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Critical Theory 1: Reflections on Ideas and Work

The Critical Theory 1 seminar, brought together with the readings and classroom discussion, was a great re-introduction to the art history narrative, critical theory and the study of visual culture. The readings gave a different interpretation of the typical story of western modernism and postmodernism. The texts covered topics of social and philosophical aspects in art. While the class reviewed some of the basic concepts of classifying artwork, it also had stimulating discourse over the issues of the male gaze, feminism and homosexuality in art.

While I have always been an avid reader of books regarding art, art history, and theories of art, I found that the readings presented in class deepened my understanding and challenged my concepts of art and art history. Specifically, I found that while some of the readings were reminiscent in their themes to other books I have read, they approached the topics in more specific and concrete ways. For example, the "*Believing is Seeing*" reading by Mary Anne Staniszewski reminded me of John Berger's Ways of seeing (1972). Both question what constitutes art and use images rather than text to explain their points, but Staniszewski presents more user-friendly explanations of her theories that help the reader better access the information.

Another example of this includes the essay we read by Leo Steinberg, entitled “Contemporary Art and the Plight of Its Public,” which is similar to Wassily Kandinsky’s book, On the Spiritual in Art (1994). Both readings discuss the idea that those who are the standard are the first to be offended by change or new ideas in the art world. However, while Kandinsky’s book focuses on more philosophical concepts, Steinberg presented more concrete examples from real-life events in the art world.

Along with readings that deepened my understanding of already familiar concepts, others presented new ideas that I had not often considered or been cognizant of in my day-to-day practice. One example of this that stood out was Judy Chicago’s essay, “The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage,” which takes ownership back of traditional gender roles and uses these roles in her artwork to honor female strength and progress. Another example includes Carol Duncan’s essay, “Virility and Domination in Early 20th Century Vanguard Painting,” which highlighted the fact that while male artists used the female form to diminish women’s individuality and assert their masculinity and power, female artists began to take back the nude figure drawing to give presence and humanization to women. Both of these readings, along with many others for the class, helped me to recognize the multiple barriers that many artists face, as well as the sometimes invisible effects art can have on its viewers and the layers in which art can be interpreted.

Overall, while I did find that some of the readings, such as Frederic Jameson’s “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” were a bit wordy and inaccessible, I do feel

that most of the content of the course helped me not only deepen my previous knowledge base, but open me up to a number of new concepts and ideas. Most importantly, however, I feel that the class helped me gain awareness of my own privilege in the art world, simply due to the fact that I had not had to actively consider many of the topics previously, and have had a wealth of examples of accepted and honored artists throughout history who are of the same gender and racial background to me. Moving forward, while I am not completely sure of the exact ways in which this information will impact my physical work, I do know that it will make me think in depth about what my work is bringing to the table and how I can contribute to a more inclusive and progressive art world.