

Feldman on Feldman

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You can imagine my feelings in listening to these very kind remarks. I expected something worse--to be torn up one side and down the other. Instead I received a number of gentle and considerate comments about the so-called Feldman method. I listened with interest and enjoyed what I heard.

I don't know precisely how to respond because I don't feel wounded. So, let me offer you an anecdotal history of how I got into the business of art criticism. Have any of you heard me talk about this? Well, not too many.

As I was saying to Jack (Hobbs), I didn't know what phenomenology was (I said I couldn't spell it) but found myself as an impecunious young instructor at Carnegie Tech in the fifties trying to earn some money over and above my salary. So, I took on a class at the Pittsburgh Plan for Art where I had to introduce the work of artists in the area to potential collectors.

Here was a great house near a park where contemporary art was continuously on exhibition. Pittsburgh had many excellent artists and craftsmen who brought their work there to be seen and, hopefully, purchased. All the work was juried, and it was of generally high quality.

We didn't have the term yuppies then, but young, upwardly mobile couples did come to buy art. In addition, there were well-to-do industrialists, U. S. Steel vice presidents and their wives who would show up to see and buy art. Many of them were the products of elite colleges and universities. A few of the women had sat at the feet of Alfred Barr at Vassar and had taken copious notes; they were art-historically literate and they had traveled extensively abroad. They were very privileged folk.

Well, it was astonishing to me that their costly higher education had not served them very well. It didn't help them when dealing with

works of art for which there was no standard literature, no college notes, no received opinions. If this applied to the Pittsburgh elite, imagine how it would apply to the graduates of public schools who hadn't read Kenneth Clark, E. H. Gombrich, or H. W. Janson.

The question we face as teachers is how to make works of art accessible to persons of all ages and social conditions who would like to get some good out of them. What must they study, what must they have experienced, what a priori knowledge must they have, before they can come into meaningful contact with the monuments of art--traditional and contemporary? The question was not being addressed very successfully then.

By hit or miss, I stumbled onto the so-called Feldman method. But I did it first and wrote about it afterwards. I want you to know that the method the panel has been discussing was based on teaching experience as opposed to armchair theorizing or extrapolating from learning theory and educational research.

My work was based on the exigencies of encountering works of art and being a critic, struggling with images, making guesses, being wrong, and trying to communicate my ideas and intuitions to students. So, I developed an approach that I think of as inductive: starting with the surface of an object and proceeding to depth. In the 1950s I knew nothing about surface counters and depth counters (to use Kaelin's language); I merely knew that teachers know--that you start from where you are with the people you have, the images given by art, and your own hunches about what will work. You arrive at meanings by refining your observations and you try to postpone closure so there will be room to correct your mistakes.

There was a psychiatrist at the University of Pittsburgh who was training physicians in how to take case histories. He thought my descriptive and analytic techniques were pretty good. He said he would use them to teach medics how to take a history and how not to prejudge symptoms, how to observe intelligently, and how to form hypotheses for interpreting data. So, I got some well-qualified encouragement along the way.

In discussions that have come up here and elsewhere, I have been accused (erroneously) of formalism. (In fact I was scolded in college for denouncing formalism in 1948.) Recently, I gave an address at Montclair State College to the members of FATE on the subject, "Formalism and Its Discontents." Indeed, I believe formalism is one of the most serious diseases that afflicts art education in the United States. It has seeped into all levels of instruction so that many artists and teachers think form in itself is the ultimate, the ding an sich, of art. They believe that form exists for the sake of form. Presumably, the goal of art and aesthetic education is to produce human beings who can see and respond to pure form. I think that is a psychological impossibility, yet many textbooks are written on the assumption that art instruction entails teaching people to recognize form and enthuse about it. They are supposed to have aesthetic experiences based on encounters with form apart from what it means in the course of their involvement in the world. Anyone with practical art teaching experience can see that this is a good way to alienate people from art. Students want to know what art means and what light it throws upon their existence. Who can blame them for becoming bored with arid commentary about symmetry and balance and fractured space detached from the social matrices in which these qualities and concepts are encountered.

Formalism presents another problem when it becomes the sole ingredient of critical method. When you have to explain art--art of all times and places, not just the art of New York, London, and San Francisco, you realize that it is not always created for the delectation of aesthetes, or for millionaires' penthouses, or for museum curators' private pleasure. The carved figure given to an African woman who is barren and wants to have a baby is not created for aesthetic, or museological, or stylistic, reasons. It is created so that she will conceive, and if you explain it only in aesthetic terms you miss much of its meaning--the meaning its forms were designed to support; you lift it out of its living context and contribute to the obscurantism that passes for education in some circles. What we call aesthetics is a relatively recent concern in the history of art; the production of art for aesthetic reasons is only about two centuries old. The kind of pleasure yielded by

the art of Matisse is by no means a universal preoccupation. Aesthetic values are real, but they do not represent the only kind of value supported by art. If you restrict the art curriculum to works of art created for aesthetic purposes, then you are going to eliminate many important artworks. Surely the Sistine Ceiling was not created for aesthetic reasons; nor Goya's Disasters of War etchings; nor Picasso's Guernica.

Another point--I distinguish between the history of art and art criticism. If you want to find out how Leonardo felt in 1490; how he applied for a job with the Duke of Milan; who was jealous of him; what he thought about the hierarchy of sculpture, painting, and literature--you can study these questions with art historians. When you reconstruct the original context of an artwork--how it was first seen and appreciated by its patrons--you are doing art history. But when you want to find out what a work of art means to kids in Pittsburgh in 1985, that's art criticism: It is the explication of art in a present context for a public you know....or think you know. There is a place where the twain do meet, but the distinction between history and criticism should nevertheless be made. In this regard, I believe the Getty separation of art criticism from art history is generally right. Both art history and art criticism should be taught in the schools, but not as arid routines of memorizing names and dates, or uncritical acceptance of received opinions.

The inadequacy of writing on the sociology of art has been mentioned. We know the names of those who have taken a sociological approach--Frederick Antal, Arnold Hauser, Anthony Blunt, John Berger, and Tim Clark. Much of the sociology of art has been written by Marxists who have a political as well as a sociological axe to grind. Still, we in art education should be doing more sociological analysis, more work on the consumption of art--with art defined to include every type of man-made image. I fought for the admission of this Social Theory Caucus as an affiliated group of NAEA, over some opposition. Not because I love you so much, but because I thought we needed a counter to the overwhelming psychological and child developmental biases of the profession. So, I am glad you are here, but now you have to justify your existence.