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Newall, Michael (2019) *Cries, Consensus and Criticality: Making Artists in the Contemporary Art School*. In: Brisbin, Chris and Thiessen, Myra, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Criticality in Art, Architecture and Design*. Routledge, London and New York, pp. 14-31. ISBN 978-1-138-18923-2.

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The Art School Crit

Michael Newall

Introduction

Crits are a form of teaching used in art, architecture and design. No history of the crit exists, but it is clear that they are a relatively recent development in art schools, their origins appearing to lie in the 1960s. They are documented at Central St Martins School of Art and Coventry College of Art at this time (where they were known as group criticisms), although they did not become almost ubiquitous in UK art teaching until later.¹ In the US they are also recognized as a “mainstay of studio art teaching” as one prominent teacher has put it.² Crits also exist in architecture and design training, although their character and history is somewhat different in these disciplines, appearing to go back to the 1940s and ’50s.³ My focus is on crits in art schools, but much of what I say can also be applied with some revisions to crits in architecture and design.

In art schools, crits mostly fit with the following broad model, which I take as standard.⁴ As one leading UK art school puts it, a crit involves a group of staff and their assigned students meeting “to enable the student to present and discuss their work and receive critical feedback”.⁵ The student first presents their work to the group of staff and other students, and explain their intentions for it. The group then responds with a substantial amount of freedom to both work and statement with questions and feedback, so that a conversation develops about the work between the student and the group. Students are expected to act on the feedback they have received. Crits vary in duration, but are typically at least thirty minutes in length.⁶

¹ For crits at St Martins, see Elena Crippa, “From ‘Crit’ to ‘Lecture-Performance’,” in *The London Art Schools: Reforming the Art World, 1960 to Now*, ed. Nigel Llewellyn (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 137–138. For crits at Coventry, see Charles Madge and Barbara Weinberger, *Art Students Observed* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973). (Coventry is discussed under the name Midville College of Art.). Madge and Weinberger record a student using the term “crit.”, the period indicating abbreviation (129). The use is in a different context, but it suggests the currency of the term among students. Sarah Rowles’ interviews show that crits were not widely established in UK art schools in the 1970s. (Sarah Rowles, ed., *Art Crits: 20 Questions: A Pocket Guide* (London: Q-Art, 2013), 89–93.

² Laurie Fendrich, in “Art Schools: A Group Crit,” *Art in America* 95 (2007): 103.

³ Kathryn H. Anthony, *Design Juries on Trial: The Renaissance of the Design Studio* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1991), 11.

⁴ One variant is the ‘silent’ crit, in which the student does not speak, at least until the end of the crit, so that the group responds to the work unmediated by the student’s own account of it.

⁵ Programme specification, BA (Hons) Fine Art, Goldsmiths University of London, 2014 (<http://www.gold.ac.uk/media/ba-fine-art.pdf>). At Goldsmiths the crit is known (uniquely so far as I am aware) as a ‘convenor’.

⁶ James Elkins mentions examples of crits 30 and 45 minutes in duration, but has run crits of three hours duration himself. (James Elkins, *Why Art Cannot Be Taught* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 119–20, 180–85.) Lucy

An important feature of crits in many art schools is the role of the student's peers in giving feedback. I take this as a distinctive feature of crits. In important respects, student opinions can and often do carry as much weight as those of teachers in this context. Broadly speaking this also means that I am less concerned with crits that are in effect 'open juries' in which the class is present, but usually only listening, while teachers discuss student work in the process of assessing it. This format is often used at the end of US MFA programmes, and is more common in architecture and design crits.⁷

My motivations and objectives are threefold. First, despite being so widespread, there are no accounts of just what crits teach, how they teach it, and why they are preferred to more conventional forms of teaching art. Crits have only occasionally been the subject of scholarly attention, James Elkins' work providing the only extensive treatments of the topic in art schools, and artists and teachers themselves have given crits little reflection, at least in print.⁸ I will begin by laying out the core of my account. It holds that a successful crit depends on the audience developing a *consensus* around the interests the work can hold. The notion of consensus is key to my account and I examine the nature of this consensus and what underlies it.

Second, the question of understanding what and how crits teach, gains urgency from concerns that have been raised about the effectiveness of crits, and the harm crits can cause students. Elkins has significant doubts about their effectiveness as a form of teaching, as do others. Crits are, Elkins says, "in effect ... simply too complicated to understand".⁹ Crits can also be harmful to students, most notably channeling hostility towards them in ways that those coming from outside art, architecture and design schooling can find shocking. Art historian Griselda Pollock has put this in the strongest terms, claiming that some students "have literally died of the experience".¹⁰ I examine various kinds of ineffective, hostile and otherwise failed crits. While it is

Soutter reports that Michael Asher holds crits at CalArts that run for "several hours" each. (Lucy Soutter, "What Lies Beneath," *Frieze* 101, (2006): 177.)

⁷ For MFA assessment crits, see Jori Finkel, "Tales From the Crit: For Art Students, May Is the Cruellest Month," *New York Times*, April 30, 2006, www.nytimes.com/2006/04/30/arts/design/tales-from-the-crit-for-art-students-may-is-the-cruellest-month.html. For a critical study of architecture and design crits, see Anthony, *Design Juries on Trial*.

⁸ Elkins, *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, esp. ch. 4; James Elkins, *Art Critiques: A Guide* (Washington D.C.: New Academia Publishing, 2011). Thierry de Duve provides another theoretically astute account of art schools, but does not discuss crits. (Thierry de Duve, "When Form has Become Attitude – And Beyond," in Stephen Foster and Nicholas de Ville, *The Artist and the Academy: Issues in Fine Art Education and the Wider Cultural Context* (Southampton: John Hansard Gallery, 1994).)

⁹ Elkins, *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, 112. Since crits are central to studio teaching, he concludes from this that art, in the context of the contemporary art school, cannot be taught.

¹⁰ Griselda Pollock, "Art, Art School, Culture: Individualism after the Death of the Artist," in *The Block Reader in Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 59.

clear that they do occur, I want to be clear that crits need not be like this – they can be reliably effective and certainly need not be so hostile as they sometimes are.

Third, I ask how crits influence art. Almost all professionally successful contemporary artists attend art school, increasingly studying to MA or MFA level and beyond in the UK, the US and Australasia.¹¹ Since crits are a dominant teaching method in these countries, they are therefore an experience almost all contemporary artists in these countries undergo. I argue that crits influence and shape the art of today by promoting a particular kind of *pluralism* in art, and they tend to do so regardless of the intentions of the teachers who run them. Pluralism has been a contentious feature in contemporary art, and I finish by examining how the pluralism that crits promote relates to another distinctive element in the contemporary art school teaching: critical theory. I show that the two can be complementary, but that there remains an irreconcilable tension between them.

Before beginning, it will help to say something about my approach. I have drawn on a range of empirical resources including documentation of and observations about crits made by others (which I cite throughout), as well as being informed by my own experiences, observations, and experiments with crits undertaken as a teacher (which I do not explicitly discuss here). Although I will not dwell on it, my approach has an affinity with the progressive theories of education developed by thinkers such as Paulo Freire, Lev Vygotsky and Ivan Illich. Notably, the reliance on a group of peers for feedback rather than a teacher has strong parallels with Freire's dictum that "[t]o teach is not *to transfer knowledge* but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge."¹² My project is primarily theoretical and descriptive, however, I also make some recommendations about how crits could be improved. Understanding what gives crits their distinctive educational value helps to show how

¹¹ According to Harold Rosenberg, "only one of ten of the leading artists of the generation of Pollock and de Kooning had a degree (and not in art), while of 'thirty artists under thirty-five' shown in *Young America 1965* ... the majority had BAs or MFAs". (Harold Rosenberg, "Educating Artists," in Harold Rosenberg, *The Definition of Art: Action Art to Pop to Earthworks* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972), 39.) Now, in the US, most professionally successful contemporary artists hold an MFA. Howard Singerman wrote in 1999 of the "unchallenged administrative success" of the degree. (Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 6.) In the UK and Australasia, the situation is much the same, with MA degrees being widely sought after. (Out of over 100 nominees for the Turner Prize since 1984 all but two have a BA qualification from an art school, and about half have a postgraduate qualification (such as an MA or MFA). I owe these statistics to Martin Lang.

¹² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy and Civic Courage*, trans. Patrick Clarke (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 30. See also Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), and Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973). I should add that I have seen no evidence that educational theory has played a role in the development or practice of crits.

they can more completely fulfill their potential, and the recommendations I make are in this spirit.¹³

1. Understanding crits

I take it that the value of crits is distinct from transfer of knowledge from teacher to student. If it were that, it could only be an inefficient and ineffective method of teaching compared to more conventional methods such as lectures, workshop instruction and so on. This is because any such method of teaching can only have its effectiveness compromised when presented in a crit format, where the other threads of conversation will confuse or obscure it. If a crit were really no more than an inferior form of some better understood type teaching, it would be impossible to plausibly account for the prevalence of the crit in art schools. So I take it that crits must instead achieve a distinctive pedagogical aim, and that must rely on their distinctive feature: the response of the group. How then does the group's response provide useful feedback or criticism for the student – and why is it more valuable, or have a value distinct from, simply seeking feedback from a teacher? Answering these questions will be the key to understanding crits, and it seems to me that in practical terms there is only one answer that can be given under these constraints.

One can think about any kind of teaching as guiding a student towards a state where that teaching is no longer needed.¹⁴ In the case of crits, it will ideally guide the student's work towards a state where it would meet (more or less) with the approval of the crit group. What does it take to get this approval? One requirement is that the student's own intentions for the work should roughly speaking be fulfilled. But more than that is needed, for the student's intentions must also be of the right kind. Broadly speaking, that happens when the group agrees with the student that their intentions are worthy, which is to say, that in fulfilling them the work has value as art. What qualities give a work this value? Donald Judd held that "a work needs only to be interesting", and I adopt his term 'interesting' to describe those qualities of the work that the viewer is able to value as artistic – that sustain what I shall call the viewer's 'interest'.¹⁵ The term as I use it is generic: it does not stipulate any particular properties (e.g. the aesthetic) that contribute to an artwork having value as art; rather

¹³ However, I have tried to avoid repeating existing advice to teachers and students. A small literature gives guidance about how best to administer crits (as a teacher) and negotiate them (as a student). See Elkins, *Why Art Cannot be Taught* and *Art Critiques: A Guide*; Kendall Buster and Paula Crawford, *The Critique Handbook: A Sourcebook and Survival Guide* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2006); Margo Blythman, Susan Orr, and Bernadette Blair, *Critiquing the Crit* (Higher Education Academy, 2007), www.adm.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/adm-hea-projects/learning-and-teaching-projects/critiquing-the-crit/; and Rowles, *Art Crits*.

¹⁴ Of course, teaching involves more than this – so this is a necessary rather than sufficient condition for teaching.

¹⁵ Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," in Donald Judd, *Complete Writings, 1959–1975: Gallery Reviews, Book Reviews, Articles, Letters to the Editor, Reports, Statements, Complaints* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art And Design, 1975).

it leaves open what kinds of properties might be of interest to the viewer.¹⁶ I should also distinguish my use of ‘interest’ from others. I do not mean a selfish bias or partiality; nor do I intend to invoke the philosophical distinction between interested and disinterested pleasure, where the former depends on the subject’s desire, and the latter does not.¹⁷

Now, the approval of the group occurs when the interest that the student has in their own work coincides or substantially overlaps with the interest that the group finds itself able to take in the work. The objective of the crit then is to get the student’s and group’s interests to converge towards such a state. This is typically a complex process. When a student gives an account of their work to the group, it usually includes an account of their interest in it – the kinds of interest they intend it to sustain – the reasons, they believe, that it is of value as art. The group’s initial response will typically include various accounts of what qualities its members find of interest, or where such qualities could be developed, in the work. Especially in the case of early student work, this will often diverge – sometimes dramatically – from the student’s intentions.

This can happen in two broad ways. First, the group may find that the intentions the student had for the work are unfulfilled. The work might be executed in such a way that the intended effects are not, or not fully, realized. This is what Michael Asher called the “disparity between what a person says their work is about and what is actually being observed”.¹⁸ Intentions can go unfulfilled in another way too: the group’s members may find themselves unable to take the interest in the work which the student themselves does. For example, it may be that formal or expressive effects that the student likes may not interest members of the group enough to sustain a successful artwork in their eyes. Autobiographical content, fascinating to the student, might not be of interest to others. A nude the student finds beguiling may not have this quality for the group, who might find it sexist or clichéd.

Second – and this applies particularly to early student work – the group will likely be interested in a range of aspects of the work that the student has not considered. Members of the group might be interested in its formal qualities, its art historical context, its social, political and ideological dimensions, to give some examples. Often a student might not even have thought about many of these things, but the group’s interest in them shows how such a meaning could be developed. A painter may not have thought about the support they paint on, the way the work is hung, nor about the social and political connotations that accompany their chosen subject matter, but the

¹⁶ Judd himself favoured what is often now called the phenomenological. My understanding of interest does not imply a preference for this quality over others – I mean it in the more open sense I describe.

¹⁷ The latter stems from Kant, and is much discussed in aesthetics. For a discussion of Kant’s and later views of it, see Nicholas Zangwill, “UnKantian Notions of Disinterest,” in *Kant’s Critique of the Power of Judgment: Critical Essays*, ed. Paul Guyer (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

¹⁸ Michael Baers, “Michael Asher (1943–2012): Parting Words and Unfinished Work,” *e-flux* 39 (2012), www.e-flux.com/journal/michael-asher-1943-2012-parting-words-and-unfinished-work/.

group can draw attention to all these things, and show how they might come to have some kind of value in the work. Lucy Soutter has made just this point about crits:

This kind of training forces students to extend their sense of engagement beyond their own experience and the image or object they have made to consider its edges and external supports ... [as well as] the phenomenological, social, historical, political and institutional implications of their work.¹⁹

In this way, the group's responses will show the student where her intentions are not fulfilled, and suggest ways in which the work could attain a broader and more complex significance, and in the process become more interesting to the group.

These are the *distinctive* pedagogical values of the crit: they are not, at least not effectively and reliably, achieved by other means. Consider a scenario in which a teacher could give a student precisely the same feedback in the context of an individual tutorial. If that were to occur, the feedback would have a different significance. From an individual teacher it is only ever a single point of view, reflecting their individual interests and commitments, which the student may not want to share. Where the group reaches a consensus it cannot be dismissed in this way – the agreement of the group carries a special kind of legitimacy – it indicates the potential for a reliable transpersonal significance. It will also tend to echo the judgements of the contemporary art world, a point I will return to later.

Following the crit, the student is expected to act on the responses they have received, often revising and developing both their work (either the work presented to the group, where it is a work in progress, or new work) as well as their intentions for it. The group will also typically give advice based on their responses: ideas about how to more successfully fulfill intentions, and about how those intentions could be revised or broadened to better interest the group. The student is not necessarily expected to take the advice offered by the group, but is expected to respond by, one way or another, working to make what they present next time more interesting to the group. That might involve taking up suggestions made by the group, or might involve other revisions.

My account raises a range of questions. Let me start from the theoretical side, before turning to the practical.

2. Consensus

My approach requires that the crit group reaches a *consensus* of some kind: a significant overlap in the individual responses of the group. Why should there be a consensus? Why should a series of subjective responses converge and overlap in the way I have described? There is no *a priori* reason why this should happen. We might well imagine, even expect, that a group of observers will respond in ways that generate no consensus. Consensus does not always occur in crits, but I believe that consensus is always possible, and in a well-run crit it will usually come about.

¹⁹ Soutter, "What Lies Beneath," 179.

Traditionally in aesthetics, a consensus of taste can be reached because individuals possess a ‘common’, that is shared, sense: a *sensus communis*. They share potentials of understanding and imagination that ensure that they have the *capacity* to respond in the same way to the same object. I will not commit to that eighteenth century approach, but I do draw from it the idea that consensus relies on a common sense. For Immanuel Kant, the *sensus communis* is “a power to judge that in reflecting takes account ... of everyone else’s way of presenting [i.e. apprehending something]”. Kant goes on, “Now we do this as follows: we compare our judgement not so much with the actual as with the merely possible judgements of others, and [thus] put our selves in the position of everyone else.”²⁰ Of course in a crit one does not need to imagine or infer the possible responses of others; the others are right there, furnishing actual responses. Group members can gauge their own capacity to respond as others do, and idiosyncratic responses can be identified and discounted, so establishing a consensus.

In an important respect we must vary from Kant. What Kant calls the “formal features” that serve as the basis for his conception of the aesthetic may be of interest to the group, but they are only likely to be one among many kinds of interests, and as I have said, I place no constraints on what these interests may be.²¹ Putting aside the much-argued case of the aesthetic, where a consensus emerges, it will depend on a range of shared dispositions of perception and thought.²² Psychology tells us that our perceptual capabilities are largely shared, determined as they are mostly by a common physiology and physical environment. Beyond this, our responses are also conditioned to a significant degree by a common social, technological and cultural environment. Such facts of common physiology, psychology, environment, society and culture allow a group to respond – to see, feel, understand art – in ways that overlap, and so shape the interests that the student and group are collectively capable of taking in art. That is to say, they give an assurance that consensus is possible.

This account allows that the common sense, as I shall now call it, need exist only as a potential in the group’s members at the outset of a crit. Most of the group might not know about a particular philosophical theory, and thus will not see how it is used in a student artwork; they might well be ignorant of an art historical style and, and how a student’s painting draws on and references it; or about events in recent politics or popular culture, and so miss an artwork’s commentary on these things. But as part of the process of the crit, they can come to recognize these things and evaluate for themselves how interesting the use they are put to is.

²⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), § 40. I draw here on Jennifer A. McMahon’s analysis of Kant (Jennifer A. McMahon, *Aesthetics and Material Beauty: Aesthetics Naturalized* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 6.)

²¹ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, § 40.

²² The common sense bears comparison to Pierre Bourdieu’s *habitus*: the relatively durable collection of dispositions for perception, thought and behaviour that are often held at an unconscious level. (Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of A Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.)) However I would not want to commit to the idea that these dispositions – especially perceptual dispositions – are always simply a matter of acculturation.

I take it that the facts of our physiology, perception and psychology are fairly unchanging, but the facts of environment, culture and technology are subject to change. Sometimes this change is quick; sometimes it is slow. The common sense, so far as it is based on these things, is changeable too, and this is reflected in the changing interests that a group will take in a work. New interests can arise – around changes in culture, ideas and technology for instance, and art students – like artists – can discover new ways to exploit these.

In the crit as I have described it, this common sense thus takes the place of older standards of judgement. No longer is the art student's work evaluated against some external standard, such as the classical style as in the case of the academic tradition, or against the practice of a single 'master' (as in masterclass or *atelier* teaching), or against nature.²³ So one might well ask, what makes this common sense an *appropriate* standard of judgement for the contemporary art school? With these earlier kinds of teaching, their appropriateness is clear: art of those times valued adherence to those standards of style and likeness to nature. In one sense, the answer in the case of crits is similar: the standard of judgement applied in crits is the same, or much the same, as that used to judge art in what is now the mainstream of the contemporary art world. That will take a little explanation, and I will return to this idea later. Another answer can also be given. The crit is historically unusual in the teaching of art in that it rejects the imitation of models. The standard of judgement the crit imposes does not come from a tradition, master or nature. Rather it comes from a community, of which the student is part, and the response of that community is, with some qualifications, free. In this way, the use of consensus as the standard of judgement reflects an aspiration of contemporary art inherited from Modernism: that traditional forms be overturned, and that direct experience of the contemporary world instead guide the artist.²⁴

3. Originality and self-expression

I said that there are some qualifications to the freedom of the group's response. These tend to be so much a part of our contemporary conception of art, that it may feel strange to call them constraints; rather, tend to be so deeply instilled in us that they are incorporated into our interests, and play a role in shaping the consensus. But I think it is worthwhile spelling these out clearly, for they further shape the workings of crits.

The first of these is *originality*: a student cannot repeat something that has already been done. One can draw from the work of others – forms, themes, strategies – and

²³ For the academy, see Nikolaus Pevsner, *Academies of Art: Past and Present* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1940). For masterclass and *atelier* training, see Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Phaidon, 1971). For one approach that sees nature as the proper model for art students, see John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1857).

²⁴ As Charles Harrison described it, Modernism involves "a commitment to skepticism in the face of received ideas and beliefs ... combined with an inclination to regard direct experience as the true source of knowledge." (Charles Harrison, *Modernism* (London: Tate, 1997), 18.)

one can quote or respond to the work of others, but one cannot reproduce it. Originality as a value in art has a history, and while its value has not gone unquestioned, there is no doubt that it has prevailed in the contemporary art world, as well as in artist education.²⁵ To fulfill the expectation for originality, students need to know something about contemporary art. In particular they have to be up to date with work using similar media and themes to their own. If they are not, they risk repeating the innovations of others, when they should be building on them, reacting against them, or otherwise finding their own approaches. The need for this been impressed into art students since the 1960s. John Baldessari tells a story that makes this point. “At CalArts I had a teaching assistant in ’70 who had a rubber stamp made that said: ‘Nice idea, but it’s already been done by,’ and there was a line and you filled it in.”²⁶ Rubber stamp aside, the expectation is standard in art schools. A typical UK Fine Arts degree specification requires its students to produce “an original body of work within the field of fine art.”²⁷ History and theory of art classes play some part in this aspect of artist training. But it is through crits that students receive tailored advice on these lines. Teachers (it is the teachers that are usually best able to give this kind of advice) seeing a student making work similar in some way to artist X, may say, “do you know the work of X?” Or (less gently), “how does this differ from X’s work?” Or (less gently again), “this has already been done by X”. Where this happens in a crit, the whole group comes to better know where the scope for originality lies, and where it does not.

²⁵ The postmodernist attacks made on originality from the 1970s are properly understood as targeting a different notion of originality from that I use here. That notion holds that canonical works of art are properly understood as *wholly* original – entirely a creation of the artist, and unrelated to the culture from which they emerged. Roland Barthes argued that something much closer to the reverse is true: that what an artist makes is rightly understood as an amalgam of sources. (Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in Roland Barthes, *Image Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978).) Rosalind Krauss gives a comparable account focusing on the visual arts, describing “the copy as the underlying condition of the original”. (Rosalind E. Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” in Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 162.)

²⁶ John Baldessari in ‘Conversation: John Baldessari and Michael Craig-Martin’, in *Art School: Propositions for the 21st Century*, ed. Steven Henry Madoff (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 52.

²⁷ Programme specification for MA Fine Art, University for the Creative Arts, UK, 2010, revised 2012, <http://webdocs.ucreative.ac.uk/MA%20Fine%20Art%20Programme%20Spec-1329306960214.pdf>. Sometimes it is said that art student work is not original. For an example, see Grayson Perry’s and Gillian Wearing’s remarks in Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Nancy Groves, “Back to Art School: Grayson Perry and Gillian Wearing Meet Tomorrow’s Stars,” *The Guardian*, August 8, 2016, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/aug/08/back-to-art-school-grayson-perry-and-gillian-wearing-visit-degree-shows. Here a more demanding idea of originality is being used. The originality of art students can be modest – a small or less significant innovation. Perry and Wearing use the term to describe work that shows a greater degree of innovation, or significance. As Wearing says, “Originality comes later, but you do want to be unique.” (Ibid.)

The second of these qualifications is that students should in fact have the interests that they claim to have in their work. In this sense, their work should be a *self expression*. No doubt some able students sometimes feign this. Sociologists studying students at Coventry College of Art in the late 1960s found a student who confessed that “all the things he does at college are ‘cover-stories’ – he does the things he is really interested in at home.”²⁸ He was the only student in his year to achieve a first-class diploma. We might wonder why this should worry anyone – if an artist can produce work that interests us, why should we be concerned whether they are much interested in it, or whether they have simulated their interest in it? But it does: most of us would feel cheated, manipulated, if an artist we admired confessed that the interests they had professed to have in their work were bogus. The expectation is an old one, and like the expectation for originality, is linked to a Romantic conception of the artist, who was expected to express his feelings, emotion, temperament through his work. We do not necessarily expect this from art today, but we still require that an artwork is a self-realization or revelation of an individual.²⁹

This requirement is tied up with perhaps the most awkward feature of crits. If a work genuinely presents a student’s interests, and it attracts criticism, this can be painful. So far as one’s interests are tied up with one’s identity (which they typically are for an art student), it can occasion genuine anguish. Moreover this process occurs in what is effectively a public forum, witnessed and enacted by teachers and peers. Crits can be emotionally trying in a range of ways, and I will discuss some others shortly. But this one is set apart from others because it is not wholly avoidable. The pain it causes may be mitigated to some degree if students are made aware of this in advance, and if the group frames its comments sympathetically. But by their nature, effective crits do involve this kind of criticism.

4. Contradictory feedback

Let me now turn to some practical questions. How does my approach account for crits where a consensus is contested in some way: where responses from some members of the group contradict responses from other members of the group?

Feedback given during crits is often contradictory. This is not something that students studying outside art, architecture and design have to contend with. On the whole, feedback in other disciplines is unequivocal and consistent: and students are expected to take this advice. But what is a student expected to do when given contradictory feedback? A recent report on art school teaching, by David Vaughan and Mantz Yorke, calls contradictory feedback “an example of the pedagogy of Art & Design”,

²⁸ Madge and Weinberger, *Art Students Observed*, 185.

²⁹ Also, as I have discussed, a crit group will often find potential meanings that the student has not yet considered for their work, and it is expected that students may adopt and develop these meanings themselves in subsequent their work. So while dissimulation about intentions may not be the best point for a student to come from, it is still possible that sooner or later the process of the crit will result in the student discovering their own interests.

and acknowledges that it can result in “confusion” for students.³⁰ The issue divides into few separate problems, as there are different kinds of contradictory feedback.

First are situations where an *idiosyncratic response* contradicts those that make up the consensus. This occurs when one or more members of the group perceive or understand the work in a way that most other members of the group find they cannot share. For example, someone may find a work attractive, where most others cannot see it that way. Or someone may have a strong aversion, such as a phobia, to the subject matter of a work, which others do not share. Typically, idiosyncratic responses are recognized and identified on that basis. As such they are typically discounted – and they need to be if a consensus is to be identified. Anyone who has taken part in crits will be familiar with this – often idiosyncratic responses spring from associations personal to an individual member of the group. Idiosyncratic opinions should be distinguished from cases in which an individual notices an aspect of the work that the rest of the group has not noticed, and in pointing it out, gets the others to share her response to it. Such cases are instances not of idiosyncrasy, but of convergence towards a consensus.

Second is *contradictory advice*. Members of the group whose responses lie within the consensus can give contradictory advice. For example, say there is a consensus about a flaw or problem in the work; members of the group may still give contradictory suggestions about how to fix this. Vaughan and Yorke describe what a student is supposed to do when they receive such feedback: “the expectation [is] that the student will consider the advice and make their own decision about it as part of the learning process”.³¹ That is, the student has to choose herself which – if any – of the advice she will take. However, contradictory advice does not threaten the consensus, which relates only to the group’s perception, understanding and evaluation of the work.

Third is a situation I call *divided consensus*. In some cases it is wrong to dismiss outlying responses – those that differ from and even contradict a consensus – as idiosyncratic. I have in mind responses that represent the views that come from a member of a minority underrepresented in the group – whether in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality or disability.³² These different responses have a basis in the social and cultural context of the relevant minority, and often include a different experience of social power relations. Here it is right to speak of a divided consensus. For if that minority were better represented in the group (or if well-represented in terms of numbers, better able to find its voice), it would give rise to a consensus of its own, perhaps overlapping with, but distinct from the dominant consensus. How does the crit function in such circumstances? The situation is complex, and can sometimes be far from ideal, as Griselda Pollock’s comments, which I cite in the next section, show. There are happier approaches: in crits as in the wider art world there is often a desire to expand the range of the majority’s interests to include at least some of the interests of minorities. Partly this arises out of an interest in justice. There is a

³⁰ David Vaughan and Mantz Yorke, *I Can’t Believe It’s Not Better: The Paradox of NSS scores for Art & Design* (Group for Learning in Art and Design, Higher Education Academy, 2009): 15, www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/nss-report.pdf.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² I include women here as a minority in respect of having a minority position in terms of power in society.

widespread interest in understanding and countering unequal power relations. Partly it comes from an interest in exploring the scope of human experience. Thus there is an interest in understanding the different kinds of experience that different perspectives outside the mainstream offer. In this way, crit groups can (i) be capable of finding interest in art made from a minority perspective, and (ii) be able to take into account and come to share minority responses to art made from a majority perspective.

5. Failed crits

I have already mentioned Elkins' position on crits, that they are "in effect ... simply too complicated to understand".³³ His book, *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, gets its title from this concern. He argues that a variety of features of crits make it very hard for students to learn from them. These include contradictory feedback and the potential for what I call hostile crits.³⁴ I have said enough now for it to be clear that I disagree with Elkins: if the kinds of practical difficulties he describes can be overcome, crits offer a valuable distinctive kind of learning. I have already dealt with contradictory feedback above, so this section examines hostile crits, and other practical issues that can cause a crit to fail – that is to say, which can prevent a student from learning from them. They can all be avoided, mostly in straightforward ways, provided teachers have an awareness of them. I should add that crits can founder in many different ways, and this catalogue is not intended to be comprehensive.³⁵

Hostile crits

As I have said, what students need to be told in crits is often difficult to take, but equally, teachers can make this process harder than is necessary. A series of Youtube videos records crits at SUNY's Albany campus. Comparing a student's work to that of a professional artist, one of the teachers says: "I guess I'm saying she's good and you're bad."³⁶ Another student, who has made a drawing from a photographic source is told, "that photograph, forgive me, is a lot more interesting than this drawing; the drawing is really boring."³⁷ And another student is told, "I think it [your work]'s really, really stupid."³⁸ The students respond to these remarks in different ways: with denial, measured capitulation, or anxious laughter. But however apt the teachers' points, they are not tactfully communicated. The emotionally freighted character of crits, and the hostile interactions that can cause them, is widely commented on. Art historian Howard Singerman remarks on crits' "everyday cruelty".³⁹ Elkins writes of having seen crits "held in front of all the students and faculty" where "it was not uncommon to see the student cry in front of everyone".⁴⁰ Art historian Elena Crippa

³³ Elkins, *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, 112.

³⁴ Elkins' more recent book, *Art Critiques: A Guide*, does not change this view, but advises students on how to best negotiate the challenges crits pose them.

³⁵ Elkins describes a number of other ways crits can fail. (Elkins, *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, ch. 4.)

³⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKab0_8Bp2Y.

³⁷ www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqnzJ4omxoA.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Singerman, *Art Subjects*, 211.

⁴⁰ Elkins, *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, 3.

records an observer of crits at St Martins School of Art finding them “devastating”.⁴¹ Kathryn Anthony has shown that crits in architecture and design are no better in this respect.⁴²

The crit has posed special difficulties for female students. At Coventry College of Art in the late 1960s, “many students, especially the girls, found this unnerving and depressing in the extreme.”⁴³ Charles Madge and Barbara Weinberger’s study of students at Coventry vividly documents the depression and anxiety this kind of teaching could cause.⁴⁴ In this context, Pollock’s claim that students “have literally died of the experience”, is plausible.⁴⁵ There is anecdotal evidence that outright hostility, towards both women and men, occurs less frequently than it has in the past.⁴⁶ In the 1960s and ’70s, teachers were almost uniformly male, and cultural norms of the time made it more difficult than it is now for women to engage vigorously in such an environment. All the disparaging comments that I quote in this section are made by men. Still, as the comments from Albany show, such hostile crits have not disappeared, and such teaching cultures also continue in the UK. Rachel Garfield, an Associate Professor at the University of Reading, who taught at Goldsmiths’ College London from 2007 to 2011 observes that, “at Goldsmiths’ the crit, rather than being a safe place where learning can happen, was often a bullying environment of survival of the fittest, where students did run out of the room crying. ... That kind of crit is a bear pit of posturing, not a learning tool.”⁴⁷

Clearly hostile crits should be avoided wherever possible. First, they can do psychological harm to students. Second, an emotionally fraught state can only make learning more difficult, and crits are hard enough for students as it is. Partly, staff need to take these matters seriously, and not diminish the impact of their behavior on

⁴¹ Crippa, “From ‘Crit’ to ‘Lecture-Performance’,” 138.

⁴² Anthony, *Design Juries on Trial*.

⁴³ Madge and Weinberger, *Art Students Observed*, 276.

⁴⁴ See esp. Madge and Weinberger, *Art Students Observed*, 83–85, as well as the observations of students, such as ‘Pam’ (124–27) and ‘Diana’ (151–54). There are many other suggestive passages. For example, a tutor writes of another student, “Jean has not got very much talent or depth of character. Her work is shallow and her attitude self-indulgent. One more mediocre art student” (128). Later, she is recorded as thinking of making a life-size “double coffin”, with “herself in one side” (132).

⁴⁵ Pollock, “Art, Art School, Culture: Individualism after the Death of the Artist.” For more on art school education at this time and women, see Lisa Tickner, *Hornsey 1968: The Art School Revolution* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2008), 96–99. The casual sexism of the teachers at Coventry is a related topic, and vividly documented by Madge and Weinberger – although it is perhaps no worse than that seen in much of the culture of the time. One female student is described by a staff member as “stolid, puddingy Mediocre certainly” (144). Another is “a nice girl, a serious girl even”, however, “[h]er work is diabolical” (154). On the Pre-Diploma course (the precursor to present-day Foundation courses) at Coventry, male students gained approval more often, and were more successful at gaining admission to diploma courses (the precursor to present day BA Fine Art courses) (36–38).

⁴⁶ Rowles, *Art Crits*, 91–93.

⁴⁷ Rachel Garfield, email message to the author, April 29, 2012. Garfield taught at Goldsmiths from 2007–2011.

students. But it is worth observing the structure of crits allows and even encourages harsh criticism. Speaking individually to a student, a teacher is likely to be measured and sympathetic. But if a group is commenting on a student's work, there is a tendency for one critical remark to be expanded on and amplified by others in the group.⁴⁸ Many accounts of teaching at Coventry illustrate this well. Here is one example. The student is working in textiles, and given the pseudonym 'Andrea' by the sociologists.

The tutors disliked her passivity, her lack of ideas and opinions. They said she had not been able to explain herself or why she was doing weaving. She had no enthusiasm, excitement or sense of involvement. One tutor said she closed her mind and contributed nothing. If she couldn't make the tutors interested in her at the next tutorial, she ought to be thrown out – she was just wasting the tutors' time. In the face of these criticisms, Andrea was defensive and angry.⁴⁹

This kind of amplification of criticism also needs to be monitored and resisted by staff.

The masterclass by stealth

A single teacher who leads a crit can manipulate it so that it serves a quite different function to that I have described. In particular, they may use it to instill in students their personal ideas of what is valuable in art, thereby encouraging their own favoured approach or style in art. Such teachers will usually dominate discussion, picking out for praise work in line with their approach, and denigrating – overtly or subtly – work that does not align with it. Sometimes teachers are aware of doing this; they see it as their proper role. Other times a teacher may do this inadvertently, through the expression of their convictions, enthusiasm and charisma.⁵⁰ In either case, the crit, as I have described it, is effectively hijacked and turned into a continuation of an older tradition of teaching, a version of the masterclass or *atelier*. This is a form of teaching where the students work alongside a 'master' in his or her studio, absorbing, carrying on and perhaps developing the master's doctrine, style, or strategies and attitudes in the case of more conceptually-oriented artists. There are things to be said in favour of the masterclass format in the context of the contemporary art school. But the form I have described is a masterclass by stealth. It misleads the students, who typically have not registered expecting this kind of teaching, and who find themselves having to go through the sham of being 'consulted' for their own responses, which can only win approval when they accord with the teacher's position. It can be particularly unhelpful for those students who, unaware of the situation before joining the class, first have to understand what is going on (for the univocal character of the masterclass can only be obscured by the multivocal crit), and then may find themselves resistant to the standards to which they find themselves unexpectedly subjected. Masterclass training should be advertised as such, and not be hidden in the form of a crit.

⁴⁸ This is so even putting aside any adverse personal dynamics between individuals. Where those exist the situation can be further exacerbated.

⁴⁹ Madge and Weinberger, *Art Students Observed*, 37–38.

⁵⁰ O. C. Garza gives a vivid account of photographer Garry Winogrand's teaching, which seems an example of this (www.ocgarzaphotography.com/).

Crits that produce the 'wrong' consensus

Sometimes crits produce a consensus that seems 'wrong' – I will say exactly what I mean by 'wrong' shortly. I have found this occasionally happens when students in early years of their programme take the lead in a crit. There are two general situations in which this can occur. The first happens when a group does not fully explore its capacity for certain kinds of responses. For example, a group might judge a nude, without exploring questions of whose 'gaze' it is presented for, or judge an abstract 'action painting', without exploring how it functions as an expression of stereotypical machismo. Considering those questions could well upend the group's original response. The second occurs when a group is unaware of a work's lack of originality due to its lack of awareness of relevant examples of contemporary art. For example, the group may approve of work when, if its members had a better knowledge of contemporary art, they would find it derivative and inadequate compared with the work of other artists working in the area.

What is 'wrong' about these kinds of 'wrong' consensus? The consensus I require in a crit depends on two things. First, the group must fully explore its capacity to find interest in an artwork. Without that it can overlook features of value, as well as defects, as in the example of the nude. Second, the group must be apprised of existing art that affects the interest the group will take in the work, or affects how the group will judge the work's originality. A 'wrong' consensus fails to satisfy at least one of these conditions.

Reaching a consensus is a process, and it is helpful to think of a 'wrong' consensus as a stage in this longer process. To help the group overcome a 'wrong' consensus, students may need a teacher to (i) point out the possibility of certain kinds of responses – the group can then judge their own capacity for these responses and their own interest in them. Or a teacher may need to (ii) draw the group's attention to other artworks relevant to gauging the interest in the work under consideration.

Crits in which the student rejects the group's judgement

Sometimes students dismiss or ignore the judgement of the group. The following exchange, also from the class at Albany, shows how things can go when this is not understood. It is also, self-evidently, an example of a hostile crit in which the conversational form encourages the teachers to reinforce and amplify criticism. The student, a middle-aged man, begins by explicitly rejecting the group's judgement.

Student: It's not up to anybody in this room. There are symbols in art and symbols mean something, and, ... and symbols have meant what they mean for more than 200 years now and I just don't see why I should, ... why what you're saying should make me want... should mean anything to me.

Teacher 1: Who is it intended for?

Student: It's intended, it's intended basically for anybody who sees it...

Teacher 2: (interrupting): It doesn't work like that.

Student: ...people might take it the wrong way, but I can't help that.

Teacher 2: No, it doesn't work like that.

Teacher 3: ...This is a rather naïve discussion we're having; I feel as if I could be having the same talk with a high school junior...

Teacher 1: Yeah, a child.⁵¹

Such exchanges can happen very easily in crits. A common strategy is that a student will observe that all the opinions they have heard are "subjective", and that they are therefore justified in ignoring them. Even sympathetic teachers can be affronted once it becomes apparent that a student is intending to discount all their responses and advice. And the student, already resolved to be unreceptive, is unlikely to be any more receptive to an impromptu discussion of the purpose of the crits, even if it is better presented than the above example. These exchanges can be avoided by ensuring that students are aware in *advance* that the consensus of the group provides the standard of judgement.

6. Crits and the art world

I have shown how crits allow art to be tested against the consensus of the group. But a crucial question remains unanswered: why is this of value to students who will shortly find themselves working in another environment, the contemporary art world?

I have touched upon the answer already: the criteria for approval employed in crits overlap significantly with those employed in the art world. Work that meets with the approval of a crit group will also be more apt to meet the approval of the larger audience of the art world. That raises a worry, and prompts a further question. The worry, which I will quickly dismiss, is this. Perhaps the consensus of the crits group is explained by members of the group absorbing the values of the art world. That would explain the apparent coincidence of opinion of crit group and art world, but it would do significant damage to my claim that responses by members of the crit group are substantially free; they would instead be dictated by the art world. It is possible that crits can work like this, but this would turn them into an analogue of what I called the masterclass by stealth, where it is *Artforum*, *Frieze*, *e-flux* or some other source whose unspoken authority is covertly transmitted to students. As with the masterclass by stealth, this is a needlessly inefficient and ineffective way of teaching. If this is what teaching by crit amounts to, it would be better conveyed by other kinds of teaching, such as lectures, seminars or workshops, where transfer of knowledge from teacher to student is overt. But I believe that the prevalence of crits suggests that they do not, on the whole, channel the standards of the art world in this way.

A further question remains: how then is it that the criteria for approval in crits overlap as they do with those applied in the contemporary art world? To answer this it will

⁵¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGBKcEhcraI. Teacher 1 is David Carbone, Teacher 2 is Daniel Goodwin, Teacher 3 is Edward Mayer.

help, first, to introduce the idea of a *concept of art* – by this I mean an idea of what art should be or do, which an artist uses to guide their art-making.⁵² A concept of art thus implies criteria for approval, and criteria for approval will usually imply a concept of art. Most criteria for approval bring with them an idea, generic or specific, of what art should be or do, and one cannot possess a concept of art without being able to judge what does and does not accord with that concept.

Historically, concepts of art have typically stipulated that art should have some or other quality that gives it value as art. So, to take a couple of examples, we can speak of a mimetic concept of art, that holds that art should involve lifelike representation, or a formalist concept of art, which sees artistic value residing in the aesthetic experiences occasioned by formal features of an art work. Is there a contemporary concept of art? One contender is what Arthur Danto calls *pluralism*. As he puts it, “[i]t does not matter any longer what you do, which is what pluralism means”, or in even pithier form, “with qualification, anything goes”.⁵³ Pluralism, on this description is characterized precisely by not stipulating what art should be or do. It removes the constraints of earlier concepts of art. However, described in this way, pluralism does not count as a concept – for in removing constraints, it also removes anything that could guide an artist’s activities among the myriad possibilities open to them. Put another way, this characterization of pluralism provides no criteria for approval. But it will be apparent that the contemporary art world, pluralistic as it indeed is, has no qualms exercising judgement – acquisition committees, prize-giving juries, foundations deciding on grants and many other bodies often find themselves in substantial agreement about the decisions they make, much as such bodies did when more restrictive concepts of art held sway.

So criteria for approval, or standards of judgement as we may now say, are in use; what then are they? They will obviously incorporate the criteria of originality and self-expression that I described above. Let me put a brief argument that suggests that there is a further similarity between the standards used in crits and in the art world. Once pluralism has loosened the constraints on art, the only way to maintain any kind of standard of judgement that is not simply subjective, that can be shared, is through a consensus based on the overlap of different interests. The overlap of individual interests – a consensus – is the only way to locate a shared agreement about artistic value while allowing those interests free rein. The standards of judgement used in crits and in the contemporary art world thus reflect one another, the former a more public, more legible version of the latter. As I have said, this should hardly be surprising, since crits could otherwise have little value.

⁵² Concepts of art are not definitions of art. Definitions of art aim to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be a work of art, and concepts of art do not do this, although they are often adapted to this purpose. For a survey of definitions of art, see Stephen Davies, *Definitions of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁵³ Arthur C. Danto, “The End of Art,” in Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 115; Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 47. The observation, at last taken roughly, is not original to Danto. Peter Bürger, for instance, had earlier written of the “simultaneity of the radically disparate” in art. (Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 63.)

7. Crits and pluralism

The crit is strongly allied with pluralism. In fact, crits tend to instill a pluralism that does qualify as a concept of art – one governed by the standards of judgement I have described above. I do not say that crits *teach* this, for it typically occurs without any corresponding intention on the part of a teacher. Nor are students typically able to articulate the concept of pluralism. Nevertheless it makes sense to say that the crit tends to instill this concept, for crits shape what students believe is appropriate or permissible in art, and help to guide their future art-making, in distinctively pluralistic ways.

It will be apparent that the format of crits *allows* for pluralism: students can present work of any medium and content to the crit group. But I want to show here that crits go further than this; they also *instill* pluralism. Consider a student who approaches a crit holding a non-pluralist concept of art – that is, believing that art should have a particular kind of quality – whether it be mimetic, formal, expressive, political, or something else – that gives it value as art. The group will put this concept under pressure, as group members explore the scope for the work to hold different kinds of interest. Let me repeat Soutter’s remarks on this: “This kind of training forces students to extend their sense of engagement ... to consider ... edges and external supports ... phenomenological, social, historical, political and institutional implications”.⁵⁴ So any non-pluralist concept will find itself under pressure to consider and acknowledge values it overlooks, ignores or rejects. Formalists must consider phenomenology beyond the optical, expressionists the semiotic reading of their gestures, political artists the forms and traditions they use to convey their message, and so on. In this way crits press such a student to open their work up to a broader range of meaning and media. Crits thus apply pressure on any concept of art that stipulates – which is to say, places restriction on – form, medium or meaning. For this reason, crits work against non-pluralist concepts of art, and in the process promote pluralism.⁵⁵

8. Are crits critical?

There is a concern that could compromise both pluralism and the crits that promote it. It may be that what I have called the common sense – the overlap of interests found in the crit group, and we can add now, the art world – is conditioned, shaped by the dominant ideologies of our culture. So, it could be that our shared interests, and the pluralism that develops out of these, tends only towards what the dominant culture favours. This could hold both in aesthetic terms, where commercially-oriented aesthetics are favored, and in political terms, where the consumerism, the capitalism,

⁵⁴ Soutter, “What Lies Beneath,” 179.

⁵⁵ It is worth adding that even the mere format of the crit goes some way to promoting pluralism. The format provides a kind of stage or frame for the presentation of a plurality of views, giving each view a kind of equality. The student’s awareness of the mere possibility of this, that a plurality of views may exist, even if they are not in fact heard by the student, tends to reinforce the kind of pluralism I have described. That is to say, even when crits fail to work as I have described, or they fail in the various ways I have outlined, the crit’s format can still suggest and promote pluralism.

and sexism of contemporary mainstream Western culture – the status quo – is unwittingly repeated and propagated. This worry converges with the objection critical theory has had to pluralism in art since the early days of postmodernism. As Hal Foster has put it, pluralism makes art “another consumer good”, part of “a steady line of obsolescent products”.⁵⁶

I have said that crits exist in a particular tension with critical theory. Before discussing how this tension plays out, it will help to be clear about the salient features of critical theory. By ‘critical theory’ I mean not only the work of the Frankfurt School, but the broader tradition that has been influenced by it, which conceives of theory as playing a politically progressive role, through a process beginning in the criticism of dominant ideologies that constrain freedoms. The idea that art should also be critical – criticizing dominant ideologies to politically progressive ends – has also become an important element in art and art schools. Thierry de Duve outlines how, since the 1980s, critical theory came to have this place in artist training and how the various disciplines that came to be aligned with critical theory often came to be drawn into art school teaching:

Linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, structuralism and post-structuralism ... entered art schools and succeeded in displacing – sometimes replacing – studio practice while renewing the critical vocabulary and intellectual tools with which to approach the making and the appreciating of art.⁵⁷

Critical theory has come to have a vital place in crits. I have already suggested in some of my remarks in earlier sections that crits can and do incorporate critical attitude. Broadly speaking, critical theory gives tools for group-members in crits to interrogate and develop their responses in two general ways. The first involves developing an awareness of how the dominant culture shapes the interests of audiences. Feminism, for example, allows criticism of the way women are represented in mainstream visual culture, and allows students to object when such imagery is reproduced unreflectively in the visual arts. Second, critical theory allows one to build on this, by developing interests beyond those determined by dominant ideologies. So students may seek out or develop images and modes of production that are not endorsed by the dominant culture. That is to say that the use of critical theory in crits allows the group to question whether they should accept interests promoted by dominant ideologies, and to explore the scope for interests that can develop beyond these. A crit group may need some education and encouragement to explore these issues, but once they have these tools of thinking, there is every chance that these will be adopted, and integrated among the group-members’ interests. I also think we can expect that interests informed in this way can form the basis for a pluralism – a

⁵⁶ Hal Foster, “Against Pluralism,” in Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1985), 24.

⁵⁷ De Duve, “When Form has Become Attitude – And Beyond,” 27. De Duve, writing in the mid-1990s, was jaded about how this had developed in some prominent art schools: “‘critical attitude’ became just that, an attitude, a stance, a pose, a contrivance.” (Ibid.) Nevertheless, critical theory has remained an important feature of art school education since then.

critical pluralism one might say – that is not susceptible to the concerns Foster expresses.

However, the tension between the crit and critical theory is real, and should not be hidden. There is no guarantee that a work with critical content, however well it accords with and accomplishes the aims of critical theory, will meet with the interest of the group.⁵⁸ We may expect that it often will – and the politically engaged character of student work often supports this. But the possibility is always there that the group’s interest in critical approaches will flag – perhaps because they have seen these themes treated before more compellingly elsewhere, perhaps on account of the intellectual demands made on the group, perhaps because other kinds of meaning seem to them more interesting, or for other reasons that individually we may judge good or ill. In this respect, critical content is like any other quality an artwork may have. The door is always open to it in crits, but there is no guarantee that it will meet with approval. In other words, the crit allows students the freedom to pursue a critical art, but it also allows the freedom not to do so.⁵⁹

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⁵⁸ Critical theorists may say that rational, well-informed interests will give priority to critical concerns. But even if this was so, interests need not be rationally determined, although I think that group members should be able to give reasons (rational or otherwise) for their interests.

⁵⁹ This also means that crits are not the best way to teach a thoroughgoing or programmatic critical art practice. Critical practices are therefore better taught in a masterclass environment where the focus needed can be guaranteed. Staff and students can agree at the outset their focus on critical aims. Then texts can be read, and student work considered without the risk that the class’s attention will move off in other directions. For an example on such lines, see Claire Bishop’s description of artist Tania Bruguera’s teaching. (Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), ch. 9.)

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