

Interview Terry Barrett – No Landscapes

As artist in residence, a programme of the Art Practice and Development research group of the Amsterdam School of the Arts, Terry Barrett worked with students and teachers from the Academie voor Beeldende Vorming and the Gerrit Rietveld Academie.

In 1997 Terry Barrett, Professor of Art Education at Ohio State University, enjoyed a one-year sabbatical in the Netherlands, where he taught art classes at the Art Academy in Tilburg. During this period he explored different cities and admired historical sites and landscapes, including the famous Dutch scenes with flowers and cows. Terry Barrett feels really at home in the Netherlands, where people tend to be as direct as he regards himself: "It is easy to work with Dutch people, they get things done and everything is well organised here. I feel comfortable with that."

Eleven years later, he returned to the Netherlands for the Museum Conference in Groningen, where he met Robert Smit, director of the Academie voor Beeldende Vorming, and Marijke Hoogenboom, professor of the research group. This was when the project No Landscapes took on its form. For Terry Barrett, it is a once in a lifetime experience to be able to transfer his extensive experience in teaching art critique to students and teachers of the Amsterdam School of the Arts.

In his classes, Terry Barrett focuses on art critique and its importance rather than teaching art techniques. He offers insight and coaches students on how to lead group discussions. "Students should allow themselves to grow into teaching and find their own style". Therefore he advises them to start with small groups, preferably formed by people they know, and work under the best circumstances. In that way, they will gradually learn to feel comfortable with larger audiences too. "Students should not be afraid of silences during lectures," he mentions, "the audience should be given time to reflect. Teachers should make more time to reflect on art. Usually they are not comfortable with talking about art and especially modern art; they focus on making and improving art."

Terry Barrett believes art is for everyone, although there is always a tension between the artist, the viewer and different interpretations: "When an art piece is discussed, it is best to know the least possible beforehand. Also the art work should always be respected. In my work with children with learning disabilities, elderly people and cancer patients, alongside a specialised nurse, I received beautiful and unexpected art interpretations. That's why I am very enthusiastic about No Landscapes. Among others, we will be working with children with learning disabilities and autism from the Altra College alongside the help of Aaltje van Zweden-van Buuren, an expert in art teaching in this field. I don't use strict art critique methods, different methods apply to different artists, or different kinds of art, the real purpose is to generate reflection and discussion. Mostly the work tells you how to approach it and what questions to ask. Simply asking questions helps people to describe what they see, and even relate to what is important in their own lives. This project is a great opportunity for me to share my experience and to research how art is perceived by different groups. Of course some interpretations are better than others because they make more sense or are based on proof."

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Terry Barrett is inspired by art that gives him insight into his views on life and the world; he enjoys figuring out an art puzzle and wants to open up the art to all audiences. He is inspired by artists such as William Wegman and Barbara Kruger; he is open to a broad range of art and is eager to discover new things. “If you say art speaks for itself there wouldn’t be a need for art teachers and tour guides in museums or art galleries. There is so much good art around and it should get more attention. Often artists feel safe to talk about techniques but don’t like to talk about the meaning of their results. Nevertheless they are intrigued by the comments on their work. Sometimes even unconscious meanings of their work come to the surface in a group discussion, and in the end the attention of the audience always feels as a compliment to the artist.”

Terry Barrett is Professor of Art Education at Ohio State University, serves as a critic-in-education for the Ohio Arts Council, engaging school and community groups in discussions of contemporary art, and is a recipient of a Distinguished Teaching Award for his courses in criticism. He is author of Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Images (Mayfield), Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary (Mayfield) and Talking about Student Art (Davis). He is also a former senior editor of the research journal Studies in Art Education and an anthology, Lessons for Teaching Art Criticism, and his chapters and articles on teaching criticism are published in anthologies and journals. He has been visiting scholar at the Getty Educational Institute for the Arts (Los Angeles), the Center for Creative Photography (Tucson), Colorado State University, the University of Georgia, and Ball State University.