

# IMAGERY IN VISUAL ARTS: MANAGING THE TEMPERAMENT OF ART CRITICISM

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CHRIS ECHETA AND BOJOR ENAMHE

(Received 26, September 2010; Revision Accepted 22, October 2010)

## ABSTRACT

Works of art can be described as narratives in shorthand where tangled mass of meaning and relationships are woven 'seemingly' inseparably by the instrumentality of a medium. The interpretation of this shorthand and the undoing of the 'tangled mass of meaning, constitute the great area known as 'art criticism'. The conservative intervention of personal emotions seems to be a fundamental characteristic of critical artistic judgment. This scenario attempts to invariably endorse the principle where "incorrect rights" and "correct wrongs" are equal to the answer, just as lullabies, in spite of tune differences, still lure babies to sleep. The tap root of emotional personification of judgment seems to continue to threaten the main line objectivity. This paper examines the issue of subjectivity in interpretation vis-à-vis established principles of objective/impersonal judgment. Art criticisms or judgments establish their bridgeheads from the components of art object. In other words art criticisms ought to only be technically made through the channels provided by the components of an art work or object. Many of these principles are largely overlooked. Comments issuing from group or conference makings give away this subjectivity. The paper encourages the judges to play the game according to the rules.

**KEYWORDS:** Art Criticism; Components of Art Objects; Personification of Judgment.

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of image generation, whether in two- or three dimensions ignites the process of being subjected to criticisms. Critics appear on the scene to interpret and judge the visuality or tactility of such images formally or informally. They table the 'innocent' artist and read out his 'offences' followed by their verdicts.

This paper notes that, many-a-time, these verdicts partner with personal emotions which tend to personify arguments along a variety of formats. It questions the rationale behind some art criticism canons which tend to mislead casual readers who may just glance through stopping short of excavating the underlay. These authors go ahead to implicate some of the renowned authors of books and contributors in journals. Streamlining the locus of art criticism is seen to be worthwhile at a six-point level, which ought to simplify and fine tune the art of art criticism.

Narrating a live-experience in an art judgment outing, the authors proved that art

professionals, sometimes, are not left out in the no-so-good understanding of art criticism due to one reason or the other. Suggestions were put forward as to a dispassionate path to unpersonalized and art-restricted art criticism.

## The Present Garment Of Criticism

The detachment of the self from art criticism has proved to be a difficult swim upstream. Many reasons are responsible for this. Prejudices due to training or lack of it, is almost always implicated in the wrong attitude towards clear and impersonal judgment. As earlier mentioned in this paper "the conservative intervention of personal emotions" stands as an 'albatros' or a 'colossus' against a calm and dispassionate approach to the subject in question.

One of the writers of this paper is a ceramist by training and may digress generally here to properly present his case. He came into the 'field of play' (practice), to meet a 'red card' ordering ceramics/pottery out. The reason being that they are 'craft' not 'art'. This is more than

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**Chris Echeta**, Department of Visual Arts and Technology Crutech Calabar, Nigeria.

**Bojor Enamhe**, Department of Visual Arts and Technology Crutech Calabar, Nigeria.

art/ceramic criticism but the position strengthens the argument against the current criticism canons. The writers here suspect strongly that the undercurrent generated by this 'craft baptism' that gave rise to the term 'ceramic art' has been entrenched into the creative dictionary of art practice, or do I say 'craft practice'. After all, there is nothing like 'painting art' art or 'sculpture art'. Ceramics ought not to be criticized on this platform.

The proponents of this craft idea have not clearly established the immovable boundaries between this 'craft' (reproductive art) and one-of-a-kind art. They have also not respected the unclear and fluid demarcation between utilitarian ceramics and its aestheticism (decorative ceramics). While some ceramics whose choice are based on beauty (art content) perform the function of utility, aesthetic ceramics also perform a function-the function of aesthetics. If the argument of function strips ceramics of the status of art, then the structures of that line of thought collapse in the face of the functional significance of painting and sculptures (which also perform decorative or aesthetic functions).

Authors and other informal writers have also disinherited ceramics in their texts. Leuzinger, (1976) talks of the Nok terracotta in Northern Nigeria. She mentioned 'clay' firing, reduction firing (black patches on wares), still failed to mention "ceramics" or "pottery" even in passing, but rather said that they were "sculptures"

Webb, (2006), extols the wonderfully produced terracotta mounted on the largest public building in England to be completely faced with terracotta, (London Natural History Museum). The work was, however, assigned to 'architecture' instead of its natural domain-ceramics. Terracotta, 'fired clay work', is a product of a ceramic process and ought not to be a 'tenant' to architecture in his own home.

Onuzulike 2005 reflects the opinions of El Anatsui, (et al), about the faithfulness to the present canons of art criticism which keeps ceramics at the sidelines. The canons endorse the categorization of art into 'fine arts' and 'applied arts' or the 'high and low art' which contribute to the problem. Cohen, 1982. In his article, "Clay at the Whitney", published in American Craft also made reference to the craft/art controversy. He saw a thin line between ceramics as a craft and ceramics as an art.

Stopping short of going ahead to mention others, this writer is blowing the whistle against the system but cannot legislate on the issues

raised. The point is that every area of art ought to be criticized within its domain and not without. The yardsticks of such criticism should be applied within the ambit of professional practice.

### Emotions And Critical Judgments

More 'offensive' prejudices are sometimes exercised when the critics, judges or adjudicators are also professional artist in one sub-discipline or the other, or in other creative areas. This professional orientation, more often than not intrudes into the art criticism techniques and approach. This 'steals' into the judgment arena and keeps prodding the adjudicator in particular directions.

For example, abstractionism and naturalism remain the basic headline formats under which all other movements yield in more or less intensities and dimensions. Even these (abstractionism and naturalism), gather followership among art critics, even those who are not professionally artists. Ceramic critics are also guilty of this. Their line of discipleship dictates and colours the terrain of their criticism, directly or indirectly.

Fauvism, (Gardener, 1975) one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century art movements was criticized and received outright rejection and abuses as it tried to elbow its way into the art performance of the time. The judges even became personal and called them 'beasts'. The 'fauvists' shocked the art world with their brazen, brash and unmitigated colour scheme, thriving on the primariness of colour. They were judged negatively by the state and their disciples. The fauvists (and their followers), judged themselves positively and considered themselves also right. Two different and opposing answers from the same question. This scenario the writers term the "principle of 'incorrect rights and 'correct wrongs'".

### Professional Prejudices

**The subjectivity** in question, surprisingly, lurk up in the neighbourhood. Sometimes, 'judges' seldom are aware of their inability to play according to the principles. To buttress this point, a live experience is mention worthy.

In 2009, the Cross River State of Nigeria organized a junior and senior secondary school art competition in painting whose theme was "Child Abuse". Chris Echeta, one of the writers of this paper was appointed as one of the adjudicators. By the time they were through with

one of the centres, it became clear that they had problems in their hands relating to judgment. The initial and preliminary comparisons of scores were sharply apposing. The uneasy silence that followed provided no common grounds for further discussions. Two camps had emerged. Each had "correct" yet different answers to the same questions. At the completion of adjudication the next day, in the second city, about two hundred kilometers away, it became obvious that positions have widened and the chances of narrowing the gap were almost non-existent.

The reason for the above situation was that critical judgments were based on the adjudicators' temperament of practice and training. These became "excess luggage" too heavy to deal with. For while some members of the team were appreciating the fluid pictorial manipulations and colour moods as statements, others went in search of rigid symmetry and seeing unpainted paper areas as liabilities instead of assests of visual weight balance, or incompleteness due to "child abuse" (the theme of the art competition).

The exercise, however, ended on a happy note as an independent panel was charged with the onus of reconciling the judgments of "these committed professionals"-and it did. It must be appreciated that adjudication is a specialized form of art criticism in that beyond putting forward one's views, one is expected to award marks. The assignment of scores or marks further personalizes the critique, making the yielding of grounds more difficult.

### **Criticism, how should it be?**

Knowing what to say and knowing how to say them, are two different things. A good statement may assume an unattractive complexion simply due to its verbal coinage and presentation. Astute and cautious deployment of personal opinions should be a frontline consideration in delving into a (someone else's) private creative enclave from where creative activities congeal

Works of art under criticism are known to have been dismissed contemptuously by statements like, "What is this?" or "What's this thing doing here?" The authors share the opinion that such commentators may be described as "examiners who mark papers they did not set". The possibilities which exist in a creative work are copiously enormous in terms of form, colour, symbols, narratives and interpretation. Extending from the above should also be the fact that titles given to works are just one of the many titular

possibilities. The naming of such work is a reaction to the prevailing mood and temperament of the creator at the time of titling. Time can also re-present works as social temperaments change.

With the above palette of 'shifting grounds', one can hardly stabilize all possibilities of criticism and as such, much caution ought to be exercised.

### **Components Of Art Objects**

Specific guidelines are necessary for areas of critical comments. Such specifics are designed to fence in the span of criticism but not in an absolute way. This paper puts forward a six-member list below:

#### **1. Authorship**

This lies with the artist who is the intellectual owner and maker of the work of art.

#### **2. Medium and Technique**

Medium is the material of execution of any work of art while technique is the approach to design destination. Under this component, issues of technical mastery or otherwise of the material can be expressed.

#### **3. Style**

This is the artist's "handwriting" on the medium which has consistent or fairly consistent pattern. This is also the tool for the classification of art works. It is the common stamp of kinship which runs across a corpus of works. This authenticates the artist's creative authorship and helps in locating the missing links in cases of multiple claims.

#### **4. Functionalism**

This is the various, contexts of utilization which yield to the objects' significance

#### **5. Iconography**

This has to do with the study of symbols or a system of symbols and their deeper meanings. Symbolic mannerisms may yields to style

#### **6. Aestheticism**

This is the evaluation of the formal configuration of a work of art. It also deals it's the compositional principles. From the above, all the components funnel into each other in a most fluent manner, but the fluency follows a particular pattern only discernible by those who are properly 'briefed'

It is expedient, that the critics should know and appreciate the interwoven nature of the art object

components. For instance, iconography (symbolism), may constitute the artistic mannerism against which stylistic characterization may learn. It may also instruct on the functionality of a body of works, while remaining an essential element of aesthetic format. Sometimes, these symbols can play historical roles as to link history with the stream of time. Or more specifically, function as pointers to cultural time ancestry.

The Nok artistic culture, for example, brings to the fore, the formal configurations of their images. The style of the 'wide-awakeness' of the eyes, punched-open nostrils and ears stray into the interpretation of the 'Nokian' style of art practice. The warm brown clay medium (fired colour) positioned itself and receives the styles, the aesthetics and the other components of those works.

Mittler G and Howze J. (1995) also listed out four operation areas for art criticism

- 1 Description, which identifies everything in the drawing (work of art)
- 2 Analysis, determining how the work is organized and composed.
- 3 Interpretation: - Explain what the work means.
- 4 Judgment: - Making a personal decision about the work's degree of success.

The cited authors proposed the four areas of criticism for the adjudication of 'drawings', but the authors of this paper have generally slotted in "used drawing" but these authors of this paper have generally slotted in "work" without making the points lose meaning and relevance. It is in the numbers 3 and 4 that the subjectivity of personal emotion usually erupts.

In between and within the headings of the guidelines harbor the experience leakages when impinged by human prejudices. As earlier mentioned, these very emotional prejudices are unconsciously picked in professional training, commitment to the temperaments of creative practice and contact. Pinnel, aligning himself with the possibility of a deep-seated wound which dangles over the head of an artist as a result of a critique says in his, "Giving A Critique"

As artists, we really do take our work seriously and critical comments about it can cut very deeply. It's not at all unusual for people to cry during a critique, which is certainly an indicator of

deeply held feelings. The critic should take care to move slowly and choose words carefully. Try to phase things in the narrowest sense. And don't draw broad conclusion from one example. (2006, 23-24/72).

In order to soften the hard ground of criticism, Pinnel observes that the major areas against which critique hinges are;

- a) Process- How things are made and what they are made of.
- b) Aesthetics- How things look.
- c) Content- What the art means
- d) Precedents- Who worked with these ideas before.

The four guidelines above which are shortened forms of the components of art objects given earlier, appear inoffensive on their own but the potentialities of prejudicial contamination remain real. They cleave tenaciously to the 'door frames' of arguments, and from there, anoint all the passing contemplations, for or against. However, the situation does not invalidate the need of those specifics. Since critics are human beings and are subject to personal opinions, the art criticism area must bend backwards to accommodate such 'offenses'.

Proper training and depth of knowledge remain a sine-qua-non for proper art criticism. These should go beyond their idiosyncrasies down to respect for creative and sentiments and creative privacies. Art criticism is like stripping creativity (and the creator) naked in a public market place and this ought to be done with tact and decorum. Sometimes, one's contact and conversation with an art critic reveals a yawning lack professional depth (in terms of visual arts for instance), yet they sit and judge (criticize) the area. Their schooling should include, inter alia, some kind of knowledge depth in the ceramic area or other areas in which they aspire to be authorities. This will equip them with the right professional jargons and cause them to appreciate material (medium) behavior and possibilities and possibilities of use. It is, however, appreciated that the most accurate and sophisticated training programme mounted for art criticism will still yield various levels of performance and compliance leakages in different individuals.

## CONCLUSION

Along the above tributaries of reason and learning, legislating on the "only and correct" ways to give a critique may fail due to the lack of

appropriate instruments of enforcements. People, including the 'judges' possess their private make-ups around which their behavioural patterns are woven. It may, therefore, present no wonder that in spite of the laid down principles of art criticism, subjectivity still rears its head. The search for a rigid compliance seems to remain elusive. It remains an object of contemplation how long this search may last. Against this background, one may continue to wonder if this "perfect" art criticism technique does not lie on paper only, while, in practical terms, lies two steps ahead of capture. However, vocal and textual persuasions, as this article, may continue to psyche-up critics and those in related areas, which hopefully, will give art criticism a human face.

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