 Mandalas, Consensus, and Criticality
Making artists in the contemporary art school

Michael Newall

Introduction

In 2004, sociologist Sarah Thornton documented a day of critiques, or crits as they are often known, run by the artist and teacher Michael Asher, at the California Institute of the Arts for the Master of Fine Arts program. The first student up, Thornton records, “has hung two large, well-crafted pencil drawings on the wall.” In front of the work, the class has assembled.

Asher sits motionless. Students stare impassively into space, swirling their coffee, their legs hanging over the arms of chairs. Each student has set up camp, staked out some territory, and distinguished him- or herself with a pet, a pose, or a signature activity.

Some students draw or knit, one has brought a sleeping bag, another a Tempur-Pedic pillow. A number come with dogs: “Dogs are allowed... so long as they are quiet,” explains a student.

“At 10:25am everyone is seated,” and Asher, “legs crossed, clipboard in hand,” nods toward the student. The student stresses that he is “just going to workshop some ideas,” and that he has been distracted by personal matters. One wonders if he is disowning the work’s shortcomings in advance. He then speaks articulately and frankly about how his drawings reflect his own feeling of dislocation around his heritage. But, by the end of his statement, he is, as Thornton says, “unravelling.” He concludes, “[s]orry, I am doing this badly. I don’t really know why I am here.”

Asher holds back from speaking, and the students fill the gap. A female student reflects sympathetically on the theme of the work and its relative invisibility in contemporary art. She then raises a different issue, challenging the student’s apparent appropriation of other cultures in his drawings—a strategy he has adopted to resolve his own sense of dislocation. Can it be justified? The student himself seems unsure. Thornton goes on: “At 1:15pm we’re in a definite lull, and Asher speaks his first words... he says, ‘[p]ardon me.’ The students raise their heads. I sit in anticipation, expecting a short lecture... But no... he says, ‘[w]hy didn’t you enter the project through language or music?’” That turns the discussion away from the content of the work and toward the student’s chosen medium. Then, “[a]t 1:30pm... Asher vaguely raises a finger. I expect he is going to adjourn for lunch,” but instead he asks the student, “[w]hat do...
you want . . .? Put the group to work.”11 The student replies, “I guess I’m wondering about the viability of political activism in my work.”12 A conversation sparks around this new topic, positions are laid out and defended. At 2:00pm, Asher draws the crit to a close. Two further crits that day will take the class through to 1:00am.

Michael Asher (1943–2012) was perhaps the most renowned teacher of crits. His were unusually long—four to five hours. In this extended timescale, student behaviors developed in unusual ways, including the napping, knitting, and pets.13 But, aside from those aspects, his crits are similar to most others in art schools, which, regardless of where they are practiced, tend to fall into similar structures and dynamics.

However, this form of teaching is a relatively recent development in art schools. Asher ran crits at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts for short) from 1974. No history of the crit exists, but its origins in art schools appear to lie in the 1960s.14 Crits also exist in architecture and design, although their character and history is somewhat different in these disciplines.15 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.

Crits are practiced much the same across departments of painting, sculpture, and other media. But they fit most naturally into art schools such as CalArts that are not divided into departments, allowing students to work across media, for as we will see, that is the kind of work they encourage. The typical features seen in Asher’s class are as follows.16 The student presents their work to the group of staff (at CalArts, Asher’s teaching assistant was also present) and students, explaining their intentions for it. The group then responds with questions and feedback. For Asher, the only rule in this conversation is that students have to “listen to and respect each other,” but we will see that there are also other constraints on how students engage in crits. Finally, students are expected to act on the feedback they have received. This is a crucial feature of crits; they are a major channel by which art school students receive feedback. Indeed the artist Josh Stone, who was the subject of the crit Thornton describes, recalls it as a positive experience, despite its difficulties: “From that critique, I learned how to . . . use a different voice in my art.”17

An important element of crits in many art schools is the role of the student’s peers in giving feedback. Few teachers are quite so self-abnegating as Asher, but in many crits student opinions can and often do carry as much weight as those of teachers. This also means that I am less concerned with crits that are in effect ‘open juries’ where the class is present, but usually only listening, while teachers discuss student work in the process of assessing it. This occurs in some Master of Fine Arts programs in the United States and is common in architecture and design crits.18

This chapter has three general objectives. 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; the first four sections aim to remedy this oversight. 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.19 The account I give here holds that a successful crit depends on the audience developing a consensus around the interests the work can support.

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.”20 Crits can also be harmful to students, most notably channeling hostility toward 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.”21 In the fifth section, ‘Failed crits,’ I examine various kinds of ineffective, hostile, and
Michael Newall

otherwise failed crits. While it is clear that they do occur, I want to be clear that crits need not be like this.

Third, I examine how crits influence art. Almost all professionally successful contemporary artists attend art school, increasingly studying to Master of Arts or Master of Fine Arts level and beyond in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australasia. Since crits are a widespread teaching method in these places, they are a familiar experience to a great many contemporary artists. ‘Crits and the art world’ and ‘Crits and pluralism’ show that crits influence and shape art by promoting a particular kind of pluralism, 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 the last section of the chapter examines another distinctive element in the contemporary art school teaching: critical theory. I show that the two are often complementary, but that there remains an irreconcilable tension between them.

This chapter draws on a range of empirical resources, including documentation of, and observations about, crits made by others (which I cite throughout). It is also informed by my own observations and experiments with crits undertaken as a teacher (which I do not discuss here). Although I will not dwell on it, my approach has an affinity with progressive theories of education such as those of Paulo Freire and Lev Vygotsky. 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.” Lastly, while my project here is primarily theoretical and descriptive, I also make some recommendations about how crits could be improved. Understanding what gives crits their distinctive educational value helps to show how they can more completely fulfill their potential, and the recommendations I make are in this spirit.

Understanding crits

I take it that the value of crits is distinct from the 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 of 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 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: why is it more valuable, or have a value distinct from simply seeking feedback from a teacher? Answering these questions is the key to understanding crits.

One can think about any kind of teaching as guiding a student toward a state where that teaching is no longer needed. In the case of crits, it will ideally guide the student’s work toward 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? Minimalist artist 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.’ 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, it leaves open what might be of interest to the viewer. I should also distinguish my use of the word ‘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, used by Kant.

Now, the approval of the group occurs when the group agrees that the student’s intentions are worthy, and that they are fulfilled in the work. Partly, this involves getting the student’s interest in their work, and the interest that the group finds itself able to take in the work, to coincide, or, at least, to substantially overlap. 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. Asher called this the “disparity between what a person says their work is about and what is actually being observed.” That happened in the crit Thornton documents—when the student’s attention was drawn to the troubling quality of their appropriation of other cultures. Intentions can go unfulfilled in another way too: the group’s members may find themselves unable to take the interest in the work that the student themselves does. For example, it may be the formal or expressive effects that the student likes do 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. This too was gently touched on in the crit, Thornton noted, when it was observed that the student’s chosen theme was relatively invisible—which is to say, not of broad interest.

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 group can draw attention to all these things and show how they might come to have some kind of value in the work. Artist and critic Lucy Soutter makes 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.

In this way, the group’s responses will show the student where their 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 where 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, and 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—and indicates the potential for a reliable transpersonal significance. It will also tend to echo the judgments 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, increasing the interest of their work to the group. In the case of the crit Thornton describes, the student’s practice changed significantly, putting aside the subjects and strategies the group found uninteresting and problematic, and developing a new approach better attuned to the interests of the group (and the art world). This account raises a range of questions. Let me start from the theoretical side, before turning to the practical.

Consensus in crits

My approach requires that the crit group is capable reaching a consensus—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 occur about.

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 thinks that we do this in the following way: “we compare our judgment not so much with the actual as with the merely possible judgments of others, and [thus] put ourselves in the position of everyone else.” 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—outliers—can be identified and discounted, so establishing a consensus.

In an important respect, we will need to 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. Putting aside the much-argued case of the aesthetic, where a consensus emerges, I take it that it will depend on shared dispositions of perception and thought. 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—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 of, say, 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 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.

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 this account, the common sense thus takes the place of older standards of judgment. 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 the style of a 'master' (as in masterclass or atelier teaching), or against nature. So, what makes the common sense an appropriate standard of judgment for the contemporary art school? With these earlier kinds of teaching, their appropriateness is clear: art of earlier periods 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 judgment applied in crits significantly overlaps with 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 judgment 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 judgment 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.

**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, they tend to be so deeply instilled that they are incorporated into our interests and play a role in shaping the consensus. But 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 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’s education. 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 has been impressed into
art students since the 1960s. Artist John Baldessari, who also taught at CalArts, tells a story that makes this point. “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.” Rubber stamp aside, the expectation is standard in art schools. A typical Fine Arts degree specification requires its students to produce “an original body of work within the field of fine art.” 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.

The second requirement is that students should in fact have the interests that they claim to have in their work. In this limited sense, their work should be a self-expression. Some able students can 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.” The student was the only one 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 interested in it, or whether they have merely simulated their interest? But it does; most of us would feel cheated and manipulated if an artist we admired confessed that the interests and values they claimed to have 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 their feelings, emotion, and temperament through their 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.

This expectation 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 art is tied up with one’s identity, 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 discomfort and anxiety that Thornton documented is a good example of this. That kind of pain may be mitigated to some degree if students are made aware of this feature of crits in advance, and if the group frames its comments sympathetically. But, by their nature, effective crits do involve this kind of criticism.

Contradiction in crits
Responses given during crits are often contradictory. This is not something that students studying outside art, architecture, and design usually have to contend with. On the whole, feedback in other disciplines is unequivocal and consistent; students are expected to take the advice they receive. But what is a student expected to do when given contradictory responses? David Vaughan and Mantz Yorke call contradictory feedback “an example of the pedagogy of art and design,” and acknowledge that it can result in “confusion” for students. The issue divides into a few separate problems, as there are different kinds of contradictory responses.

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. Someone may find a work interesting, where most others cannot find an interest in it. Or someone may be unable to see the interest in a work, where others do. We are all apt to make idiosyncratic responses on occasion.
By their nature, they spring from something particular to the individual: a perception, attitude, or association that is a matter of personal experience, and that others do not share. In crits, idiosyncratic responses 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. However, idiosyncratic opinions should be distinguished from cases where 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 that response to it. Such cases are instances not of idiosyncrasy, but of convergence toward a consensus.

Second is contradictory advice. Members of the group whose responses lie within the consensus can still give contradictory advice. Say there is a consensus about a flaw or problem in the work; members of the group may 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.” That is, indeed, all they can do. The student has to choose which—if any—of the advice to 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. 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 already 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 the discussion of women’s experiences in crits below shows. 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 a concern with justice. There is a widespread concern to understand and counter unequal power relations. Partly this 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.

Failed crits

I have already mentioned Elkins’ position on crits, that they are “in effect . . . simply too complicated to understand.” 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. 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 and 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, can prevent a student from learning from them. They can all be overcome, mostly in straightforward ways, provided teachers have an awareness of them. I should add that crits can flounder in many different ways, and this catalog is not intended to be comprehensive.
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.” 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.” And another student is told, “I think it [your work]’s really, really stupid.” 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, are widely commented on. Art historian Howard Singerman remarks on crits’ “everyday cruelty.” 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.” Art historian Elena Crippa records an observer of crits at Saint Martin’s School of Art (London) finding them “devastating.” Architectural historian Kathryn Anthony has shown that crits in architecture and design are no better in this respect.

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.” Charles Madge and Barbara Weinberger’s study of students at Coventry vividly documents the depression and anxiety this kind of teaching could cause. In this context, Pollock’s claim that students “have literally died of the experience” is plausible. There is anecdotal evidence that outright hostility, toward both women and men, occurs less frequently than it has in the past. In the 1960s and 1970s, 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 discuss in this section are made by men. Still, as the comments from Albany show, such hostile crits have not disappeared, and such teaching cultures continue. Rachel Garfield, currently an Associate Professor at the University of Reading (Berkshire, United Kingdom), observes,

[i]n one of the institutions I taught, 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 . . . [t]hat kind of crit is a bear pit of posturing, not a learning tool.

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. Staff need to take these matters seriously, and not diminish the impact of hostile behavior towards students and their learning. But it is worth observing that 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. 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 did liked 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
Crits, consensus, and criticality

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.62

This kind of amplification of criticism—which, as I say, can occur in comments from both staff and students—also needs to be monitored and resisted.

The masterclass by stealth

A single teacher who leads a crit can manipulate it so that it serves a quite different function to what I have described. In particular, they may use it to instill in students their own ideas of what is valuable in art, thereby encouraging their own favored 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.63 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 their studio, absorbing, carrying on, and perhaps developing the master’s approach. In contemporary art, this may involve transmission of conceptual strategies as much as, or instead of, visual style. There are things to be said in favor of contemporary versions of kind of this kind of teaching. It has a long and successful history in German art schools.64 But the form I have described is a masterclass by stealth. It misleads the students, who typically do not expect this kind of teaching. They find themselves having to go through the sham of being ‘consulted’ for their 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 must 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 required to meet. Masterclass training should be advertised as such, and not be hidden in the form of a crit.

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 the early years of their program 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 an image of 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? Consensus in a crit depends on two things that are lacking here. 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 (i) to 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 (ii) to 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 judgment

Sometimes students dismiss or ignore the judgment of the group. The following exchange, 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 where the conversational form encourages the teachers to reinforce and amplify criticism. The student, a middle-aged man, begins by explicitly rejecting the group’s judgment.

**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.65

Such exchanges can happen very easily in crits. A common strategy is that a student will observe that the group’s opinions 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. 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 judgment.

Crits and the art world

These final sections explore how crits shape the art and artists that come out of them. In approaching this, it will help to first address a question I have delayed examining. Why are the judgments of crits of value to students who will shortly find themselves working in another environment—the contemporary art world?

I have touched upon an answer already: work that meets with the approval of a crit group will also be more likely to meet the approval of the larger audience of the art world. That is to say, the criteria for approval used in crits in some sense overlap with those used by the art world. By ‘art world,’ I mean to include those with influence in the exhibition, funding, support, and discourse around contemporary art—it is an important audience for those graduating from art schools.
This raises a worry and prompts a further question. The worry, which I will quickly dismiss, is this: perhaps the agreement of the crit group with the art world is explained by members of the group absorbing the values of the art world. That would explain the apparent coincidence of opinion, but it would do significant damage to my claim that responses by members of the crit group are substantially free, for these would instead be dictated by the art world. It is possible that crits can work like this, but this would turn them into an analog 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 would be a needlessly inefficient and ineffective way of teaching. If this is what teaching by crit amounts to, it would, of course, be better conveyed by other kinds of teaching, such as lectures, seminars, or workshops.

The further question is this: how then is it that the criteria for approval in crits overlap with those applied in the contemporary art world? To answer this it will 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. A concept of art thus implies criteria for judgment of art, and criteria for judgment will often imply a concept of art.

Historically, concepts of art have stipulated that art should aspire to some particular quality that optimizes its artistic value. To take two simple examples: we can speak of a mimetic concept of art, which 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 artwork. Is there a contemporary concept of art? One contender is what philosopher Arthur Danto called pluralism. As he put 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.” 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, and it guides art-making by saying, roughly speaking, do as you like, anything goes. There will indeed need to be qualification. For instance, we can add the expectations for originality and self-expression that I described earlier and to which work in crits were also subjected. Crits have a similar character, in that they too give freedom for the student to present work without any constraints of older concepts of art and, in a similar way, to largely pursue their own interests.

There is more to say, for crits also require that students heed the consensus of the group. Is there a similar expectation in the art world? It is beyond the scope of this chapter to answer this question properly. But it is obvious that judgment in the art world works in a range of ways—it is sometimes made by individuals and sometimes by groups. Where judgment relies on a group’s decision—on museum acquisition committees, prize-giving juries, and foundations deciding on grants, for example—that will in effect often mean a consensus decision, made on a similar basis to what occurs in crits.

So, the standards of judgment used in crits and in the contemporary art world thus reflect one another to a significant degree, and the former might even be considered a more public, more legible version of the latter in some cases. As I have said, that should hardly be surprising, since crits could otherwise have little value.

**Crits and pluralism**

Crits, we have seen, are strongly allied with pluralism. This section argues that crits also tend to instill pluralism in students. 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.

Consider a student who approaches a crit holding a non-pluralist concept of art—that is, believing that they should pursue some particular quality in art—whether it be mimetic, formal, expressive, political, or something else. The crit group will put this concept under pressure, as its members explore the scope for the work to hold different kinds of interest. Recall Soutter’s remarks: “[t]his kind of training forces students to extend their sense of engagement . . . to consider . . . edges and external supports . . . phenomenological, social, historical, political, and institutional implications.”68 A student holding a non-pluralist concept will find themselves under pressure to consider and acknowledge values that their concept overlooks, ignores, or rejects. Political artists must consider the media and forms they use to convey their message (as the student in Asher’s crit was asked to do); formalists must consider phenomenology beyond the optical; expressionists, the semiotic reading of their gestures—and so on. In this way crits press students to open their work up to a broader range of meaning and media. At this point, one might ask: does consensus not repress many viewpoints, and so resist pluralism? In fact, the reverse is true. Consensus mostly acts to discount the opinions of those who hold non-pluralistic concepts of art, which stipulate that certain qualities in art should be pursued in preference to others. Most of a crit audience—most of the time—will deny the restrictive concepts of art of others. It is not just pluralists who will do this, but anyone who does not hold that same concept of art. Those who hold restrictive concepts of art will reject other restrictive concepts that do not agree with theirs. Once the group settles into the process of evaluating work, they will be driven towards the position that art can have a plurality of values, even if that is not the art that they, individually, make. Any other position, aside from pluralism, is unworkable in this context. In this way, crits work against non-pluralist concepts of art, and, in the process, promote pluralism.69

Are crits critical?

Pluralism is controversial. As Hal Foster put it in the early years of postmodernism, pluralism makes art “another consumer good,” part of “a steady line of obsolescent products.”70 In the context of this account of crits, the worry is as follows: it could be that our shared interests—our shared sense of what is valuable in art—and the pluralism that develops out of this, tends only toward interests favored and encouraged by entrenched social, political, and commercial powers in society. This could hold both in artistic terms, where commercially-oriented aesthetics or other forms that do not threaten the status quo are favored, and in political terms, where the consumerism, capitalism, sexism, and so on of much contemporary Western culture is unwittingly repeated and propagated.

This argument suggests that crits are not critical, in the sense that critical theory is critical. By ‘critical theory,’ I mean both the work of the Frankfurt School and 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: attitudes and values that permeate culture and serve the ends of the dominant social, political, and commercial powers. The idea that art should also be critical in this sense—criticizing dominant ideologies to politically progressive ends—has also become an important element in art and art schools. Thierry de Duve has outlined 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:
Crits, consensus, and criticality

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.72

Critical theory has also come to have a vital place in crits. We have seen this already in the crit Thornton documents—the student is criticized for appropriation of other cultures, the kind of act that capitalism and consumerism happily condone in other contexts.73 Many of the examples I have given of typical moves in crits incorporate this 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 students to build on this, by developing interests beyond those sanctioned by dominant ideologies. So, students may seek out or develop images and modes of production that are not endorsed by the dominant culture. A crit group may need these approaches modeled for them before they begin to explore these issues, but once they have these tools of thinking, there are unlikely to simply discard them. The critically naïve pluralism that Foster attacks is therefore not the pluralism that crits currently instill.

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.74 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 because other kinds of meaning seem to them more compelling, or for other reasons that 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.75

Notes


2 Thornton, Seven Days in the Art World: 47. The student is Josh Stone. Stone also discusses the experience in the podcast “The Crit—The Legacy of Michael Asher’s Post-Studio Class at CalArts.”

3 Thornton, Seven Days in the Art World: 48.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Thornton, Seven Days in the Art World: 48.

7 Thornton, Seven Days in the Art World: 49.

8 Ibid.

9 Thornton, Seven Days in the Art World: 49–50.
10 Thornton, Seven Days in the Art World: 52.
11 Thornton, Seven Days in the Art World: 53.
12 Ibid.
13 According to Jack, this also extended to Asher: “Michael used to nod off all the time.” “The Crit—The Legacy of Michael Asher’s Post-Studio Class at CalArts,” 11:50–12:00.
14 Crits are documented at St Martin’s School of Art at this time (where they were known as group critiques), although they did not become almost ubiquitous in UK art teaching until after the 1970s. For crits at St Martin’s, 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 Subjects Observed (London: Faber & Faber, 1973). Coventry is discussed under the name Midville College of Art.
16 A 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. Artist and teacher Mary Kelly gives an account of this in Thornton, Seven Days in the Art World: 54–55.
20 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.
22 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 De-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 Master of Arts degrees being widely sought after. As I write, out of over 100 nominees for the Turner Prize since 1984 all but two appear to have a Bachelor of Arts qualification from an art school, and about half have a postgraduate qualification (such as a Master of Arts or Master of Fine Arts). I owe these statistics to Martin Lang.
25 Of course, teaching involves more than this—this is a necessary rather than sufficient condition for teaching something.
Crits, consensus, and criticality


27 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.


32 Kant, Critique of Judgment: §40.

33 Ibid.

34 The commonsense bears comparison to Pierre Bourdieu’s habitus: the relatively durable collection of dispositions for perception, thought, and behavior 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.


36 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.

37 The postmodernist attacks made on originality from the 1970s are properly understood as targeting a different notion of originality from the one 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, MA: MIT Press, 1986): 162.


39 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 Nance Groves, “Back to Art School: Grayson Perry and Gillian Wearing Meet Tomorrow’s Stars,” 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.).

40 Madge and Weinberger, Art Students Observed: 185.

41 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 their subsequent 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.
Michael Newall

45 I include women here as a minority in respect of having a minority position in terms of power in society.
46 Elkins, Why Art Cannot Be Taught, 112.
47 Elkins’ more recent book, Art Critiques: A Guide, does not change this view, but advises students on how to best negotiate the challenges critics pose them.
48 Elkins describes a number of other ways critics can fail. Elkins, Why Art Cannot Be Taught: 112–165.
49 www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKab0_8Bp2Y
50 www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqnzJ4omxoA
51 Ibid.
52 Singerman, Art Subjects: 211.
53 Elkins, Why Art Cannot Be Taught: 3.
54 Crippa, “From ‘Crit’ to ‘Lecture-Performance’”: 138.
55 Anthony, Design Juries on Trial.
56 Madge and Weinberger, Art Students Observed: 276.
57 See esp. Madge and Weinberger, Art Students Observed: 83–85, as well as the observations of students, such as ‘Pam’ (124–127) and ‘Diana’ (151–154). 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).
58 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 . . . [m]ediocre 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).
60 Rachel Garfield, email message to the author, April 29, 2012.
61 This is so, even putting aside any adverse personal dynamics between individuals. Where those exist, the situation can be further exacerbated.
63 O. C. Garza gives a vivid account of photographer Garry Winograd’s teaching, which seems an example of this; www.ocgarzaphotography.com
64 John Reardon has interviewed a range of artists working in German art schools about their teaching practices in this tradition. John Reardon, Ch-ch-ch-changes: Artists Talk About Teaching (London: Ridinghouse, 2009).
65 www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGBKcEhcrAl
66 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. That is not something that concepts of art do, although they are sometimes adapted to this purpose. For a survey of definitions of art, see Stephen Davies, Definitions of Art (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).
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.


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.

CalArts is widely regarded for its incorporation of critical theory in its visual arts programs. See, for example, Thornton, Seven Days in the Art World: 62–63.

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.

I think this also means that crits are not the best way to teach a thoroughgoing or programmatic critical art practice. Critical practices are 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.