The Critique Handbook
A Sourcebook and Survival Guide

Kendall Buster and Paula Crawford
CONTENTS

Preface v
Acknowledgments vii
Introduction: What Is a Critique? ix

SECTION I: Framing the Discussion

Chapter One Formal Matters 3
Chapter Two The Story It Tells 46
Chapter Three Making and Taking 80
Chapter Four The Work in the World 85

SECTION II: Having the Discussion

Chapter Five Critique Dynamics 93
Chapter Six Critique Preparation and Exercises 120
Index 145
PREFACE

One can picture the art school critique as a small point, like a rest area, along the continuous line of a student’s studio practice. It’s a place to stop, check your direction, look at the map if necessary, clear the trash out of the car, and generally refresh yourself for the next leg of the journey. It is neither a destination, nor is it the path itself. But it can be useful, as a kind of systems check and place to reflect on the purpose and progress of your passage.

In the following pages, we have attempted to offer a variety of languages, vantage points, and practical structures for viewing and analyzing works of art. Conceding that there cannot be a single system for the evaluation of art, but rather a network of interlocking languages based on sometimes incompatible assumptions, we’ve isolated some of the larger spheres of influence in an attempt both to examine and connect them.

This book is derived from our own experiences both as students and as teachers of art and was motivated by the realization that there are no maps or guidebooks for the critique, as far as we know, that really parse and scrutinize this strange ritual with an eye to making participation in it useful and even illuminating. Indeed any good critique relies on a free flow of ideas as they run parallel to, in contradiction with, or are even embodied by works of art. We have structured our book to reflect this, with all of the inevitable overlaps and repetitions. Forgive us for this. If at times this book reads like a laundry list of options, it should be taken in the spirit of the kind of brainstorming that critiques themselves inspire when fresh eyes examine works of art.

The book is organized into two main sections. Section One, Framing the Discussion, consists of four chapters, which present ways to think about and discuss studio work. Ideas are presented on their own terms and through the imagining or reconstruction of critique situations. Section Two, Having the Discussion, examines the critique itself as a complex and dynamic discourse played out by human actors. It offers concrete advice on preparing for, engaging in, and getting the most out of art school critiques.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is a collaborative project in the fullest sense, born out of many conversations and experiences that the two of us have shared, first as art students and then as artists, teachers of art, and friends. While jointly conceived and written, this collaboration could not have been realized without our colleagues and students at the Corcoran College of Art and Design, George Mason University, and Virginia Commonwealth University, where much of the raw material was generated through our experiences in the studios and critique rooms. We have also drawn on our experiences as students at the San Francisco Art Institute, Yale University School of Art, and the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program.

We would particularly like to thank Siemon Allen, Jeffrey Brown, and Sophie and Jack Crawford-Brown for their infinite patience and support throughout every stage of the writing of this book. We are deeply grateful to Suzanne Carbonneau for her help, Ledelle Moe for her encouragement, Kris Dahl and Morton Brown for their salient advice, and to our fathers, Ralph Buster and John Crawford, for their unwavering belief in us.
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_