Criticizing Photographs

An Introduction to Understanding Images

THIRD EDITION

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About Art Criticism

This book is about reading and doing photography criticism so that you can better appreciate photographs by using critical processes. Unfortunately, we usually don't equate criticism with appreciation because in everyday language the term criticism has negative connotations: It is used to refer to the act of making judgments, usually negative judgments, and the act of expressing disapproval.

In mass media, critics are portrayed as judges of art: Reviewers in newspapers rate restaurants with stars, and critics on television rate movies with thumbs up or thumbs down or from 1 to 10, constantly reinforcing judgmental aspects of criticism. Of all the words critics write, those most often quoted are judgments: "The best play of the season!" "Dazzling!" "Brilliant!" These words are highlighted in bold type in movie and theater ads because these words sell tickets. But they constitute only a few of the critic's total output of words, and they have been quoted out of context. These snippets have minimal value in helping us reach an understanding of a play or a movie.

Critics are writers who like art and choose to spend their lives thinking and writing about it. bell hooks, a critic and scholar of African American cultural studies, writes this about writing: "Seduced by the magic of words in childhood, I am still transported, carried away, writing and reading. Writing longhand the first drafts of all my works, I read aloud to myself, performing the words to hear and feel them. I want to be certain I am grappling with language in such a way that my words live and breathe, that they surface from a passionate place inside me." Peter Schjeldahl, a poet who now writes art criticism as a career, writes that "I get from art a regular chance to experience something—or perhaps everything, the whole world—as someone else, to replace my eyes and mind with the eyes and mind of another for a charged moment." Christopher Knight, who has written art criticism
for the *Los Angeles Times* since 1989, left a successful career as a museum curator to write criticism precisely because he wanted to be closer to art: “The reason I got interested in a career in art in the first place is to be around art and artists. I found that in museums you spend most of your time around trustees and paperwork.”

Some critics don’t want to be called critics because of the negative connotations of the term. Art critic and poet Rene Ricard, writing in *Artforum*, says: “In point of fact I’m not an art critic. I am an enthusiast. I like to drum up interest in artists who have somehow inspired me to be able to say something about their work.” Michael Feingold, who writes theater criticism for the *Village Voice*, says that “criticism should celebrate the good in art, not revel in its anger at the bad.” Similarly, Lucy Lippard is usually supportive of the art she writes about, but she says she is sometimes accused of not being critical, of not being a critic at all. She responds, “That’s okay with me, since I never liked the term anyway. Its negative connotations place the writer in fundamental antagonism to the artists.” She and other critics do not want to be thought of as being opposed to artists.

**DEFINING CRITICISM**

The term criticism is complex, with several different meanings. In the language of aestheticians who philosophize about art and art criticism, and in the language of art critics, criticism usually refers to a much broader range of activities than just the act of judging. Morris Weitz, an aesthetician interested in art criticism, sought to discover more about it by studying what critics do when they criticize art. He took as his test case all the criticism ever written about Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. After reading the volumes of *Hamlet* criticism written through the ages, Weitz concluded that when critics criticize they do one or more of four things: They describe the work of art, they interpret it, they evaluate it, and they theorize about it. Some critics engage primarily in descriptive criticism; others describe, but primarily to further their interpretations; still others describe, interpret, evaluate, and theorize. Weitz drew several conclusions about criticism, most notably that any one of these four activities constitutes criticism and that evaluation is not a necessary part of criticism. He found that several critics criticized *Hamlet* without ever judging it.

When critics criticize, they do much more than express their likes and dislikes—and much more than approve and disapprove of works of art. Critics do judge artworks, and sometimes negatively, but their judgments more often are positive than negative: As Rene Ricard says, “Why give publicity to something you hate?” When Schjeldahl is confronted by a work he does not like, he asks himself several questions: “Why would I have done that if I did it?” is one of my working questions about an artwork. (Not that I could. This is make-believe.) My formula of fairness to work that displeases me is to ask, “What would I like about this if I liked it?” When I cannot deem myself an intended or even a possible member of a work’s audience, I ask myself what such an audience member must be like.”
Feingold thinks it unfortunate that theater criticism in New York City often prevents theatergoing rather than encourages it, and he adds that "as every critic knows, a favorable review with some substance is much harder to write than a pan." Abigail Solomon-Godeau, who writes frequently about photography, says there are instances when it is clear that something is nonsense and should be called nonsense, but she finds it more beneficial to ask questions about meaning than about aesthetic worth.

"What do I do as a critic in a gallery?" Schjeldahl asks. He answers: "I learn. I walk up to, around, touch if I dare, the objects, meanwhile asking questions in my mind and casting about for answers—all until mind and senses are in some rough agreement, or until fatigue sets in." Edmund Feldman, an art historian and art educator, has written much about art criticism and defines it as "informed talk about art." He also minimizes the act of evaluating, or judging, art, saying that it is the least important of the critical procedures. A. D. Coleman, a pioneering and prolific critic of recent photography, defines what he does as "the intersecting of photographic images with words." He adds: "I merely look closely at and into all sorts of photographic images and attempt to pinpoint in words what they provoke me to feel and think and understand." Morris Weitz defines criticism as "a form of studied discourse about works of art. It is a use of language designed to facilitate and enrich the understanding of art."

Throughout this book the term criticism will not refer to the act of negative judgment; it will refer to a much wider range of activities and will adhere to this broad definition: Criticism is informed discourse about art to increase understanding and appreciation of art. This definition includes criticism of all art forms, including dance, music, poetry, painting, and photography. "Discourse" includes talking and writing. "Informed" is an important qualifier that distinguishes criticism from mere talk and uninformed opinion about art. Not all writing about art is criticism. Some art writing, for example, is journalism rather than criticism: It is news reporting on artists and artworld events rather than critical analysis.

A way of becoming informed about art is by critically thinking about it. Criticism is a means toward the end of understanding and appreciating photographs. In some cases, a carefully thought out response to a photograph may result in negative appreciation or informed dislike. More often than not, however, especially when considering the work of prominent photographers and that of artists using photographs, careful critical attention to a photograph or group of photographs will result in fuller understanding and positive appreciation. Criticism should result in what Harry Broudy, a philosopher promoting aesthetic education, calls "enlightened cherishing." Broudy's "enlightened cherishing" is a compound concept that combines thought (by the term enlightened) with feeling (by the term cherishing). He reminds us that both thought and feeling are necessary components that need to be combined to achieve understanding and appreciation. Criticism is not a coldly intellectual endeavor.
Chapter 1 • About Art Criticism

SOURCES OF CRITICISM

Photography criticism can be found in many places—in photography classrooms, lecture halls, and publications. Published criticism appears in books, exhibition catalogues, art magazines, photography magazines, and the popular press. Exhibition catalogues list the exhibited works; reproduce several, if not all, of the pictures; and usually have an introductory essay explaining why the curator selected this group of works for an exhibition. Such essays often offer insightful interpretive commentary on photographs and photographers. After the exhibitions, the catalogues are marketed as books and take on a life of their own.

Barbara Kruger has combined her critical essays, which previously appeared in several publications, into a single volume titled *Remote Control: Power, Cultures, and the World of Appearances*. Rosalind Krauss’s critical essay on Cindy Sherman’s photographs accompanies the artist’s work reproduced in *Cindy Sherman 1975–1993*. Arthur Danto has published critical essays on Cindy Sherman’s *Film Stills* and the photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe in comprehensive books by those artists. Susan Sontag’s criticism of photography began as a series of articles and became the book *On Photography*. Jonathan Green’s book *American Photography* is a critical treatment of recent American photography. Much critical writing about photography has appeared in exhibition catalogues such as *The New Color Photography*, by Sally Eau Claire, and *Mirrors and Windows*, by John Szarkowski. These two catalogues are based on exhibitions these curators have organized. As past curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Szarkowski organized many exhibitions and often prepared accompanying exhibition catalogues. Sally Eau Claire is a freelance curator who designs shows for museums and prepares catalogues.

The majority of photography criticism, however, is found in the art press—the large art magazines such as *Artforum* and *Art in America*, and regional art journals such as *Dialogue* from Columbus, Ohio, *New Art Examiner* from Chicago, and *Artweek* and *Photo Metro* from California. Much photography criticism is also published in journals specifically devoted to photographic media, such as *Afterimage*, or in photography publications including *Aperture* and *Exposure*. Reviews of photography exhibitions appear in daily newspapers of national import, such as the *New York Times*, and in local newspapers. Some critics choose to write for very large audiences and publish in mass media circulations: Abigail Solomon-Godeau has published her criticism in *Vogue*, and Robert Hughes and Peter Plagens write art criticism for *Time* and *Newsweek*.

Each of these publications has its own editorial tone and political ideology, and critics sometimes choose their publications according to their style of writing, their critical interests, and their personal politics. They also adapt their styles to fit certain publications.

Editors often provide direction, sometimes quite specifically. The *New Art Examiner*, for instance, instructs its reviewers that “the writer’s opinion of the work is the
backbone of a review. Set up your thesis by the third paragraph and use the rest of the space to substantiate it.” The editors add: “Keep descriptions brief and within the context of the ideas you are developing.” Dialogue similarly defines reviews as the “personal assessments of individual shows or of more than one related show or event.” Dialogue’s editors also ask that writers include only sufficient description for intelligibility but add: “Use descriptions to help the reader see the work in a new way and/or to illuminate connections between the exhibited work and the larger art world.” Both publications distinguish short reviews from feature articles and have different editorial guidelines for each.

Policies about what they cover vary from publication to publication, too. Grace Glueck, who writes art criticism for the New York Times, explains that her paper covers important museum and gallery shows because that is what the readers expect. Similarly, because his magazine is national and devotes comparatively little space to art, Peter Plagens of Newsweek covers museum shows, almost exclusively, but tries to write about as many museum shows of contemporary art as possible.

Many critics have editorial independence about what they cover. Kay Larson, who writes for the weekly New York Magazine, says, “I write about what interests me.” She explains that she tries to see everything in town that she can manage to see, looks for things that she likes, and then makes her choices about what to write: “Ultimately I base my decisions not only on whom I like but whom I feel I can say something about. There are many artists every week whom I do like and whom I feel I can’t say anything about.” Robert Hughes, who writes around twenty-four pieces a year for Time, is subject to no editorial restrictions or instructions, and he covers what he chooses. However, because Time is a newsmagazine and needs to be timely, the exhibitions must still be showing when his article runs and, because the magazine is distributed internationally, he writes many of his reviews of shows outside New York City.

When critics write for different publications, they are writing for different audiences. Their choices of what to write about and their approaches to their chosen or assigned topics vary according to which publication they are writing for and whom they imagine their readers to be. A review of an exhibition written for the daily newspaper of a small midwestern city will likely differ in tone and content from a review written for the Sunday New York Times because the readers are different. The Times has national as well as regional distribution, and its readers are better informed about the arts than are average newspaper readers; a critic writing for the Times can assume knowledge that a critic writing for a regional newspaper cannot.

KINDS OF CRITICISM

In an editorial in the Journal of Aesthetic Education, Ralph Smith distinguishes two types of art criticism, both of which are useful but serve different purposes:
Two types of art criticism that serve different purposes:

Exploratory aesthetic criticism and argumentative aesthetic criticism. In doing exploratory aesthetic criticism, a critic delays judgments of value and attempts rather to ascertain an object's aesthetic aspects as completely as possible, to ensure that readers will experience all that can be seen in a work of art. This kind of criticism relies heavily on descriptive and interpretive thought. Its aim is to sustain aesthetic experience. In doing argumentative aesthetic criticism, after sufficient interpretive analysis has been done, critics estimate the work’s positive aspects or lack of them and give a full account of their judgments based on explicitly stated criteria and standards. The critics argue in favor of their judgments and attempt to persuade others that the object is best considered in the way they have interpreted and judged it, and they are prepared to defend their conclusions.

Ingrid Sischy, editor and writer, has written criticism that exemplifies both the exploratory and argumentative types. In a catalogue essay accompanying the nude photographs made by Lee Friedlander, Sischy pleasantly meanders in and through the photographs and the photographer's thoughts, carefully exploring both and her reactions to them. We know, in the reading, that she approves of Friedlander and his nudes and why, but more centrally, we experience the photographs through the descriptive and interpretive thoughts of a careful and committed observer. In an essay she wrote for the New Yorker about the popular journalistic photographs made by Sebastião Salgado, however, Sischy carefully and logically and cumulatively builds an argument against their worth, despite their great popularity in the art world. She clearly demonstrates argumentative criticism that is centrally evaluative, replete with the reasons for and the criteria upon which she based her negative appraisal.

Andy Grundberg, a former photography critic for the New York Times, perceives two basic approaches to photography criticism: the applied and the theoretical. Applied criticism is practical, immediate, and directed at the work; theoretical criticism is more philosophical, attempts to define photography, and uses photographs only as examples to clarify its arguments. Applied criticism tends toward journalism; theoretical criticism tends toward aesthetics.

Examples of applied criticism are reviews of shows, such as those written by A. D. Coleman. Coleman also writes theoretical criticism as in his "Directorial Mode" article. Other examples of theoretical criticism are the writings of Allan Sekula, such as his essay "The Invention of Photographic Meaning," in which he explores how photographs mean and how photography signifies. He is interested in all of photography, in photographs as kinds of pictures, and refers to specific photographs and individual photographers only to support his broadly theoretical arguments. Similarly, Roland Barthes's book, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, is a theoretical treatment of photography that attempts to distinguish photography from other kinds of picture making. In her writing about photography, Abigail Solomon-Godeau draws from cultural theory, feminism, and the history of art and
photography to examine ideologies surrounding making, exhibiting, and writing about photographs. Her writing is often criticism about criticism. Later in this book we will explore in detail theories of art and photography, theoretical criticism, and how theory influences both criticism and photography.

Grundberg also identifies another type of criticism as “connoisseurship,” which he rejects as severely limited. The connoisseur, of wine or photographs, asks “Is this good or bad?” and makes a proclamation based on his or her particular taste. This kind of criticism, which is often used in casual speech and sometimes found in professional writing, is extremely limited in scope because the judgments it yields are usually proclaimed without supporting reasons or the benefit of explicit criteria, and thus they are neither very informative nor useful. Statements based on taste are simply too idiosyncratic to be worth disputing. As Grundberg adds, “Criticism’s task is to make arguments, not pronouncements.” This book is in agreement with Grundberg on these points.

THE backgrounds of CRITICS

Critics come to criticism from varied backgrounds. Many art critics have advanced degrees in art history and support themselves by teaching art history as they write criticism. Several come from studio art backgrounds. Some critics are also exhibiting artists, such as Peter Plagens, who is a painter and a critic for Newsweek, and Barbara Kruger, who exhibits photographic art and writes criticism. Rene Ricard is a poet and art critic; Carrie Rickey writes film criticism for the popular press and art criticism for the art press.


A. D. Coleman became a full-time, freelance critic of photography in 1968. He wrote a regular column called “Latent Image” for the Village Voice and also wrote for Popular Photography and the Sunday New York Times. Since 1974 he has written for a variety of publications including Artforum and currently is photography critic for the weekly New York Observer. He also provides commentary for National Public Radio’s “Performance Today” and writes criticism for various publications such as Photo Metro, published in San Francisco. Coleman is not a photographer and was never formally schooled in photography; prior to writing about photography, he
wrote theater criticism for the Village Voice. He began writing about photography because he was “excited by photographs, curious about the medium, and fascinated—even frightened—by its impact on our culture.” He thinks of himself as a voice from the audience of photography and wrote more than four hundred articles from that vantage point between 1968 and 1978. In 1994 he published a collection of his recent essays about issues of contemporary international photography under the title Critical Focus by A.D. Coleman.

Before she began writing photography criticism, Abigail Solomon-Godeau was a photo editor with an undergraduate degree in art history, and she had her own business of providing pictures for magazines, textbook publishers, educational film strips, and advertisers. She eventually became bored with her work and also became aware that she was part of what culture critics were deriding as the “consciousness industry.” About that she says: “Here was an enterprise that was literally producing a certain reality that people, or students, or whoever, wouldn’t question because it was perceived as real [because it was photographed]. That’s when I started thinking that I would really like to write about photography.” After trying for two years to make a living as a critic in New York, she realized that the only way she could economically survive as a critic was to teach. She earned her Ph.D. in art history to gain access to jobs in higher education. While teaching, she has written for publications as diverse as Vogue, Afterimage, and October and has published a collection of her essays in Photography at the Dock.

Grace Glueck believes that to become educated the critic needs to look at as much art as possible and at “anything that deals with form including architecture, movies, dance, theater, even street furniture.” Mark Stevens agrees and stresses the importance of spending time in museums: “Immersion in excellent examples of different kinds of past art is the best training for the eye.”

STANCES TOWARD CRITICISM

Critics take various stances on what criticism should be and how it should be conducted. Abigail Solomon-Godeau views her chosen critical agenda as one of asking questions: “Primarily, all critical practices—literary or artistic—should probably be about asking questions. That’s what I do in my teaching and it’s what I attempt to do in my writing. Of course, there are certain instances in which you can say with certainty, ‘this is what’s going on here,’ or ‘this is nonsense, mystification or falsification.’ But in the most profound sense, this is still asking—what does it mean, how does it work, can we think something differently about it.”

Kay Larson, who is also concerned with explanation of artworks, says that she starts writing criticism “by confronting the work at the most direct level possible—suspension language and removing barriers. It’s hard and it’s scary—you keep wanting to rush back in with judgments and opinions, but you’ve got to push yourself back and be with the work. Once you’ve had the encounter, you can try to figure out
Stances Toward Criticism

how to explain it, and there are many ways to take off—through sociology, history, theory, standard criticism, or description."26

Grace Glueck sees her role as a critic as being one of informing members of the public about works of art: She aspires to "inform, elucidate, explain, and enlighten."27 She wants "to help a reader place art in a context, establish where it's coming from, what feeds it, how it stacks up in relation to other art." Glueck is quick to add, however, that she needs to take stands "against slipshod standards, sloppy work, imprecision, mistaken notions, and for good work of whatever stripe."

Coleman specified, in 1975, his premises and parameters for critical writing:

A critic should be independent of the artists and institutions about which he/she writes. His/her writing should appear regularly in a magazine, newspaper, or other forum of opinion. The work considered within that writing should be publicly accessible, and at least in part should represent the output of the critic's contemporaries and/or younger, less established artists in all their diversity. And he/she should be willing to adopt openly that skeptic's posture which is necessary to serious criticism.28

These are clear statements of what Coleman believes criticism should be and how it should be conducted. He is arguing for an independent, skeptical criticism and for critics who are independent of artists and the museums and galleries that sponsor those artists. He is acutely aware of possible conflicts of interest between critic and artist or critic and institutional sponsor: He does not want the critic to be anyone's mouthpiece but rather to be an independent voice. Coleman argues that because criticism is a public activity, the critic's writing should be available to interested readers, and that the artwork which is criticized should also be open to public scrutiny. This would presumably preclude a critic's visiting an artist's studio and writing about that work, because that work is only privately available.

Coleman distinguishes between curators and historians who write about art, and critics. He argues that curators, who gather work and show it in galleries and museums, and historians, who place older work in context, write from privileged positions: The historian's is the privilege of hindsight; the curator's is the power of patronage. Coleman cautions that the writer, historian, curator, or critic who befriends the artist by sponsoring his or her work will have a difficult time being skeptical. He is quick to point out, however, that skepticism is not enmity or hostility. Coleman's goal is one of constructive, affirmative criticism, and he adds: "The greatest abuses of a critic's role stem from the hunger for power and the need to be liked."29

Mark Stevens agrees that distinctions should be maintained between writing criticism and writing history: "The trouble with acting like an art historian is that it detracts from the job critics can do better than anybody else, and that is to be lively, spontaneous, impressionistic, quick to the present—shapers, in short, of the mind of the moment."30
Lucy Lippard is a widely published independent art critic who assumes a posture different from Coleman's, and her personal policies for criticism are in disagreement with those of his just cited. She terms her art writing "advocacy criticism." As an "advocate critic" Lippard is openly leftist and feminist and rejects the notion that good criticism is objective criticism. Instead, she wants a criticism that takes a political stand. She seeks out and promotes "the unheard voices, the unseen images, or the unconsidered people." She chooses to write about art that is critical of mainstream society and which is therefore not often exhibited. Lippard chooses to work in partnership with socially oppositional artists to get their work seen and their voices heard.

Lippard also rejects as a false dichotomy the notion that there should be distance between critics and artists. She says that her ideas about art have consistently emerged from contact with artists and their studios rather than from galleries and magazines. She acknowledges that the lines between advocacy, promotion, and propaganda are thin, but she rejects critical objectivity and neutrality as false myths and thinks her approach is more honest than that of critics who claim to be removed from special interests.

RELATIONS BETWEEN CRITICS AND ARTISTS

Lippard and Coleman raise a key question in criticism about the critic's relation to the artist. And they each have different answers: Coleman advocates a skeptical distance between critic and artist, and Lippard a partnership between them. Critics take various positions between these two polar positions. Peter Schjeldahl says that "intimate friendships between artists and critics, as such, are tragicomic. The critic may seek revelation from the artist, who may seek authentication from the critic. Neither has any such prize to give, if each is any good." He adds: "A critic who feels no anguish in relating to artists is a prostitute. A critic who never relates to artists, fearing contamination, is a virgin. Neither knows a thing about love."

Kay Larson feels that to be informed she is required to study history and also to "talk to artists." She struggles with the issue of responsibility and states, "Your responsibility to the artist is to be as fair as possible," and in a second thought adds, "You have a responsibility to your taste and values."

Mark Stevens sees his primary responsibility being "to his own opinion." He also tries "to be fair, and not to be nasty," and he regrets the few times he's been sarcastic. He thinks that knowing artists is difficult because he doesn't want to hurt their feelings or champion work that he doesn't think is good. He thinks "it's probably a bad idea to know artists too well, to accept works of art or to know dealers too well."

Christopher Knight likes to associate with artists but does not talk to them about their work until after he has written about it: "I never talk to an artist about the work until I've written something because it only confuses me. I don't see myself as
being a translator of the artist's intentions to the public." Michael Feingold believes that criticism "is not a part of the artistic process. That is matter between artists and their materials, artists and their colleagues, artists and their audiences. Criticism comes later. When it tries to impose itself on the process, it usually ends by corrupting art while making itself look insipid or foolish." 

Editors of periodicals that publish criticism are also sensitive to issues of integrity and possible conflicts of interest between a critic and an artist or institution. The New Art Examiner, for example, declares in bold type in its reviewer's guidelines: "Under no circumstances are manuscripts to be shared with outsiders (the artist, dealer, sponsor, etc.)." Dialogue disallows reviews from writers who have a business interest in a gallery where the show is located, a close personal relationship with the exhibiting artist, any position within the sponsoring institution, or previous experiences with the artist or sponsoring institution. These policies are instituted to avoid damage to a publication's and a writer's credibility.

There aren't easy answers to questions of the ethics of criticism or to deciding personal or editorial policy. The question is less difficult, however, if we realize that critics write for readers other than the artist whose work they are considering. Critics do not write criticism for the one painter or photographer who is exhibiting; they write for a public. Grace Glueck thinks that, at best, the critic gives the artist an idea of how his or her work is being perceived or misperceived by the public.

The relation between the critic and the artist also becomes less clear when we realize that criticism is much more than the judging of art. This point is easily forgotten because in art studios, in schools, and in classrooms of photography, criticism is often, unfortunately, understood solely as judgment. The primary purpose of school criticism is usually seen very narrowly as the improvement of art making; little time is spent in describing student work, interpreting it, or in examining assumptions about what art is or is not. Thus we tend to think that published professional criticism is judgment and, more specifically, judgment for the artist and the improvement of art making. This conception of professional criticism is far from accurate.

CRITICIZING CRITICISM

Although the critics quoted in this chapter have seriously considered their positions regarding criticism, their positions differ; and their theories and approaches do not combine into a cohesive and comprehensive single theory of criticism. Quite the contrary. Critics frequently take issue with one another's ideas. Art critic Hilton Kramer has dismissed Lucy Lippard's writing as "straightout political propaganda." John Szarkowski is frequently accused by social-minded critics of "aestheticizing" photographs—turning too many of them into "art," particularly socially oppositional photographs. Allan Sekula's writing is so suspicious of photography that it has been called "almost paranoid" and has been likened to a history of
women written by a misogynist. These conflicting views contribute to an ongoing, interesting, and informative dialogue about criticism and photographs that enlivens the reading of criticism as well as the viewing of photographs.

Art critic Donald Kuspit is the editor of a series of books that anthologize the major writings of such contemporary art critics as Lawrence Alloway, Dennis Adrian, Dore Ashton, Nicolas Calas, Joseph Masheck, Robert Pincus-Witten, Peter Plagens, and Peter Selz. In his foreword to their writings, he calls them “master art critics” and provides some reasons for his positive appraisal of their criticism. He thinks they provide sophisticated treatment of complex art. They have all thought deeply about the nature of art criticism and have seriously considered how they should go about doing it. He praises the independence of their points of view and their self-consciousness about it. Kuspit knows they have all expanded their criticism well beyond journalistic reporting and have avoided promotional reporting of the artist stars of their day. He admires these critics for being passionate about art and their criticism and for depending on reason to prove their point. In their passion and reason they have avoided becoming dogmatic—they “sting us into consciousness.”

In these statements Kuspit provides criteria for good criticism by which he can measure and weigh the writings of others about art. Mark Stevens offers these criteria for good criticism: Critics should be “honest in their judgment, clear in their writing, straightforward in their argument, and unpretentious in their manner.” He adds that good criticism is like good conversation—“direct, fresh, personal, incomplete.” Not all criticism is good criticism, and even if all criticism were good criticism, critics would have differing points of view and would want to argue them. Those in the business of criticizing art and criticizing criticism understand that what they do is tentative, or “incomplete” in Stevens’s terms, open to revision, and vulnerable to counterargument. The best of critics realize that they cannot afford to be dogmatic about their views because they can always be corrected. They can be passionate and often are, but the best of them rely on reason rather than emotion to convince another of their way of seeing a work of art. Critics believe in how they see and in what they write, and they try to persuade their readers that their way is the best way, or at least a very good way, to see and understand. Writing about Robert Hughes’s criticism, Nicholas Jenkins says that Hughes’s “strong opinions seem shaped almost as much by his love of the surge of powerful rhetoric as by his sense of intellectual conviction.” Hughes concurs: “Of course there’s an element of performance in criticism.” Critics are also open to another’s point of view, but that other will likewise have to persuade them, on the basis of reason, before they change their views.

Several readers and critics themselves have complained that criticism is too often obscure, too difficult to read, and at times incomprehensible. Peter Schjeldahl, with some self-deprecating humor, writes that “I have written obscurely when I could get away with it. It is very enjoyable, attended by a powerful feeling of invulnerability.” Then, with less sarcasm, he adds: “Writing clearly is immensely hard work that feels
faintly insane, like painting the brightest possible target on my chest. To write clearly is to give oneself away.** This book tries to give ideas away by making them clear and thus accessible—especially when they are difficult ideas—to anyone interested in knowing them.

THE VALUE OF CRITICISM

The value of reading good criticism is increased knowledge and appreciation of art. Reading about art with which we are unfamiliar increases our knowledge. If we already know and appreciate an artwork, reading someone else’s view of it may expand our own if we agree, or it may intensify our own if we choose to disagree and formulate counterarguments.

There are also considerable advantages for doing criticism. Marcia Siegel, dance critic for the Hudson Review and author of several books of dance criticism, talks about the value for her of the process of writing criticism: "Very often it turns out that as I write about something, it gets better. It’s not that I’m so enthusiastic that I make it better, but that in writing, because the words are an instrument of thinking, I can often get deeper into a choreographer’s thoughts or processes and see more logic, more reason."**

Similarly, A. D. Coleman began studying photography and writing photography criticism in the late 1960s because he realized that photography was shaping him and his culture; he wanted to know more about it and “came to feel that there might be some value to threshing out, in public and in print, some understandings of the medium’s role in our lives.” For him the process of criticizing was valuable in understanding photographs, and he hoped that his thinking in public and in print would help him and others to better understand photographs and their effects on viewers.

If the process of criticism is personally valuable even for frequently published, professional critics, then it is likely that there are considerable advantages for others who are less experienced with criticizing art. An immediate advantage of thoughtful engagement with an artwork is that the observer’s viewing time is slowed down and measurably prolonged. This point is obvious but important: Most people visiting museums consider an artwork in less than five seconds. Five seconds of viewing compared to hours and hours of crafting by the artist seems woefully out of balance. Considering descriptive, interpretive, and evaluative questions about an artwork ought to significantly expand one’s awareness of an artwork and considerably alter one’s perception of the work.

In criticizing an art object for a reader or viewer, critics must struggle to translate their complex jumble of thoughts and feelings about art into words that can be understood first by themselves and then by others. Everyday viewers of art can walk away from a picture or an exhibit with minimal responses, unarticulated feelings, and incomplete thoughts. Critics who view artworks as professionals, however,
have a responsibility to struggle with meaning and address questions that the artwork poses or to raise questions that the artwork does not.

Critics usually consider artworks from a broader perspective than the single picture or the single show. They put the work in a much larger context of other works by the artist, works by other artists of the day, and art of the past. They are able to do this because they see much more art than does the average viewer—they consider art for a living. Their audiences will not be satisfied with one-word responses, quick dismissals, or empty praises. Critics have to argue for their positions and base their arguments on the artwork and how they understand it. Viewers who consider art in the way that a critic would consider it will likely increase their own understanding and appreciation of art—that is the goal and the reward.
CHAPTER 2

Describing Photographs

DEFINING DESCRIPTION

To describe a photograph or an exhibition is to notice things about it and to tell another, out loud or in print, what one notices. Description is a data-gathering process, a listing of facts. Descriptions are answers to the questions: "What is here? What am I looking at? What do I know with certainty about this image?" The answers are identifications of both the obvious and the not so obvious. Even when certain things seem obvious to critics, they point them out because they know that what is obvious to one viewer might be invisible to another. Descriptive information includes statements about the photograph's subject matter, medium, and form, and then more generally, about the photograph's causal environment, including information about the photographer who made it, the times during which it was made, and the social milieu from which it emerged. Descriptive information is true (or false), accurate (or inaccurate), factual (or contrary to fact): Either Richard Avedon used an 8- by 10-inch Deardorff view camera or he didn't; either he exposed more than 17,000 sheets of film or he didn't. Descriptive statements are verifiable by observation and an appeal to factual evidence. Although in principle descriptive claims can be shown to be true or false, in practice critics sometimes find it difficult to do so.

Critics obtain descriptive information from two sources—internal and external. They derive much descriptive information by closely attending to what can be seen within the photograph. They also seek descriptive information from external sources including libraries, the artists who made the pictures, and press releases.

Describing is a logical place to start when viewing an exhibition or a particular photograph because it is a means of gathering basic information on which understanding is built. Psychologically, however, we often want to judge first, and our
first statements often express approval or disapproval. There is nothing inherently wrong with judging first as long as judgments are informed and relevant information is descriptively accurate. Whether we judge first and then revise a judgment based on description, or describe and interpret first and then judge, is a matter of choice. The starting point is not crucial, but accurate description is an essential part of holding defensible critical positions. Interpretations and judgments that omit facts or are contrary to fact are seriously flawed.

Critics inevitably and frequently describe, but in print they don't necessarily first describe, next interpret, and then judge. They might first describe to themselves privately before they write, but in print they might start with a judgment, or an interpretive thesis, or a question, or a quotation, or any number of literary devices, in order to get and hold the attention of their readers. They would probably be dreadfully boring if they first described and then interpreted and then judged. In the same sentence critics often mix descriptive information with an interpretive claim or with a judgment of value. For our immediate aim of learning the descriptive process of criticism, however, we are sorting and highlighting descriptive data in the writing of critics.

DESCRIPTIONS OF AVEDON’S "IN THE AMERICAN WEST"

When Richard Avedon's photographs "In the American West" were first shown, in 1985, Douglas Davis was in the difficult position in which art critics often find themselves—he had to write some of the first words about some new and challenging work. He also had to write for an audience of readers who had not seen the work. Avedon's American West work is now relatively well known because it has been exhibited and has been available in book form since 1985, and it has been considered by several critics. But the work wasn't known when Davis wrote about it for Newsweek, shortly after its inaugural exhibition opened. Davis's review is one magazine page plus a column in length, about 1,000 words, and is accompanied by four of Avedon's photographs from the exhibition. It is full of descriptive information—facts and verifiable observations about the work in question.

Davis opens his article with this sentence: "In the thick of the crowd of portraits on display in Ft. Worth by famed fashion photographer Richard Avedon to document the American West, there is one immensely ambitious—and revealing—trip-tych." Thus, because his readers may or may not know of Richard Avedon, Davis quickly and without condescension informs them that Avedon is a famed fashion photographer. He also explains that the show is of portraits, that there are a lot of them—"in the thick of the crowd of portraits"—and that they are on display in Ft. Worth. That they are on display in Ft. Worth, although basic, is interesting to note because major shows by a famed fashion photographer, and by Avedon, are more likely to open in New York City than in a city in Texas. That they were made "to
Descriptions of Avedon's "In the American West"

document" the American West becomes important for Davis's ultimate judgment of
the show.

Davis begins his review of the show by discussing one piece, which he calls
"immensely ambitious" and "revealing." It is a complicated piece and not reprinted
with the article. Our mental image of it depends on Davis's description: "More than
10 feet long, almost 5 feet high, it is the largest image in an exhibition dominated by
life-size faces and torsos." The work is very large by photographic standards; Davis
emphasizes the dimensions of it and also reveals that most of the show is life-size:
"Here we stand face to face with four grimy coal miners lined up across three separate photographs." Readers who may not know the term triptych can now decipher
that this piece is composed of three separate photographs. Davis identifies the subject
matter of this piece as four coal miners whom he describes as "grimy" and as
"lined up." He also describes the experience of viewing this large image: "we stand
face to face" with them.

Davis's description of the image's size is important to note because if his readers
see these photographs they will likely see them as pages in Avedon's book, small
reproductions in magazines or newspapers, or perhaps as slides on a screen in a
classroom, but not as they were presented life-size in the Ft. Worth exhibition. One
purpose of descriptive accounts is for understanding in the present; another is to
accurately record for posterity. Some of today's criticism of new work will eventually
become part of art history for future generations long after exhibitions have closed.

Davis then explains that one of the four miners in the triptych appears twice,
with his face split by the separation between two of the three pictures. Davis finds
this split "hypnotic and arresting." In one picture the miner wears a beard and in
the other he does not. Davis explains that Avedon photographed the miner twice,
at three-month intervals: the first time the miner had a beard, the second time he
did not.

All of this description of the one triptych appears in Davis's first paragraph of the
article. And this information sets up his ensuing interpretation of what the work is
about and then his evaluative conclusion about how good it is: "In many ways, Avedon's
long awaited new body of work . . . is as two faced as this miner."

For Davis, this new work is two-faced because, first, it has been promoted as a
forthright, direct, and "documentary" treatment of the West and as a departure from
Avedon's high-fashion style for which he is famous. But according to Davis,
although the photographs may seem candid and spontaneous, they are highly con-
trived: "As always he pursued style, manner and effect." The show Davis concludes
in the last sentence of the article, does not document the West, but rather docu-
ments Avedon himself and his style. Thus, Davis's judgment is mixed: The show
fails because it is not an accurate documentation of the West as it was promoted and
as it pretends; but it succeeds as the continuation of a photographer's "exhilarating
pursuit of the perfect photographic style."
Between the opening paragraph about the triptych and the concluding paragraph containing Davis's judgment of the work are three paragraphs of descriptive information. Not only are descriptions interesting and enlightening in themselves, but they are also used to support a critic's interpretation and judgment. Davis's interpretation of the work is that it is very stylized, and his judgment is that the work both fails and succeeds because of its stylization. We and other critics may agree or disagree with Davis's decisions about Avedon's work, and in Chapters 3–6 we will fully consider interpreting and judging photographs, but our primary concern here is description. Although description, interpretation, and evaluation overlap in a critic's writing, often in the same phrase or sentence, we will continue sorting out Davis's descriptive language and consider all the descriptive information he provides in his brief article.

In the next paragraph we learn that the work was long-awaited and that it has been highly advertised as different from the work that made Avedon famous in the 1960s. Davis typifies the style of earlier work as “mannered high-fashion.” In the first paragraph he said there were many photographs; now he specifies that 124 pictures are on display and that they are reproduced in a book published by Abrams. In a judgment and not a description, Davis calls the book “handsome.” He also adds that the photographs have “seeming candor and spontaneity.”

In the third paragraph Davis informs readers that this work was commissioned in 1980 by the Amon Carter Museum of Ft. Worth, where the show opened. Davis tells us that Avedon traveled extensively and went to the Rattlesnake Roundup in Sweetwater, Texas, to a rodeo in Augusta, Montana, and to coal mines in Paonia, Colorado. He held 752 photo sessions and shot 17,000 pictures. Davis states that Avedon's project was as immense as the documentary efforts of William Henry Jackson and Edward Curtis, who surveyed regions of the American West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In the fourth paragraph Davis discusses Avedon's method of shooting. He tells us that Avedon has “a bare chested beakkeeper stand before the lens with scores of bees crawling across his skin.” Davis claims that Avedon's subjects seem relaxed and real; he attributes this to Avedon's method of photographing, which he also describes. He relates that in making these photographs Avedon used an 8- by 10-inch Deardorff view camera, permitting him to stand close to the subjects, talk with 'em, and snap the shutter while standing away from the camera. Davis observes that the backgrounds are all uniformly white, made with a sheet of seamless paper hung behind the subjects; that the exposures were by natural daylight; and that all the prints are enlarged from uncropped and unretouched negatives.

In the final paragraph Davis quotes Avedon as saying that when looking at one of these photographs he wants us to believe that the subject “was not even in the presence of a photographer.” He offers more descriptive language about Avedon's stylistic treatment of the subjects—“the deadpan stare into the camera, the slouch of the body, the cropped arm or head at the edge of the frame.” He describes the subject
matter of another picture as a “burly lumber salesman holding his impassive baby upside down” and mentions a coal miner who has a face “painted with rock dust” before he draws his conclusion in his final sentence, quoted earlier, that Avedon exhilaratingly pursues the perfect photographic style.

Davis’s article is written for a mass circulation magazine with readers of diverse interests. It is relatively short, of “review” length rather than “feature” length. Another review of about the same length was published in Ariforum in the same month that Davis’s appeared in Newsweek. It is written by William Wilson, identified in a byline as a writer and editor. A feature article called “Avedon Goes West” was written by Susan Weiley and published in Artnews six months later. Both Ariforum and Artnews are national in scope and devoted exclusively to visual art. Whereas the Davis and Wilson reviews are about one magazine page in length and about 1,000 words, Weiley’s is six pages and about 3,500 words. One photograph accompanies Wilson’s review, and four are printed with Weiley’s article.

Davis and Wilson generally agree in their appraisals of the show. Although they both approve of the work, they have reservations. Like Davis, Wilson does not accept the work as an accurate documentation of the West. He sees it as Avedon’s fiction, but he doesn’t mind that; rather, he enjoys the photographs as he would a good story. Although he faults some of the photographs as “self-important” and “patronizing” and mere “fashion,” he is positive about the exhibition. Susan Weiley, however, clearly disapproves of the work. Although she admires Avedon’s “flawless craftsmanship,” for her the American West project is “cold and mechanical” and “without that power to deeply disturb.” For her it is “fashion, not art.” With these brief overviews of the positions taken by Wilson and Weiley, we have two more critical positions on Avedon to consider as we continue to explore description in criticism. In addition to analyzing descriptive statements about Avedon’s work by these three critics, we will also consider descriptions of other types of photographs.

DEscribing Subject Matter

Descriptive statements about subject matter identify and typify persons, objects, places, or events in a photograph. When describing subject matter, critics name what they see and also characterize it.

Because there are 124 portraits in the Avedon exhibition, many of which are group portraits, there are too many to list individually. Davis chooses to summarily describe the subjects of the show as “ranchers, housekeepers, rodeo riders and oil drillers, pig men, meatpackers and an army of unemployed drifters.” Some of these nouns were supplied by Avedon as part of his titles—for example, David Beason, shipping clerk, Denver, Colorado, 7/25/81—and Davis has included several of them in his review. But he invents the phrase “an army of unemployed drifters.” He adds that one of the coal miners is “tall and enigmatic,” and he writes of a boy “with a snake wrapped coyly around his arms.” These descriptions of subject matter seem
simple, straightforward, and obvious when we read them, but Davis had to fashion
these subjects with carefully selected words. The photographer gives us images; the
critic gives us words for the images.

In his Artforum review, William Wilson describes the same subject matter that
Davis saw but summarizes it differently. He calls the subject of the show "a human
cyclorama" and says that the show includes not only the expected "cowboys and
Indians" but also "a couple of mental-hospital patients; a physical therapist; three
sisters from Wildhorse, Colorado." About the three sisters, Wilson adds that they
have served as co-presidents of the Loretta Lynn Fan Club for the past twenty-five
years. In colorful descriptive language utilizing alliteration, Williams mentions
"soot and grime and rips and rashes and blood" and states that the heads of slaugh-
tered sheep and steers are important inclusions in these portraits.

In her feature article in Artnews, Susan Welley had considerably more space than
the one page allotted to the reviews by Davis and Wilson, and she chose to describe
a lot of Avedon's work, starting with his older fashion work which, she tells us,
began in 1946. She discusses how his work differed from that of his peers who pho-
tographed fashion, and she explains that he freed the fashion photograph from the
still studio pose. She uses lively descriptive language to discuss the subject matter of
his fashion work and how he presented it: In real and recognizable places he pho-
tographed models as they "leaped off curbs or bounced down a beach or swirled
their New Look skirts through Parisian streets or gamed at a roulette table." Welley
also relates that in addition to his commercial fashion work in the sixties and sev-
eties Avedon made portraits of celebrities. Beyond merely identifying the subjects
as portraits of artists, writers, and politicians, she characterizes them in carefully
chosen descriptive language: "Avedon presented the frailties of the body: the sags
and bags, lines and pouches that flesh is heir to, the double chins, enlarged pores,
glazed eyes and sullen expressions of the rich, the powerful, the famous." She also
describes a "devastating series" of portraits Avedon made of his father as he was
dying of cancer.

When she discusses his American West work, Welley not only describes the sub-
jects he photographs but also those he does not photograph: "fearless gunslingers or
stalwart lawmen or fierce cattlemen or Houston oil barons, or any of the stock char-
acters that live in our imagination of the West." As do Davis and Wilson, she lists
the persons in the photographs by their jobs but further describes the lot as "a cat-
ologue of the odd, the bizarre, the defective, the deformed, the demented and the
maimed." And like Wilson, but unlike Davis, she mentions the bloodiness of some
of the subjects: "Slaughterhouse workers and their implements are drenched in
blood, and severed, bloodied calf, steer and sheep heads all have their likenesses
immortalized."

Welley concludes that Avedon's choice of subject matter is more interpretive
than descriptive: "After a short time one realizes the westerners were selected solely
for their strange physical characteristics." She is not alone in her conclusion.
Richard Bolton, writing in *Afterimage*, considers Avedon's work exploitative and asks of the subjects of the photographs: "Were they told that, had they been less dirty, less debilitated, or had better taste, or better posture, they might not have been chosen to be photographed?"¹⁰

These critics have seen the same work and write about the same exhibition, but in describing the subjects of the photographs they have us notice different aspects and characteristics. There is much overlap in their observations about the subject matter, because they are writing about observable facts, but there is also room-for different selections of what to include and what to exclude as well as considerable variance in the language they use to describe the subject matter once they have named it.

Avedon's subject matter is mostly people and is relatively uncomplicated—usually one person to a photograph. But as we have just seen, describing that subject matter is not an easy task. The subject matter of many other photographs is also simple, but when criticizing it, we characterize what is there. Edward Weston's subject matter for an entire series of photographs is green peppers. The subject matter of a Minor White photograph is bird droppings on a boulder. Irving Penn's subject matter for a series of photographs is cigarette butts.

Some photographers utilize a lot of simple objects as their subject matter. In a series of still lifes, Jan Groover "took her camera to the kitchen sink" and photographed complicated arrangements of kitchen utensils such as knives, forks, spoons, plates, cups, plastic glasses and glass glasses, pastry and aspic molds, metal funnels, whisks, plants, and vegetables.¹¹ Most of the objects are recognizable, but some are abstracted in the composition so that they are "surfaces and textures" and not recognizable on the basis of what is shown. Although in real life Groover's subject matter is a pie pan, on the basis of what is seen in the photograph it can be identified only as "a brushed aluminum surface" or "a glistening metallic plane." The subject matter of many abstract works can be described only with abstract terms, but critics still can and should describe it.

The subject matter of some photographs is seemingly simple but actually very elusive. Cindy Sherman's work provides several examples. Most of these photographs are self-portraits, so in one sense her subject matter is herself. But she titles black and white self-portraits made between 1977 and 1980 "Untitled Film Stills." In them she pictures herself, but as a woman in a wide variety of guises from hitchhiker to housewife. Moreover, these pictures look like stills from old movies. She also made a series of "centerfolds" for which she posed clothed and in the manner of soft-porn magazine photographs. So what is the subject matter of these pictures? In a *New York Times* review, Michael Brenson names the subject matter of the film still photographs "stock characters in old melodramas and suspense films."¹² But Eleanor Heartney, writing in *Afterimage*, says that both the self-portraits and the film still photographs directly refer to "the cultural construction of femininity."¹³ They are pictures of Cindy Sherman and pictures of Cindy Sherman disguised as

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others; they are also pictures of women as women are represented in cultural artifacts such as movies, magazines, and paintings, especially as pictured by male producers, directors, editors, painters, and photographers. To simply identify them as “portraits” or “portraits of women” or “self-portraits” or “self-portraits of Cindy Sherman” would be inaccurate and in a sense would be to misidentify them.

Some photographs, such as those of Joel-Peter Witkin, have obviously complex subject matter. His subject matter is sometimes difficult to decipher and always demands attention because it is usually shocking. In a feature article in Exposure, Cynthia Chris characterizes Witkin’s subject matter as sexual, violent, and perverse and itemizes it in this litany: “fetus, child, male, female, hermaphrodite, corpse, skeleton, the beautiful, the deformed, the obese, live animal and taxidermic specimen.”14 Hal Fischer, in Artweek, describes Witkin’s subject matter in the following way: “tortured figures, obese women, carrot dildos, fetuses and anything else which may enter this photographer’s imagination are fabricated into enigmatic, often grotesque tableaux.”15 Witkin uses models whom Fischer describes as “earth-mother goddesses, transsexuals, masked and bound men and other inhabitants of the demimonde.” In her article Chris states: “Usually nude, they are less dressed than entangled in hats, hoods, masks, wings, rubber hoses, flora, fauna, food, and sex toys.”16 The subjects are sometimes further altered by scratching and other manual manipulations done to the negatives before they are printed, and many of the photographs are collages of different negatives.

Witkin also includes other art objects or segments of them in his tableaux, and he frequently refers to artworks by artists of earlier times. Van Deren Coke details some of these art objects and art references in his introductory essay to an exhibition catalogue of Witkin’s work.17 A 1981 photograph by Witkin titled The Prince Imperial refers to a portrait of the son of Napoleon III made in the 1860s. Witkin’s Mandam is based on a painting done in the 1830s by George Catlin, and Courbet in Rejlander’s Pool refers to both the painter Courbet and the photographer Rejlander. Some of Witkin’s photographs refer so closely to other artworks that Coke includes the historic paintings in the catalogue of Witkin’s contemporary work: The Little Fur, painted around 1638 by Peter Paul Rubens, is printed opposite Witkin’s Helena Fourment. In a footnote, Coke relates that Witkin’s photograph parodies a portrait of Rubens’s wife, Helena Fourment. Witkin also parodies portraits by Goya and Grant Wood (Portrait of Nan) and a sculpture of Venus by Canova. In another of Witkin’s photographs, Pygmalion, segments of reproductions of Picasso’s paintings are part of the photograph. Thus the subject matter of this photograph is other art, which is observable only if the viewer knows the other art or is told of the references by someone else, such as a critic. The parodies in particular are problematic because a parody is not effective unless the reader or viewer knows that it is a parody and how it ridicules what it refers to. In these examples of Witkin’s work, the subject matter is not obvious, so the critic must describe it accurately and completely.
Joel-Peter Witkin, Portrait of Nan, 1984.

Copyright © by Joel-Peter Witkin. All rights reserved. Courtesy of the artist.
DESCRIPTING FORM

Form refers to how the subject matter is presented. Ben Shahn, the painter and photographer who made photographs for the Farm Security Administration in the 1930s, said that form is the shape of content. Descriptive statements about a photograph's form concern how it is composed, arranged, and constructed visually. We can attend to a photograph's form by considering how it uses what are called "formal elements." From the older ariforms of painting and drawing, photography has inherited these formal elements: dot, line, shape, light and value, color, texture, mass, space, and volume. Other formal elements identified for photographs include black and white tonal range; subject contrast; film contrast; negative contrast; paper contrast; film format; point of view, which includes the distance from which the photograph was made and the lens that was used; angle and lens; frame and edge; depth of field; sharpness of grain; and degree of focus. Critics refer to the ways photographers use these formal elements as "principles of design," which include scale, proportion, unity within variety, repetition and rhythm, balance, directional forces, emphasis, and subordination.

Edward Weston identified some of the choices of formal elements the photographer has when exposing a piece of film: "By varying the position of his camera, his camera angle, or the focal length of his lens, the photographer can achieve an infinite number of varied compositions with a single stationary subject."18 John Szarkowski reiterated what Weston observed over fifty years ago and added an important insight: "The simplicity of photography lies in the fact that it is very easy to make a picture. The staggering complexity of it lies in the fact that a thousand other pictures of the same subject would have been equally easy."19

In an essay for an exhibition catalogue of Jan Groover's work, Susan Kismaric provides a paragraph that is a wonderful example of how a critic can describe form and its effects on subject matter:

The formal element put to most startling use in these pictures is the scale of the objects in them. Houseplants, knives, forks, and spoons appear larger than life. Our common understanding of the meaning of these pedestrian objects is transformed to a perception of them as exotic and mysterious. Arrangements of plates, knives, and houseplants engage and delight our sight through their glamorous new incarnation while they simultaneously undermine our sense of their purpose in the natural world. Meticulously controlled artificial light contributes to this effect. Reflections of color and shapes on glass, metal, and water, perceived only for an instant or not at all in real life, are stilled here, creating a new subject for our contemplation. The natural colors of the things photographed are intensified and heightened. Organic objects are juxtaposed with manmade ones. Soft textures balance against, and touch, hard ones. The sensuous is pitted against the elemental.20

The formal elements to which Kismaric refers are light, color, and texture; the principles of design are scale, arrangements of objects, and juxtapositions. She cites scale as the most dominant design principle and then describes the effects of

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Groover's use of scale on the photographs and our perception of them. She identifies the light as artificial and tells us that it is meticulously controlled. The colors are natural; some of the shapes are manufactured and others are organic, and they are juxtaposed. She identifies the textures as soft and hard, sensuous and elemental. Kismaric's description of these elements, and her explanation of their effects, contributes to our knowledge and enhances our appreciation of Groover's work.

Kismaric's paragraph shows how a critic simultaneously describes subject matter and form and also how in a single paragraph a critic describes, interprets, and evaluates. To name the objects is to be descriptive, but to say how the objects become exotic and mysterious is to interpret the photographs. The tone of the whole paragraph is very positive. After reading the paragraph we know that Kismaric thinks Groover's photographs are very good and we are provided reasons for this judgment based on her descriptions of the photographs.

**DEscribing medium**

The term *medium* refers to what an art object is made of. In a review of Bea Nettles's photographs in the 1970s, A. D. Coleman described the media Nettles was using: “stitching, sensitized plastics and fabrics, dry and liquid extraphotographic materials...hair, dried fish, Kool Aid, feathers, and assorted other things.”[^21] The medium of Sandy Skoglund's *Walking on Eggshells*, 1997, can simply and accurately be said to be *Cibachrome*, or *color photograph*, but in the installation she constructed for the photograph, Skoglund uses the media of whole, empty eggshells (some filled with plaster), cast paper bathroom fixtures (sink, bathtub, toilet, mirror), cast paper wall tiles with relief-printed images, cold-cast (bonded-bronze) sculptures of snakes and rabbits, over a variable floor space of thirty square feet. To make *Spirituality of the Flesh*, she bought eighty pounds of raw hamburger with which to cover the walls in the final photograph, and she used orange marmalade and strawberry preserves to color the walls and floor of *The Wedding*. Descriptive statements about a picture's medium usually identify it as a photograph, an oil painting, or an etching. They may also include information about the kind and size of film that was used, the size of the print, whether it is black and white or in color, characteristics of the camera that was used, and other technical information about how the picture was made, including how the photographer photographs. Each of the critics of “In the American West” writes about how Avedon made the pictures.

Davis tells us that Avedon's prints are uncropped and not retouched, that the subjects were illuminated with natural light in front of white paper, and that Avedon held 752 photo sessions with the subjects of the portraits and shot 17,000 sheets of film. He also relates that Avedon used an 8- by 10-inch Deardorff view camera, which allowed him to stand close to the subjects and talk to them as he shot.

Wilson mentions the camera and tripod, the rolls of white paper for background, and Avedon's ability to stand by his subjects rather than behind the camera when

Courtesy of the artist.
shooting. He also tells us that Avedon held 752 shooting sessions and adds that he did this work over five consecutive summers, traveling through seventeen western states, from Kansas to California.

Weley does not detail much technical information, but she describes Avedon's positioning of the subjects in front of white paper on location and tells us that two assistants loaded his camera. She describes his method of photographing and interprets the psychological effects of his method: "He is in total control, has complete authority over his subjects. He selects, arranges, directs, just as he would a fashion shot."22

In her essay on Groover's work, Kismaric specifies that some of the still lifes are done in the platinum-palladium process. She explains that this method of working was invented in 1873 for its permanence, but she also details its aesthetic qualities—"delicacy, soft grays, and warm tones."23 Kismaric considers further Groover's choice of photography rather than painting even though Groover was trained as a painter: "By using photography instead of painting, Groover complicates the notion of representation, and emphasizes the capacity of photography to make works of the imagination."

Critics of Witkin's work usually discuss how he uses the medium of photography. Gary Indiana, in a review in Art in America, says that "many of the prints have been made to look like daguerreotypes salvaged from partial decomposition" and adds that "the edges are scored with black lines and smudges suggestive of Action Painting."24 In a review in Artweek, Hal Fischer also describes how Witkin treats the medium of photography and posits some of the effects of his treatments: "By etching into his negatives and selectively bleaching and toning the prints, this artist imbues his imagery with a nineteenth century aura without compromising the sense of photographic reality."25 In the same publication a year later, Jim Jordan agrees that Witkin's formal treatments of his photographs make them look old, from the eighteenth century and the court of Louis XVI. Jordan further relates that Witkin uses a Rolleiflex camera, prints on Portriga paper, sometimes through a tissue paper overlay that he sprinkles with water and Joning chemicals.26

Uta Barth makes photographs in the spirit of conceptual art that examine and pointedly utilize distinctive characteristics of the medium of photography, such as camera movement, position, nonstationary subject, scale, or focus. According to critic Andrew Perchuk, Barth's photographs are "boiled down to an almost topological study of how the photographic apparatus orients and disorients the viewer."27

Thus the description of medium involves more than just using museum labels, as in labeling Ian Groover's images as "three chromogenic color prints," or "platinum-palladium print," or "Gelatin-silver print." To fully describe the medium a photographer is using is not only to iterate facts about the process he or she uses, the type of camera, and kind of print, but also to discuss these things in light of the effects their use has on their expression and overall impact. Critics might more fully explore these effects as part of their interpretation or judgment of the work, but
they ought to explicitly mention the properties of the medium in the descriptive phase of criticism.

**DESCRIBING STYLE**

Style indicates a resemblance among diverse art objects from an artist, movement, time period, or geographic location and is recognized by a characteristic handling of subject matter and formal elements. Neo-expressionism is a commonly recognized, recent style of painting, and pictorialism, "directoril" photography, and the "snapshot aesthetic" are styles of photography.

To consider a photographer's style is to attend to what subjects he or she chooses to photograph, how the medium of photography is used, and how the picture is formally arranged. Attending to style can be much more interpretive than descriptive. Labeling photographs "contemporary American" or "turn of the century" is less controversial than is labeling them "realistic" or "straight" or "manipulated" or "documentary." The critics of Avedon's work being considered here are particularly interested in determining whether his style is "documentary," or "fictional," or "fashion." Determining Avedon's style involves considerably more than describing, but it does include descriptions of whom he photographs, how he photographs them, and what his pictures look like.

Of all the treatments of Avedon's style considered here, Weiley's is the most complete. She begins with his earlier portraits, claiming that he "Avedonizes" his subjects. She generalizes his early portrait work as "confrontational" and typifies it as "frontal, direct, with a single subject centered, staring directly out at the viewer." She explains that he undermined the glamour of the famous people he photographed—that he stripped them of their masks and "brought the mighty down to human scale, assassinating all possibility of grace or vanity." Weiley is much less sympathetic to Avedon's treatment of his subjects in the American West work; she finds his manner of working "disagreeable," "condescending to his subjects," and "frankly arrogant" in its exploitation. Whereas the famous people he photographs are media smart and used to being photographed and publicized, the westerners are not, and she thinks that in the hands of Avedon they are "like innocents led to slaughter." Thus, on the basis of descriptive facts about Avedon's style, namely whom he photographs and how he photographs them, Weiley goes beyond describing and interpreting his style and forms a negative judgment about it.

**COMPARING AND CONTRASTING**

A common method of critically analyzing a photographer's work is to compare and contrast it to other work by the same photographer, to other photographers' works, or to works by other artists. To compare and contrast is to see what the work in question has in common with and how the work differs from another body of work.
Chapter 2 • Describing Photographs

Each of the critics under consideration here descriptively compares Avedon's work to that of other photographers.

Davis compares the size of Avedon's American West project to the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century documentary projects of William Henry Jackson and Edward Curtis.31 Jackson was an explorer, writer, and photographer who over twenty-five years produced tens of thousands of negatives of Indians and the western landscape. Curtis published twenty volumes of The North American Indian between 1907 and 1934. Although Davis compares the three photographers, he does not equate Avedon with the other two in terms of merit. In a judgment and not a description, Davis states that "Avedon is no Jackson or Curtis."

Critics need not limit their comparisons of a photographer to another photographer. Wilson makes comparative references between Avedon and several others of various professions, most of whom are not photographers but rather literary sources he knows and figures in fashion and popular culture: Sam Shepard, Edward Curtis, Mathew Brady, August Sander, Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Evie Knievel, Salvador Dalí, Elsa Schiaparelli, Charles James, Andy Warhol, Tom Wolfe, Calvin Klein, Georgia O'Keefe, Ansel Adams, and Irving Penn. Wilson compares Avedon to other storytellers and to others who bridged the gap between fashion and art, because he interpretively understands Avedon to be telling stories and attempting to transcend fashion with his photographs.

Of all the critics considered here, Weiley makes the most use of in-depth comparisons, paying particular attention to the similarities and mostly the differences between Avedon's work and that of Robert Frank, August Sander, and Diane Arbus. She cites Robert Frank's book, The Americans (1959), because like Avedon's it is "a harsh vision of America"32 and because both men are outsiders to the cultures they photographed: Frank is Swiss, and Avedon is not a cowboy. To compare Avedon with Frank, Sander, and Arbus, Weiley has to describe each one's photographs and manner of working and then specify how each photographer's work is different from and similar to that of the others.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION

We have seen that a critic can find much to mention about the photograph by attending to subject, form, medium, and style. And, as mentioned earlier, critics often go to external sources to gather descriptive information that increases understanding of that photograph. In their writings the critics of Avedon's work each used much information not decipherable in the photographs. By looking only at his American West photographs, a viewer cannot tell that Avedon's exhibited photographs were selected from 17,000 negatives, that he held 752 shooting sessions, that the work was commissioned by the Amon Carter Museum, or that they were made by a famous fashion photographer who had a large body of images made pre-
viously. This information comes from a variety of sources, including press releases, interviews with the artist, the exhibition catalogue, and knowledge of photography history. To compare and contrast Avedon's work with his own earlier work and with the work of others, including nonvisual work, each of the critics went to external sources.

In an example different from the critical treatments of Avedon's work, Van Deren Coke relies primarily on external information to provide an introduction to Witkin's work in an exhibition catalogue. Coke gathered the information from Witkin's master's thesis, written at the University of New Mexico in 1976, and from statements that Witkin has made about his work. Much of the information Coke provides is biographical, about the facts of Witkin's life and about his psychological motivations for making specific images. Coke believes that information about Witkin's life illuminates his photographs, and he includes as psychological motivation Witkin's shocking story of how at the age of six he witnessed a car accident and stood close to the decapitated head of a little girl. Coke also relates that Witkin's father was an orthodox Jew and his mother a Catholic and that they divorced over religious differences, that Witkin's first sexual experience was with a hermaphrodite, that he studied sculpture in the evenings at Cooper Union School of Art in New York, that he was an army photographer during the Vietnam War, and that one of his assignments was to photograph accident and suicide victims.

In her article on Witkin, Cynthia Chris relies on external information that includes Coke's catalogue essay and a lecture Witkin delivered at the Art Institute of Chicago. She particularly notes how Witkin obtains the unusual subjects for his photographs—by searching the streets, by following people, through want ads, and through an afterword in his book "that reads like a shopping list"—because she finds his methods objectionable.

Critics and theoreticians of criticism differ on the importance and desirability of external information, on certain types of information, and on the means of gathering it. As we saw in Chapter 1, A. D. Coleman, for example, advocates distance between the critic and the artist, and distinctions between curating and criticizing and between writing history and criticism. Lucy Lippard, however, assumes a partnership with the artists she writes about and feels comfortable interviewing them and seeking their views of their work. In the past, critics rejected biographical and psychological information about artists as irrelevant and advocated instead that the artwork be the source of criticism, that the rest is distracting. Most contemporary critics, however, embrace a more contextual view of criticism and art and carefully consider the photograph's causal environment, including the context in which it was made. The importance of considering context will be explored in Chapter 5.

The test of including or excluding external descriptive information is one of relevance. The critic's task in deciding what to describe and what to ignore is one of sorting the relevant information from the irrelevant, the insightful from the trivial.
and distracting. When engaging in criticism, however, one would not want to substitute biography for criticism or to lose sight of the work amid interesting facts about the artist.

DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

It is probably as impossible to describe without interpreting as it is to interpret without describing. A critic can begin to mentally list descriptive elements in a photograph, but at the same time he or she has to constantly see those elements in terms of the whole photograph if those elements are to make any sense. But the whole makes sense only in terms of its parts. The relationship between describing and interpreting is circular, moving from whole to part and from part to whole.

Though a critic might want to mentally list as many descriptive elements as possible, in writing criticism he or she has to limit all that can be said about a photograph to what is relevant to providing an understanding and appreciation of the picture. Critics determine relevancy by their interpretation of what the photograph expresses. In a finished piece of criticism, it would be tedious to read descriptive item after descriptive item, or fact after fact, without having some understanding on which to hang the facts. That understanding is based on how the critic interprets and evaluates the picture, or how one evaluates it. At the same time, however, it would be a mistake to interpret without having considered fully what there is in the picture, and interpretations that do not (or worse, cannot) account for all the descriptive elements in a work are flawed interpretations. Similarly, it would be irresponsible to judge without the benefit of a thorough accounting of what we are judging.

DESCRIPTION AND EVALUATION

Joel-Peter Witkin is a controversial photographer who makes controversial photographs. Critics judge him differently; and their judgments, positive or negative or ambivalent, influence their descriptions of his work. Cynthia Chris clearly disapproves of the work: "Witkin's altered photographs are representations of some of the most repressed and oppressed images of human behavior and appearance," whereas Hal Fischer writes that "Joel-Peter Witkin, maker of bizarre, sometimes extraordinary imagery, is one of the most provocative artists to have emerged in the past decade." And Gene Thornton of the New York Times calls Witkin "one of the great originals of contemporary photography." Their evaluations, positive or negative, are often mixed into their descriptions. For example, Gary Indiana uses the phrases "smeared with burnt-in blotches" and "the usual fuzz around the edges" to describe some formal characteristics of Witkin's prints, and Bill Berkson describes the same edges as "syrupy." These are not value-neutral descriptors but rather descriptors that suggest disapproval. Another critic, Jim Jordan, talks about
“Witkin’s incredible range of form definition within the prints” and claims that Witkin’s surface treatments “inform the viewer that these are works of art.” 40 Jordan’s phrase “incredible range of form definition” is also a mix of description and judgment, with positive connotations.

In published criticism, descriptions are rarely value-free. Critics color their descriptions according to whether they are positive or negative about the work, and they use descriptors that are simultaneously descriptive and evaluative to influence the reader’s view of the artwork. Critics attempt to be persuasive in their writing. Readers, however, ought to be able to sort the critic’s descriptions from judgments, and value-neutral descriptions from value-laden descriptions, however subtly they are written, so that they can more intelligently assent or dissent.

Novice critics can find it beneficial to attempt to describe a photograph without connoting positive or negative value judgments about it. They may then be more sensitive to and aware of when descriptions are accurate and neutral and when they are positively or negatively judgmental.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DESCRIPTION TO READERS

As we have seen throughout the chapter, description is an extremely important activity for critics, established or novice, because it is a time for “getting to know” a piece of art, especially if that art is previously unknown and by an unfamiliar artist. Descriptions are also important to readers, because they contain crucial and interesting information that leads them to understand and appreciate images. Descriptions provide information about photographs and exhibitions that readers may never get to see and otherwise would not experience at all. Descriptions are also the basis on which they can agree or disagree with the critic’s interpretation and judgment.

Describing photographs and reading descriptions of photographs are particularly important activities because people tend to look through photographs as if they were windows rather than pictures. Because of the stylistic realism of many photographs, and because people know that photographs are made with a machine, people tend to consider photographs as if they were real events or living people rather than pictures of events or people. Pictures are not nature and they are not natural; they are human constructs. Photographs, no matter how objective or scientific, are the constructions of individuals with beliefs and biases, and we need to consider them as such. To describe subject, form, medium, and style is to consider photographs as pictures made by individuals and not to mistake them for anything more or less.

Description is not a prelude to criticism; description is criticism. Careful descriptive accounts by insightful critics using carefully constructed language offers the kind of informed discourse about photographs that increases our understanding and appreciation of photographs.