The Critique Handbook

The Art Student's Sourcebook and Survival Guide

Second Edition

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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 do not necessarily deserve either the censure or the praise they receive. Indeed, the criteria themselves are fluid and contextualized within a historical and current network of conversations about art that occur between the works themselves and the critical voices that surround them.

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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 is 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 is put up will be an array 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 individual students, either in isolation or among peers.

Critique as Theater A critique can be seen as theater, and much about it resembles a 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 they seem mumbled and drifting. Body language is in play. Sometimes your fellow students will listen intently, and other times they will 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: they also vary with the dynamics of the critique group, the level of the class, and the purpose of the project. The critique also takes place within the larger context of contemporary artistic practice, itself a pluralistic patchwork of 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 is perceived. There is the work that is physically in front of us, and also 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 difficulty 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: "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 traditionally been frowned upon by critics or historians. It is too speculative, too subjective. Much contemporary art, nevertheless, is exhibited with supporting information, supplied by the artist. These may be statements of intent, small histories of process, or 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 and fair game for critics. 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 does not, discussion can turn on this disconnect or on the merit of the intentions themselves, or it could focus on how to realize them better. But does it really matter whether or not the work and what you *think* you are doing have anything in common? Indeed, many artists (even famous ones) do not 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 is 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. 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 is 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 Critique Format Is at Odds with Your Work Can a critique actually change or interfere with your work? For example, how do we critique a performance of uncertain duration when the critique has a fixed time allowance? How can we properly address 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. And 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, as seen 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.

CONTEXT AND CRITIQUE

Actions Outside the Critique Room Most of us have experienced performances by artists, which take place at a set time with an invited audience. In critique, however, we are sometimes asked to discuss actions that occur off-site, or are realized in a time frame that makes it impossible to simply watch and discuss.

Actions

After school each day, a student goes on a two-hour walk, always taking a different direction.

A student is silent for thirty days. She communicates only through notes on a small pad.

A group of students, all dressed in suits, goes to a small diner in a nearby town. They discuss in audible tones an upcoming mission to Venus.

A group of artists in a museum exhibition arranges to have all of the works removed to a warehouse. For twenty-four hours, everyone—including the gallerist and the curator—thinks the works have been stolen.

Some are actions created for the *artist* to experience something alone—self-imposed silence, a walk without destination. In others, the artist

engages the viewer in a manner that challenges typical social interaction. In many, the artist plays a subversive role, in that she does not announce herself as fiction. All, however, operate with a porous relationship to real life.

Critiquing Works That Must Be in the World When the context in which a work is shown is central to how we read it, we come to the critique room with the recognition that the work is being looked at in a strange sort of laboratory. Therefore, in most critiques, though we are limited to what is in front of us, we may need to address how such works operate outside the critique space.

For some works, it is enough to speak about them in relation to the other contemporary works, historical precedents, or how they might be contextualized in a group exhibition. Here, substantive discussion does not depend on the work being taken literally or speculatively out of the neutral space of the critique room.

Other works, however, which can *only* exist outside of the critique room, present special challenges for the discussion. Critiquing certain sculptures or performances in public places, murals, guerrilla artworks, or private actions requires inventiveness and flexibility. How do we approach such work in critique?

The Off-Site Critique If you make works that exist outside the critique room, you are responsible to get the group to your work, be it a simple stroll around the corner, a class trip on the bus, or a map with directions to the site handed out the previous week. How the piece is read is directly linked to your presentation of it. If your piece takes the form of an event or action that has happened prior to the critique, documentation becomes an integral part—indeed, a stand-in for the work, both in the critique room and later in the gallery. Thus, the thoughtful presentation of documentary evidence of an action or performance—be it text, photos, or video—is critical to any meaningful critique of it.

Pink Things

It is the first snowfall of the season. A student gives everyone in the class a map of the city with pink dots at various locations within a twenty-five-mile radius. Over the course of the week, everyone is instructed to visit the seven sites. At each site is a different artwork. At one, the student has skillfully wrapped an entire eight-foot tree in thin pink strips of fabric. In another, he has sewn a transparent pink sleeve over a parking sign. Other works on the sites in the map include a pink cushion attached to a park bench and a pink curtain installed at the entrance to a men's room. Students are asked to travel to the sites and write about the work and their experiences.

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 also holding 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 either by dismissing everything that has been said or by trying to please the instructor and 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 as approval or 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 hopefully received 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,[1] 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 what you plan to do and 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 writhe 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 comments on a fellow student's work, as from comments on 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 selected works, being available for only a limited period of time. 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 own work but also to the substance of the overall discussion. What is said to your peers probably applies to you.

WHO IS CRITIQUING YOU?

Most critiques are led by a single instructor who directs class discussion and provides much of the feedback on your work. You may not always like what you hear at critique. You may feel misunderstood or downright picked on, but remember that no matter what form the criticism takes, there is always a lesson there for you. Your job is to listen, select, and absorb information. In deciding to study art, you have entered into an implied contract with your faculty. There is an understanding that your

instructors, along with other experts invited into the studio, come with experience in the field of art that is greater than your own. Indeed, they must be recognized as *experts.*

The word "expert" is related to the words "experience" and "experiment," which come from kindred Greek and Latin words whose meanings have to do with the idea of trying.There is an implication 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."[2] It can be helpful to consider the kind of special knowledge that this expert brings to your critique.

Instructors and guests alike have different personal histories, aesthetic sensibilities, interests, areas of expertise, and even political views. To whom do you listen? How do you select what is useful? How do you make sense of the opposing views and the seemingly irrational praise and censure that come your way? We have attempted here to create loose portraits of some of the most common types of experts that we have 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, which should be seen as incomplete sketches or mappings of the many and complex personalities found in art studios. Still, an understanding of the differences within our panoply of experts, and an idea of what makes each of them tick, might help you glean the message from the medium, and make constructive sense out of your critique. Again, bear in mind that these are not hard-and-fast categories, and that many instructors have qualities and worldviews that spread across the categories.

Types of Critics

Connoisseurs 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."[3] 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 is 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 and authenticity, as well as conventions of beauty and appropriateness—the assumption being that these qualities are readily apparent to the trained, sensitive viewer. The famous critic Clement Greenberg was considered such a connoisseur. Remember the scene in the movie *Pollock* when Greenberg walks into the artist's studio. After slowly perusing all the new paintings, he points to just one of them and makes the declaration that it isn't bad.

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 will be up for debate.

This brings up a few questions worth considering. We might ask, for example, what makes an artwork good or successful? Or if and how we can define beauty. Is beauty a universal quality readily assessed 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 there 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 might it 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."

Judges All critiques involve the judging of work, but an instructor who appears to operate with a large degree of detachment and without any predetermined position might be typecast 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.

If you hear something like the following 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 knew that thigh in the carving piece was a problem and struggled with it all week, or you already knew the mirror-hanging device in the video piece was a disaster. In other instances, you may disagree: actually you had planned to paint the wood and ran out of time, so you have no interest in the wood grain, and 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, or only the positive?

Evaluators *Evaluators* are similar to judges, but the evaluator's assessment of work is driven by a clearly stated and objective set of criteria, which are often drawn from goal-specific assignments. 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 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 those goals. With evaluators, you might bring your greatest achievement into the critique room and be dismissed for failing to follow the assignment guidelines.

Specialists *Specialists* differ from evaluators in that they are most concerned with a particular expertise in a given field. This may be special knowledge of a material or process or some unique life experience. A specialist operates in a manner similar to that of an evaluator. 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 will be directed at the particulars of specialized materials, media, or processes. Your instructors who are most confident addressing media-specific issues or technical problem-solving in critique usually conduct themselves as specialists.

Keep in mind that most specialists will be focused on one 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 to 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 experience—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.

Narcissists Of the many instructor archetypes that we have encountered, narcissists are often the most loved and the most resented. As in the Greek myth about a boy who fell in love with his own reflection,[4] the *narcissist* is inclined to praise and censure work according to how well it mimics his own, both in look and in method. Therefore, if you are drawn to this instructor's work, you may find it immensely satisfying to study under his tutorship. Indeed, you will feel that you have become part of a special community or a traditional *atelier.*

The narcissist-conducted critique is typically a performance. The critique is an event, a reward to initiates for all their hard work. But it can also be a place of public humiliation for the lazy, the untalented, and the nonbelievers. The criteria vary according to the specifics of the narcissist's own practice, but his work is often the standard and the goal. Students are often invited to speak once they have established that their views are in tandem with this instructor, or when they might be used as foils against which he can argue his own points.

This instructor can feel very powerful. You may notice that the decisions that you make in your work begin to rely almost exclusively on *his* eye, even what you imagine he would think or say. For many students, this can be positive. You have put yourself under his guidance and he will teach you what you need to know. You also like the comfortable feeling of his clear and unambiguous answers. (So many other teachers seem to answer your questions with questions!) Nevertheless, when you encounter a narcissist, an important thing to be mindful of is a feeling that you have lost your own center. You have given up your own power and judgment, and you are relying completely on his. This is a red flag: It is always healthy to try actively to pursue a wide range of perspectives.

Drill Sergeants The *drill sergeant* relies on his 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 hoping for his approval, you come to the critique with your best efforts. But the drill sergeant is hard to satisfy, and this only whets your resolve to try even harder. It is 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, the drill sergeant always creates in you the vague feeling that you have not done enough. When, at the term's end, the drill sergeant is pleased, many students leave with a sense of tremendous accomplishment.

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."

If you respond well to a kick in the pants, critiques with a drill sergeant can work wonders. But if you need a bit of encouragement, the drill sergeant style may feel ineffective or even mean-spirited. Drill sergeants can inspire and motivate you, but if you are not very 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 your own sense of self-motivation. The tough love approach of the drill sergeant may be appropriate at some stages in your studio growth and less so at others. Some experienced artists maintain that such strict discipline is needed early on in the game; others argue 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.

Unconditional Supporters The flip side of the hard-to-please drill sergeant is the *unconditional supporter.* An authority figure offering unconditional support defuses any argument and derails 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 positive reinforcement can best bolster the self assurance that one needs to develop a confident and original artistic voice. Whereas drill sergeants are sometimes revered simply because they are so stingy with praise, unconditional supporters may be distrusted because they appear to be so wishy-washy.

Supportive remarks may be appropriate in building confidence, but if overused and not balanced with criticism, the absence of clear critical content in critique can make it ineffective. Critiques built entirely on feel-good supportive remarks can also lead to an attitude among the group that the critique is meaningless. Try and separate out the substance of what your instructors say from their personal teaching styles.

Philosophers and Theorists Philosophers and Theorists share similar styles. *Philosophers* get their authority through the world of seemingly obscure ideas that they bring into the critique room. They see the works being critiqued as an avenue for asking philosophical questions. Indeed, the works act as a kind of a permission slip for asking esoteric abstract questions. Critique discussion with philosophers can be some of the most interesting and some of the least practical. 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.

Theorists often use specialized language as a kind of power over the group. Indeed, language is used to project the theorist's worldview, and your work is often evaluated by how well it illustrates theories and paradigms that challenge or critique our everyday assumptions. Unlike philosophers who seem to take pleasure in discovering profound questions raised by your work (ones that even you did not know were there), theorists may reject your work if it does not function within specific conceptual constructs. With theorists, concept trumps craft. And for students with a conceptual orientation, this style of instruction can be extremely rewarding.

Because both 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 student in need of formal or crafting advice may try to redirect the conversation back to the work itself. That said, if you are open to these more intellectual teachers, you are likely to finish the semester with a great reading list and a swarm of new and interesting ideas in your head. In other words, this style of instruction can be a wonderful source of content for your work.

Visiting Artists, Curators, Gallerists, or Critics You probably, at some point, will have your work critiqued by a visiting artist or critic, either in a group setting or in a private session. These visits can be some of the most stimulating and nerve-racking. The studio visitor will be reacting to what he sees without any prior knowledge of your work. He may or may not be accustomed to looking at student work or work-in-progress.

Such visitors are notoriously unpredictable. Some ask you questions in order 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 seeing your work for the first time, is that there is the possibility for a brutally honest 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 see your work in a cold public light and also to consider what to present and how you want to organize that presentation.

Critiques with Faculty Groups

Faculty Groups That Argue Faculty that critique in groups often 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 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, and the exposed nuances that we begin to see beyond the obvious, ideological, and narrow present.

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 experiences, 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 structured into graduate studio programs to assess work at scheduled intervals.

Every faculty group has a dynamic all its own, which varies according to who is 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 they may 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 all involved! 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 may come and go; there may be no formal order that designates who should begin and with what topic. Some may 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! Do not 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.

Many Distinct Voices in the Group You will likely encounter instructors or other experts accustomed to critiquing alone embedded in faculty groups. They may 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 may make subjective declarations particularly on matters of aesthetic value in tones that seem to say, "But is this not evident to *everyone*?" A specialist may 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 distinct voices can become a cacophony of monologues, where everyone is talking and no one is listening.

When such 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 biennial above and below the equator, and holds her own when debating art theory. Another seems almost psychic, making comments about your work that you sense are deep, but you are not sure why or how they 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 to obscure theoretical texts, to fascinating and eccentric subjective responses? How do you process