

# The Critique Handbook

A Sourcebook and Survival Guide

**Kendall Buster & Paula Crawford**

*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.

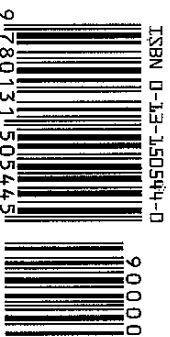
**Kendall Buster**, whose extensive exhibition record spans national and international venues, is the recipient of an American Academy of Arts and Letters award. Buster is Associate Professor of Sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University.

**Paula Crawford** has had exhibitions in the United States, Canada, and Latin America, and directs the painting program at George Mason University, where she is Associate Professor.

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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*

## **SECTION ONE**

### ***Framing the Discussion***

## 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 at times 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.