

# Observations on forms and patterns of critique

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*What is the best thing a critique can do?  
What is the worst thing a critique can do?*

Critique of student work, by peers and faculty, is foundational to the way we currently teach art. We are assumed to understand what is meant by critique and to have similar expectations of how that practice unfolds. Rarely is this actually the case. What follows are observations on forms critique may take, as well as notes on emergent patterns. These notes, neither comprehensive nor definitive, are intended simply to shake up habits of participation.

## FORMS

**Firing Squad.** Named for the direction of inquiry and for the emotional effects produced on the body of the one questioned. The student is expected to defend her work against a barrage of questions or comments. In some instances, as in an oral dissertation defense, the questioning continues, ever more specific, until the student can no longer answer the questions. While what is being measured is the extent to which the student can continue to answer questions, there is another element to this structure - everyone ends having failed. Whatever other benefits this method of questioning may hold, it also guarantees that every student leaves the room having just failed. This does something to the student. We must consider how this fits into the whole of the institution's methods of evaluation. In some institutions this is considered the most rigorous form of critique.

**Don't Kill the Baby.** Janet Desaulniers, professor and former chair of the Writing Program at SAIC, structures her writing workshops around this mandate. "You're stupid about what you've done. You don't know yet what you've made." A thing arrives in class to be discussed and it's weeks, days, maybe only hours old. You treat it accordingly. You coo at it a bit, you tell it what it looks like it's going to be, you ask it some questions. You don't mock the infant's lack of verbal ability or motor skills. You encourage. You keep it alive. You put things in front of it to see of what it wants more. She urges a consideration of context - explains that the writing programs students now go through to get master's degrees borrow their format from the interactions between writer and editor at the time of a work's acceptance for publication. The editor made improvements, small or large, moved things around, polished bits. The work was already accepted, was already deemed worthy when this tinkering was introduced. Importing this editing approach into a writing program highlights the failures of a work, but without the larger context of established worthiness. A work has barely emerged and already it is taken apart. This may not be the best way to develop writers. Context matters, we forget this.

**Creative Response.** As modeled by writer Matthew Goulish and Goat Island Performance Group. The word critical means dividing something up into parts, discerning and observing the structure of those parts. The choice of what parts to accentuate is a subjective one. Creative response is a practice of responding to creation with more creation. It is against the habit of separating critical from creative thinking. It recognizes that attention amplifies and that habits of thinking develop easily. A mind practiced in finding the flaws in others work will have a hard time not turning on its own creative work. To make a creative response is respecting someone else's work through close observation of what that work does and of how it is structured. It is to make oneself vulnerable to being inspired by some aspect of the work and to allow that moment to be the seed for the creation of a response.

*Goat Island Summer School. Summer 2003. When one person or group performs, two individuals are assigned to offer a response the next day. They watch the piece with everyone else and note what they find most miraculous. The next morning they offer a three minute performance - an amplification and extension of the miracle. Sometimes the relationship to the previous performance is evident, sometimes not. Over the course of the three-week workshop, a charge builds. One thing inspires the next, ideas and images are distilled, repeated. It's not so important here to verbalize what it is a classmate is doing, just that I give it attention and respond with action of my own.*

**What? So what? Now what?** So simple. Keep it for when you're feeling dull or sleepy or don't know what to do with this thing that's before you. **What?** Really just an articulation of what you see before you. Include observations that seem too obvious. Physically what's it made of? Can you discern different parts? Where does your attention linger? How do you feel looking at it? Slow down your thoughts as you look and put them on loudspeaker. This gives the student feedback on how the work is seen. **So what?** Build from what you or someone else has said in direct observation. Why are these things important? What aspects of the work draw lines of association to things outside the work (other artists, social concerns, pop culture)? What contradictions or complications arise in looking? Can you frame these contradictions neutrally – without valuing them as positive or negative? **Now what?** Where does all this take you? What might happen next? Why must X be resolved to allow Y to stand out? Sequence matters. You have grounded your suggestions in observation. A critical piece of information will be received differently when a student feels their work has been looked at closely than when he hears first what fails. Relationship matters here, establish it each time.

## DYNAMICS

Regardless of the form a particular critique takes, there are habits of communication and thought that inhabit our interactions with others. Keeping these in mind may help make a critique function the way you want it to.

**Communication is always double (at least).** There is the content of what we say and there is how we say it. Think back to middle school. "I like your dress." Said in one tone of voice or by a friend, this means "I like your dress." Said in another tone of voice, perhaps with a slight sneer, or by someone we know doesn't like us, this means "you look ridiculous in that dress," or "that is an ugly dress." Always information and a force. Gifted teachers can deliver information about the failure of some aspect of a piece and still leave us excited about continuing our work. We receive the criticism folded up within the strong sense that they wish for us to be successful. If you find yourself surprised by a strong reaction to something you are being told about your work, dissect the communication into these two parts – ask yourself what content is being conveyed, and what the force of the communication is - what this person appears to want for you. Consider this in your own communication with other students.

**Attention amplifies.** The object of your affection has started wearing a red wool cap. In any crowd, on any street, you see red wool caps. There aren't any more than before, but now you're primed to notice them. Our mind builds on what's there. We want our students, and our peers, to keep making work and to build that work in stronger and more complex ways. It is much more difficult to articulate what a thing is trying to become or has the potential to be than it is to explain how it fails or what it is not. Giving attention to what is working, to what has potential allows a student to continue thinking about that. Spending too much time on what doesn't work leaves the student likely to do the same - a state of mind less likely to generate strong work.

**Naptime.** In all-day critiques, people are not in the same space a half-hour after lunch as they are mid-morning. We function differently at different times of day. It's more difficult to be attentive at some times than at others. Pace yourself, be aware as both giver and receiver of feedback how the information or enthusiasm you sense may be as much a function of the state a group is in as of your own work.

**Group norms.** We all know that norms get set in groups, sometimes very quickly. Some people exert greater influence in a group than others. If you find yourself in disagreement with the general direction of the conversation - whether because the information seems less relevant than something else not being talked about, or the tone seems excessively harsh or gentle - you are in a position to shift the direction just by saying something else. Consider going back to observation and building a new line of inquiry out from there. "My attention goes to this area here, and it seems to do something different than what we've been talking about" or "I see what you guys are saying but I don't get that feeling at all." If a single direction is allowed to dominate the discussion, the student whose work is being critiqued gets a skewed sense of the work. Take

responsibility for articulating your position, especially when it isn't the prevailing one. Yes, you might appear the freak, but hey - there you are, say what you see. Plus its good practice for being a citizen in today's United States. If you find yourself annoyed by the direction a conversation is going, or by a tangent that has left behind all connection with the work, but don't know how else to re-direct, try to re-set the conversation by returning to observation. Likely someone else will take things up from there.

*A visiting artist came to talk to a graduate seminar - she had given an intense and idiosyncratic lecture to the school as a whole and now, afterwards, we had several hours to talk with her as a smaller group. As soon as she sat down with us we started to lob questions at her. Why did you X? Why didn't you Y? This went on for a good hour. I watched her getting defensive and giving us less and less information. I found myself frustrated by the aggressiveness of the group. Watching, I decided it had something to do with a number of students whose lives were lived from the neck up. I took a chance and in a lull I spoke briefly about how the lecture had affected me physically - how I'd found my breath slowing down in rhythm with the video being shown - and how at the end of that first period of the lecture I found myself in an entirely different physical state than when I'd first walked in. How this shift of state made me more receptive to her lecture, I thought, then I would otherwise have been. She softened with this first communication that wasn't a question. We got better information. Perhaps some felt the first portion was a more rigorous critique, but I felt it was creating a tension which interfered with our ability to learn from one another. I wanted something different and went for it. Had she not wanted the same, or had the others in the class persisted in the earlier approach, at least I would have made a push for what I wanted to see happen. Make the situation work for you, don't leave it up to those who speak first or loudest. It's your time.*

If you are the person being critiqued - you can also shift the tone. If the conversation is going down a track you find unhelpful, try to move it. If it's too soft to be helpful, ask outright "What about the work fails?" Or if praise has been offered to one aspect, ask for someone to play devil's advocate against it. How do you turn down the heat on a critique that has become too harsh to be useful to you? You can take this head on and argue in defense of your work. This can be difficult, especially if work is still new, and you yourself are not yet sure of its value. You can try to make a lateral shift away from the work itself. For example, asking for suggestions of other artists whose work seems related and worth looking up. I don't mean to imply that you should never hear out a challenging critique, but if you know for yourself that it's gone past the point where you *can* hear what's being said, or that it's becoming something you'll need to recover from - then do what you can to take care of yourself. You can always say "thank you, let's move on."

[First prepared in 2004 when I was a teaching assistant in Anne Wilson's Time, Material, and the Everyday class, SAIC. Updated several times over the years. No longer in active use.]