

**The Ladder and the Mattresses:
Ways to Think and Talk About Art in the Classroom**

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Abstract

Using exercises based on the image of stacked mattresses from the tale of *The Princess and the Pea*, combined with Ecker and Kaelin's Aesthetic Inquiry ladder model, will help art educators schematize their thinking and talking about art in the classroom. Whether by selecting phenomenology or another philosophical method for navigating through the levels of aesthetic discourse: criticism, meta-criticism, theory, or meta-theory, this paper illustrates how an artist educator always has the option of utilizing studio practice at each of those spatial positions. This is how new generations of thoughtful art objects and events are born, and how the cycle of aesthetic discourse itself is renewed.

Author's Note:

I dedicate this essay to Professor David W. Ecker, with my deepest gratitude and appreciation for his inspired teaching and mentorship. His classic Levels of Discourse in Aesthetic Inquiry ladder model, described here, has profoundly influenced my teaching and research throughout my professional teaching career, from my doctoral research at NYU in the 1990's, to my current projects with new learning platforms in virtual worlds. For Dr. Ecker's many students, he and his ladder are legendary, reaching up into the ether of possibility, and knowing no bounds.

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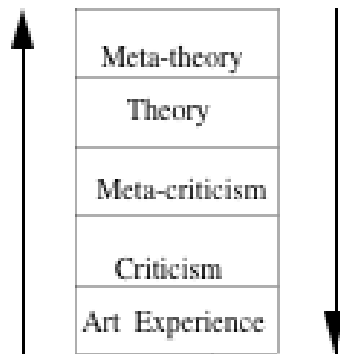
The Princess and the Pea

Do you remember the tale of the *Princess and the Pea* by Hans Christian Andersen? In the story, the little princess couldn't sleep a wink because she felt the dried hard pea buried under a huge stack of mattresses! That little pea is very much like the art object or event that underlies all aesthetic discourse. Instead of a pea, imagine a painting, or an installation, or a performance as that insistent kernel underlying layers of criticism and theory.

The Ladder

Eugene Kaelin and David Ecker saved us from having to dial the mattress store when we want to schematize our thinking and talking about art. In their essay, *The Limits of Aesthetic Inquiry*, they gave us a ladder instead. In their simple model, the art object or event is at the bottom of the ladder. On the next rung up is criticism, above that is meta-criticism, then theory, and on the top is meta-theory. With the art object or event as the basis, each successive level of aesthetic discourse proceeds from the one beneath it. The

nice thing about this model is that it works as well upside down, too. With meta-theory as the base, the levels of discourse refer ultimately back to the art object/event (Ecker & Kaelin, 1972).



**Figure 1. Ecker & Kaelin's
Levels of Discourse in Aesthetic Inquiry**

Let's begin with the art object/event as the basis of our inquiry and select one of three options: engaging in a verbal critique, writing text, or creating another art object, as a response. But, for whatever medium we choose for our critique, we need a method.

Using Phenomenology as our Critical Method

Here are four drawings by my high school students from a project titled: *Beyond the Teacup*. (See Appendix) As art objects, they are positioned at the base of Ecker and Kaelin's ladder. We begin at step 2 on ladder, which is criticism. I suggest that we begin with writing a short text using phenomenology as our method. A school of philosophy led by Edmund Husserl, phenomenology can be used as a method of describing the experience you are having, without explaining it or making hypotheses. In Husserlian phenomenology it is not necessary to interpret the art object/event, nor draw conclusions about it (Husserl, 1962). Let us begin now by having an art experience in Time 1, writing about it critically in Time 2, and in Time 3 reducing our writing to its essential features as meta-criticism.

Procedure

Time 1 Art Experience

Select a student drawing and attend carefully to it, trying to block out all outside stimuli. In his *Aesthetics for Arts Educators*, Kaelin calls this performing an *epoché* or ‘bracketing out’ the outside world and limiting our attention to the art object/event as it appears to us (Kaelin, 1989).

Time 2 Criticism

For several minutes write descriptive text about your experience.

Time 3 Meta-Criticism

Now perform Husserl’s *Phenomenological Reduction*: Reduce your writing to the essentials. Delete details that are not essential features of the art experience.

The Studio Practice Option

Both the ladder and that iconic pea under the mattresses give us a good way to schematize aesthetic discourse. Using phenomenology as a method to write descriptive text is one way among many others to engage in critical discourse about an art object or experience. What I’d like to suggest here, too, is that it is also possible to engage in studio practice in response to an art experience. For example, my doctoral research, *A World Community of Old Trees*, a continuing ecology art project on the Web, is a meta-critique in process of my critique of earlier ecology projects on the Internet (Julian, 1998). Embedded in it are paintings, drawings, photographs and multimedia as well as text.

How then can criticism be an actual art piece? Can meta-criticism be made of paint or steel as well as words? Why can’t those rungs on the ladder be an art piece all its own? Let’s do the following exercise to see how it works.

Drawing as Meta-Criticism

The meta-critique of the critique of the source art object can be in the form of more art. This happened quite nicely in my Web research in the *Student Projects* section where one of my students invited the world to respond to his page in the Web project by manipulating his imagery and adding it to his pages (Julian, 1997).

We can do this now by actually drawing our meta-critique with pencil on paper. This means that we may make our own teacup drawing as meta-criticism of the student teacup drawing we experienced and critiqued with text.

Procedure

Please produce a drawing as meta-critique of your selected *Beyond the Teacup* student drawing in the next 10 minutes.

In the time that remains in the class, volunteers may read their critiques and show their meta-critique drawings. Students may also place both exercises on their desks and the class may walk around and view the work.

Toward Theory Building

A natural response to this activity might be the beginning of theory building, Step 4 on the ladder, or the third mattress up. Students might view the text and drawing samples as data and make hypotheses based on their observations. Criticism of any fledgling theory about our *Beyond the Teacup* universe of aesthetic discourse would fit at the top of the ladder at Step 5 Meta-theory.

I hope that images of the ladder and the mattresses, and these exercises will help art educators schematize their thinking and talking about art. Whether by selecting phenomenology or any other philosophical method for navigating through the levels of aesthetic discourse: criticism, meta-criticism, theory, or meta-theory, I believe that an artist educator always has the option of utilizing studio practice at each of those positions. This is how new generations of thoughtful art objects and events are born and how the cycle of aesthetic discourse itself is renewed.

References

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Appendix

Beyond the Teacup, High School Student Drawings

