

The Turn of Writing in Art Criticism

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Abstract: The language of contemporary art creation, as a form of presentation, has largely replaced the explanatory function of art criticism writing. Art criticism must proactively anticipate possible shifts in writing approaches. This involves the fusion of imagery and linguistic intelligence, termed the "symbiosis" of an individual's "life dialect."

Keywords: Symbiosis, Individual Dialect, Visual Intelligence

I. Criticism Cannot Play the Role of Saving Art History

Books on the essence of art criticism are almost always a waste of time, a meaningless exercise in piling up words. Using essentialist tools to think about contemporary visual art adds nothing to the discussion, except a sense of confusion, full of vague expressions like "because" and "so." How can you identify a shared quality in so-called artistic creations that could be called art, based on anything—any object, event, statement, or concept? This is akin to saying that the essence of the world is the embodiment of God's nature, like Leibniz's monads harmoniously composing the world; the result is the same whether you say it or not.

A particularly thankless endeavor is the field of "art studies," which refers to the general laws of various art forms. This is a monstrosity from the Stalinist era under Soviet guidance. I have read many such books in the past, and what is termed "general laws" is nothing but an ideological propaganda tool. Conversely, how could there possibly be any common laws? Music, painting, dance, and cinema—all arts targeting different senses, such as ears, eyes, and the body—are unique in their inimitability based on the senses they appeal to. If one insists on finding a common "way" for them, it is not knowledge presentation but a cultural directive, achievable only through authoritarian power. We then turn "authoritarian directives" into the tools of literary and art studies, resulting in "directive" pseudo-academic work, which is not surprising.

Currently, the hottest type of visual art writing is curatorial criticism. This depends on two factors. First, curating is an important means of integrating visual art with social resources, either as a public product or a commodity on the market. Second, the spatial presentation configuration increasingly reflects the external organizational form through which visual art transmits academic ideas. However, I conclude that curatorial criticism is not a public form of art criticism writing for the following three reasons: First, the curator is primarily an employer; second, the curator serves as an indirect agent for the artist; third, the curator is the one packaging and selling the product. This synthesis of three parties' interests means that curatorial introductions, the explanation of the main themes, and curatorial philosophy analyses, or what are called justifications for the selection of works, are nothing but self-glorifying: a collaborative effort, a perfect fit. Thus, it can be said that there is little inherent connection with the production of public knowledge. Therefore, I believe curating and curatorial writing are practical texts distinct from critical writing.

Of course, this is not to deny its importance. On the contrary, this is an important way for visual art to intervene in the public communication of society. Whether or not it constitutes the production of public knowledge remains to be seen.

Visual art has expanded in all directions, and everything is now art. Whatever the eye can see, it can be interpreted as visual art. Everyone has their own reasons; different people say different things. What was once called "taste without argument" is now "everyone is an artist" or "everyone is a critic." In the age of social media, everyone is an artist, and who am I but one of them?

In such circumstances, how can critical writing be professional? How can it become a part of the art-social system? Do people today look at Cézanne or Picasso and logically connect the works with the writings of certain critics from that era? Fry's contribution to elevating Cézanne's place in art history was remarkable, but today, one can view Cézanne's works without necessarily referring to Fry's critical texts. That is a technical aspect of art history. Otherwise, it becomes a matter of looking at words to recognize images.

It is an undeniable fact that critical writing is increasingly marginalized. This stems from the fact that visual art creation is increasingly using visual effects and language tools as intertwined modes of expression. Especially in the era of new media, most artists are skilled both in the arts and in language, presenting the logic of creation through verbal articulation, with images or structures of objects revealing intent. This is not the end of art, as argued by Arthur Danto. On the contrary, it has become a new tool for artistic creation. Danto's theory of the "end of art" is actually a death knell for the epistemological essence of art. He follows Hegel's logic that art has increasingly become about concepts, ideas, and intellectual stories. Further investigation reveals that Danto's Hegelian-based art philosophy is built on shaky ground. Hegel's "Aesthetics" argues that the characteristic of painting is to compress three-dimensionality into two dimensions, a principle that aims to return to an inner determinism. But imagine: If painting does not compress three dimensions into two, is it still painting? This kind of high-sounding, self-deceptive statement by philosophers fools many aestheticians, including Danto. In fact, it is a superficial aesthetic text created by a layman, which when applied to actual works, results in a quack doctor prescribing useless medicine.

On the other hand, the increasingly philosophical nature of visual art, using language as an integral component, has not led to the death of art. Instead, it has become a darling in contemporary art exhibitions. The natural consequence of this is that so much of this kind of criticism essentially adds a layer of unnecessary verbal information. The intertwining of language and images undoubtedly becomes a new type of contemporary art. In my view, supplementary and explanatory criticism are necessary and essential, but the nature of the writing is merely supplementary or rhetorical in its expression.

Some art critics firmly believe that art criticism serves as the gatekeeper of art history, that today's theoretical work is preparing the way for future generations to enter art history. Does this stand? I believe it does not hold up theoretically. There are three reasons for this.

1. The primary argument for this view is the theory of artistic will from Hegel to Riegl. The allure of art history is non-logical. Certain styles or techniques may show continuity for a period, but overall, the succession of styles reflects what Schumpeter calls "destructive" development. The negation of the former leads to the emergence of the latter. The birth of the latter is neither a gift nor a continuation of the former, nor a natural logical

inheritance. For whom is your criticism guarding the gates? Will future generations want you to guard them? How will you guard the gates for future generations? Is it simply standing at the entrance to a historical tombstone?

2. Can an enlightened view of art determine how future generations will write and choose art history? On what basis? Based on all the texts you've provided? What method of yours can determine the future and be certain of its acceptance? Historical development has never had a logical derivation, and it cannot be deduced from today to predict the future. The idea of preparing for the future is nothing more than a poetic sentiment and a self-serving justification for the work one does.
3. What kind of history is art history? Can art criticism lay the foundation for art history? Croce said that all history is contemporary history. On the contrary, when later generations study the history of their predecessors, they are actually seeking meaning and wisdom for their own existence. Can we, today, know what future generations will need in terms of meaning and wisdom?

In short, no one can decide the fate of future generations. These three reasons are sufficient to completely negate the notion of art criticism serving as the gatekeeper of art history. Therefore, I strongly oppose calling the writing of the art phenomena, events, and figures we personally experience, discuss, and make a living from "history." At best, it is just a pile of materials. In the contemporary context, I prefer to categorize various practical criticism and the kind of writing I advocate into two separate paths. Practical criticism is the tool critics use to earn a living by selling their words, and I believe it's fine as long as it pays the bills. Everyone needs to eat, drink, and live. Moreover, art institutions are still producing large numbers of prospective art critics! As for the kind of criticism writing I expect, it comes from listening to the deep breath of one's own life, drawing from the "dialect" of individual life that emerges from here and now, at this moment, with this body, this thought, and this feeling.

II. Criticism as the Individual "Life Dialect" of the Critic

Art criticism, as a conscious choice and act of an individual within society, inevitably carries some form of social expectancy, whether explicit or implicit. Its most valuable creativity lies in how it impacts people's future expectations, thus achieving a personalized social meaning. Therefore, to influence future expectations, the key contribution of art criticism writing is to amplify the humanistic value reflected in visual imagery. The writing I advocate is a potential power that promises future significance; it arises not only from the understanding of artworks but also from the critic's journey to explore the meaning of their own life.

I oppose the so-called "purely art history-oriented" criticism. I take a stance against using art history as a tool for judging works of art. Art history provides the baseline for our thoughts, not a ruler for judgment. Art criticism can use various tools to help us analyze and ensure that the analytical texts possess a communicable commonality. Art is not "art for art's sake," nor is it created for the sake of art history; it is created for life and for the better survival of society. Thus, I argue that the theory of "art for art's sake" is a formal pretext for art's autonomy and self-referentiality, in order to better practice the independent spirit of art.

The practical implementation, as Goodman describes, involves the statement's truth and the correspondence between description, representation, illustration, and expression: "The truth of a statement is how appropriately it fits into a world, in the way a statement may fit one or another representational form or type of organization and behavior." (1) This text discusses "intertextuality" in terms of art's self-discipline. I interpret "intertextuality" as constructing a "spiritual realm" between the external world and the artwork, allowing the critic to communicate the humanistic spirit and life philosophy rooted in their individual life to society. Similarly, we should consciously build a visual language writing that is based on visual art, independent of the artwork itself. These writings should be based on "looking" or, using a trendy term, "gazing," and should return to the meaning output of one's own life source.

I also oppose the so-called progressive view of art criticism. Art is evolving, not a logical inevitability, not a linear progression from A to B. Development is a form of substitution, fundamentally accidental, marking the growth of a new form of art or artistic medium. However, this does not mean that it can replace previous ways of art creation or its media. The great art of each era is not replaced by the art that follows, and future generations may not necessarily surpass the previous ones in greatness. This is the core reason for my opposition to the theory of art's progress. Today's art is not necessarily better than yesterday's, nor is future art necessarily superior to today's or ancient art. This is one of the greatest characteristics of art as a cultural form.

As Greenberg wisely put it: "Art will develop, but it will not progress!"

Here, we must insist that criticism is not a historical expressway of social change, where one method or set of concepts can freely navigate the ocean of art. It is a series of critical intellectual adventures. Failures will inevitably outnumber successes, and misinterpretations will certainly be more common than correct ones. Thus, we find the occasional intellectual brilliance in the process. Art criticism writing is more about enjoying the journey. Even the hardships of the adventure are rewarding when we find a way out after being lost. Each critique, no matter how others view it, is an independent, free, and enjoyable spiritual retreat in discovering the value of thought.

On a macro level, art criticism involves both external and internal issues. External issues concern the need for art criticism to address societal and cultural problems, presenting issues of rebellion, foresight, boundaries, and marginality, rather than succumbing to or flattering power, capital, or popular trends. It must also maintain the awareness that it is "artistic" thinking, not scientific thinking, acknowledging the validity of its own thoughts while understanding the limitations of extending them to the outside world. Internal issues refer to the continuity of the work being undertaken, the positioning of art history, the achievements of other artists on both vertical and horizontal axes, the innovation of critical tools, and the critic's own originality.

Thus, in art criticism, external issues take precedence over internal ones. This is because the critical thinker, armed with freedom, independence, and a willingness to challenge, uses the intellectual razor to dissect societal issues, practicing an independent humanistic spirit of "social intervention" in art criticism. However, this does not mean that internal issues are unimportant; art is both art and technique. The technique underpins the art, and its depth and sophistication

are the material guarantee for the charm of the artwork. Without it, art would be nothing but magic.

I maintain that art criticism is a critique of life's value and meaning. Regardless of the methods or interpretive tools used, the ultimate aim must be to provide insights into society, life, and human spirit, contributing new content and expanding space for the growth of the values of freedom. I call this highly individualized writing on visual cognition and sensory experience "the individual's 'life dialect.'" It is a "place" of individual life, characterized by an unknown, non-referential "solitude" that gives birth to a linguistic intelligence formed with the image.

In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead presents the concept of "Concrescence," which refers to the process of absorbing sensory materials produced by the body into personal individuality, integrating them in various sensory forms, "giving dry bones a flesh and blood reality with emotions, purpose, and appreciation." In this process, the world composed of multiple elements "gains an individual unity, with each item in 'the many' becoming an integral part of a novel 'one.'" (2) This means that "Concrescence" is a formal process of determining the object based on individual sensations. In this process, the person realizes the intuitive creativity of their free will. It brings a sensory connection to the real-world opportunities, with the subject providing the form, feeling the sensation itself, and ultimately embodying intuitive intensity, whereby individuality transforms into universal perception. This is the origin of all knowledge and life cognition, a vital generative process.

Thus, the writing of the critic's individual "life dialect" is an unpredictable, unconstrained journey, beginning and ending in experience, but pushing beyond the familiar into new depths and distances. It then enters what I term the "new place" of critical writing, where the critic contributes linguistic intelligence about the visual meaning.

III. Critical Writing as the Intellectual Language of the Individual's "Life Dialect"

Diderot's art criticism is writing from the sociological perspective of viewing painting. This represents the shift of painting from the "private portrait" of the court and new aristocracy to a visual social mechanism, acting as both intermediary and bridge, and is largely considered a part of literature. For instance, Baudelaire's critique of painting, Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, and others were seen by contemporaries as a form of literary criticism through the lens of painting.

Looking at Ruskin's *Modern Painters* today is akin to geological studies of mountains and landscape painting, discussing how the depiction of trees, flowers, and plants in painting relates to their growth environment. He recommended Turner for his ability to depict sea waves, mountains, mist, and color compositions, which he considered a unique skill, achieved only by Turner, akin to meteorology in its fantastical use of color. In this, the professional threshold of outstanding painting techniques and pure aesthetic taste is established. Especially with the literary interpretation of visual perceptions based on art specialization, it becomes a refined essence. Fry's art criticism writing gradually distances itself from literary interests, focusing solely on visual aims, such as his promotion of Cézanne. It closely resembles the close reading of structure by later New Critics, summarizing external beauty through the internal structure of sketches, colors, and form features. Similarly, Fry, using a structure-based yardstick, critiques

Matisse's art for lacking structure despite its color. His failure to perceive the historical significance of Matisse's color lies in his adherence to the outdated view that color should be subservient to structure.

Greenberg's critical writing marks a "turn" from professional technical standards toward non-professional conceptual ideas. On one hand, he observed that in the practices of modernist artists, the depth of form almost entirely transformed into a playful interest in the plane and imagination; on the other hand, this "flattening" tendency worried him about the imminent disappearance of painting's foundation. His efforts resemble the predicament shown in Marilyn Monroe's skirt: both aiming to express sensuality while fearing exposure.

Danto's critical writing, in contrast, represents a "direct exposure." In modern art, nothing is not art, and anything can become art. Regardless of the method, materials, or means, any concept can be expressed. From the ultimate goal of art as expression or embodiment, all objects, or even non-objects, possess the potential to become art. Thus, art is dead. Contrary to Danto's statement, this philosophical view of the ultimate goal of artistic embodiment has not made artists feel that their work is dead. Instead, it has become a new approach to creation. This new approach involves using various tools to achieve the ultimate goal of a philosophical presentation of objects. Along this path, some view the "artist-philosopher" as the future subject of intellectual writing, thus interpreting Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as a historical novel from romantic individual freedom to grand epic narration. (3) George Smith, *The Artist-Philosopher and New Philosopher*, Routledge, 2018, p. 35.

The pressing issue here is: what role should art criticism writing play? What purpose does it serve? What function can it fulfill for such works by artists? At least, in this context, we should consider what type of critical writing is appropriate.

The type of critical writing I envision is best understood as an independent new genre, based on the meaning source of this individual's "life dialect" in a particular place, time, person, body, sensation, and thought. It is related to visual works yet also unrelated, connected to the philosophical concepts Danto discusses, yet not bound by them. It represents a new form of language in visual art and its cultural intervention in society, outputting a textual meaning of "life dialect" in relation to visuality or the "gaze." Its specific characteristics are: 1. a clear stance, 2. a visual scalpel that cuts into the texture of visual images, 3. further interpretation of the spirit beyond the image's charm, 4. capable of existing independently of the image, yet distinct from literary-style criticism. This type of critical text is about the image but not confined to the image; it is connected to the image yet goes beyond it, and is "language intelligence" generated by the image's ecosystem. This is the keyword of my critical writing. Thus, it is distinguished from exhibition reviews—such as the feelings from walking through an art space, or introductory and interpretive auxiliary criticism aimed at attracting viewers. It offers the "language intelligence" generated by the image ecosystem. Visual art criticism writing constructs this "intelligence": it is first visual, then linguistic, and ultimately "co-formed."

Whitehead's famous saying is: You must wait until your textbooks are lost, your notes burned, and all the detailed points you memorized for the exam have been forgotten, before you can understand what you have truly learned. These are organic experiences generated in the

process, which gradually form our world. But experience does not lead us back; it moves us forward. At this point, there are no precedents to follow; it is "feeling our way across the river." The "visual language intelligence" I speak of is this critical point. Only through this can we enter the space-time and spirit of change, to see the "new place."

Francisco J. Ricardo's interpretation of criticism resonates with me. He says: "Criticism in its current sense is not about providing methods or ideas for interpreting works, nor is it about judging whether works are good or bad, but about finding something beyond and behind reading and sensory experience." "Criticism is a reasoning that begins with sensory experience, taking the work and the audience to a new place, beyond the audience's initial view." (4) Francisco J. Ricardo, *The Engagement Aesthetic—Experiencing New Media Art through Critique*, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 3.

The "new place" refers to the textual space of visual language intelligence evoked by these various images. Of course, this idea cannot be entirely attributed to Mr. Ricardo. Warburg long ago stated that it is necessary not only to establish analogies between paintings and specific texts, but also between paintings and different texts beyond them. A painting is merely a component of the work's network. "No author, like Panofsky, has so carefully elaborated and continuously refined the concept of art as knowledge. Nor has any author, like Warburg, integrated art so deeply into the significance of a social behavior. Compared to Warburg's description of *Melancholia I*, which is framed with an understanding of artists overcoming fear and superstition, Panofsky saw it as the melancholy of 'those who cannot transcend spatial limitations.'" (5) Michael Podro, *The Art Historian as Critic*, Commercial Press, 2020, p. 225.

What is this textual space like?

G. Ryle, in *The Concept of Mind*, states: "When we 'see' things with our 'mental eye,' we do not see them the way we see a fallen leaf." "Having consciousness and self-awareness is not a byproduct of the mind; it is the mind in action. The mind does not seem to 'eavesdrop' on the thoughts we have. Having thoughts is the mind in action. In short, there is no ghost in the machine—only the machine." (6) Peter Watson, *The History of Twentieth-Century Thought*, Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2008, p. 574.

Typically, we consider critical writing as a form of "translation" of an image's internal messages, as if "eavesdropping" on the disclosure of its inner content. However, I insist on writing as "seeing" with the mind in action, discovering evidence of the world. These are not the exhibits of "eavesdropped" material but are "seen" for themselves. This is precisely the irreplaceable core of visual art. How to explain, from what angle, and by which method, is not just the presentation of this "seeing" itself; rather, it is my shaping of an intellectual object with a dedicated belief, which forms the foundation of the criticism writing. This object is the physical evidence of the intellectual language of seeing the world. Geertz in *Local Knowledge* says that thought is a purposeful manipulation of cultural forms, and its significance is the writing of "his own depth" with regional dialects. The visual image of "seeing" is the "new place" of the individual's intellectual evidence.

The significance of art criticism in expanding the spiritual world lies in this: the "life dialect" of personal regional marks.

The creation that dares to lead the world and the criticism that dares to be the first is an interactive system. The adventure and community of the art world are formed in this way. This situation more often faces non-historical issues. I do not believe that art history can provide answers to contemporary art's active practices and real-time thinking. The answers art history can offer will certainly not address the forefront issues or future domains. Therefore, the important feature of art criticism is to maintain the particularity and transcendence of "self-legislation," rooted in the meaning source of this place, time, body, thought, and sensation—the individual's "life dialect."

Greenberg's critique of the "Academy" is precisely a classic contrast to this concept: First, it walks within the predetermined patterns of art history, such as "generally accepting others' decisions instead of making your own—almost as if you want others to decide for you, pre-accepting their decisions. For example, you start by sticking to a certain style, like 19th-century French academic artists who remained faithful to the Ingres school—sharp lines, smooth contours, and shadows drawn with sculptural precision, without using much color." Secondly, "Academy art—this is a well-worn topic—avoids risks at all times. Once you make the first decision—whether it's the 19th century adherence to the Ingres school, or 1930s followers of Picasso, or 1950s admirers of de Kooning—the rest will naturally follow, as if all decisions automatically fall into place." In short, the so-called "Academy" is where you let others make decisions for you, where others have already prepared decisions for you—they now adhere to a category or type, which is 'extreme'." (7) [Clement Greenberg, *Art and Taste—Observations on Art and Taste*, translated by Chen Yiping, Chongqing University Press, 2017, pp. 144-145)

Similarly, the predetermined nature of "Academy" critique and teaching is one of the attributes of education, that is, teachability, but its exploration of the insecurity of thought and thinking cannot be taught and cannot be learned through any prescribed path. Therefore, in the face of "ready-made decisions prepared by others," narcissism is not your intellectual capital but rather your epitaph. In other words, your critical writing can only have a meaningful foundation if it leaves a trace in wandering and drifting; otherwise, no matter how many quotes from great masters you use to protect yourself, your criticism will still have no output.

"Daring to be the first in the world" means embarking on a journey of "nothingness"—whether you fall into a pit or climb a mountain, the outcome is unknown. Whether the journey is "a view that is unmatched" can only be known by experience.

So, I am still wandering...