How do we see, think about, and evaluate works of art?

A practical manual for participation in the fundamental studio practice of the critique, The Critique Handbook is an invaluable resource for examining the uses and misuses of artistic analysis. Presenting hundreds of examples drawn from every genre of artmaking, noted artists Kendall Buster and Paula Crawford address the complexity of what actually occurs in critiques. Their book fills a serious gap in the art studio, as they scrutinize a practice that has been largely unquestioned and provide models for more informed and effective ways of conducting and taking part in critiques. Their observations, which can be applied to beginning through advanced studio courses, bring to light the underlying social and power dynamics of critiques and offer illuminating advice on how to make critiques more cogent and evenhanded. They also offer advice for participants on how to prepare for critiques and benefit more fully from them.

Thoughtful and witty, this book is written in a style that is elegant and eminently readable. The Critique Handbook promises to become an indispensable and timeless text on this subject, doing for the art studio what The Elements of Style has done for the writer's workshop.

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS A CRITIQUE?

The words critic, criticism, critical, criterion, and critique all come down to us from a family of words in Greek that refer to judging, distinguishing, and selecting. While art professors often see the critique purely as a place for constructive evaluation, to many art students, the critique is synonymous with judgment day. True to its Greek origins, the critique is seen as the place of reckoning, where the classroom authority blesses or disparages an object in which the student has become personally invested. The professor’s job is to give useful criticism, to deconstruct the object and evaluate its parts with an eye to offering the student practical solutions to perceived deficiencies. The student’s role is to distance himself enough from the work so that he can constructively participate in its demise. This dichotomy of the evaluative and the judgmental, already inherent in the critique’s linguistic history, sets up the predetermined conflict that is played out in the formal art school critique.

This ritual, which occurs in the artificial setting of a classroom art studio, among students and art faculty, often becomes an end in itself, a goal toward which each student’s production is aimed. But the critique is not a singular goal or deadline. Rather, it is one of many, part of a series of cadences that partition the semester into sections of creative productivity. Thus, the critique is both a deadline and a marker of a perpetual beginning, a freeze-frame moment in the context of a continuous studio practice. In a sense, this is carried beyond art school into professional practice when the critique is replaced by the curator’s studio visit (another ritual of judgment and selection), the subsequent exhibition, and finally the press review.

The idea that the critique is really a small marker in the larger continuity of an artist’s practice allows both student and teacher to think of it as a useful tracking device rather than as a courtroom drama. It becomes a kind of cross-sectional look at an ongoing activity rather than a place where items are ranked. This favors process over product, the means over the end, and arguably a belief in a necessary fluidity between the artist, the creative act, and the possibilities of a particular final product.
Nevertheless, as useful as it is to frame it as such, the critique has traditionally operated as a proceeding, where work (and perhaps student) is judged within the often subjective parameters derived from a professor's own art school experiences, aesthetic principles, and even taste. This becomes easy to see, in intermediate and advanced studio classes, when several professors (or other art professionals) focus on a single work and begin to offer vastly different assessments. While this can be confusing to students, it at least sends the healthy message that the interpretation of art is subjective, and that often winners and losers alike don’t necessarily deserve either the censure or the praise they receive. Indeed, the criteria themselves are fluid and contextualized within an historical and current network of conversations about art that occur between the works themselves and the critical voices that surround them.

Kendall Buster and Paula Crawford
Chapter Five

CRITIQUE DYNAMICS

GENERAL CRITIQUE DYNAMICS

Who is in the room, what are we looking at, how are we looking at it?
A critique happens when a group of people convenes in an art studio or critique room to discuss and evaluate works of art. Depending on the class level, the school’s resources, and the area of study, the group is comprised of a combination of students, one or several instructors, and sometimes other invited participants, usually thought of as experts. That’s the surface view of things. But many unseen variables come into play as a critique unfolds. More often than not in beginning classes your critique will be conducted by a single instructor, and the work that’s put up will be a group of individual responses to a common assignment. But in intermediate and advanced-level art courses, and certainly on the graduate level, the faculty/student ratio is inverted so that it is not uncommon to have five or more faculty members conducting a series of fairly lengthy critiques for single students, either in isolation or among peers.

Critique as Theater
A critique can be seen as theater and much about it resembles performance. Instructors and students can take on guises in critique that seem at odds with their everyday personalities. Verbal exchanges can be conversational, argumentative, tangential, or disconnected. Sometimes comments are delivered like rhetorical declarations, other times mumbled and drifting. Body language is in play. Sometimes your fellow students will listen intently and other times look aimlessly around the room. When a student is being critiqued some will actively
engage in eye contact while others will tend to slump and duck in the corner. Pay attention to your own body language and that of your fellow students. Are you projecting confidence or defensive bravado? Are you naturally less talkative than other students or are you acting deliberately disengaged?

The critique is also a kind of game, not because it lacks seriousness but because it operates with a set of mutually agreed upon rules of engagement and criteria. These vary according to your instructor’s views about art and her approach to structuring the critique, the dynamics of the critique group, the level of the class, and the purpose of the assigned project (if any). The critique also takes place within the larger context of contemporary artistic practice, itself a pluralistic patchwork of often competing discourses. When the critique format and its criteria reflect a particular approach to assessing art, as is often the case, then unspoken assumptions about what constitutes legitimate art practice come into play.

The Art Object Is Not Absolute
When an artwork is presented for critique, a variety of variables inform the way it’s perceived. There is the work that is physically in front of us and our individual interpretations of it. We can see it in relation to other works the artist has done, and ask if the work shows any evidence of progress, or even if the work offers a solution to problems raised at the last critique. It will inevitably be compared to the other works in the room and then in relation to other works in the surrounding art world and in art history.

The Language of Critique
An artwork is commonly described in critique as working or not working. Aside from the fact that we use the verb to describe the noun, working evokes odd images of something efficient, industrious, and effective, in contrast to something lazy, ineffectual, or uncooperative. Should we imagine it as working on us? Or is it working harmoniously with other elements in an aesthetic structure? We instinctively feel that we all know what we mean when we say, “that works,” or “that doesn’t work,” and we feel comfortable using such language without really thinking about what we mean.

Critiques are often full of militaristic language: defend your work, struggle with the painting, attack the canvas, execute the piece, wrestle with it, master the medium. Instructors have even been known to instruct students to think of the painting as an opponent. Are these terms too loaded? Do they necessarily refer to a masculine viewpoint as some critics claim, or do they appropriately reflect the difficult nature of giving substance to an idea?

An instructor who thinks of a painting as the result of an authentic creative act might use language that points to the act, such as, “You didn’t know what you were doing in that area,” or “you weren’t really painting here,” or “this work lacks commitment; you’re only painting effects; this is false; I don’t buy it.”

Listen to the language in critique. Try to get a sense not only of what is being said but also of the hidden assumptions that lie beneath. No matter what the instructor’s or visiting expert’s own agenda (everyone has one), more often than not, she or he is pointing to something in your work that needs attention. Indeed good criticism comes in many guises.

Artist’s Intentions
To guess an artist’s intentions by looking at a work has never been a fair venue for critics or historians. It is too speculative, too subjective. Much contemporary art, nevertheless, is exhibited with supporting information in the form of artist statements and interviews. Add to that works that point directly to the artist, by means of biographical texts that are integral to the work, and the question of intentionality becomes unavoidable. In the art school setting, where the goal is to help students to realize their visions, a discussion of your intentions has a place, even if it can be both confusing and revealing. What you claim the work is about and what the critique participants see can be miles apart. However, clarity of intention can lay some groundwork for a discussion bent on helping you realize these intentions in the artwork. The formal means by which intentions are articulated become a part of the critique dynamic.

If your critique begins with you introducing the ideas that led you to make a work, intention overtly sets the tone for the discussion. If you have a relatively clear idea of what you are trying to do and can articulate that, the group can quickly determine if the work matches up. If it doesn’t, discussion can turn on this disconnect, or the merit of the intentions themselves, or how to realize them better. But does it really matter whether or not the work and what you think you’re doing have anything in common? Indeed, many artists (even famous ones) don’t understand
their own motives and make work that belies their intentions in complex and interesting ways.

Instructors may refuse to hear about your intentions, responding to long introductory explanations with comments, such as “Your ideas are getting in the way.” “The work speaks for itself.” “You’re all caught up in the ideas and not in the work.” “I don’t care about what you think you’re doing, you don’t know what you’re doing,” and so on.

Your instructor may ask you about your intentions, but even if you are particularly articulate, can we ever really know what they are? What we think we are doing in a work and how it’s received publicly can be worlds apart. Intentions, if they do come up, will often be critiqued along with the work, and then taken with a grain of salt.

**Cliché and Originality**

When someone’s work in critique is labeled clichéd, or references are made to another artist’s work, the complex subject of originality will arise. This can be confusing. We praise originality, along with freshness and inventiveness, and yet we insist that to achieve these things one must be well versed in contemporary art and art history. Is this not contradictory? To avoid cliché, isn’t it best to isolate yourself from all that influence? Wouldn’t this improve your chances of creating something truly original? Doesn’t the instructor’s insistence that you look at so-and-so’s work undermine your quest for originality? Are you not in danger of becoming derivative?

In fact, research into contemporary and historical art has the opposite effect. For in our daily lives, we are all surrounded by images and examples of art, whether we study it or not. Hence, we are continually being influenced not by creative interesting solutions, but by provincial, second-tier, watered-down examples of art. The result is that we are influenced, not to produce highly original inventive work, but rather to make work that resembles what we think art should look like, indeed, what we are used to seeing.

One way to understand this is to consider the music world. Imagine attempting to engage with an alternative music scene having only listened to your grandparent’s country collection. This could be interesting in an oddball conceptual way, but your exchange will be a lot richer if you have studied and are familiar with lots of music, both mainstream and obscure.

This is not to say that art about art is necessarily desirable. It’s simply that knowledge of your field enables you to be part of the larger conversation, to see your work as it will be perceived publicly. Thus, knowledge of the world and culture can only enrich you, whether literature, scientific study, personal experiences, or travel. Knowledge of historical and contemporary practice places you in a larger stimulating conversation. It can even make you bolder and more inventive. Worry less about being original and more about being informed. You will end up being less clichéd!

**When the Format of the Critique Is at Odds with the Format of Your Work**

Can a critique actually change or interfere with your work? For example, how do we critique a performance of uncertain duration? Or an off-site sculpture meant to be accidentally encountered? Is it better for you to construct an installation with imperfect lighting or with limited assembly time in order to get some discussion going? Or does it make sense to limit your efforts to the particulars of the critique space? A critique can at times become an odd parallel universe that exists to the side of your work.

For this reason, more and more documentation is ending up in the critique room. As discussed in the chapter “The Work in the World,” off-site installations, private performances, or guerrilla actions, located at distances inconvenient for group critique, may need to be presented as documentary.

Whether you choose video, photographs, written texts, or artifacts, the format itself becomes a legitimate subject for the critique. For example, what size are your documentary photographs? How is the video edited and presented? Are artifacts from an off-site performance pinned to the wall or arranged in books? Is a chronology created? Do you attempt a recreation of the site?

Documentation and presentation act as records of an art event and become themselves the place of meaning. Where does the art occur? Is the video of a performance running on a gallery monitor the art? Or has the art already occurred in another time and place? Like old black-and-white photos of early performance art, what is exhibited in a gallery becomes the art, in that it is what we experience, in place of the event itself.
SURVIVING THE CRITIQUE

Leave Your Ego at the Door

The first step to surviving the critique is to leave your ego at the door. All critiques test your ability to occupy the paradoxical position of being, at once, committed to your work and detached in critique. Remember that you are not your work. Try to become an impartial viewer, standing *beside* rather than *against* the other members of the critique. Consider the criticism thoughtfully, as if the work in question was done by someone else.

Staying objective in the face of feedback from a single authority can be especially challenging, since the authority’s point of view may seem subjective, self-serving, or unfair. Nonetheless, you are still likely to receive a great deal of useful information. You want to remain open-minded while at the same time hold onto your own sense of vision and purpose. You may be tempted to adjust your own work to what you think the instructor favors. This is ultimately unconstructive. Make sure that you are taking the information from the critique in an *active*, not a *reactive*, way.

Active and Reactive Listening

What do we mean by this? In a reactive response you *react* to criticism by either dismissing everything that has been said or by trying to please the instructor by following suggestions to the letter in spite of your better instincts. An active response, and a better way to deal with criticism, is to listen carefully, take notes, and isolate issues that have been raised. For even if you reject an offered solution, it may be pointing out a legitimate problem. The biggest danger in any critique, but especially in critique situations where there is a single authoritative instructor, is the tendency to see all criticism, positive or negative, as approval and disapproval, and to see comments as prescriptive orders. If you are criticized for something in your work, try and articulate *for yourself* what alternatives are open to you.

One way to approach a critique *actively* is to respectfully, but firmly, engage with questions. “Could you explain to me further why you think that? I don’t agree that this was a poor choice of color, but I am open to reconsidering.” “Explain to me a bit more about why you object.” Even if the final result is still disagreement you have engaged in a nondefensive manner, demonstrated that you are listening, and asked for some clarification.

This can be helpful also in critiques where you encounter wildly diverging opinions. When two respected instructors give you responses that are exactly opposite, do you close your eyes and just choose one? Instead, you must try to think through each of their arguments and solutions. Turn them over. Work through them. Go back into the studio and perhaps experiment with both solutions side by side. Often your eye will settle the argument.

Critical to a successful critique of any kind is an ability to detach yourself from your work. Again, comments—be they positive or negative—are not directed toward you. This is one of the most difficult things to grasp when you have just been working night and day to complete a piece. If you have been very involved, it is hard to suddenly separate from a work when you put it up for critique. But separate you must. Thus, in critique, you will look at your work side by side with the authority, almost like two scientists, objectively assessing what is before you. Stepping to the side to get out of the line of fire is crucial to absorbing what is observed and discussed.

Critiques of Class Assignments or Works Made with Specific Parameters

When an assignment contains highly specific project parameters, the critique is sometimes limited to a simple determination as to whether works do or do not meet the assigned criteria. For example, your entire class is given the same formal or conceptual problem to solve or a project that is material or technique specific. Every student in the class paints from the same still life or sculpts in clay from the model. Such assignments are often designed to test your level of proficiency in a given material or technique.

Thus, in critique much of the discussion is centered on how and whether the works demonstrate technical achievement in a common material or a process. Or in cases where the assignment is to explore particular formal or conceptual issues, a critique may focus on whether and how these are evident in the work. In critiques of assignments with clear parameters, if you produce an ambitious and even accomplished work that ignores the challenge of the project requirements you will likely have an unsatisfactory critique.
Surviving the Technique-Specific Critique

Preparation for technique-specific critiques is straightforward. First and foremost is the importance of understanding the instructor’s goal in making the assignment. What skills is she trying to teach you? What concepts or issues does she want you to consider by asking you to implement this work? Make sure that you are clear in this regard! Many students can testify to the confusing experience in a critique when a skillfully realized work—one that has drawn universal praise from peers outside the classroom—is dismissed, while what looks to be an awkward, unsuccessful work is intensively discussed. Keep in mind that in these critiques the work is often operating in the service of a particular instructional mission. You may not ultimately work with these materials or processes, or have those issues in mind as you begin to develop your independent studio practice, but the lessons that are taught through the completion of a project within stated parameters can inform later work in unforeseen ways. This will broaden the options open to you for realizing future work.

Instructors differ on how closely you are expected to follow the rules of their assignments. Some expect a strict rulebook response, while others strongly encourage a range of creative interpretations. What happens in an assigned project when the work takes a direction that leads away from the assignment? Given that any work can evolve in unforeseen ways, and indeed should, how do you best reconcile your own need for flexibility and still maintain the discipline to stay on track with the project parameters?

Critique Preparation Is Project Preparation

When a project is assigned, articulate in your own words, not only what you plan to do but also what skills you will employ. Review the project guidelines. Ask questions. As the piece begins to take shape, if the work appears to be diverging from the assignment, speak to the instructor. No effort is ever wasted, as anything you do can contribute to the totality of your studio experience. Nonetheless, this work might not be appropriate for the critique. Remember that the assignment is designed to offer specific instruction. When in doubt, check with your instructor. What seems to be at odds with the project goals may actually be a logical and useful extension of those goals.

Interestingly, you may find that as you begin to develop more independent individualized work, your approach to these early problem-solving projects can be a clue to the kinds of processes that will be important in your own studio practice. You may find that you embrace the structure of predetermined goals, or that you write and struggle with what feels like a restraint on your free-flowing (and unpredictable) creative expression! The critique will be a kind of gauge of your tolerance for working within such restrictions, which you may encounter much later in the form of commissions or collaborative projects.

When Only Selected Works Are Discussed

Another scenario occurs when the need to critique the work produced by a large class overrides the possibility for group discussion. This could be called the so much work, so little time model. You may experience this critique as a blur of comments from the instructor as she races from work to work, or selects works, seemingly at random, from a wall of individual pieces hung salon style. In critiques like these, individual pieces are discussed as examples for the entire group and the public assessment of any particular student’s work is less important than the presentation of various concepts.

As unfair as it seems, and indeed frustrating if your work is overlooked, this kind of critique is an extreme example of something that is part of the dynamic of any group critique. That is, you can often benefit as much from what is said about a fellow student’s work as comments about your own. In this kind of critique you must reconcile yourself to the possibility that your efforts may not even be discussed. Nevertheless, it is crucial that you remain open to the information offered. This is one of the most important lessons to be learned in assuring a productive critique within any critique structure. Though the critique is an assessment of particular works, it is also a conversation where the work itself becomes a kind of entry point into a larger discussion.

On rare occasions, a visiting critic, curator, or artist will critique selective works, as described above, being available for only a limited period of time, in contrast to more accessible course instructors. This can sometimes give rise to a palpable sense of competitiveness in the critique, as students vie for attention. You should focus your efforts on installing or presenting your work to the best of your ability, and then come to the critique with as much detachment as you can, directing your attention, not only to what is said or not said about your work but also to the substance of the overall discussion. What is said to your peers probably applies to you.
WHO IS CRITIQUING YOU?

The Expert
Most critiques are led by a single instructor who moderates a group discussion and provides much of the commentary. In deciding to study art, you as a student have entered into an implied contract with your faculty. There is an understanding that your instructors, along with other experts invited to critique your work from time to time, come with experience in the field of art that is greater than your own.

Indeed, the word expert is related to the words experience and experiment, which come from kindred Greek and Latin words that have to do with trying, with implications of knowledge through trial and error. Hence, one definition for expert in the Oxford English Dictionary reads, “one who has gained skill from experience.” A second definition calls the expert “one who has special knowledge causing him to be regarded as an authority.” It can be helpful to consider the kind of special knowledge that this expert brings to your critique.

Instructors and guests alike have different sensibilities, interests, areas of expertise, and even politics. Whom do you listen to? How do you select what is useful? How do you make sense of the opposing views and seemingly irrational praise and censure that come your way? We’ve attempted here to create loose portraits of some of the most common experts that we’ve encountered both as teachers and students. Of course, most experts are composites, embodying the qualities and critique styles of more than one of our types. Still, an understanding of the differences between and motivations of various experts can perhaps help you glean the message from the medium, and thus make more sense out of your critique.

The Absolute Authority
Many critiques, especially in beginning studio classes, are run by an absolute authority—the instructor. Students put work on display and the instructor does most of the talking. This model operates on the assumption that a work of art demonstrates discernable skills and structural integrity that can be identified either as the successful expression of your virtuosity and attention to conventional notions of craft, or that it at least contains some qualities, identifiable by the instructor, that verify its success. Discussion is often centered around formal elements and craft issues, but can also be rooted in a perspective born of your instructor’s own artistic practice or eccentric and subjective responses. The authority here is the instructor, and his or her voice remains unopposed. Work will be praised and censured according to your instructor’s own criteria.

The Connoisseur
You may encounter an instructor who uses phrases like “this works” and “this does not work,” with little explanation for what this means or why it is so. This kind of instructor might be called a connoisseur.

By definition, a connoisseur is someone whose expertise is the result of some innate gift or learned ability to see works of art with a rare, sensitive eye. The connoisseur has discriminating taste and an eye for authenticity. The beautiful, the harmonious, and the appropriate are critical standards for the connoisseur, whose experienced eye knows how to discern “that which is good, that which is bad, and that which is indifferent.” Historically, artists have worked under the guidance (or tyranny, depending on your perspective) of connoisseurs. And collectors still rely on connoisseurs to assess the aesthetic and market values of artworks. Although it’s easy to picture an antique character complete with monocle and bent back, inspecting a dusty painting, there are indeed connoisseurs of contemporary art with a taste for the present or even the next thing! These new connoisseurs will be steeped in a knowledge of contemporary art practices, to which their tastes and discriminating eyes are always attuned. In each case, your work will be judged by predetermined criteria that might seem mystifying to the uninitiated. At the end of the day, the new connoisseur is the same wolf in sheep’s clothing, so let us go back to the classic discerner of beauty and authenticity.

Our old-style connoisseur comes to a critique with predilections for particular styles of work and critique criteria that are informed by notions of craft, authenticity, as well as conventions of beauty and appropriateness, the assumption being that these qualities are readily apparent to the trained, sensitive viewer.

A connoisseur-led critique can produce interesting debates about defining and setting criteria for beauty and skill. Whether the connoisseur’s assessment of the work in critique is merely a subjective response, disguised as expertise, or a true recognition of student achievement (or lack thereof) will be up for debate. This brings up...
a few questions worth considering. We might ask, for example, if and how we can define beauty. Is beauty a universal quality readily accessed by anyone or is it specific to a given historical period or culture? What words do we use to describe a work of art to which we have a vague positive response? Are their set criteria or standards for giving a work a thumbs-up or thumbs-down? Or is the reception of art by its nature subjective? How does taste factor into our choices in making and judging art? Is taste a skill? Can it be learned? Must it be learned? Is it important that our work be beautiful? Or refuse to be beautiful? Can disturbing content be beautiful? Should it be? How does the concept of the beautiful relate to the concept of the sublime? Can one back up declarations such as “this is beautiful” with evidence of some kind?

That One’s a Dandy

A friend described a painting critique she attended at a prestigious summer art camp. A famous New York artist was invited to critique, and all of the students were in their places with works ready to bring up, as called. One work after another was brought to the front for critique. Each time the visiting artist said, “I don’t have anything to say about that one. What’s next?” When the next painting was put up, he said the same thing. “Nothing to say about that one. What’s next?” This went on for some time until, after a long series of dismissals, a painting was put up that gave him pause. After looking at it for about twenty seconds, he stroked his chin and declared, “Well, now that one’s a dandy.”

The Judge, the Evaluator, and the Specialist

Three common experts encountered in critique are the judge, the evaluator, and the specialist. All critiques involve the judging of work, but an instructor who appears to operate with some degree of detachment and without an obvious predetermined position might be thought of as a judge. A judge presents opinions with some logical argument in support of her position and no style appears to be favored over another. The judge weighs the evidence and her assessments are balanced between positive and negative. Evaluators are similar to judges, but the evaluator’s assessment of work is driven by a clearly stated and objective set of criteria. Specialists have a particular expertise in a given field. This may be special knowledge of a material or process or some unique life experience.

Surviving the Judge

Commentary from judges, evaluators, or specialists may be easier to comprehend and process because it seems less arbitrary and subjective. An instructor, whose every negative comment is balanced with a positive one, who swings between two poles, from comment to comment, before summarizing a ruling declaration, might be called a judge. If you hear something like this in critique, how do you react? “Your carving skills are evident, but you have lost the proportion of the figure here (pointing to the thigh), and she looks to have a lump on her forehead, which could not have been intentional. But the form does show a sensitive use of the natural grain of the wood, so all in all I think it is a good beginning.” Or this? “Your use of mirrors to reflect the projected video images around the room is inventive, but the wires that the mirrors are suspended from are distracting, and I like the way that we see fragments of the body in the mirrors, but I think the gestures could have been more developed. All in all the video installation is ambitious.”

In some instances you will agree. (You already knew that thigh in the carving piece was a problem and struggled with it all week. You already knew the mirror-hanging device in the video piece was a disaster.) You may disagree. (Actually you had planned to paint the wood and ran out of time, so you actually have no interest in the wood grain. You think the gestures in the video are subtle and just fine as they are.) Ask yourself if such an assessment contradicts or affirms what you already know. If some aspect of your work has been judged deficient, reconsider and reexamine these parts of the work. Do you only hear the negative criticism? Only the positive?

Surviving the Evaluator and Specialist

Evaluators and specialists tend to operate out of clearly stated criteria, which are often encountered when assignments are goal specific. For example, if your drawing is being evaluated according to its mimetic function, likeness is the measure. It is straightforward enough to evaluate a well-drawn arm, a foreshortened figure, a still life with a single light source, or a landscape with atmospheric perspective. However, if your assignment, for example, is to make a sculptural work that resists reference, or uses one material, or involves three kinds of joinery, then the work will be evaluated according to its adherence to the goal.
A specialist operates in a manner similar to that of an evaluator. These are typically instructors with expertise in particular areas to the exclusion of others. Specialists work best in the context of very specific assignments with clear goals. Critiques will be focused on how best to implement a given technique, and much of the critique discussion and feedback directed at the particulars of specialized materials, media, or processes. Your instructors who are most confident addressing media-specific issues or technical problems solving in critique usually conduct themselves as specialists.

Keep in mind that most specialists will be focused on a particular aspect of your work. If you can identify the expertise of a specialist and engage her on those terms, you will add to your knowledge base tremendously. If you try and force a specialist to address issues outside her area of expertise, you may end up feeling frustrated and shortchanged. Whether a matter of interest or self-confidence, some specialists will all but dismiss approaches that do not involve their own materials, processes, or formats. Again, it is best to identify the specialist's contributions—whether very particular technical knowledge or life experiences—and tap into those resources. Remember any critique is a small fragment of a much larger body of information that you will encounter over time.

More Authorities: Narcissists, Drill Sergeants, Unconditional Supporters, Theorists, and Philosophers
The kinds of authoritative voices that you will come across in critique are infinitely variable. Let's identify a few more and discuss how to recognize and be better prepared when you encounter these experts and their approaches. Bear in mind though that these are not hard-and-fast categories and that many classroom authorities embody qualities and share outlooks across the categories.

The Narcissist
The narcissist is inclined to praise and censure work according to how well it mimics his own, both in look and in method. The narcissist-conducted critique is typically a performance. The critique is an event, a reward to initiates for all their hard work. It's a place of public humiliation for the lazy, the untalented, and the non-believers. The criteria vary according to the specifics of the narcissist's own practice, but his work is always the standard and the goal. Students are often invited to speak once they've established that their views are in tandem with the narcissist's or as foils against which he can argue his own points.

Surviving the Narcissist
The narcissist's power is such that it can be difficult to recognize it when you're under his spell. Warning signals might be if you're finding that the decisions that you make in your work rely almost exclusively on his eye, even what you imagine he would think or say. You also like the comfortable feeling of his clear and unambiguous answers. (So many other teachers seem to answer your questions with questions!) When you encounter a narcissist, an important thing to be mindful of is a feeling that you've lost your own center. You've given up your own power and judgment and are relying completely on his. To regain your center, try to actively pursue a wider range of perspectives.

If you are not an initiate and, for scheduling reasons, you find yourself in the class of a narcissist and his followers, you may feel like you woke up to discover that you joined a cult in your sleep. In this situation, the best thing is to try to learn what you can, knowing his way is one among many.

Drill Sergeants and Unconditional Supporters
Two more variations are the drill sergeant and the unconditional supporter. The drill sergeant uses his voice of authority to challenge the student. In this case, the particulars of his criticism are less important than the fear he inspires. Dreading public judgment and craving his approval, you come to the critique with your best efforts. But the drill sergeant is never satisfied, and this only whets your resolve to try even harder. It's the "I don't think you can do it!" approach. What the drill sergeant really believes about you may remain a mystery. The specifics of the drill sergeant's criticism may not even be important. To be effective, all the drill sergeant needs is for you to maintain, at least for a time, the vague feeling of not having done enough. When, at the term's end, the drill sergeant is pleased, many students leave with a sense of tremendous accomplishment, often crediting the drill sergeant with this success.
Trashcan

In a senior critique class the instructor comes around to a sculpture that the student has been tirelessly working on for weeks. After glaring at it for a few moments, he points at a red metal trashcan in the corner of the room. "See that trashcan over there," he growls. "That trashcan is better than your sculpture! At least that trashcan knows what it is!" The student is devastated. Years later she recalls the incident and realizes that her gruff professor was really saying, "Look at the clarity of that red trashcan in the corner over there. The person (or machine) that made it did not hesitate for a moment. It was made with a clear purpose. It embodies that clarity. When I look at your sculpture I am confused. It has no internal logic that I can discover. I don’t understand your decisions."

The flip side of the hard-to-please drill sergeant is the unconditional supporter. An authority figure offering unconditional support defuses any argument and derailed any real criticism in the critique. At the heart of this model is the insistence that all art making is a creative act and that only positive reinforcement is constructive to the confidence that one needs to tackle studio challenges.

Surviving the Drill Sergeant or the Unconditional Supporter

Needless to say a critique with either a drill sergeant or an unconditional supporter can work wonders or be completely ineffective. Do you need a kick in the pants or a bit of encouragement? An instructor who personifies a drill sergeant will inspire and motivate you when you need a particular kind of challenge, but if you are, for whatever reason, less resilient you can become demoralized and discouraged. The danger also exists that you will end up working for the critique in order to please this authority figure and not develop a real sense of self-motivation. The tough love approach of the drill sergeant may be appropriate at some stages in your studio growth and not others. Some experienced artists maintain that such strict discipline is needed early on in the game; others assert that beginning artists respond better to criticism that gets increasingly tougher as confidence develops. Let the drill sergeant motivate you and accept his challenges, but remember that you are not making your work for him.

Supportive remarks may be appropriate to build confidence, but if overdone and not balanced with criticism such remarks will seldom serve you in becoming a better artist. Critiques built entirely on feel good supportive remarks can also lead to an attitude among the group that the critique is meaningless.

When it comes to praise in critique, you may find that the drill sergeants are sometimes revered simply because they are so stingy with praise and unconditional supporters distrusted because they are so loose. Try and separate out the substance of what each says from individual personal styles. The merit of either positive or negative comments in critique is not necessarily linked to their frequency.

The Philosopher and the Theorist

The philosopher gets his authority by always relinquishing it, whereas the theorist uses his language as power over the group. Both see the work being critiqued as an avenue for illustrating theoretical constructs or philosophical questions. For the theorist, your work is another proof of his or her carefully constructed worldview; for the philosopher, it becomes a permission slip to ask interesting abstract questions. Critique discussion with philosophers and theorists can be some of the most interesting and some of the least useful. You may well leave the critique room feeling stimulated and even enlightened, and then find yourself in the studio without concrete solutions for your piece. Philosophers are often more pleasant than theorists, who may turn against work that doesn’t fall within specific conceptual constructs.

Because philosophers and theorists tend to critique “to the side” of the work and direct most of the discussion to ideas in which they have an interest, the best way to deal with either is to redirect the conversation back to what is front of you. That said, if you are willing, you are likely to finish the semester with a great reading list.

Visiting Artists, Curators, Gallerists, or Critics

When a visiting artist responds to your work in a studio visit, the result can and should be a mutually stimulating conversation. The studio visitor is reacting to what he sees in the studio without any prior knowledge of your work. Often the visitors are not educators and are unaccustomed to looking at student work or even work in progress.

Such visitors are notoriously unpredictable. Some ask you questions to open a dialogue; others deliver a well-articulated (or not-so-well-articulated) opinion. Others peruse the work silently, leaving you in awkward anticipation. The advantage of a visitor, who is meeting
you and your work for the first time, is that there is the possibility for a brutal honesty in his reaction, no matter how off the mark it may be. It is a valuable lesson in preparing for studio visits with curators or gallerists in the future because it forces you to consider what to present and how you want to organize your work.

**Critiques with Multiple Experts**

**The United Faculty Committee**

Faculty groups usually operate with multiple voices, and we will discuss these later, but in some situations they all speak from the same perspective. We might then think of them as a united faculty committee. This is a group that critiques from a shared position and may be comprised of individuals who have a common worldview or ideology. You will most likely encounter a united faculty committee at an institution where curriculum is informed by a very definite canon, such as continental theory, formalist painting and sculpture, or academic figurative traditions. However, a united committee also occurs when members of a group all hold in common certain conventions particular to a given medium. “Clay should always be glazed, never painted.” “Dovetail and dowel joints are superior to nails.” “Paintings should always contain six tones for modeling light and shadow.”

**Surviving the United Faculty Committee**

The united faculty committee, as the name implies, can be one of the most intimidating, if the group has already reviewed your work in your absence or if you are asked to defend your work before the committee. Common at end-of-term candidacies or as a gateway to admission to an honors program, this experience differs from a critique, where a group of faculty (and perhaps students) gathers in your studio to discuss your work. This group tends to speak as one, with members echoing each other’s points and reinforcing a collective position.

Given that the united committee speaks with one very powerful voice, it is difficult to contradict. You are not only outranked but outnumbered. How do you participate in such an experience? The best strategy is to get your bearings and approach the situation with objectivity. Then listen. If possible, respectfully but firmly engage the panel by meeting its declarations with questions. Note taking is an excellent tool. If the observations are constructive but confusing, you will have a wonderful record of what actually happened when you are no longer distracted by being on the hot seat. If the comments turn out not to be constructive, you will at least have had something to do with your hands and been able to feign interest in the face of hurtful or disagreeable pronouncements.

**A Constructive Response**

If your work is critiqued from an ideological position that you do not share, your best defense is to try to understand that position. Get the reading list for goodness sakes and find out where these people are coming from! Let’s say that you are working on large painterly field paintings and you encounter a group of faculty that clearly seems only to like photographs with texts, which explicitly address social issues. Will any of these people help you to be a better painter? Perhaps not. Will you learn more about why your self-referential painting is so annoying to them? Will you come away with a clearer understanding of what it is you are doing? Will you stretch your own definitions of what art can be? Probably. Or alternatively, you find out that the committee only accepts photorealistic figure painting and censures any form of abstraction. Your research will help to clarify the hows and whys of what you are up against.

What if each day, on your walk to school, you collect a small discarded object that you find along the way. You present these at the end of the semester with small stories attached. The panel critiquing you—all dedicated builders—dismisses your work. How do you respond? Your best tactic is to encourage them to articulate exactly why craft should be favored over found objects. Ask individual panel members why they have such objections to the work. Is this particular action of collecting too obvious or is it just undeveloped in the work? Is there a fundamental problem with the idea of found materials or is this work just not labor-intensive enough? If it’s the latter, is labor quantifiable, and is it a fair benchmark for evaluating work? As long as you see the critique as an opportunity for discussion, even ideological incompatibilities can become opportunities for understanding your own activities. Your differences may remain irreconcilable, but if you emerge from the clash with the ability to better understand and articulate your position, the critique experience has not been in vain.
A Brief Note on Shared Worldview or Ideology

Ideology, a word that encompasses a range of meanings and usages, is loosely used here to mean a hidden structure of beliefs and values that shapes the way we think, act, and understand the world. For many students this will be an unfamiliar word and one that seems puzzling when applied to the critique. But its usefulness as a term has everything to do with how we assess the world around us, and this, of course, includes art.

As one encounters various authoritative voices in critique it becomes more and more evident that strong positions are seldom grounded in simple matters of preference or taste, but rather in personal belief systems. If a student who is operating out of a perceived quest for universal beauty puts work before a committee or faculty member who regards such efforts with suspicion, the student will face an ideology gap. An instructor who came of age in the politically active youth culture of the late 1960s, for instance, might find it difficult to appreciate reality television.

Whatever experts you encounter in critique, consider the criteria that they use to assess work, and pay particular attention to the language they use. As always, take notes, even at critiques of the work of your peers. Identify the terms used and research any that are unfamiliar to you. You may determine that in critique one approach has been privileged over others. Try to identify and differentiate ways of seeing and discussing works in critique.

Multiple Voice Critiques

Multiple voice critiques operate on the old Socratic principle that dialogue is a means to wisdom. Not that strict Socratic dialogues are occurring, but it is through dialogue that we can unpeel the layers of meaning, the problems that need fixing, and the possibilities for future work. Dialogue—which literally means in Greek through (or by means of) words (or speech)—can be messy, especially as more and more people engage in it. But it is through the contradictions, the defining of terms, the exposed nuances that we begin to see beyond the obvious, the ideological, the narrow present.

Faculty in Groups

One of the most common venues for critiquing is the often cobbled-together group of faculty and visitors found in upper division and graduate critique rooms. This group of voices, often with widely different views and experience, comes together in a space to engage with your work. Some are members of a standing committee that meets more than once to follow your progress; others are invited artists and critics, thrown into the mix for a particular critique event. You will also encounter faculty groups in schools where team teaching is employed and where special critique sessions are held and structured into graduate studio programs that assess work at scheduled intervals during the course of a two-to-three-year program.

Every faculty group has a dynamic all its own, which varies according to who’s in the group, the combined personal dynamics, and the changeable moods of its members. Faculty participants within a critique group may have greater or lesser degrees of familiarity with your work and have wildly divergent comfort levels with particular forms of contemporary art. Some come to group critiques with the candor and enthusiasm one might bring to a lively intellectual conversation among friends, while others struggle to find a rhythm, or even be heard, in what can seem to be a jumble of competing voices.

Critiques by groups of faculty can be some of the best and some of the worst experiences for you and your faculty alike! One would think that an assembly of experts, all focused on your work, each bringing to bear his or her experience, insight, and expertise would be a sure formula for a successful critique. Why then are some group faculty critiques so rich in information and others totally maddening? Part of the answer lies in the group dynamic and part in the lack of clear structure and leadership. Participants come and go, there is no formal order that designates who should begin and with what topic. Some like to show off, others to hold back. Some are simply bored, whereas others have their own agendas to promote. Be aware that a faculty group in critique is often a freewheeling unpredictable creature! Don’t take offense if the conversation veers away from your work and takes on a life of its own or if your work is met with awkward silences. This is as likely about the dynamics of the group as it is about your work.

Single Voices in Faculty Groups

At times you will encounter instructors or other experts, accustomed to critiquing alone, embedded in a faculty group. They will participate in ways that assure their independence and authority. A judge may avoid the chatter and fray of disagreement during the critique until the end, where she will offer a summary of the proceedings and perhaps a final
ruling. A connoisseur will make subjective declarations particularly on matters of aesthetic value in tones that seem to say, "But is this not evident to everyone?" A specialist will either limit his critique contribution to a few comments that address his particular field or doggedly continue to pull the conversation back to his area of expertise. A critique full of single-voice authorities can become a cacophony of monologues, where everyone is talking and no one is listening.

Surviving Faculty Groups
When a faculty group assesses your work the results can be confusing, particularly because this is a group of experts. The faculty group is made up of individuals, who are each a rich source of information. One can solve any technical snag, build anything, and give you the phone number of the place to get the parts. Another will seem to have read every text in the Western canon, including much of the contemporary fiction written since last week. One has traveled the world, has seen every Biennal above and below the equator, and holds her own when debating art theory. Another seems almost psychic, saying things about your work that you sense are deep, but aren't sure why or how this will help. How do you sort out statements coming from so many perspectives? How do you reconcile contradicting opinions? How do you organize information that ranges from highly specific technical advice to relevant quotes from obscure novels or theoretical texts, to fascinating and eccentric subjective responses? How do you process so much information period? After all, while all this is being thrown at you, you are standing next to your private labors made suddenly public! The only solution is to make a record of it.

Collecting and Processing the Data
Take written notes, have a friend do it, or even audiotape the critique. Documenting can and should be done no matter what kind of critique you find yourself in, but is especially useful to sort through the richness and variety of information that may be thrown at you from a group of faculty. This will not only be a record that allows you to reconstruct what has been said in a specific critique but also will be a diary of what was said in the last one and the one before that.

Identify contradictory comments made in the critique and place them side by side on a page. Do these differing viewpoints share some identifiable issue? Can you articulate what is being questioned in your work? Is there a single issue that acts as a kind of magnet for these contradictory comments? Do two of your instructors really present opposing positions, or are these just nuanced versions of the same criticism? If each instructor has proposed a different way in which you might have made your work differently, you will likely feel pretty annoyed. List these suggestions and identify commonalities. Even if a particular solution may seem unacceptable the fact that the suggestion has been made can also direct you to a problem area that needs to be considered.

Try to determine whether the same complaints seem to come up again and again. Are you told in every critique that you overwork your paintings or that your surfaces are too thin? Is the group always interested in the ideas you raise in your found object box constructions, but inevitably the discussion turns to the loose hinge or badly painted edge? Is composition always mentioned, or scale, or palette? In every painting you present, do instructors begin to talk about what is going on in the scene, only to soon start fussing about the figure's anatomy? Are you asked why you never use color, why you always choose found objects of a certain style?

How will you improve your figure drawing skills, or is this really an issue? Do you need to stand firm in your use of digital effects in the transitions, or should you reconsider? Do you need to spend more time on details like fasteners and nails even when you are impatient to get on with the idea, or are all these craft details irrelevant?

Do some topics always come up in your critiques, topics that you believe have nothing to do with your work? Can you identify a position to contextualize your work that may be opposite to how it is read by the critique group? Ultimately, you must determine how to use this information.

Take a look at phrases and statements made in the critique. Out of a list of seemingly disconnected statements, you may be able to construct some coherent conclusions. Sometimes a critique discussion continues over the course of several critiques. Sometimes an odd observation becomes relevant not with the next work, but after ten works! The important lesson is to see the critique as an active conversation.

Tiny Sculptures
A student presents five tiny sculptures to a faculty group. The work is a collection of five beetles that have been dressed in red and gold embroidered capes. Everyone in the group is drawn in to look closely and declares them to be beautiful.
“Yes, they are lovely,” says one instructor, “but they just die on these big pedestals. I think you should build your own bases — tall very thin ones.”

A line of questioning follows around embroidery techniques. Someone then asks, “Are they real?” A participant offers that he would like to see the sculptures presented under a theatrical spotlight. A side conversation develops among some faculty about another artist who works with miniatures.

“What was her name?” they ask one another.

“I think you should figure out a way to add a magnifying glass to the sculpture,” says one instructor, and later in the critique finishes the thought with, “Have you thought of taking macro lens photographs and presenting those, or projecting them?” A discussion then follows on the practice of making sculpture as photographic props. Is this a good thing or a bad thing?

One instructor calls it a sneaky way to avoid rigorous craft. “Hollywood fakery!” he declares.

Another has reservations about this solution, but for different reasons. “I am so over the make a small sculpture and photograph it so it looks big thing!” The critique ends with a discussion on the general topic of insects—likes and dislikes—and everyone’s personal memories.

As the group breaks up an instructor, who has up until this point been quiet, weighs in with, “I think these insects are just too small and you should work bigger.”

Though contradictory, it’s easy to see how all these comments address scale and presentation, which for most of the faculty was the least resolved part of the work but never articulated specifically. If these comments are scattered among stories about insects, questions about how the works were made, or mentions of contemporary artists working in miniature, they might seem disjointed. A written document allows you to look more objectively at the information and to organize seemingly contradictory or unrelated suggestions.

**Faculty Moderated Group Critiques with Student Participants**

Unlike the critiques above, conducted by authorities whose effectiveness relies in large measure on personal charisma, an active faculty moderator will respond directly to the dynamics of the group. Because the active faculty moderator is leading your critique with a less authoritative voice, the success of the critique is particularly dependent on your active participation.

How much your instructor-moderator intervenes varies. Some will simply walk into critique and ask you to begin. This might be called the “throw ’em in the deep end and see if they can swim approach.” If many of you are silent, so be it. If all of you are silent, so be it. (Some instructors will show a remarkable ability to let the whole room hold silent until someone speaks up.) If some students are domineering, so be it. If a clique develops and gangs up on a student whose work is deemed objectionable, so be it. Anything short of physical assault is fair game. The potential for high drama makes this approach to critique a favorite for some students and a nightmare for others.

Most faculty moderators, however, will utilize some kind of a structure, even if a loose one. If the critique is flat because everyone is disengaged, too worried about being polite, or just inarticulately mean, your instructor may direct your critique with a question to set the tone, call on selected students, guide a line of inquiry with follow-up questions, move the discussion away from a tangential conversation, or reintroduce a point that has been dropped prematurely. Sometimes role-playing, writing assignments, and other creative strategies will be used to facilitate more informed and active participation between you and your fellow students.

**Related Lessons**

Though some faculty moderators prefer not to interfere with any immediate readings at the onset of a critique discussion, others find that framing the discussion of a work around pertinent topics allows for more substantive dialogue. Before posing questions, your instructor may frame the discussion by introducing ideas that are invoked by the work at hand, be it a link to current art practices, a social or political issue that needs some explaining, or an artist’s explicit use of poetry. This broadens the context for the discussion of a particular piece by defining the way in which it is in conversation with other works being made.

**Your Responsibilities When Working with a Moderator**

Once acclimated to the democratic feeling of a moderated critique, you may actually begin to resent the kinds of controls the instructor brings to bear. You may wonder what a discussion of contemporary art has to
do with your work, or feel that you are beyond having what is sometimes basic information fed to you in such a manner.

Try to understand that your critique group may be made up of students with widely divergent communication styles. Some students may be less confident than you and need practice articulating ideas and building vocabulary. You will each come to the critique with unequal degrees of familiarity with art history and contemporary art. This kind of framing of the critique discussion is an introduction to the notion of art as an entry point into ideas.

**Big Kids on the Playground**

Don’t assume that everyone in a class has the same level of familiarity with a given artist’s work or kind of work. If you happen to be especially knowledgeable about an artist or idea relevant to the discussion, then engage with the group from this vantage point.

All too often arrogant students with a thimbleful more knowledge than their classmates engage in the cheap thrill of intimidating the less experienced “younger kids” on the playground. If you are the more experienced student, try to conduct yourself with dignity and generosity in critique. If you are the unfortunate recipient of such bullying, remember that doing well is the best revenge. Work hard. Focus on what you are doing. In case there is merit to the cruel comments, try to separate out the value in the message from the boorishness of the messengers.

Also, as you develop your own studio practice, you will find yourself drawn to research, read about, and see work that is not the same as that which interests your colleagues.

**A Note on Critique as Democracy**

If we think of a critique as a democracy, then everyone has an equal voice. There is no authority, and everyone—students and instructor alike—contribute to the discussion. The question arises, “Is everyone’s opinion as good as everyone else’s?” If some students are more perceptive, more informed, or more articulate than others, how can a democratic critique facilitate open but informed dialogue? Like a democracy, the model relies on rules of order and an informed citizenship. This is a good argument for fully participating in the critique whatever the format the instructor uses and completing any preparation assignments.

**NOTES**

1. Using the term *studio practice* may seem unnecessary and even pretentious. Why not refer to this thing that we do simply as our *studio work* rather than risk evoking law firms, violin lessons, or yoga retreats? And yet these associations are appropriate to a particular way of thinking about the creative process. It implies some sustained repeated activity, an activity that is the opposite of random experience or dabbling. (Even a studio practice that is defined by random experience is one that posits a sustained investigation of random experience as its mission!) And there is a sense of commitment attached to a statement such as “the daily practice of painting.” Consider someone who defines herself as a *practicing* rather than nominal member of a religious community. How a yogic practice as opposed to a yoga lesson suggests a deeper level of experience. Even the word’s association with sports suggests mastery through a kind of knowing, not only through the mind but also through the body. For artists, it can mean a kind of intimate familiarity with a material, a way of moving, mark making, even selecting or sampling that implies a training of the eye through *practice*.


3. Ibid.

4. In Greek mythology, Narcissus was a boy so beautiful that when he looked in a pool and saw himself reflected back, he fell in love with his own image. He finally pined away and died of love for himself.