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Preface

The first year I was hired at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, I was on a panel with four other instructors. We sat down on five chairs in an empty ballet practice room. An MFA student from the Performance Art Department walked out in front of us. The lights went down, and the spotlight went on her. She was wearing a 1950s-style calico dress. She spoke for ten minutes about her childhood, staring into the darkness over our heads. When the performance was over, we all went into a backstage room and sat on filthy couches for the critique. One instructor said the lighting was overly dramatic. The student had a little note pad, and she wrote that down. Another said the student's story was interesting but too disjointed. And then a third instructor said something that changed the way I thought about critiques forever. He said:

“You know, you have very hairy legs.”

I expected the student to be outraged. She hadn't mentioned her legs at all, so the instructor's remark seemed way off topic, way out of bounds. There was a pause, and then the student said:

“Yes, I know, all the women in my family have hairy legs. My mother never shaves.”

The instructor—his name was Tom Jaremba, the wonderful founder of the Performance Art department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where I teach—grinned. “Wow,” he said, “I think that's fabulous. Hairy legs on a woman have such an *amazing* effect. It's so strong.”

“I haven't thought about that,” the student said, taking notes.

The conversation got very animated after that, and everyone started talking about shaving. I don't remember if I said much: I was probably just taking it all in. I didn't mind the subject, as long as the student didn't mind. It was obviously more fun to talk about than lighting or narrative. What amazed me, and continues to amaze me, is that there was no sense that the conversation had strayed off topic. This is an art critique, I thought: a place where all possible subjects are permitted, all at once. There are no rules. Anything at all might be pertinent. It was one of the strangest conversations I had ever been part of. Not because it is strange to talk about who shaves themselves, when, or where, or why, but because it is weird to mix that kind of talk with talk about art, theater, lighting, and narrative, and then to try to understand it all together as a way of teaching art.

It might have been shortly after that day that I decided to make a special study

of critiques. Ever since then I have participated in as many critiques as I can. I have made audiotapes and transcripts; I've taken reams of notes and photographs; I've talked to students and instructors; and I've read what little there is to read on the subject. For me, critiques are the most interesting, infuriating, and challenging part of art teaching. Of all the things that happen when art is taught, critiques the hardest to understand, the trickiest to make use of, the least understood, and potentially the most helpful and rewarding.

Terminology

A quick word about terminology. I call studio art teachers “instructors,” “professors,” and “teachers” indiscriminately. Sometimes I call the teachers in a critique “panelists.” In most of the world, “professor” is a special category, higher than an ordinary university teacher. In North America, every department is full of professors. I am not observing those distinctions here. This book is about visual art instruction wherever it happens: in a two-year liberal arts college, a community college, a research university, an art department, an art academy, an art school, or a technical or design school. I take examples from all of those, without stressing the differences, which often hardly exist anyway.

The same goes for the expressions “art school,” “art department,” “art academy,” and “art university.” Different parts of the world use different names. There are over twenty “art universities” in Japan, which sounds odd to someone from North America. On the other hand the “art schools” in North America sound strange to people from Europe and South America, where art is usually taught in art academies.

I also don't distinguish between BA and BFA, or MA and MPhil and MFA, or PhD and DCA. Degree-granting differences can be significant, but not often, I think, at the level of the critique itself.

Acknowledgments

This book wouldn't have been possible without all the colleagues I've shared critiques with over the years. I'd like to especially remember six colleagues who have died since I started work in 1988: Tom Jaremba; Shellie Fleming, a thoughtful presence in film critiques; Paul Hinchcliffe, an adventurous painter and teacher; George Roeder, an Americanist political historian who managed, somehow, to bridge the

gap between his field and art; Kathryn Hixson, whom most people remember as the editor of the *New Art Examiner*; and Robert Loescher, one of the art world's real originals. You won't find much trace of Bob on the internet, because he gave his life to teaching his three specialties: Hispanic art, the history of sexuality, and the history of food. He was outrageously good at all three subjects.

There's no way I can name all the colleagues who have been part of critique culture at the School, but I especially want to thank Joan Livingstone, John Manning, Claire Pentecost, Frank Piatek, Chris Sullivan, Lisa Wainwright, Faith Wilding, Michiko Itatani, Anders Nereim, Helen Maria Nugent, Anne Wilson, Gaylen Gerber, Jim Nutt, Simon Anderson, Lin Hixson, Alan Labb, Michael Miller, Stephanie Brooks, Beth Nugent, Werner Herterich, Tiffany Holmes, Michael Newman, Susanne Doremus, Carol Becker, Candida Alvarez, Gregg Bordowitz, Jesse Ball, Mary Jane Jacob, Sharon Cousin, Frances Whitehead, and Barbara DeGenevieve, for their many insights over many years.

Thanks, too, to the student artists who gave me permission to tape and transcribe their critiques and reproduce their work: Sean Lamoureux, Alexandra Helene Copan, Chris Fennell, Diego Gutierrez, Rebecca Gordon, Chris Campe, Catherine Arnold (now Schaffner), elin o'Hara slavick, and Andrea Schumacher. And special thanks to Joanne Easton, who shared her MA thesis on critiques with me; to the gang on my Facebook page for lots of ideas (you're all thanked in footnotes); to Jerry Saltz (who posted my project on his Facebook page on June 23, 2011, resulting in 900 responses) and all his friends (they're all thanked too); to Buzz Spector; and to Tom Mapp, who was once my teacher when I was in the MFA program at the University of Chicago.

And finally, to all the students in my critique classes over the years. Sadly, I don't have a list of all those classes, so the spring 2014 class will have to stand in for all of them: thanks to Catalina Acosta-Carrizosa, Kyle Riley, David Albert, Ke Wang, Amy Stoker, Keith Tolch, Aubrey Manson, Fabienne Zuijdwijk, Annelies Kamen, Leonard Suryajaya (not in the photo), Ilan Gutin, and Laís Pontes, for putting up with all the experiments and proposals in this book. There we are in the photo.

How This Book is Organized

Learning about critiques is like walking into a swamp. Ever walked into a swamp? At first you squish along in the mud, and it seems like everything will be fine. But then the mud gets sticky, and it grabs your shoes, and there are sticks underwater that you can't see, and they snag your legs, and soon you can hardly move. (Why did you walk into a swamp to begin with?)



There is no yellow brick road to understanding critiques, no simple solution, no standard advice. And so there really is no way to organize a book on critiques so that it builds from one thing to the next.

On the other hand, there is often a difference between what happens in the first year (Freshman year, Foundation year) and what happens later in the undergraduate (college, BA, BFA) curriculum. And there is often, but by no means always, a distinction between what happens at the BA level and what happens at the MA (or MFA, or MPhil) level. And there is very definitely always a difference between what happens at all those levels and in the PhD.

The first two editions of this book scrambled all those levels together, because that's how I feel about critiques. Teachers pointed out that some sections are over the head of beginners and introductory classes. One reviewer, on Amazon, even said this book was only for MFA students. So for this third edition I have reluctantly separated the "Basics" from the BFA, MFA, and PhD. I have also reluctantly gathered some chapters on the theory of the critique, and on practical experiments you can make with critiques (they're called "Projects").

I am full of misgivings about this organization, and I strongly recommend you read at random anywhere you'd like in the book. Critiques are disorderly things: that is why they are interesting. It's easy to think that there are good ways to distinguish between the first year, the BFA, and the MFA, and for administrators there have to be ways to do that. But in real life everything is tangled together.

Why There Are So Few Books on This Subject

I think it is weird that something as universal as art critiques—practiced all around the world, at all levels of education—has so little written about it. Part of the explanation is that the people who write books about teaching are mainly administrators and educators, and not art teachers. There is a large literature on how to assess and grade art students, for people who run art departments and art schools, and that counts as writing on art critiques. That literature is full of ideas like “the student should be able to articulate her influences,” or “the student should show that she can connect and synthesize different ideas,” or “the student should provide evidence that she can work innovatively and develop new content.” Administrators, deans, and chairs of departments need writing like that to assess students: but it just doesn’t get near what is actually said in studio critiques. If you’re interested in that literature, you might look up writing in the field of art education; or you might look at the websites of organizations that help monitor education standards, like the commissions on higher learning in the US and Europe. This book isn’t about that.

There may be up to five thousand institutions in the world that grant the equivalent of BFA, MFA, and PhD degrees in the visual arts,² and if each one of those holds just five critiques a semester (and surely the number is much higher) then there are at least fifty thousand art critiques each year. And yet there is no standard literature on critiques: nothing about how to run them, what they’re supposed to accomplish, what standards they might employ.

There is a book called *The Critique Handbook*, but two-thirds of it is about the basic terms and ideas that are used in art instruction, like “form” and “space.” If you’re new to the art world and you’re looking for a book that will introduce you to critiques but also to form, space, scale, format, line, color, realism, and abstraction, then *The Critique Handbook* may be a good choice.³ There is a fun chapter called “The Crit” in Sarah Thornton’s *Seven Days in the Art World*; and some passages in the edited volumes *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School*, *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, and *Agonistic Academies*.⁴

There’s a good book by Timothy Van Laar and Leonard Diepeveen, *Active Sights: Art as Social Interaction*, but it’s more about artists in the world than students.⁵ And there’s a book by Deborah Rockman called *The Art of Teaching Art*, geared to introductory-level drawing classes.⁶ All of these books spend a lot of time on things other than critiques.

The only book I know, other than this one, which is exclusively on art critiques is the very entertaining *Q-Art Presents / Art Crits: 20 Questions, A Pocket Guide*, edited by Sarah Rowles (2013). It’s about open critiques, including self-trained artists, so it’s especially good on ways critiques can be supportive, and how to gain confidence with them. I have incorporated references to that book in this one.

What's New in This Edition

This is the third, final, and definitive edition of this book: I will not be expanding it further, so it's a safe book to buy. Previous editions have been available in less expensive black and white versions, but this time I decided color really does make a difference, so there is no black and white option. The cover was painted especially for this book by Mark Staff Brandl.

About 10 chapters are expanded from chapter 4 in my book *Why Art Cannot be Taught: A Handbook for Art Students*.⁷ It is the only time I have ever repeated anything from one book to another. I re-used that material because *Why Art Cannot be Taught* should really have been a book about art critiques, but it grew into something bigger. The chapters on art critiques were buried, and students didn't see them. I wanted to bring that material out and write something focused on art critiques. *Why Art Cannot be Taught* also has a history of art schools, discussions of common problems in teaching art, and a section about whether or not art can be taught.⁸ If you're interested in the history of art teaching, or in the philosophic problem about whether or not art can be taught (in studios, or even in classrooms), then that book might be better than this one.

This book is not just an extract from that one. I have worked hard on this book: everything's been reorganized, and lots has been rewritten; lots of material is crowd sourced from Facebook; and this edition also adds five new chapters that weren't in the second edition—2, 5, 7, 10, and 43. It's as good as I can make it.

How To Contact the Author

You can write at jameselkins@fastmail.fm or through the contact form on the website www.jameselkins.com. I am always glad to hear from people with new critique experiences, questions, or problems.

I have traveled widely as a guest speaker, and participated in art critiques in most states of the US (I seem to be missing Maine, Idaho, Missouri, Oklahoma, Vermont, Alaska, and Hawaii), and in about 15 foreign countries. (I have been to art departments and academies in 60 countries, but I have only been in critiques in about 15 of those.) My traveling—on average once a week during the academic year—has given me a wide, nebulous, and unquantifiable sense of the flavor and style of critiques in many places. I've tried to incorporate as much of that into this book as I could.

Even though there's hardly anything more annoying than an advertisement, I'd like to say that if your institution would like a workshop on critiques, just let me know.

Your Future Outside Art School

One last word before we get started. This book is all about individual and group critiques in institutions like schools, universities, colleges, and academies. Critiques happen in many places: among friends, in bars, in artist's residencies, in community centers, in commercial galleries, in project spaces. Those critiques can often be less formal, because there's less of a power relation, and—most important!—because there is no money involved. I hope that some of what I say can be helpful in those real-life situations.⁹

I have one piece of advice about critiques out there in the real world. After you graduate, the chances are you'll have a circle of friends, and you'll all critique each other's work. The danger is that as the years go on, you'll get to know each other very well, and your friends won't be giving you the serious, fundamental critiques you may need. I've seen this happen many times: good friends after ten or twenty years support one another, but that is not always what is needed.

So here's my advice, which no one ever takes:

1. When you graduate, gather a group of friends, and try to find a space you can all share.

2. Then after four or five years, dump them and find another group.

Critiques depend on honesty.

James Elkins
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