allen Poe, who was his contemporary, he draws on a vast vocabulary and uses relatively long sentences. But, like Poe, he is widely regarded as a very skilled writer, so give yourself an hour or so, and try to enjoy a master stylist at work. In the first excerpt, he’s laying the groundwork for his defense of Turner. What does he seem to think of the average viewer of art? And how does he conceive of the process of aesthetic judgment, exactly? In the second excerpt (the conclusion to the first volume) how does he view other critics, and how does he present Turner (especially at the end of the section)?

**Group presentations:** Each of the following readings involves a response, on some level, to a new artistic work, idea, or set of ideas that emerged in the years around 1900. Do the reading carefully, and then prepare a 5-minute presentation in which each of you speaks, and in which you briefly respond, as a group, to the prompt below. Feel free to bring a very short PowerPoint presentation, or a brief excerpt, in order to support your presentation. But do adhere, please, to the 5-minute limit; practicing your presentation will help. You’ll be graded (as in later presentations, as well) on the accuracy, accessibility, organization, and appeal of your presentation.

**Felix Fénéon, “Neo-Impressionism”**

- Group 1: Summarize his argument, and comment on any relevant connections to the arguments of either Ruskin or Steinberg. Group 2: summarize his writing style - how would you characterize his tone, or language? Do any of his word choices stand out?

**Guillaume Apollinaire, “Picasso, Painter and Draftsman” and “Young Artists: Picasso the Painter”**

- Group 3: Summarize his argument, and comment on any relevant connections to the arguments of either Ruskin or Steinberg.
- Group 4: Summarize his writing style - how would you characterize his tone, or language? Do any of his word choices stand out?

**Kenyon Cox, “The Modern Spirit in Art”**

- Group 5: Summarize his argument, and comment on any relevant connections to the arguments of either Ruskin or Steinberg.
WEEK FIVE  FORMALISM/EXPERIENTIALISM, GREENBERG/ROSENBERG; INTERPRETING MOVEMENTS


By the 1940s, New York City had emerged as a center of modern art. But the art scene in New York was still quite small by our standards; it consisted of a few galleries and several dozen established painters, sculptors, and critics, most of whom knew each other well. Pollock and De Kooning were two leading lights, but not far behind them were Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, both of whom were Jewish public intellectuals who became well known for their writings on art. This week, we’re reading two of their most famous essays. The art historian Stephen Foster has called the essay by Rosenberg, written in 1952, “perhaps the most controversial piece of criticism ever to address the post-war American painting scene.” Rosenberg’s language can be quite airy, but his central point is relatively clear: he’s advancing an idea regarding a certain strand of American painting. But what’s new, exactly? (And is it really so new after all? If you’ve had any philosophy, you might think about connections between his claims and Existentialism). Eight years later, Clement Greenberg, who had been writing art criticism since the late 1930s, wrote “Modernist Painting” for a Voice of America broadcast. How does he describe the modernist project? What makes a modernist painting modernist, in other words? And, once you’ve answered that, try this: how do you think Greenberg might define modernist sculpture?

Moodle post: Although Greenberg and Rosenberg moved in similar circles, and were friends with some of the same artists, their two interpretations of American art were quite different. Which do you prefer, and why? Post a thoughtful paragraph-length comment on this subject through the discussion board on the class Moodle site at least an hour before class. You’ll be graded (as in all Moodle posts) on the thoughtfulness of your response, and on the level of your writing.

Optional extra credit: Clement Greenberg, “How Art Writing Earns its Bad Name.” In this piece, written in 1962, Greenberg questions the value of Rosenberg’s essay. In a two-page essay, quickly summarize Greenberg’s argument, and then offer your own assessment of his logic: how convincing are his claims? Worth up to two points on your final grade.

WEEK SIX  THE LATE FIFTIES AND EARLY SIXTIES: ARTNEWS, AND POETS ON ART. THE ART OF WRITING.


While Rosenberg and Greenberg were the leading critics in 1950s New York City, a number of other critics also attained a degree of prominence. Many of these critics were also professional poets, and they were often also personal friends with the artists whose work they were
reviewing. Several of these poet-critics wrote for ARTnews, one of the most widely circulated journals on art; consequently, it soon acquired a reputation for publishing criticism that was often poetic and impressionistic. And the figure at the helm of ARTnews was Thomas Hess, the managing editor, who often wrote criticism of a poetic bent himself. Here, I’m asking you to read a section of his 1959 essay on de Kooning – part of the first book-length study of the painter. Hess approaches de Kooning’s art from several angles: what are some of them, and which seem the most fruitful to you? And what do you make of his use of words such as mystery, and breath, or his use of analogies? And, if you were de Kooning, would you be happy with such a review? Next, turn to Frank O’Hara, who was a celebrated poet and critic, and curator at MoMA before dying in a car accident in 1966. He’s writing on a show of AbEx paintings, but in this excerpt he’s also very attentive to context. What sorts of things does he notice, or highlight? And how would you describe his writing style? Is it effective, on the whole? Finally, read the piece by Kramer, who was soon fed up with the so-called poetic school of art criticism. Why does he feel, exactly, that such criticism is not effective? And are his assertions fair, in your opinion, or is he merely curmudgeonly (or both)?

Moodle post: This week, we’ll be thinking seriously about effective critical writing. As you read O’Hara’s essay, decide which sentence you think is most effective, and, in a one-paragraph response posted at least an hour before class, try to explain why, in specific terms.

WEEK SEVEN THE SIXTIES: THE RISE OF ARTFORUM AND THE ASCENDANCY OF FORMALISM

Read: Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood.”

Although American criticism in the 1950s and early 1960s had been centered in New York, it was a California-based magazine – Artforum, founded in 1962 – that became the leading voice of American art criticism in the mid-1960s (and that then moved, perhaps predictably, to New York). Publishing writings on modern and contemporary art that often extended Greenbergian formalism, Artforum was also known for ambitious, theoretical prose that could test the patience of its readers. (Peter Plagens, who was an Artforum contributor himself, wrote in a journal entry in 1974: “Tried to read three issues of Artforum on the plane coming in, got through only part of one article before my head hurt”). Still, the journal was extremely influential, and gave voice to a number of critics who went on to become some of the most studied writers on art. Rosalind Krauss and Michael Fried were two of the most celebrated names in Artforum’s stable; as students, they had personal relationships with Greenberg and became his most famous disciples, adopting his formalist approach. For this week’s class, I’d like you to read Fried’s widely discussed 1967 essay on art and objecthood. As a young writer, Fried – who is now a professor of art history at Johns Hopkins – adopted and stretched many of Greenberg’s ideas, and in this piece he attempts to defend the continued validity of Greenbergian formalism by offering a nuanced position regarding the emergent works of Minimalists (whom he calls the Literalists). Essentially, he’s arguing that modernist art always involves a careful distinction between media and an attention to the specific characteristics of each medium – but that Minimalism somehow blurs the line between various arts. But how, exactly? You might focus especially, in answering this, on his notion of theatricality: how does Fried define it, and what does he think of it? And you might also ask, why does he seem so
serious? What’s at stake, in a broader sense? Fried’s essay is difficult (especially in the first few pages), but it’s conveniently broken into manageable sections: as you read, jot down what you see as the main idea or central sentence in each section. And give yourself some time in tackling it; it’s a challenging piece, but offers real rewards, if it’s taken seriously. If you feel like you need some motivation, see the theartstory.org entry on Michael Fried, which calls it “one of the most important pieces of art criticism on 20th century American art.”

Group 1 also reads Barbara Rose, “ABC Art” (1965). By the mid-1960s, it was clear that Abstract Expressionism was no longer the only game in town; one group of artists, soon known as Pop artists, turned to popular and commercial imagery in their work, and another, as Rose points out in this essay (originally published in Art in America) seemed occupied with a very different sort of concerns. We know them now as Minimalists (a term that was only beginning to take hold in 1965); they included artists such as Carl Andre and Donald Judd. In this piece, Rose is primarily concerned with loosely articulating what she sees as an emerging sensibility embodied in the work of these artists. In a ten-minute presentation, I’d like you to briefly summarize her essay, and then to move into an analysis of it. Essentially, she’s more interested in cataloguing recent developments than in judging them, but which of her observations strike you as particularly useful, or insightful? And (a harder question) how might this work represent a challenge to the modernist formalism of Greenberg and Fried (see, for instance, page 59)?

Group 2 also reads Lawrence Alloway, “Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross...” (1966). This piece is a bit different from that of Fried, in that it’s largely concerned with iconographic, rather than formal, analysis: that is, Alloway’s interested in subject matter. In discussing Newman’s Stations of the Cross (a series of 14 images traditionally related to the final events of Christ’s life: see his page 44 for a fuller discussion), Alloway offers a number of ways of thinking about the meanings of such work. What are some of these? And how much attention does he give to the artist’s intentions? In a ten-minute presentation, I’d like you to briefly summarize his essay and then to begin to answer these questions; you might also bring a related image or two, or offer a sentence that you think is typical, and explain why.

Happy Fall Break!

WEEK EIGHT REACTING AGAINST GREENBERG: THE RETURN OF POLITICS, AND FEMINIST CRITICISM


Although the formalist criticism of Greenberg and Fried was remarkably influential in the 1960s, by the end of the decade, a number of critics felt that it was irresponsibly inattentive to larger, pressing developments, such as political change and feminism. The two writers we’re reading this week are thus typical of a band of criticism in seeking a more engaged and politically active tone. Kozloff’s angry piece was written for Artforum in 1971 in response to a show that had been organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which tried to pair a number of internationally recognized artists with American companies with the aim of fostering a dialogue between industrial America and the arts. Kozloff criticizes the project for a number of reasons.
(in his words, “Everyone got screwed”) – but he also drops a few hints regarding more positive possibilities. So what would a successful art, in his mind, seem to involve? And what do you think, ultimately, of Kozloff’s charge that many of the involved artists were guilty of cooperating with agencies responsible for ongoing “techno-fascism”? Lippard’s piece, on the other hand, is much less indignant; instead, she’s interested in noting broad trends in recent work by women that focuses on the body – and in bringing that work to the attention of a broader audience. It’s a piece of writing that essentially takes stock of a wide body of evidence, and tries to impose some order on it. But does that qualify, in your mind, as criticism? Why, or why not?

**Reading response:** After doing both of the assigned readings, choose one, and write a thoughtful two-page response in which you respond to either of the following prompts. It’s due by the beginning of class; you can either e-mail it to me (in MSWord-compatible form), or hand it in as a hard copy. Your grade will depend on the level of analysis and engagement with the text, and on the quality of your prose.

1. When Kozloff began writing art criticism in the early 1960s, he was deeply influenced (like many critics of his generation) by Clement Greenberg’s example. By the late 1960s, however, he was often trying to distance himself from Greenberg, and took a number of rather public swipes at the older critic. How does this essay differ from Greenberg’s brand of criticism? In two pages, explain your position as fully as possible. Especially strong responses will refer to Greenberg’s “Modernist Painting” or to class discussions of Greenberg, and might involve a little bit of research on Kozloff.

   or

2. Lucy Lippard became well known for her work in *Artforum* in the 1960s, but soon became unhappy with the little attention given to female artists, and in the 1970s she wrote for a range of publications on political and feminist themes in contemporary art. Here, she outlines some pitfalls and potential difficulties inherent in body art by women, and offers a distinction between European and American approaches. But she also hints at her own hopes for such work. What are her hopes, apparently, and how do you react to them? In two pages, discuss Lippard’s hesitations and ideals, and evaluate them: would you add any potential complexities of your own?

**WEEK NINE CULTURE WARS: OCTOBER AND THE NEW CRITERION. FURTHER NOTES ON INTERPRETATION**

**Read:** The Editors, “About October,” and The Editors, “A Note on The New Criterion.”

Although *Artforum* and *Art in America* are still published, they had begun to seem conventional and limiting to some critics as early as the early 1970s. Among those seeking a more insistently political brand of criticism were Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, who left *Artforum* to found *October* (named, as they note, for a critical moment in the Russian Revolution: look up ‘October Revolution’ on Wikipedia, to figure out what they mean by “that moment”) in 1976. In their first issue, the two editors explained their hopes for their new journal. At points, they are explicit: what sorts of subject, and what analytical and editorial methods, do the editors seem to value? It’s also worth paying attention, though, to what’s implicit in their argument: how would you describe their writing style, their range of sources, and their intended audience? Six years later, and at the opposite end of the political spectrum, Roger Kimball and Hilton Kramer also
felt the need to start their own journal— but for very different reasons. They are clearly
dissatisfied with existing publications on art— but why, exactly? And while editors of The New
Criterion offer several examples of the types of criticism that they feel is lacking, what, exactly,
will their new journal apparently try to defend, or uphold?

**Group 3** also reads Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” (1984). Published in *October*, this piece was typical of a growing interest in institutional critique: in an analysis,
that is, of the political and economic frameworks that shape and influence the meanings of artworks. In
the early 1980s, as work by New York-based artists such as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat
attracted widespread interest, galleries began to take advantage of the low rents in Manhattan’s Lower
East Side, and the city began to promote the area as a new arts center. Deutsche and Ryan, however,
see the process as rather more complicated, and in this article they point to some of the costs of the
development—and to ways in which those costs were overlooked or marginalized. In a ten-minute
presentation, briefly summarize their essay, and then offer an evaluation, as well: which of their
arguments are most convincing, and why? What would the authors seem to prescribe as a better
alternative? And, if you’d like, you might also think about parallels in Baltimore: is the city-sponsored
Station North Arts District comparable, in any ways?

year when (due in part to George Orwell’s novel by the same title and Reagan’s bid for a second term)
political discussions were often pointed, Kramer’s essay is largely concerned with Lucy Lippard’s
contention that “There is no neutral zone.” But how does Kramer see this claim as having larger import?
What is his general attitude regarding art with a political content—and can you think of cases that might
problematic his case? In a ten-minute presentation, I’d like you to briefly summarize his essay, and
then to begin to answer these questions; you might also bring a related image or two, or offer a
sentence that you think is typical, and explain why. By the way, note too that Linda Weintraub, who’s
mentioned here, spoke at MICA in 2008; some of you may have attended that lecture.

**WEEK TEN CRITICISM OF EXHIBITIONS AND THE PROCESS OF JUDGMENT, OR EVALUATION**

**Read:** A.D. Coleman, “Christmas Gift: ‘Harlem on My Mind,’” Peter Schjeldahl, “Surrealism Revisited,”
and Jerry Saltz, “American bland Stand.”

Written for *The Village Voice* in the politically fraught year of 1969, the essay by Coleman (a
celebrated American critics of photography), has little patience for a recent show at the Met. In
2002, Schjeldahl, who has written for the *Voice* and *The New Yorker*, found himself rather
distracted and unconvinced by a 2002 show of Surrealist work, and he produced this review,
which was later called “a brilliant essay” by James Elkins. And, also in 2002, Jerry Saltz let
readers of the *Voice* know that he’d simply been bored by the recent Whitney Biennale. All
three pieces, then, offer rather negative evaluations of the shows that they review—even as
they have some very positive things to say about particular pieces. But what criteria do they
seem to use in judging the shows? And what sorts of specific institutional or curatorial decisions
do they focus on in critiquing the exhibitions as a whole? Finally (as always), think about the
structure of each criticism, and the writing styles of the three critics. Which piece do you
ultimately find most effective or appealing, and why?
Group 5 also reads Thomas McEvilley, “Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief: ‘Primitivism’ in Twentieth-Century Art...” (1984). This essay (which appeared in Artforum) was written in response to a huge, and very controversial, show on Primitivism and 20th-century art at MoMA. McEvilley admits that the show involved a brilliant display, but he’s deeply troubled by some of its larger implications. In a 10-minute presentation, summarize his criticisms: how does he see the show as making specific claims about the universality of modernism (and why would MoMA be particularly invested in doing such a thing?). How does he question the purported relationships between primitive and modernist work? What does he think of the absence of an anthropological viewpoint, or of the privileging of form over content and context? Finally, evaluate his argument: which of his complaints seem strongest (or weakest), and why?

Group 6 also reads Thomas Crow, “I’ll Take the High Road, You Take the Low Road” (1991), in the January 1991 issue of Artforum (due to the magazine’s format, I can’t scan or copy the piece, but you can find it in Decker’s holdings, in both bound and duplicate form; the article is on pp. 104-7). Crow is writing on “High and Low,” a controversial MoMA show that attempted to demonstrate some of the ways in which 20th-century artists had learned from conventionally ‘low’ sources, such as ads. But he’s not solely interested in reviewing the show – which had already been widely panned – as much as he is certain themes related to the show, and to MoMA’s larger mission, or self-presentation. What, specifically, does Crow make of the image of Kirk Varnedoe, or of MoMA’s attempt to position itself in the art world in a particular way? And how does he view, in turn, what he sees as MoMA’s “middle-brow” attitude towards theory, and towards its visitors? Finally, once you’ve summarized the piece, try to offer an evaluation: do his claims seem fair, and useful, or not (and why, or why not)? In a 10-minute presentation, briefly describe the show, and concisely analyze Crow’s piece.

WEEK ELEVEN: MORE ON WRITING AS CRAFT: OPENINGS, PERSONAL STYLES, AND SHORT-FORM WRITING


These two authors were (and are) often celebrated for their prose style, but their ways with words vary considerably – as these examples, both from the early 1980s, make clear. Part of the reason for their stylistic differences is that they were written for different sorts of publications: Plagens’ ran in Art in America, a national monthly, while Hughes’s piece appeared in Time, the international newsweekly. As you read, then, think about how the writers responded to their anticipated audiences. Pay attention, too, to the ways in which they begin and structure their writings: how do they create a specific tone, or mood, and how do they then develop their argument? Finally, note the reference in Plagens’ piece (on pages 264 and 265) to a “local art school”: that’s MICA!

Brief review: Over the past two weeks, we’ve thought about the processes of interpretation and judgment. Here’s a chance to practice these on your own terms. By Sunday, head over to the Walters, and check out the small show entitled Thai Story: The Vessantara Jakata. Then write two thoughtful 250-word reviews, in different voices or styles, in which you introduce the show to your reader and offer an original interpretation of the work or the exhibition (or both), and an evaluation of the show as a whole. Part of the goal here is utterly conventional, and you’ll be graded primarily on the force and the clarity of your arguments and on the depth of your claims. But part of the goal, too, is to get you to
experiment with voice, and you’ll also be graded on the diversity and consistency of the styles that you generate. You might write one review in a light, humorous voice, and another in an academic tone—or try variants of your own. But please do give yourself a chance to revise your work; writing a brief review can be harder than composing a long one! It’s due at the beginning of class; you can e-mail it to me, or bring a hard copy. And remember that the Walters is closed on Monday and Tuesday!

WEEK TWELVE: IS THERE A CRISIS IN CRITICISM?


2003 was a fascinating year for art critics, as several writers published widely-read works in which they claimed that art criticism as a whole was in crisis. In a small book, Elkins argued that this was in part because criticism was “massively produced, and massively ignored.” In an article for Art in America, Raphael Rubinstein alleged that critics no longer seemed willing to offer judgments. But both writers added other thoughts on the matter, as well: jot their specific allegations down as you read. Finally, Katy Siegel offered a rather different take on the matter, as she claimed that any crisis in criticism was simply part of a larger shift in society’s artistic attitudes. But what did she mean, exactly? And whom do you find more convincing – Siegel, or Elkins and Rubinstein? Is there a crisis in criticism? (Or was there, in around 2002)?

One-page exhibition review proposal due: Choose an exhibition, show, or body of work (which should not be your own, but which you can visit) for your final piece of criticism. To do this, you might have a look at the listings in City Paper, or The New Yorker, if you’re headed up to New York; in Baltimore, possible venues around MICA might include The Walters, the Baltimore Museum of Art, The Contemporary Museum, the C. Grimaldis Gallery, Goucher College’s Rosenberg Gallery, the Goya Contemporary Gallery, or the Current Gallery. Once you’ve settled on a subject for your review, write a one-page summary of your intended approach: when will you visit, for whom will you write, what might you focus on in the review, and what might your interpretive angle(s) be? (Or, as Thomas Hess, the editor of ARTnews in 1965, told a young Peter Schjeldahl, who had applied for a job: “Just write me a letter telling me what makes you think you are qualified to walk into a gallery where some poor bastard has his paintings and to tell him they are no good”). Incidentally, you are welcome to review a student show; as Sue Spaid, who teaches art criticism, has written, “The best way to teach students how to write about art is to assign them to review their peers’ exhibitions (fellow art students) or to write essays for student shows.” Your grade will depend upon the appropriateness of the choice, and on the thoughtfulness involved in your explanation of why you chose it.

Optional extra credit: Arlene Croce, ‘Discussing the Undiscussable,’ published in The New Yorker in 1994, was a bombshell. In it, she refused to see or to review the nominal subject of her article: a dance by Bill T. Jones, in which Jones featured video images of individuals with AIDS. Arguing that such a move made the piece victim art, Croce offered a number of thoughts on the matter – thoughts that soon became extremely controversial, inspiring responses by Joyce Carol Oates and Homi Bhabha, among others. But what do you think? Was Croce’s article useful? Courageous? Irresponsible? Read her piece and then, in a two-page paper, offer a thoughtful assessment of her infamous review. Worth up to two points on your final grade.
**WEEK THIRTEEN: CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM**

**Read:** First, take an hour or two to flip through the various reviews in Decker Library’s most recent issue of *Artforum, FlashArt* or *Frieze*, and to check out artritical.com. Then settle in and read this week’s reviews, all of which were written in the last six months: Roberta Smith in *The New York Times* on the Frans Hals’ show at the Met, Blake Gopnik for *The Daily Beast* on Ryan Trecartin at PS1, and, finally, a *City Paper* piece to be determined. Admittedly, the contemporary landscape of art criticism is difficult to summarize quickly, as it’s so clearly diverse and global. With that in mind, I thought it might be helpful to point you to several very different venues and to to consider the particular styles of three active writers. Given her post at the *Times*, Smith is very well known; she is occasionally criticized for allegedly favoring female artists, but here she tackles a show by an Old Master. What’s her take, and does she frame it effectively, in your view? Unlink Smith (and his brother Adam, who writes for *The New Yorker*), Blake Gopnik is based in D.C., and has written for *The Washington Post* for a number of years. Here, though he’s writing online, for *The Daily Beast*. How, first of all, does he try to take advantage of the online format? Is his decision successful, in your view? And how do the ensuing comments alter the effect of the piece? Finally, the *City Paper* article is locally relevant; it concerns a recent Baltimore exhibition. Pay particular attention, as you read it, to the structure of the review: what sorts of specific information does the author convey in the first few paragraphs, and how would you categorize the main topics of those paragraphs?

**WEEK FOURTEEN: WORKSHOP**

**Read:** at least two recent articles in the online Arts: Art & Design section of *The New York Times* (http://www.nytimes.com/pages/arts/design/index.html) and one recent article in the art section of *The Village Voice* (http://www.villagevoice.com/art). Try to find an assertion or an approach that reminds you of a writing we’ve discussed this term. We’ll then talk about the relevant pieces in class.

**Initial drafts of exhibition reviews due.** Your review should be no more than 1,000 words in length. Bring at least two hard copies, and be prepared to share them with classmates, who will offer feedback.

**WEEK FIFTEEN SUMMARY: THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURES OF ART CRITICISM**

**Final drafts of reviews due.** Using my comments, and those of your classmates, develop your exhibition review into a finished, polished piece that is no more than 1,000 words in length. In developing this final draft, you should think especially closely about your opening, the structure of your review, your word choices, and your concluding sentence. You can turn it in as a hard copy, or e-mail the file as an attachment; in either case, it’s due at the beginning of class. You will be graded on the accuracy and structure of your review, on the ambition and level of analysis of your claims, and on the creativity and thoughtfulness of your prose.

**WORKS CITED**