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Mentor's Introduction

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mentor's introduction

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The study of art, particularly through a critical process, has received new currency under some of the recent changing directions in art education. Therein also lie some problems and dilemmas. Discipline based studies have focused on the work of art, an object, that tends to be dominated by formalistic aesthetics, or the study of the object primarily for its structural properties. Such studies limit what is admitted as art, and have largely ignored the contextual dimensions surrounding the creation of art. The "other" art education is focusing more on the social/political, anthropological dimensions and context of creation. The problem is: Can criticism or the critical process addressing the understanding of art, deal with both the nature of art as a physical object as well as its meaning in a broader context?

The more traditional concept of criticism, and its variations, including description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation, tend to be interpreted and used primarily as an object focused process that ignores art's functions and meanings in society. Conversely, those reductionist Marxist views that fail to address the specificity of art reduce art to a meaning devoid of attention of the physicality of objects, therein reducing objects to verbal concepts rather than visual/verbal meaning.

Another problem with some views of critics is that they primarily designed to view and understand so called "fine arts" created by "creative genius," particularly those objects designated as objects for display in museums, galleries, and art exhibits. From a broader perspective, these views eliminate a large percentage of visual materials created for and servicing a variety of everyday functions in society -- advertising, graphics of all sorts, art of self-educated individual, and the materials created by different ethnic and social groups.

If one takes a broad view of art, essentially the visual material created by individuals and groups, then a view of criticism must enable one to understand how such material is created and functions in society. Most views of the critical process are inadequate to the task. So from a socially oriented perspective a critical process must not only deal with the great variety of visual material created and used in a society, but must be able to facilitate an understanding of how such material operates within the context of conditions as opposed to a formalistically oriented aesthetic. This is essentially the

problem that Gayle Weitz addresses in her proposed adaptation of Burke's Dramatist Pentad, a literary critical process, to facilitate understanding the broad array of visual material that functions in society.

Ms. Weitz's selection of Kenneth Burke's Dramatist Pentad is based on the idea that other approaches to criticism focus on one of the elements -- viewer, art, artists, culture -- without adequately considering relationships among the others; whereas the Dramatist Pentad includes all of the elements while it is Gayle's contention that it can be adapted to more adequately address the broad array of visual phenomena that functions in society, traditional concepts of art.

The easiest road for a doctoral student to follow is that well traveled, particularly by one's mentor; however the really good contributions are made by those students with the courage, pizzazz and the willingness to take risks. I believe that Ms. Weitz has demonstrated this ability in her study. Such attempts are the ones that can take significant leaps into the future.