



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS

Art School Critiques as Seductions

Author(s): James Elkins

Source: *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Spring, 1992), pp. 105-107

Published by: [University of Illinois Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3332733>

Accessed: 27/01/2014 08:27

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Illinois Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Aesthetic Education*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

- series of lectures delivered in Cologne, Berlin, and Düsseldorf, 1871-1873. Reprinted as *Helmholtz on Perception: Its Physiology and Development*, ed. Richard M. Warren and Roslyn P. Warren (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1986).
12. J. B. Deregowski, *Distortion in Art/ The Eye and the Mind* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).
 13. Rhoda Kellogg, *Analyzing Children's Art* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing, 1969), p. 70.
 14. Hoyt L. Sherman, *Drawing by Seeing* (New York: Hinds, Hayden & Eldredge, 1947).
 15. Katharine Blick Hoyenga and Kermit T. Hoyenga, *Psychobiology: The Neuron and Behavior* (Pacific Grove, Calif.: Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1988), p. 438.
 16. Francis V. O'Connor, "Two Methodologies for the Interpretation of Abstract Expressionism," *Art Journal* (Fall 1988): 223.

Art School Critiques as Seductions

Studio art critiques can become highly emotional, and when that happens they can also be unhelpful or actively destructive. For that reason it is good to have a theory about emotion, a way of reading critiques that can help salvage something useful from the confusion of antagonism. One possible theory, which I have found widely applicable, involves reading critiques as enactments or metaphors of seduction.¹ By this I do not mean innuendo between instructors and students, but a way of naming the interaction between instructors and the artworks that are presented by the students. There is much in the way that artists present their work that echoes the customs and strategies of seduction, and we should not omit the most obvious signs, as when an instructor declares, "I love that!" or "That's wonderful!" or "I'm very taken by that!" But seduction operates in more general and more intricate ways.

At the very least, an artist wants attention. The panelists and guests should be engrossed, interested, intrigued, responsive, excited. The work is meant to draw them in, to invite them, to provoke them. Sometimes, to be sure, the artist wants something more like friendship, a lasting and renewable dialogue of equals. But more often, given the briefness of the encounter and given the difference in rank and age between the teachers and the students, the aim is more immediate and also more intimate than friendship. Students themselves play variable roles in these dramas, since they are the works's creators, promoters, and representatives. The artwork "presents itself" or is introduced, and it, not the student, is to be the object of the teacher's attention. At its best, the artwork can incite a range of responses within the compass of a critique: at first, one might be repelled, then attracted; there might be the promise of "depth" or lasting interest; the work may seem "coy" or overly aggressive; it may appear as an "other" or as an acquaintance, as a relative or a stranger.

Elements of Seduction

This way of thinking about critiques permits a closer understanding of some of the sources of destructively high emotion. It is essential to bear in mind that even a successful critique ends in unfaithfulness. Those teachers who are not the student's advisors, or who are not in the student's depart-

ment, will leave the work at the end of the session, and most will not return. This is a simple fact, and very important: panelists who are themselves artists never forget that the artist has been alone with the work for days, perhaps for months, all that time preparing the work to be seen. The classical metaphor for this is childbirth, since the work is like an offspring; but in this context, I would suggest that the solitary time spent creating can also be seen as time spent in front of a mirror, “fixing” or primping an ideal image, and it is that image that is displayed for the panelists. Given the importance of this time spent in preparation—however it is to be imagined—it follows that the brevity of the critique and the inevitable dispersion of the critique panel correspond to a lover’s rejection. Often enough the teachers will continue to discuss the work, and it will remain in their minds for some time, but eventually will come the moment when each panelist will be unfaithful to the student’s work. And this is a principal source of emotional difficulty, both for students and for teachers. To the degree that showing work is like an invitation, there is a potential for hurt. And it is made even more virulent by the fact that everyone involved knows that spurning and unfaithfulness are inevitable consequences of showing work.

I am not implying we need to imagine each critique as a bedroom scene. Seduction is a model, a way of understanding the curious emotional charge that often accumulates and discharges during critiques. In this sense critiques are veiled or allegorical psychodramas, and they necessarily involve the entire spectrum of “unnatural” as well as natural responses to seduction, including voyeurism, display, lechery, perversion, and bad faith. In ordinary critiques, the fundamental structure of display, appreciation, and “unfaithfulness” runs like a conventional narrative in a novel and so is not obtrusive. The student and the teachers can learn about the specifics of the work without raising issues of decorum. Typically there is a fair amount of praise in critiques, and if one listens carefully, it is apparent that the praise is sometimes inserted into places in the dialogue where it does not logically belong. In such cases its function is to reassure. An incongruous, sudden, or irrelevant statement of praise says, in effect, that the conversation is going well and there is no cause for alarm.

Sometimes it can be useful actually to talk like this and to say, for example, that a certain work “seduces” or appears “friendly.” But it is rarely useful to mention that a student is behaving as if he or she wanted indirectly to seduce the panel. Doing that would only impede the real seduction that is going on between the work and the panelists. In an emotional critique, I would suggest, this is exactly what goes wrong. The seduction is not succeeding, and both parties know it; discomfort and suspicion build on both sides, until they find expression in remarks that are loaded with emotional freight. Ultimately those pretenses are cast aside, and openly rude remarks can provoke a breakdown of the dialogue.

Some Conclusions

I have suggested a sexual metaphor in order to help explain the violence that sometimes accompanies critiques. Thinking of panelists and students

as jilted lovers can sometimes explain highly emotional, provocative responses, but it is not necessary when the critique is running smoothly (at a lower “emotional level”). It would take a book—or better, a novel—to rehearse all the emotions that can take place during critiques. This brief commentary alone contains betrayal, coyness, insinuation, and slander—all elements of the classical repertoire of love.² And I would also comment that there is nothing demeaning or irrelevant about seduction as a model for critiques: after all, sexuality is a central fact of life, and it is always possible that critiques may be at their best, or purest, when they are most like successful seductions.

James Elkins

School of the Art Institute of Chicago

NOTES

1. These comments are inspired by Jean Laplanche’s revision of Freudian theory and art criticism that uses seduction as its primary trope. See Jean Laplanche, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, trans. D. Macey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
2. The best text here is Roland Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse*, trans. R. Howard (New York, 1978). His entire book could be applied to critiques, as a handbook of effects.

This essay is abstracted from the author’s *On Teaching Art*, a work in progress on the theory of art schools.

Experimental Aesthetics: Implications for the Aesthetic Education of Nonartists

Research in experimental aesthetics has been a source of debate in the arts and in psychology for decades. It has been argued that experimental aesthetics can never hope to address crucial questions about aesthetic experience, because it lacks the wherewithal to get at real aesthetics. It has been claimed that experimental aesthetics asks artificial questions about artificial experiences. Current approaches to experimental aesthetics attempt to ask real questions about real aesthetic experiences.

Research in experimental aesthetics has utilized many different techniques to acquire information about how people make aesthetic judgments. In visual aesthetics, those methods have included sorting tasks in which subjects are presented with various designs they are asked to sort.¹ After sorting, subjects are then asked to explain the techniques they used to arrange the cards into stacks. Presumably, the manner of sorting reflects the subject’s opinions with regard to important features of visual design that differentiate or assimilate patterns. Studies of this type have demonstrated that many of the Gestalt principles² play roles in subjects’ judgments.³

As time passed, though, the sorting method and other procedures that approached aesthetic experience from the atomistic aspect of perception