



## *Art Criticism Essay Suggested Guidelines*

An art criticism essay focuses on the art. A biographical essay focuses on the artist. The following suggestions are intended for authors who take themselves to be writing art criticism. They are the product of APRA's ten years of experience in fact-checking texts submitted for image or text reproduction permission.

### **(1) Make sure you get the facts right.**

**(1.1) Perceptual facts:** It is best to describe the art object you perceive while you are looking at or experiencing it. Ensure that the final draft of your description of the perceptual facts about the work is accurate by visually comparing it with the object you are writing about.

**(1.2) Physical but non-perceptual facts:** Facts about the materials that constitute the work, or about the production process that resulted in the work, or the exhibition history of the work, may not be accessible to direct perception. They may require further research. Research is different from speculation, gossip or third-person hearsay. Ensure that the final draft of your description of physical but non-perceptual facts about the work is accurate by basing it on careful and thorough research.

**(1.3) Mental facts:** Facts about the artist's beliefs, motives, purposes, or other mental states can be ascertained by consulting the artist's statements about those mental states. These statements may be accessible through the artist's published texts, such as essays or interviews; or (less reliably) through conversation with the artist. Ensure that the final draft of your description of the artist's mental states is accurate by basing it on the artist's on-the-record statements that confirm your description, and which you can quote or cite bibliographically.

Art criticism discusses objects and events that are empirically observable. So there is no excuse for not getting the facts right when writing about them. To the extent that you do not, you are writing fiction for your readership, while misleading them into believing you're writing about physical objects and events that actually exist.

### **(2) Do not instrumentalize the artwork as a psychological artifact for making inferences about the artist's mental states.**

**(2.1) Artistic Purposes:** The effect on you of a given conjunction of perceptual and physical facts about an artwork does not necessarily express the artist's intentions in creating it.

**(2.2) Subconscious Drives:** The effect on you of a given conjunction of perceptual and physical facts about an artwork does not necessarily reveal the artist's subconscious drives.

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**(2.3) Social Attitudes:** The effect on you of a given conjunction of perceptual and physical facts about an artwork does not necessarily reflect the artist's beliefs about the world or about other people.

Unlike the artist's relevant on-the-record statements, neither the exclusively perceptual facts about the artwork, nor its physical but non-perceptual facts, nor the effect on you of any of these facts, are a reliable evidential basis for speculating on the artist's mental states in creating it. This does not mean that the artwork's effect on you is not useful and important for experiencing the work and grasping its conceptual, social or art-historical meaning (see (3) below).

### **(3) Interpret and analyze the artwork, not the artist.**

**(3.1) Conceptual Implications:** The intellectual effect on you and others (artists, critics, academics, intellectuals, the general public) of the artwork is a useful evidential basis for drawing out its conceptual implications.

**(3.2) Social Impact:** The psychological, emotional, or perceptual effect on you and others (artists, critics, academics, intellectuals, the general public) of the artwork is a useful evidential basis for articulating its social impact.

**(3.3) Art-Historical Significance:** The art-historical associations the artwork effects in you and others (artists, critics, academics, intellectuals, the general public) are a useful evidential basis for exploring its art-historical significance.

Interpreting an artwork in terms of its implications, impact and significance requires substantial research (not speculation, gossip or third-person hearsay). That research begins with your own first-personal, direct empirical observation, both of the artwork and of your responses to it. Convincing interpretation of an artwork is anchored in your ability to truthfully recognize and mine *your own* responses to the work. And it requires the confidence to share those responses with your readership. This is an essential building block in the solid empirical foundation that lends authority to your views.

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Why is it necessary to state these self-evident principles explicitly? - Because most (not all) art criticism that purports to address my artwork violates (1) and (2), and ignores (3). In these respects, the art critical treatment of my work is different from the art critical treatment of most other artists I know. Most such essays get the descriptive facts of other artists' work right. They do not deflect the reader's attention away from the work and onto the putative mental states of its creator. And they do focus on the meaning, impact and implications of the work itself. To confirm this, compare the treatment of my work with the treatment of other artists' work in any anthology in which we all appear together and each receive individual critical discussion.

There are many possible explanations of why most art critics approach my work differently than they do the work of many other artists. But none of those possible explanations justify this difference in treatment, none are plausible, and none are complimentary to their authors. The important point is that art critics who violate these principles are thereby violating elementary standards of quality in their own work. They are performing at a substandard level of professional competence. Their editors may wish to consider whether the gains of publishing art criticism of substandard quality really outweigh the losses.

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