

NCECA 2006 Panel: "Exploring a New Criticism"

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Moderator: Lynette Jennings

Panelists: Jim Romberg, Tony Hepburn, Brian Gillis

Transcription (Grammatical edit.)

Lynette:

My name is Lynette Jennings, and I would like to welcome you to "Exploring a New Criticism." Many of you know me from a previous life on national television. I spent 35 years of my career celebrating, promoting, teaching art and design, and in fact, interviewing many of you in an effort to bring art to society in a meaningful way. But more than that, I am the other half of you. I am a collector. I learned a lot from you throughout those years. Those days we spent together in your studios, you telling me your story and me inquisitive and moved. Because of the impression you left with me, I have formed my own definition of art: "A deep personal expression, a communion with self and the observer."

What I also learned from you is that it takes an incredible amount of courage to be an artist. To put it all out there with a single mark on a piece of paper or a piece of clay. To dedicate your life, your passion, your peer and personal relationships to a single focus. But it's that intimacy that also makes you vulnerable and fragile. So criticism is tough stuff. But it's a necessary part of making art. So why is criticism so desired and yet so feared to the extent that you submit self and work only to the trust and protection of a friendly writer? Notice that I didn't say "critic", but rather "friend". Platitudes and accolades are soft. The hard stuff is what we are after.

Can we do it here today? Because in creating a language and a vocabulary, which seems to be part of what's missing, with which to evaluate ceramic art, we are at the same time consciously thinking about applying that criteria to our own art. So if I asked you personally to describe good criticism, in the back of your mind you will be thinking, "Oh, oh, does my work live up to this? What's going to happen when this is applied to me?"

Is it possible to criticize without defensiveness, nepotism, ego, arrogance, undo humility, paranoia, protectionism, or career threat? Do we have the courage to be open, honest, accepting, and responsive? Can we give each other as artists, novices, emerging artists, mature artists, even our heroes permission to fail? To grow. To rediscover, to reconsider and to explore?

Why do we need good constructive criticism? We need it desperately to preserve and invest in the integrity and longevity of art, of ceramics, and in ourselves as artists. We need criticism to build trust and self-confidence, and we need good criticism to provide collectors and galleries with an intelligent platform with which to engage with art. So I am inviting you today to speak out. This is a dialogue. As you can see the lights are up, we are on stools on the edge of the stage and not behind a table of authority. The gentlemen

on this panel do not necessarily agree on all the points in this discussion today so things could get exciting. And we'd like your voices heard as well as theirs. So let the panel begin. (introductions)

Jim:

Over the past few months as I have talked about the panel, I began to receive a few anonymous emails that mentioned things like "fools and angels". Even "Pandora" came up a few times and then someone hummed the theme from mission impossible on the phone. But even more people cheered the effort on. The time has come. From a challenge issued from Korea, about how magazines, as critical vehicles are sometime too cozy, from articles we read continually posing the questions about art criticism "Where is the depth?", to artists visiting institutions to review graduate works and openly admitting "I just don't know how to talk about these", there is a problem. There is a desperate need. So how do we start and where do we go? What is this thing called criticism?

First of all, criticism is not monolithic or monochromatic, or created from the mind of one or few. An effective and understandable working critical framework must be a collective undertaking. And this means everybody in this room. And flying in the face of academic arrogance, I would like to say that each of you can participate in some way. Criticism can be a collective creation grown from amongst us and not something that descends or is handed down from on high.

The second point is that the spectrum of consideration must be very wide, including all forms and expression and use in clay. The hierarchy of significance can become a horizontal scale embracing functional ceramics, conceptual pieces and everything in between, with an examination of how successfully each achieves its intention being much more the issue than where it is in the hierarchy. The imposition of a pyramidal structure of importance implying that every piece of clay is in fact yearning to strut in the white light of the galleries on high, never to be touched or fondled ever again, is a massive distortion of creative intention and accomplishment. I'd like to announce today that the art and craft debate is over. (applause)

Let's consider each piece for what it is. This doesn't mean that the debate is over but that the debate takes a different tone. It's not a competition. It's an effort to see how each piece fulfills the intention that it announces, whether it is functional, sculptural, conceptual or whatever. We need to talk about it in its own terms.

Criticism also must be understandable. We need the lofty clouds of this philosophical discourse, but the discussion can achieve a wider level of comprehension, and still not lose its rigor. Are we suggesting a "Dick and Jane" criticism, that pats everybody nicely on the head? Not at all. I think if anything, it becomes more rigorous. It demands an expanded vocabulary. It demands increased awareness of what the expressiveness of clay is about. Laudatory pronouncements, or perhaps I should say "promotions", need to be replaced with rigorous examination of the success or failure of works in reaching their proclaimed intentions. When was the last time you read a so-called review that described the territory a piece is claiming or aspiring to and that the work for some reason has not yet arrived? Some people call this a negative criticism. I think it is not negative in the slightest way, but it tells the truth about what is happening.

Not every piece of clay, even from proclaimed masters is successful and we need to announce that if respectable growth and honest accolades are to have worth and merit.

The new criticism will be constructed through dialogue. We cannot wait for “Jean de’Clay” to arrive with a golden pen. Such an act or adherence would only corrupt any criticism projected. Each of you does have a voice, an idea, a point of view, a curiosity, a passion, the exercise of which will bring a new awareness.

Brian:

I should probably start by prefacing that I have no answers, and the only thing I can talk about are the observations that I have made and questions that I have come up with. Hopefully this is something that goes on beyond these walls, and becomes part of our culture. We’re moving from being a culture of nepotism, which I think is safe to say, is the state right now, to a culture of discourse. I conducted an informal study of people that I know by asking “where do you think criticism is now and where do you think it could be?” Two things were a common current in all those conversations. One, everybody started off by saying “there is no criticism”. And two, everybody said “I’d like to be anonymous”! Why is there no criticism? Why does everyone want to be anonymous? And are they related?

One of the things that I’d like to see happen from this is the development of an environment where people feel comfortable to challenge those that may afford them opportunities in the future, and where you could shed myopic idolatry and possibly question people you learn from. Hopefully we could discard agendas and talk as though we would if we were two people in each other’s studio, where candor is paramount. And we could take the work somewhere more than just patting each other on the back and being friends.

I think it’s important also to not just say “This is crap”, for the sake of saying this is crap, because that is equally as detrimental as if you said, “This is great!” So what needs to be paramount is the “why” and to take it beyond any unqualified proclamations. And so what I am interested in is not criticism where someone ordains something as a successful piece or unsuccessful piece but where it takes the conversation further.

This isn’t anything new. Jim did something similar to this in the 80’s and Tony in the 70’s. And this room is packed. So everybody’s on board. It is possible that the general art world is already on board as well. So, I think we just need to shed some veils. And last, we need to set up a culture where people don’t need courage to challenge. I am not sure how that can happen. I am in a tenure track position right now. And panels like this and shows that I could get invited to could help me. So honestly, I have something to loose by challenging institutions. So how can we set up a culture where people don’t feel that they have something to loose?

Tony:

Criticism in the print media is kind of new. It only began around 1914 because art became abstract. We needed people to interpret what we were looking at. Prior to that we didn’t need it because we knew what we were looking at. We invented the critic. If you look at the New York Times review of the Armory Show in

1916, you will see what critics were doing. And they were really bad, because they did not understand the craft of being a critic. They thought criticism was judgment and I would argue that it is not.

Think Greenburg: his position was that "I will interpret the art work for you. You don't have to worry, I will deal with it." Shortly after that, things moved to the gallery owner as critic. This is a monumental position. They decide what we see. They are probably the most important critics in our culture. How do they do it? I don't know. The worst kind of critic is the gallery critic. And I am not going to give you a name. (audience laughter) Many of you know of somebody in power that has the ability to critique the ceramics world and decide what rises to the top. And we all have to deal with that.

Of course the layers I am pointing to run deep. We don't have time to navigate all of them. To be parochial is not my usual inclination. We could look at ceramics magazines, their editors are critics. "Ceramics Monthly" and "Art and Perception". We all know those editors. They are all critics of what we are allowed to look at. A suggestion: do not look at the printed word or image. This is hard to do because we live in a culture that is desperate to stay connected 24/7. So in our desperation to feed our senses, we have to look at it. And it is addictive.

I went to the Critical Ceramics web site, which is an admirable pursuit, to see how the internet may have changed the language. So far, it has not. I went there on February 27th, and I looked at the web page, and I quote, "The work featured will be chosen by Forest Snyder", (nice guy), "Editor, and Kate Maury, Moderator. Lest you forget that the whole point of this exercise is to have fun...". What! Criticism is supposed to be fun? Like hell it is! Anyway...

Criticism is a craft and it can be learned and taught. Criticism at its most pivotal, is all of you in your studio, in that lonely moment when you ask, "Is this a good idea?" "Is the question I am asking of my work a quality one?" That all depends on how well you have learned the craft, the craft of putting quality questions to yourself. The dialogue in the art schools, the quality of the psycho-drama, called the group critique, will shape what is made.

Martin Heidegger, the well-known theorist, once said that "questioning is not just something we do on the way to knowing. Questioning itself is in fact the highest form of knowing." So, some of my colleagues here are asking for answers, and I am saying, I am asking for questions.

Liking something takes you nowhere. To dislike it doesn't do anything. It has got to be qualified. Peter Schjeldahl who was the critic for "The Village Voice", was reviewing the "Banality Show" of Jeff Koons: "Jeff Koons' work makes me sick! And I find my response really interesting." You see where I am going with that? Spoken or written words are equally tricky. Sometimes they simply don't work. Dave Hickey in reviewing the show of Ken Price, concluded that what made his job difficult was "that words do not stick to his work". Sometimes the words go out there, and they fall off it. Our job is that if we're making a judgment, if the words stick, then it is probably meaningful. And 99% of the words won't stick. What goes on here is the currency of language. It is our collective responsibility.

Jim:

One of the things we want to definitively establish is the necessity of a dialogue. And this criticism will be formed slowly. It will be formed from many questions, from many responses.

Brian:

I think also it would help us not to talk about the absence of criticism.

Steve Reynolds, audience:

I don't like to be anecdotal, but I think that this is important. About 20 years ago Jim Romberg organized a very intelligent criticism panel in Sun Valley, Idaho. And a very pithy New York writer was a participant, by the name of Jeff Perrone. And what came out of that forum that I embraced as an artist, was the position that the artist doesn't have to wait for criticism to be critical. And in fact, being an artist is a form of being critical. It is a critical gesture if you are intelligent about the decisions you are making. Artists have the responsibility to be self critical, self analytical, be their own critic in some form, and not wait passively for the affirmation, the sanctification. It might not come. And so you're are waiting for Godot.

Lynette:

Do we start with self criticism? I think there is a tendency for self criticism to follow the pattern of public criticism. "What is my work going to look like in the gallery, what are people going to say about it? And that could color true self criticism."

Jim:

I think that is a very key point. That is the beginning: when you first picked up a piece of clay, aside from just getting it in your hand, and made that original mark, whether it was your thumb, your nose, your head, or whatever that began the process, and then continued to embellish. How that occurs, and what questions you ask at that point are essential. If you are only asking how this can have a price tag of over \$1000, or be accepted at the contest, then the very nature of what this act is about becomes distorted and perverted. You're right, it starts right there. And when I say criticism is a collective, not everyone in this room will put their pen to paper, but hopefully, your mind, your soul, your heart is pouring into that clay and you're seeking ways of expanding what that embraces. That's the heart of the whole thing and that's the reason, I say, this grows from up and we often look at it to come from down, from somebody to bequeath, or somebody to crown us. In fact the nature of the animal is in all of us.

Richard Jacobs, audience:

First of all, thank you so much for this effort and the initiation of this dialogue. It is appreciated. You are makers, I would imagine most of us here are makers. I am a collector and perhaps with a different perspective in terms of what I want. What I need and what I engage with in both the creator and the object, is the idea that this is a formative and not a summative journey in trying to find those standards and criteria that are workable. But they are always approximations and hopefully subject to further ratification, further modification. I have four standards that I just wrote down, that are the beginnings of a self-conscious

criteria. I think there are some conflicts in the marketplace with my criteria. The first thing is that what I expect from the maker/creator is a level of caring - a life-long devotion to the skill and refinement of their work. And I think I can find that evidence in the object. I look for it. The second thing is that this object, once I appropriated it, if I could afford it, that this object enhances, ennobles and enriches my life, and it enlarges those possibilities of an improved quality of life. Third criteria: that this object – and this is important, and I am not sure that the maker always thinks about this - it has to be fit for my domestic space....

Tony (interrupting):

Oh, give me a break! Get out of here! It has to fit your domestic space?! And that's a criteria?
(applause) Wrong, wrong, wrong. Right from the get-go.

Richard:

You may respond when I am finished. As a critic, you've just said "wrong, wrong, wrong", which I think perhaps demonstrates a discrepancy in your earlier comments.

Tony:

I'm a critic?

Richard:

I think there is a discrepancy. This object becomes a member of my family. This must be deserving of my personal care and attention. And the last thing is that this object becomes a placement in the context of my collection and is assimilated, integrated with the other objects. What I am trying to say here is that I often find that subjects created for the marketplace, are created for attention and sometimes become sensational or become vulgar, in order to make or get that kind of attention, and what I prefer...

Tony (interrupting):

Enough!

Richard:

...is that the integrity of the object, the integrity of the maker...

Tony (interrupting):

C'mon. We don't have time....I want to...I can't let that go... Context is everything. The primary context is what is made in the studio. You are imposing a secondary context as a collector. And nobody should give a damn about you, frankly!

(audience applause, all speaking at once, audience chaos)

Brian:

I think it's important not to think of standards and frameworks but rather about an inquiry and discourse, and based on context and intention. I think we put blinders on when we start to think that there's a framework, that there's a language that we can all get on board with. It's a little bit more difficult but I think that the

conversation grows exponentially if we have an unfettered discourse that doesn't have frameworks and standards.

Jim:

Let me just interject. Criticism is also best when it is lively and includes points of ignition and we just witnessed one of those. (audience laughter) The wheels start to turn. We need the time and space to debate as Tony and Richard were wont to do. Otherwise, it's Republicans and Democrats, folks and people turn and go away and try and mount the edifice of their own castle with the righteousness of opinion or scholarship. And then others mount theirs, and the battle goes on. And there is no learning and knowledge and expansion of what our consciousness can be.

Tony:

I often talk to my students about the concept of changing channels. The first channel is the clay channel. You decide to work with clay. The second one maybe, "I'm making figurative work". So you go on the figure channel. And then you have all this stuff left over. What is made in your studio is the residue. And that goes out and that's what we are talking about. And when it goes out and you enter the critic channel or the collector channel. The question is, how much do you care about the critic channel in the newspaper, the collector channel who is going to pay you thousands to get your work. But you can't really think about that stuff when you are making it. I think you are all here in this room because you want to find new channels in which to locate your work. And that's so hard .

Louise Klemperer, audience:

I used to do some writing about clay, Jim. I even wrote about you years ago. But, Tony, in your channels, you're talking about the collector. Frankly, if the collector bought one of my pieces, I'd be pleased that it appealed to him. But even though he doesn't have any standards that I think that I would work towards, I like that he is thinking about what he is getting rather than reading an article. I made a list of what I think might be useful criticism, some of which I used to try to do and some I didn't. I guess you start with what the person says they are doing. It's really important to listen to the artist, but then you need to go beyond that. What other meaning, context, as a critic, can you put it in...and not just art context, but bigger historical things, social things that are going on? And then where a critic can be useful is not just looking at the figure but looking at the ground. What is trying to be brought forward? What is there? And maybe it's not successful yet . You don't say, "oh, that's bad", but is there something in there that is trying to go somewhere? And you might be helpful in seeing that or it might be your own personal projection. And I think a big thing is not to accept assumptions. I'm thinking of the old worn chestnut, "Form follows function". Well, that lead to a very tight cannon of what was the proper function. In truth, there are a trillion different forms that could achieve the same function. We put that limit on ourselves and we need to think beyond that. And I think it's okay to give personal reactions, but the point is, that as a critic, my reaction isn't any better or shouldn't be taken any more seriously than anyone else's.

Tony:

Wrong! Absolutely wrong.

Jim:

I agree with Tony.

Tony:

Are we talking about democratic criticism? That's bogus!

Chris Staley, audience:

I think that there is a sort of paradigm that's setting the discourse. I have always been amused whenever I have had an exhibition and people say, "Well, how did it go?" And the subtext of that question is "How did it sell?" And it seems to me that the same sort of paradigm operates in the university quite often. And both Tony and Jim, and the other gentleman talked about the significance of questions, and really I think that quite often, the quality of the learning experience is the quality of questions being asked. What advice would you give to this audience, would you give to me, in terms of how one develops the degrees of probing, the provocative questions.

Tony:

You know, there are many ways to do it. Derrida may not be the hot subject he was. We can still look to...if we could compare Derrida to Dave Hickey for just one day, it would lead you to think about things. And then you have to go back into your studio and really read stuff you hate rather than read stuff you like, that conforms to your own position.

Jim:

Let me offer a more sensual approach to this questions. Some of us have a hard time wading through Derrida. I second what's been said about philosophy. The exercise of stretching your mind certainly is essential. But I think another place to go is to take the elements that are there. If we identify one of those elements then go out of the studio with that element in mind. If it is space, line or form, and find out, do your research, what are you drawn to that fits into that category? Is it a plane flying across the sky? Is it a dancer embracing space? Is it skid mark on the cement? But you start also to identify your own passions. You expand. You don't stop with one solution but you go out, and then go and see how other people have used, for instance, line. How did Motherwell, how did DeKoonig do that? So that your work, once you announce an intention, a line, a form... then you find you're not satisfied... yes, that line, that handle is just stuck on a cup and you can get your hand into it. But a handle embraces a cosmos, you know, it really does. Go out and take the time to find out, investigate first your own curiosities and then go and read how other people have dealt with it.

Brian:

I'd like to speak to Chris's questions, how we can promote question asking in education. I think a lot of it has to do with the objective. We are assuming that everybody has the same objective. My mom is taking a ceramics class in a community college and I think her objective in taking that class is not my objective in

making work. So I think that it is going to be fiercely individualized. It's about establishing an inquiry where everyone sees themselves as a mad scientist. Scientist is the key word. You approach things through a hypothesis. And instead of asking "Is this piece better than my last piece?" you ask a question from an hypothesis about the piece. You've formed an experiment. You gather data and then you check back in to see if you want to gather more. And I think that approaching it as a scientist instead of an object maker where you poop this thing out and then it exists, you think of everything as test tiles. Everything is part of your individuation journey as a maker, where it is less to do with pooping and more to do with asking questions. (applause)

Phil Cornelius, audience:

As an artist of the last 50 years, I have learned through the process of going to movies and things, "Don't read it! Go and see it". Make your own opinion, or talk to people coming out of movies. If they all loved it, it's probably a terrible movie. If everybody hated it, go see it. Everyone in this room is as different as their fingerprint is from everyone else. There is no one here who can speak for everybody and so all I can do is speak for myself. And all I would say is, "Don't read it. Make up your own mind".

Katie Frank, audience:

I am a college student. I am interested really in that process of being in the studio and questioning your own work, and knowing how to push it to that next stage, that critical analysis of self, to ask those questions, "When is this stupid? When is this working?..."

Tony, interrupting:

That's the craft. That's what we are talking about. One of my teachers was Frank Auerbach, a painter, who was the most self critical person I have ever met. Auerbach had a show at the Marlborough Gallery in London. And his show was up, the place was full and I was talking to him and I sensed he was looking over my shoulder and not at me. What he was looking at was one of his paintings. And there he was at the height of his fame, and he walked up to that wall, picked up his painting and walked out of the gallery. Self-critical 100% of the time, even at your own opening. I'll never know what that means. You know, I aspire to it, and I hope you do, but to get to that point of looking, looking, looking...it's so hard. That moment stayed with me, which is, "Okay, I am the critic. Oh, but am I that good a critic. No. I am falling short."

Brian:

I think at the root of what Tony's saying is honesty also...and shedding ego and not wondering how this piece is going to get you in to a show. Nobody's going to be as honest with you, as honest as you are going to be with yourself. It has to start with you being completely candid and not having the obstacles of ego or too much self awareness of things, you need to risk not being successful.

Member of the audience:

As a mad scientist, how do we avoid creating a Frankenstein? What I mean by that is, as Tony was saying, critics emerged in 1914. It's an art form in its own right. And any art form needs grist for the mill. The grist is art. And they have done a jujitsu, on the rest of the art world in terms of the curator and critic, entering into a

position of intermediation - a priestly function. Now it would be nice to enter this world that Brian has mentioned, in which we don't have to have courage in order to speak critically, but I have never seen the case where it doesn't take courage to confront.

Brian:

The Frankenstein's been different in ceramics. That's all. But I think we need to not be focused on this Frankenstein and just let it rip. We need to stop having frameworks and standards and over-thinking the way we are going to talk, and just talk honestly. And I think we can all sign a pact and say we are all going to have courage, but we have to figure out a way to set up a culture, where we don't need courage.

Jim:

I think this is an essential question. At some point the work leaves the studio. You've hovered over it and whatever...where does it go?...and I think that is what the question is dealing with... and once that happens and you are putting that work forth, to also be as acutely aware as you can be as to what arenas are you pushing that into. If you put it into a Saturday market where people stream by, it is going to be one thing. If you put it in a group of colleagues, another... but I think if you try to seek and find those that maybe you are most fearful of and say, "Okay, these are the people I want to look at it". Also finding people totally out of the field...some of the best comments on my work have been from people who almost wandered into my studio, looking for a restaurant or something, and a"Oh, that's interesting..." and the dialogue started. I think that's the responsibility that we have... to say that I am ready to go up against the toughest that I can, a kind of interior Olympics in some way, and seek that out. And if someone says, "That's very nice, and I love the blues and reds, and greens and it goes with my sofa", then you know very quickly that's not the arena, unless you are looking for money or whatever. But that is a passage in a sense that work needs to go through.

Member of the audience:

I think critical thinking has to do with breaking things down and understanding their components. And so for my students, I usually break it down into eleven components beginning with a personal sensibility, and personal history and moving on to form, talk about techniques, materials, processes, historical connections, talk about value. And there are eight different kinds of value that I can think of. There's craft value, contemplative value, historical, and academic value. There's expressive value, social value, political value, all different kinds of value. Also we talk about ethics, about how this whole thing integrates with the rest of your life. So to me it is a system, it's a floating system - an expanding system. There are parameters there that do mean something but yet they do kind of move around a little bit. People approach them in different ways, so to me the trick is to see why people are approaching them and in what ways and to try to understand where you fit into that system.

Tony:

There's a guy called Kemmelman who wrote a book called "The Making of the American Art Student". It is primarily directed at the graduate student. How criticism intersects with how we train...train? (I hate that word)...educate maybe...(a little better)...anyway, how we deal with people in the educational process and

how critical it is to forming the discourse we are talking about. And Kemmelman in his book, points directly to how we have all been conned into thinking the way we think. And it's all to do with when art entered the university, and therefore had to conform to things like grades, requirements, credits, all that crap that's got nothing to do with making art. And you know it's a serious problem. I think all of you in this room are having to deal with it. You said it (to Brian), "I have to get tenure". So how does that affect his criticism about his students? Is it to do with encouragement in order to get tenure? You know, this is very tricky territory which we have to deal with. Fortunately I don't. So I can talk about it. A lot of people can't.

Jim:

I think the question, observation, is good. Sometimes we imagine these steps, these ladders that we could climb. But ultimately in my mind, if criticism exhausts the content of the work...then the work is a failure. And the other aspect of all of this is that we need to keep in mind that we're visual artists. We make objects that hopefully go beyond description, beyond almost comprehension. And in the end, a work is successful, I think, when it carries you to places that you can't describe, that puts so much together that words won't fit...and I think that needs to be part of this dialogue. It's not simply assembling a tinker toy of significant pieces but at some point, having experienced all of that, you are carried beyond your wildest imagination and belief.

Brian:

I think a part of this also is a willingness to be uncomfortable.

David Jones, audience:

I am a potter and a writer from England. And when I decided to come to NCECA I thought I'd better do a little bit of research. So I read the poet laureate, Bill Stafford. He said, "Deciding to be objective is a subjective decision." And I think that starts to sum up some of the issues that deal with criticism. One of the things we want to do is shed light on an issue. One of the ways of shedding the light is by actually making a definition of what criticism is. I think there is an issue here of conflicting meanings of the word. In one meaning we define criticism as evaluation, and the other meaning as interpretation. So what we are looking for are two different things. One is to do with how good something is and the other is to do with what it means. We're looking for understanding, and I do want to take issue with Brian Gillis' idea that there should be no frameworks.

Brian:

I didn't say that. I said that it needs to deal with the objective. So for instance the objective of my mother might be evaluation and dealing with value and composition and things like that. Where with me, the objective is different. So I think that the objective itself becomes a framework of sorts.

Dave:

I think there has been so much wooly thinking, so much wooly talking coming from the stage at the moment. What we haven't had is an example of what we regard as good criticism. I think it is remiss not to have an example.

Tony interrupting:

That's so bogus.

Brian interrupting:

This is good criticism. People are challenging each other. It's possible that we could be friends and disagree so that we can bring up things that other people miss. Does there have to be answers?

Tony:

Sorry we don't have pictures for you my friend. We don't need them.

Dave:

But you need an example of good criticism. All we've done is talk around an issue here.

Tony:

Your example would not be my example.

Dave:

I think there has been an extreme level of wooliness about...

Tony interrupting:

Can you define...did you say wooliness?

Dave:

I think there is a level of indecision.

Tony:

What the hell is wooliness?

Dave:

Well, I think *you* might find it on a sheep...

Jim:

I think one of the mistakes at this point is to announce a framework, to hold up the twelve steps of an effective criticism. I think there have been enough hints given. I think one of the difficulties has been just that. We are looking for a larger effort, a larger collective to come forth and feed this process in ways that can't be contained by a twelve step situation. At this point in our development, the idea is that many questions are going to be asked. And the response to those will then derive what you are looking for. But imagine: "I can give you the perfect critique criteria. I've got the Jim Romberg version! it's works every time. I sell it for \$5.95! You know, publish in your magazine and I'll be famous!" That's not what we are looking

for. We are looking for something that gets beyond that and invites a level of profundity that has yet to appear...it appears in some of the works... but not, I think, in the writing.

Brian:

I think that what is happening in this room where people are challenging each other and posing tough questions is going to lead to understanding. It is safe to say that when you reach a point when you think you know things, you end up inhibiting your learning. We can have a discourse based on understanding and not come up with conclusive things... to label things, and be able to promote something where it is an organic conversation that is perpetually changing.

Jim:

I think valuable criticism is slow. It takes time. To go back and look at that piece again and again. Opinion is very fast: "I like it." "I don't like it." "It's good", or "It's bad." We are talking about developing a slower dialogue that has more profundity, more sources than merely opinion as educated as they sometimes may be.

Member of the audience:

I am from two sides of the coin. I have been a studio potter for 40 years and I unfortunately also own a gallery. The self discovery and criticisms arrive from when we were beginning, when we were eclectic, when we were a student. That whole trip that we take is why everybody is sitting here. That's the voyage. That's the joy, the rush, the fun of it all. That's why it is very difficult for us as producers of things to sit around and try to criticize, to create criticisms - that's for somebody else. And on the other point, and I think this is a really important point, as I said, I unfortunately now own a gallery and it's a fairly difficult position to be in. But the one thing that I note, is that the moment I wrap that piece up in bubble wrap or whatever, the moment it goes out that door, the value of that piece is zero. That's it.

Tony:

Amen.

Mary Barringer:

I am a studio potter that just became an editor. What I am struck by is how much we want to keep this in the studio and in our own process of self criticism. And yet almost all of us make objects that go out into the world. They're going to be separate from us and we seem to not want to allow that to happen and to embrace the fact that things are going to have meanings that we don't control. They're going to be involved in conversations that we won't be present at to guide and structure...and our intention, you know, our artist statements, our questions, our processes which are so important to us. In the studio, if the work doesn't carry that, or even if the work does carry it, the context that it enters is going to be different. And the role of criticism is to look at the object. The role of criticism as opposed to self criticism, I think, is to look at the object in the world and talk about what it means out there. We have to let that happen or else why make things that are separate from us? Why not just write in our journals and bury them?

Tony interrupting:

I can't let that go without talking about Walter Benjamin's notion of the "aura". And the thing that critics cannot communicate to us is a work's aura. I went to a show of Richard Serra's "Towards' Ellipses", and these enormous steel structures were so wonderful. They so resonated with my body that, that night I called my wife and said, "I have seen the most incredible sculptures I have ever seen". And she said, "What did they look like?" And I was speechless. "I don't know. You know, I don't know." Richard Serra is arguably one of the most important artists in America today, and critics have tried to attach language to it, not very successfully. There is a separation between language and experience.

Lynette:

To Mary Barringer's point. Art is a two-way street. It's the maker and the viewer. Otherwise, make it and stick it in your closet. So the criticism we have been talking about has been self criticism, contextual criticism. How does that get out? How does it move into the marketplace?... to establish a platform for the work to be appreciated? I think there is a link that is missing here. The art community doesn't communicate these values to the market place. So we have no guidance. We have no intellect with which to value good art. It sits inside the art community, it doesn't get out.

Jim:

I think if we take some of the discussion we've had about self criticism, certainly a dimension of that is the public criticism. Those people who are writing, those people who are editing magazine articles, need to approach their writing with the same demands...to ask, "What is the intention?" "Where is this going? What framework am I setting up?" I think that one of the difficulties now, is that the writing, certainly in ceramics, gets involved with description, process and precedent. "This work is like" da, da, da... And we need a criticism that deals with the content and that the writer takes seriously, as seriously as possible what they are crafting which are words and opinions and information. And be aware that it's not simply a laudatory pronouncement about what it engages with, without giving some explanation or interpretation of what the potential significance of this is. So writers need to work as hard also. And I don't think that is happening.

Tony:

In "Ceramics Monthly" and "Art and Perception", all the writing in there is all stuff people like. I occasionally read the letters that people write to those magazines. And they say, "We want more stuff about", da, da, da...in other words, the magazines don't want to go to the trouble to handle difficult issues. That is a big problem.

Brian interrupting:

There are not a lot of staff writers for most of the magazines that we read so they rely on people writing stuff for each other. I think this business of having your friends write stuff about you is a bad thing. But I think we're not speaking directly to the question. We are one of the only disciplines in academe that does not have blind peer review. In a lot of cases we engage in this masturbatory artists-look-at-art. And the question is how we can make this accessible to people outside of the art world. It seems that the question

behind that is how can we incite a will for people to be open to that accessibility. Is it the case that people just aren't that interested outside of the art world?

Lynette:

I don't think it's that they are not interested. I think it is because they don't have a platform. You haven't given them the material with which to evaluate the work.

Brian:

So how can we give them the will to want to evaluate the work?

Lynette:

Well, I think that speaks to what has to go on here today and going forward. It's a big subject. It concerns not just the art, academics and the maker - it also concerns galleries, the collector and the public who has the potential of becoming a collector at any level. Everyone who engages with art is effected by this subject. And it's not a matter of creating a simple framework in this room and then making up a dictum for universal criticism. This is an ongoing dialogue that needs help and your participation.

Jim:

This is valuable only as it goes forth from this room. What do we do next? That's the question. So that's another dimension of this. We have talked about creating a critical review that is published and that deals only with critical writing. We want to get some opinions about that and other people involved. Magazines will present a critical dialogue in one issue and the next issue is about something totally different. We need continuity. I challenge all NCECA members to continue this dialogue in this form also. Where we go from here is critical, so to speak.

(big applause)

End