

CRITIQUES

The following outline is only one approach to critiquing and a rather exhaustive one. Use what is useful to help you set up your own approach.

My hope is that an outline such as this will show you how to think systematically. To understand a work (whether someone else's or your own) requires a full look--an awareness of the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and aesthetic powers within the piece. The full look develops when you consciously pursue a solid structural approach to each piece you see. Eventually, you will no longer need to be deliberate about it and can depend on the fact that you are receiving from and giving to the piece all that you can.

I. Initial reception

- Tell the artist what happened to you when you first saw the piece. For example: "I first felt bored. I mean, I looked at it because I had to, not because I wanted to."
- If your response changed after further examining the piece, tell the artist this too: "But then I noticed how you structured the figures: the man who falls out of the picture on the right, the huge hand that thrusts into the surface. I began to follow the movement of the piece and realized how carefully you put it together. I thought about each figure walking in his own little world. The way you placed each figure affirmed the uncertain look on each face."

II. Pointing

- Point out what areas within the piece you believe work well. (loud, rich, energetic, full, delicate, subtle, gentle, still, carrying conviction)
- Are there places that don't seem right? Even if you can't articulate it, point these areas out. You are providing input for the artist. (artificial, hollow, careless, flat)

III. Discussing the content

- What is the piece about? What are the central feelings, ideas, beliefs, and messages that you think the artist is exploring? Are the artist's intentions clear? Subtle? Confused?
- For whom was the piece made? Where does it fit into our culture? Into its own culture? Is it critical or accepting of the space it lives in? Does the work have cross-cultural potency? Will it "live through history"? Does it matter?
- Think of a metaphor, word, or phrase which you believe best summarizes the piece. This helps the artist grasp perceptions

and reactions that neither he/she nor you may be fully aware of. Don't struggle for words--play around. If you want to, use the following exercises to help you.

- a) If the object were a voice, how would it sound? (shouting, whining, whispering, laughing)
What if it were a type of weather, a kind of terrain, an animal, a plant, with fruit, a musical instrument, a tune, etc.?
- b) If the artwork were a book, what kind would it be? (comedy, tragedy, drama, mystery, romance--or novel, short story, epic, poem, myth, classic, etc.) Tell the story.
- c) Explain the piece in terms of a particular clothing fashion. What kind of model would be standing by the piece if it were an art photo? Does the work transcend the style, envelop it, or fall short of it?
- d) Imagine that the piece evolved from one artwork and is evolving into another. Tell where it came from and where it is going.
- e) If the artwork were a person, what kind of character would it have? Job? What would the person look like?

IV. Examining the object

- Study the basic aesthetic elements within the piece. This can help the artist determine the strengths and weaknesses of the individual parts of the piece.
- Composition:
How does the eye move across and through the piece?
How does repetition (of shape, color, scale) work within the unity of the piece? Is there rhythm, pattern? Where is the contrast in the unity?
How does the composition deal with the edges of the piece?
How does it deal with the scale of the piece?
- Color and value range:
Is the value range wide or narrow? The color range?
How does the color and value work with the structure and attitude of the piece?
- Form and space:
How are the forms developed? Lines or masses? Natural or distorted approach to form? Positive/negative shapes? Are the forms and shapes believable?
What kind of space does the piece hold? Deep, shallow? Overlapping, transparent? Western perspective, oriental perspective? Shifting or stable space?
- Technique:
Collage, tromp-l'oeil? Loose, tight? Acrylic, oil, tempera, stone, clay, mixed? Texture implied or actual?
Is the use of materials compatible to the intent?
Is the use of the materials compatible to the material itself?
- Visual attitude of the piece:
Is there a sense of care, patience, thoughtfulness, daring?
Does the work feel labored, plodding or automatic and within the capabilities of the artist? Was it too easy for the artist?
Do you think the artist's time was well-spent?

V. Feeling

--After going through this procedure--after gathering information about the piece--what are your new feelings for the piece? Have they altered?

FOR THOSE DOING THE CRIT

- I. If you don't take time, you can't give an honest reaction. Look at the piece at least twice; that is, two separate times.
- II. Your initial critique can be followed up with other reactions. You don't have to say it all at once and then shut up for good. Someone else's statement may remind you of something. The artist needs to know whether a reaction is common or rare. On the other hand, don't grab all the talking time.
- III. Never quarrel with another's reaction. If someone reports something that seems wacky or contradictory, listen openly. Maybe what you see is accurate and he is wrong--but maybe he sees something you aren't seeing. We each bring our particular mood, temperament, and experience to our critique. Use the situation to sharpen your eyesight and broaden your opinions.
- IV. No kind of reaction is wrong. Insufficient, perhaps, but not wrong. Your reaction is one part of the whole group's reaction. The group's reaction is one part of the total response that the piece will get during its lifetime. Just keep in mind that your reaction is for the purpose of building a stronger artwork, not for the destruction of the artist.
- V. Although no reaction is wrong, you still need to work hard to see accurately. If your reaction is "I don't like it," or "Not another one of those!" state it but don't quit looking. Figure out why you don't like it or why you feel its kitsch. Sometimes a piece needs a second or third look in order to discover the things hidden within it.
- VI. You are always right and always wrong. Always right--no one else knows what you perceive and experience. Always wrong--you never see or experience enough. Be simultaneously sure of yourself and humble.

FOR THE ARTIST BEING CRITTED

- I. Be quiet and listen. Often you may have to bite your tongue. Do it.
 - Don't give long introductions. You will learn more if the viewers are uncertain about what the piece is, why it was done, who it is for, and what materials you used. After the critique, you can give them input.
 - No apologies: "I didn't have time to finish," or "It's not how I want it to be," or "I struggled with this thing over and over before I got it this far."
 - Never say what you want your piece to do for the viewer. You want trustworthy, honest reactions.
 - Don't get defensive: "What do you mean, you think...?" Take the responses in and later reflect on them as a whole.
 - People will ask questions: "Why did you do...?" or "What was the reason...?" Before you answer the question, find out why they asked.

II. You won't be able to understand everything you are being told. Instead, try to understand how people tell you their reactions. Their attitudes are as important as their words.

III. Don't be tyrannized by what is being said.

--Listen openly or you will scare them into holding back.

--Suppose they all agree that something you made is lousy. Be clear about why it didn't work for them. Maybe one small change would solve it. Maybe they are wrong.

--Suppose some people thought your work was too sentimental (too unclear, too intellectual, too common or whatever). What does that mean? Are they bothered by the sentimentality or is it actually some other problem that makes the sentiment stick out awkwardly?

IV. Remember who has which job.

--The "critics" give responses and evaluations. Their only responsibility is to make sure their attitudes are helpful, not destructive.

--You decide what to do with their responses and evaluations. You decide whether the problems they brought up are genuine problems. Sometimes they aren't. But don't avoid problems. If you decide there is a genuine problem, follow your chosen solution. There are many ways to solve a problem--your solution is yours alone and belongs to your piece.

V. You are always right and always wrong. Always right--your decision is final. It is your work, the product of your development. Always wrong--you cannot dispute their experiences and perceptions.

****GENERAL THOUGHTS****

If you are doing a written critique, your approach will likely be a bit more logical than one done in a group. Written crits invite sketching the piece and reading materials written by or about the artist.

Group critiques seem to work best when set in a time frame. If a group can't keep itself together, appoint a moderator.

Group critiques for one artist with several pieces will run differently than a group critique for several artists with one piece each, or for one artist with only one piece. Be pliable.