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### How to Critique

Critique of artwork by instructors or peers is the standard form of evaluation used in most studio art courses. Without it, the student has little sense of what has been accomplished, other than some idea of whether directions have been followed, which in itself serves little purpose. In order to move forwards as a studio artist, you must become confident and self-directed in the studio. This involves building technical skills and knowledge while learning to synthesize diverse influences and information in creating original style and narrative in your work. Among the advantages of pursuing these objectives in an academic setting is the opportunity for individual and group critique. The critique challenges and tests you on several levels. It requires that you present your work to others for critical appraisal, it tests your ability to intellectually articulate materials, process, technique, concept, intent, and narrative in reference to your work and the work of others, and it builds your confidence in art and design.

In the critique, we talk about what works and what doesn't in a piece or a group of pieces, sometimes in terms of particular assignments, and usually in terms of the work's overall success and the personal and artistic growth displayed. The evolution of craftsmanship, concept, design, and originality in your work are the primary indicators of successful studio art education, and much of your accomplishment is revealed in your ability to actively participate in critical dialogue.

Your artwork serves as a prop for the important learning that takes place during critique, when we discuss whether the work is effective. It provides the opportunity and catalyst for discussion of conceptual, technical, and design issues relative to each piece. With that in mind, it is your responsibility to contribute to every critique in a constructive and proactive way and listen carefully to what others say about the work.

The traditional format for art criticism includes four steps: *description*, *analysis*, *interpretation*, and *judgment*. In this case we are dealing with individual and group critique, rather than written criticism, so we can dispense with description.

#### Analysis

Consider all the different levels on which you can critically evaluate the work. Think about materials, technique, craftsmanship, concept, formal design, and utility. Has the artist used materials and techniques effectively with good craftsmanship, appropriate to formal and narrative aspects of the piece? Has the artist used color, value, and texture effectively. Are formal design aesthetics key to the success of the work, and if so, does the overall design work visually? Does the overall design seem unified or disconnected?

If the work is functional, has the artist consciously and successfully dealt with issues of ergonomics and utility? Does the work make you want to use it or see it used? Does it seem receptive to use, as if it will gracefully and effectively fulfill its utilitarian purpose?

### **Interpretation**

Try to come to some understanding of how you feel about the work and why. What is your personal interpretation of the work? What is your experiential response? In other words, how does the work make you feel? Do you have some sense of what the work is trying to accomplish or communicate? A key factor in any critical appraisal of artwork in the academic setting is the determination of whether the artist successfully implemented her/his concept and intent. This is especially important in contemporary art, and the artist should be able to define the concepts and intent behind the work. Sometimes you will clearly perceive concept and intent in the work, and if so, you should comment on it. If you cannot get a sense of this, then ask the artist. In response, she/he should be able to discuss concept and intent, and it is often the case that such discussion during critique will help the artist to clarify these issues.

### **Judgment**

Based on what the artist has to say about concept and intent, offer opinions about whether you think the work is successful, and discuss the reasons why. If you are familiar with the artist's work over time, discuss areas in which the work shows significant growth and development, and areas that need more attention and resolution. Be fair and respectful in your assessment of the work, taking into consideration the artist's skill level, the expectations of particular assignments, and other pertinent factors. Once you have formulated opinions and suggestions, be honest and straightforward in stating them.

When you make critical comments about someone's work, be sure to offer useful information. Give the person somewhere to go with your comments - some positive direction. It does no good to say "This piece is very interesting," or "I like this piece," or "This piece doesn't work," unless you can explain why you feel that way. Be specific about what has been accomplished. What makes the piece work? What are its strengths? What are its weaknesses? For every criticism, make suggestions about what might be done to improve the work. It's appropriate to say that some part of a piece or a whole piece doesn't work for you, but you need to explain the reasons for your criticism and offer suggestions.

The strengths of a work are often best emphasized in comparison to its weaknesses, and almost every piece has strengths and weaknesses. This is one of the most important strategies for effective critique of artwork. Search for both the strong and weak aspects of the piece, and offer criticism that compares and contrasts the two. Don't be confrontational unless the work really calls for it. There's no gain in a critique style that's always warm and fuzzy, with everyone being artificially nice for fear of hurting someone's feelings, but at the same time, don't make it harder than it needs to be. There's no excuse for cruelty or meanness in a critique.

When your own work is being critiqued, if useful information is not forthcoming, ask questions of those critiquing your work. Don't be hesitant about this. You have nothing to lose and so much to gain. Remember that the critique is one of the most important learning dynamics in studio art, and you must be proactively involved to make the most of it.