

CONTENT, CONTEXT, FORM & TECHNIQUE

References

- Weintraub, Linda, Art on the Edge and Over: Searching for Meaning in Contemporary Society 1970s- 1990s, Litchfield: Art Insights, Inc. 1996.
 - Barrett, Terry, Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary, Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing, 1994.
-

A valuable way to assess the qualities of a work of art is to ask questions about content, context, form, and technique. Contemporary art and design demands this level of questioning because art today is not just about surface quality or composition. If this is all the viewer is looking for, much is missed. Like Modern art (1890- 1950), contemporary art concerns itself with an appreciation of beauty and taste, but not necessarily with pretty or pleasant pictures. Likewise, contemporary art does not necessarily conform to Western concepts of art established in the early 20th Century.

Let's go back in time. In 1905, Einstein's theory of relativity expressed that space and time are relative concepts rather than absolute concepts. The psychological theories of Sigmund Freud looked to the unconscious and soon after the treatment of mental or emotional problems by psychological means. These are major breaks in thinking about existence, knowledge, and ethics. Should we be surprised the Cubists in 1910 were fracturing the picture plane and beginning to explore "non-objective" paintings? Science and technology today are likewise shattering our views of the world, our bodies, and how things are. Should we be surprised at the range of approaches, issues, and compositional arrangements that contemporary artists and designers are addressing?

In the 1950's Pop Art was a celebration of postwar consumerism and a reaction against abstract expressionism (both its heroic personal stance and psychological content). Pop art took a playful and ironic approach to art and life and brought popular culture into the gallery.

In the mid 1960's, Conceptual Art believed the idea, rather than the art object, was paramount. The object (in the gallery) was simply a document of the artist's thinking. Conceptual Art was a reaction against the commercialized art world of the 60's. Conceptual Art's desire was to expand aesthetic boundaries and blur the space between real time and space and the function of art.

In the 1970's the Feminist Art movement contested the canons of modernism and Greenbergian formalism as taught then in art schools. It introduced instead feminist content and gender issues; non-hierarchical uses of materials and techniques; a multiple-voiced, fluid subject; and challenged the Euro-American male litany of artistic criteria, aesthetic values, and art-historical practices.

Glossary

Formalist approach to art

- an understanding of art primarily based on what artworks look like.
- believes color, shape, pattern, texture is central to understanding/creating art.

Anthropological approach to art

- emphasizes art's social context.
- attempts to understand a work in terms of its broader relationship to culture.

Canon

- The generally agreed upon, basic group of works and artists that people find central to understanding and appreciating art.

High Art

- a Western concept of art.
- superior attitude, distinguishing itself from popular art or low art.

Avant-garde

- artwork that deliberately challenges the basic premises of the art and culture.
- challenges materials, subject matter, and permanence of art.

THINKING ABOUT ART

Subject Matter “What do you see?”

- Refers to the persons, objects, places, and events in a work of art.

Potential questions to ask

What visual things does the viewer identify in the work?

Content “What is it saying?”

- The emotional or intellectual message of an artwork.
- The expression, essential meaning, significance, or aesthetic value of a work of art.
- Content refers to the sensory, subjective, psychological, or emotional properties we feel in a work of art.
- Content is not just a description of the subject matter.

Potential questions to ask.

Is there a narrative present?

Are there symbols to interpret?

Are the images metaphoric?

What were the artist’s intentions?

Does this work ask questions or provide any answers?

What adjectives might describe this work?

What did the artist hope people would experience from this work?

Is this work emotional or intellectual?

Form “How is it saying it?”

- The arbitrary organizational or inventive arrangement of all the visual elements.
- The artwork’s composition (arrangement) or visual construction.
Elements: line, shape, texture, value, color
Principles: unity, variety, balance, emphasis, rhythm, proportion, scale
- How the artist presents subject matter (or excludes it) by means of a chosen media.

Potential questions to ask.

Would I describe the composition as harmonious or discordant, simple or complex, easy or confusing . . . ?

Is the composition an obvious no-brainer or does it require intelligence or an investment by the viewer?

Is the organization pleasingly accessible or confrontational?

Is the composition flat or layered?

How is line, shape, texture, and color influential or important?

What principles of design can be applied here? Unity variety, balance, emphasis, rhythm, proportion, scale?

Is the way media is used influential on the form?

Context “What else might matter?”

- The set of circumstances or facts that surround a particular event, situation, etc.
- This could include when a work of art was made, where, how, and for what purpose.
- This could include historical information on the artist or issues or things the artist references.

Potential questions to ask.

Does any personal information about the artist affect how the work is interpreted?

Is why the artist made the work valuable?

Is this particular time in history of value to interpreting the work?

Are the things that inspired this work important?

Were any references used influential on the work?

Technique “How was it done?”

– The manner and skill with which artists employ their tools and materials to achieve an expressive effect.

Potential questions to ask.

Does the audience understand how the work was made?

Does having an explanation how the work was made contribute to appreciating the work?

Does the media in any particular way influence the subject or content?

Vocabulary

aesthetics	perception
allegory	personification
appropriation	postmodern
beauty	representation
communication	response
composition	rhetoric
conceptual	sign
connotation	signifier
deconstruct	signified
deconstruction	simile
denotation	subjective
expression	style
icon	symbol
index	
information	
irony	
interpretation	
theory	
media	
medium	
metaphor	
modern	
parody	