

Chapter Five

CRITIQUE DYNAMICS

GENERAL CRITIQUE DYNAMICS

Who is in the room, what are we looking at, how are we looking at it?

A critique happens when a group of people convenes in an art studio or critique room to discuss and evaluate works of art. Depending on the class level, the school's resources, and the area of study, the group is comprised of a combination of students, one or several instructors, and sometimes other invited participants, usually thought of as experts. That's the surface view of things. But many unseen variables come into play as a critique unfolds. More often than not in beginning classes your critique will be conducted by a single instructor, and the work that's put up will be a group of individual responses to a common assignment. But in intermediate and advanced-level art courses, and certainly on the graduate level, the faculty/student ratio is inverted so that it is not uncommon to have five or more faculty members conducting a series of fairly lengthy critiques for single students, either in isolation or among peers.

Critique as Theater

A critique can be seen as theater and much about it resembles performance. Instructors and students can take on guises in critique that seem at odds with their everyday personalities. Verbal exchanges can be conversational, argumentative, tangential, or disconnected. Sometimes comments are delivered like rhetorical declarations, other times mumbled and drifting. Body language is in play. Sometimes your fellow students will listen intently and other times look aimlessly around the room. When a student is being critiqued some will actively

engage in eye contact while others will tend to slump and duck in the corner. Pay attention to your own body language and that of your fellow students. Are you projecting confidence or defensive bravado? Are you naturally less talkative than other students or are you acting deliberately disengaged?

The critique is also a kind of game, not because it lacks seriousness but because it operates with a set of mutually agreed upon rules of engagement and criteria. These vary according to your instructor's views about art and her approach to structuring the critique, the dynamics of the critique group, the level of the class, and the purpose of the assigned project (if any). The critique also takes place within the larger context of contemporary artistic practice, itself a pluralistic patchwork of often competing discourses. When the critique format and its criteria reflect a particular approach to assessing art, as is often the case, then unspoken assumptions about what constitutes legitimate art practice come into play.

The Art Object Is Not Absolute

When an artwork is presented for critique, a variety of variables inform the way it's perceived. There is the work that is physically in front of us and our individual interpretations of it. We can see it in relation to other works the artist has done, and ask if the work shows any evidence of progress, or even if the work offers a solution to problems raised at the last critique. It will inevitably be compared to the other works in the room and then in relation to other works in the surrounding art world and in art history.

The Language of Critique

An artwork is commonly described in critique as *working* or not *working*. Aside from the fact that we use the verb to describe the noun, *working* evokes odd images of something efficient, industrious, and effective, in contrast to something lazy, ineffectual, or uncooperative. Should we imagine it as working on us? Or is it working harmoniously with other elements in an aesthetic structure? We instinctively feel that we all know what we mean when we say, "that works," or "that doesn't work," and we feel comfortable using such language without really thinking about what we mean.

Critiques are often full of militaristic language: *defend your work, struggle with the painting, attack the canvas, execute the piece, wrestle*

with it, master the medium. Instructors have even been known to instruct students to think of the painting as an *opponent*. Are these terms too loaded? Do they necessarily refer to a masculine viewpoint as some critics claim, or do they appropriately reflect the difficult nature of giving substance to an idea?

An instructor who thinks of a painting as the result of an authentic creative act might use language that points to the act, such as, "You didn't know what you were doing in that area," or "you weren't really *painting* here," or "this work lacks commitment; you're only painting effects; this is false; I don't buy it."

Listen to the language in critique. Try to get a sense not only of what is being said but also of the hidden assumptions that lie beneath. No matter what the instructor's or visiting expert's own agenda (everyone has one), more often than not, she or he is pointing to something in your work that needs attention. Indeed good criticism comes in many guises.

Artist's Intentions

To guess an artist's intentions by looking at a work has never been a fair venue for critics or historians. It is too speculative, too subjective. Much contemporary art, nevertheless, is exhibited with supporting information in the form of artist statements and interviews. Add to that works that point directly to the artist, by means of biographical texts that are integral to the work, and the question of intentionality becomes unavoidable. In the art school setting, where the goal is to help students to realize their visions, a discussion of your intentions has a place, even if it can be both confusing and revealing. What you claim the work is about and what the critique participants see can be miles apart. However, clarity of intention can lay some groundwork for a discussion bent on helping you realize these intentions in the artwork. The formal means by which intentions are articulated become a part of the critique dynamic.

If your critique begins with you introducing the ideas that led you to make a work, intention overtly sets the tone for the discussion. If you have a relatively clear idea of what you are trying to do and can articulate that, the group can quickly determine if the work matches up. If it doesn't, discussion can turn on this disconnect, or the merit of the intentions themselves, or how to realize them better. But does it really matter whether or not the work and what you *think* you're doing have anything in common? Indeed, many artists (even famous ones) don't understand

their own motives and make work that belies their intentions in complex and interesting ways.

Instructors may refuse to hear about your intentions, responding to long introductory explanations with comments, such as “Your ideas are getting in the way.” “The work speaks for itself.” “You’re all caught up in the ideas and not in the work.” “I don’t care about what you think you’re doing, you don’t know what you’re doing,” and so on.

Your instructor may ask you about your intentions, but even if you are particularly articulate, can we ever really know what they are? What we think we are doing in a work and how it’s received publicly can be worlds apart. Intentions, if they do come up, will often be critiqued along with the work, and then taken with a grain of salt.

Cliché and Originality

When someone’s work in critique is labeled clichéd, or references are made to another artist’s work, the complex subject of originality will arise. This can be confusing. We praise originality, along with freshness and inventiveness, and yet we insist that to achieve these things one must be well versed in contemporary art and art history. Is this not contradictory? To avoid cliché, isn’t it best to isolate yourself from all that influence? Wouldn’t this improve your chances of creating something truly original? Doesn’t the instructor’s insistence that you look at so-and-so’s work undermine your quest for originality? Are you not in danger of becoming derivative?

In fact, research into contemporary and historical art has the opposite effect. For in our daily lives, we are all surrounded by images and examples of art, whether we study it or not. Hence, we are continually being influenced not by creative interesting solutions, but by provincial, second-tier, watered-down examples of art. The result is that we are influenced, not to produce highly original inventive work, but rather to make work that resembles what we *think* art should look like, indeed, what we are used to seeing.

One way to understand this is to consider the music world. Imagine attempting to engage with an alternative music scene having only listened to your grandparent’s country collection. This could be interesting in an oddball conceptual way, but your exchange will be a lot richer if you have studied and are familiar with lots of music, both mainstream and obscure.

This is not to say that art about art is necessarily desirable. It’s simply that knowledge of your field enables you to be part of the larger conversation, to see your work as it will be perceived publicly. Thus, knowledge of the world and culture can only enrich you, whether literature, scientific study, personal experiences, or travel. Knowledge of historical and contemporary practice places you in a larger stimulating conversation. It can even make you bolder and more inventive. Worry less about being original and more about being informed. You will end up being less clichéd!

When the Format of the Critique Is at Odds with the Format of Your Work

Can a critique actually change or interfere with your work? For example, how do we critique a performance of uncertain duration? Or an off-site sculpture meant to be accidentally encountered? Is it better for you to construct an installation with imperfect lighting or with limited assembly time in order to get some discussion going? Or does it make sense to limit your efforts to the particulars of the critique space? A critique can at times become an odd parallel universe that exists to the side of your work.

For this reason, more and more documentation is ending up in the critique room. As discussed in the chapter “The Work in the World,” off-site installations, private performances, or guerrilla actions, located at distances inconvenient for group critique, may need to be presented as documentary.

Whether you choose video, photographs, written texts, or artifacts, the format itself becomes a legitimate subject for the critique. For example, what size are your documentary photographs? How is the video edited and presented? Are artifacts from an off-site performance pinned to the wall or arranged in books? Is a chronology created? Do you attempt a recreation of the site?

Documentation and presentation act as records of an art event and become themselves the place of meaning. Where does the art occur? Is the video of a performance running on a gallery monitor the art? Or has the art already occurred in another time and place? Like old black-and-white photos of early performance art, what is exhibited in a gallery becomes the art, in that it is what we experience, in place of the event itself.

SURVIVING THE CRITIQUE

Leave Your Ego at the Door

The first step to surviving the critique is to leave your ego at the door. All critiques test your ability to occupy the paradoxical position of being, at once, committed to your work and detached in critique. Remember that you are not your work. Try to become an impartial viewer, standing *beside* rather than *against* the other members of the critique. Consider the criticism thoughtfully, as if the work in question was done by someone else.

Staying objective in the face of feedback from a single authority can be especially challenging, since the authority's point of view may seem subjective, self-serving, or unfair. Nonetheless, you are still likely to receive a great deal of useful information. You want to remain open-minded while at the same time hold onto your own sense of vision and purpose. You may be tempted to adjust your own work to what you think the instructor favors. This is ultimately unconstructive. Make sure that you are taking the information from the critique in an *active*, not a *reactive*, way.

Active and Reactive Listening

What do we mean by this? In a reactive response you *react* to criticism by either dismissing everything that has been said or by trying to please the instructor by following suggestions to the letter in spite of your better instincts. An active response, and a better way to deal with criticism, is to listen carefully, take notes, and isolate issues that have been raised. For even if you reject an offered solution, it may be pointing out a legitimate problem. The biggest danger in any critique, but especially in critique situations where there is a single authoritative instructor, is the tendency to see all criticism, positive or negative, as approval and disapproval, and to see comments as prescriptive orders. If you are criticized for something in your work, try and articulate *for yourself* what alternatives are open to you.

One way to approach a critique *actively* is to respectfully, but firmly, engage with questions. "Could you explain to me further why you think that? I don't agree that this was a poor choice of color, but I am open to reconsidering." "Explain to me a bit more about why you object." Even if the final result is still disagreement you have engaged in

a nondefensive manner, demonstrated that you are listening, and asked for some clarification.

This can be helpful also in critiques where you encounter wildly diverging opinions. When two respected instructors give you responses that are exactly opposite, do you close your eyes and just choose one? Instead, you must try to think through each of their arguments and solutions. Turn them over. Work through them. Go back into the studio and perhaps experiment with both solutions side by side. Often your eye will settle the argument.

Critical to a successful critique of any kind is an ability to detach yourself from your work. Again, comments—be they positive or negative—are not directed toward you. This is one of the most difficult things to grasp when you have just been working night and day to complete a piece. If you have been very involved, it is hard to suddenly separate from a work when you put it up for critique. But separate you must. Thus, in critique, you will look at your work side by side with the authority, almost like two scientists, objectively assessing what is before you. Stepping to the side to get out of the line of fire is crucial to absorbing what is observed and discussed.

Critiques of Class Assignments or Works Made with Specific Parameters

When an assignment contains highly specific project parameters, the critique is sometimes limited to a simple determination as to whether works do or do not meet the assigned criteria. For example, your entire class is given the same formal or conceptual problem to solve or a project that is material or technique specific. Every student in the class paints from the same still life or sculpts in clay from the model. Such assignments are often designed to test your level of proficiency in a given material or technique.

Thus, in critique much of the discussion is centered on how and whether the works demonstrate technical achievement in a common material or a process. Or in cases where the assignment is to explore particular formal or conceptual issues, a critique may focus on whether and how these are evident in the work. In critiques of assignments with clear parameters, if you produce an ambitious and even accomplished work that ignores the challenge of the project requirements you will likely have an unsatisfactory critique.

Chapter Six

CRITIQUE PREPARATION AND EXERCISES

PRESENTATION

Presentation Is Everything

A critique is like an exhibition. Out of the studio the work must stand on its own. At the scheduled time for critique, all work should be installed and ready to discuss. Nothing will be more annoying for your instructor than to begin a long critique day by waiting for you to hammer a nail or find a base.

The best way to avoid this scenario is to know in advance how you will install your work. If you are hanging a painting, get the necessary hardware and invest in a small level. If your sculpture requires a base, either construct your own or make sure the school base is painted and the appropriate size for the work. Shabby pedestals or those with wet paint are not acceptable. In short, do all troubleshooting before the critique begins.

Lighting

Lighting is important but can vary greatly. Some schools have critique rooms or areas equipped with gallery lighting, while other critique spaces make do with harsh overhead fluorescents. If you are fortunate enough to have the option to use spots, floods, or other considered lighting options, take full advantage of this learning opportunity. Again, plan ahead and set aside enough time before critique to light your work. Often this will complete the work in unforeseen ways. If you are stuck with overhead or fluorescent lights that do not enhance your work, you might consider experimenting with inexpensive clamp-on lights.

Title Cards

If there is outside information critical to the reading of the work—for instance, the found objects that you display were all collected on specific paths in the city, or the geometric abstract painting is actually a graph drawn from statistics on alcohol abuse—then you must consider ways to communicate this information. This is necessary even if you plan to stand in front of the work and introduce it to your classmates.

One solution is to make a small title card, a convention routinely adopted by galleries and museums to contextualize works in significant ways. As we discussed earlier, a black square painting called *Untitled* is read very differently than an identical one titled *Sample of Coal from Toxic Site 284*. You may also relay important information in the title card by listing the material. The same painting we called *Untitled* will change meanings if the medium is listed as *sampled coal from toxic site on canvas*.

Introducing Your Work

You may be asked to introduce your work before the critique begins. This can be useful if there is information not immediately evident in the work. For instance, if something occurred in the process of making the work, that information is critical to its meaning. Some instructors want this information to be included as part of the presentation, perhaps through title cards, wall text, or handouts. (Rarely will an artist be able to stand beside a work on exhibition and explain it.) Other instructors who think of critiques as forums for discussion will freely grant the right to frame the conversation about your work, rather than stand mutely by enduring a guessing game from your classmates.

If you are asked to present your work, ask yourself if you are giving a long-winded explanation full of excuses and descriptions of failed intentions. Are you insisting on the obviousness of obscure references that no one else sees? Are you explaining what the work *means* without regard for what it communicates?

Preparing Your Introduction

If you have been asked to introduce your work in critique, or if the typical format in your class is for the artist to say a few words before a work is discussed, there are a few things you can do to prepare. First, articulate for yourself what you think are the critical issues in your work. What technical problems did you struggle with? What were you

reading at the time the work was made? What sources inform your work? Consider also what questions you may have asked yourself in the studio. In other words, *you* frame the discussion. Try to refrain from long explanations that do not open dialogue. Focus on questions, not claims.

During critique, follow up comments with questions. Ask your fellow students to elaborate and clarify. Don't be afraid to ask, "What do you think about this?" Point to what you think is a trouble spot. Engage in the dance; don't dodge the jabs.

Intentionality is a complex thing in art making. Sometimes what happened against your will is better than what you desperately wanted. (If only you can see it.) Listen carefully to the comments and engage them. Not with excuses or regrets, but with an open mind. Try to see what everyone else sees. The most important thing you can do here is really listen. The gap between what you think you are doing and what you are actually producing can only be bridged by stepping to the side and trying to see your work as it is.

Artists and Writing

Writing has always had an odd relationship with the visual arts. While writers and artists have sat in cafes together, collaborated, and even married one another, writers, critics, and the public in general have regarded artists who write with suspicion. The idea is that artists are good at what they do *because* they can't use language like the rest of us or, at least, that the one gift precludes the other. This myth paints the artist as an inarticulate genius who can only communicate through his work. Yet history is full of artists who have thought deeply and written beautifully. And often this writing has been about how they see and what they do in the studio. Writing is as much a conceptualizing tool as it is an expressive one. Make writing a habitual part of your critique participation as well as your studio production. As strange as it may sound, writing can help you find out what you think.

Writing Before Speaking in Critique

Sometimes your instructor will set aside a quiet period at the beginning of the critique for everyone (including the instructor) to take time to look at the work and respond before any verbal exchange begins.

In an *open writing* session, you might spend some unstructured time before critique writing about the work in the room, each student choosing an order and length of time for considering each piece. In a *free writing* session, you will typically move in a group from work to work, writing for a timed interval in front of each piece before moving on to the next. *Free writing* is a specific technique that differs from open writing in that the writer becomes receptive to a stream-of-consciousness that is simultaneously recorded on the page. Variations include *free writing* about the entire body of work in a group critique as if it were an exhibition, or *free writing* while moving randomly around the room from work to work. Whether or not your instructor structures writing into a critique, you can always use it to collect and record your thoughts about the work in front of you.

How to Free Write

Free writing can be an effective warmup exercise. Here is how it is done. Get a pad of paper, set a timer for five minutes or so, and begin writing. Never let the pen come up from the paper. Don't stop to read what you have written. Keep moving, and if you run out of words, keep writing the last word you wrote over and over until you become unstuck. Five minutes is a long time to write without stopping to see what you have done. *Free writing* is writing without censoring yourself or stopping to compose, and it can yield surprising results.

Free writing is also a method that you might wish to explore outside of critique. For instance, try free writing every morning for two weeks or periodically in your studio.

EXERCISE I

Artist's Questions

Bring five to ten questions to the critique. Make photocopies for each of your classmates and the instructor.

Your questions will be handed out before the critique and answered during a quiet writing period before discussion.

Classmates' responses will be referred to in discussion of your work and returned to you at the end of the critique.

Thinking and Preparing Artist's Questions

Preparing your artist's questions. A few simple questions say a lot about what *you* want answered. Questions can address craft, options that you have wrestled with in the studio, artists that you are looking at, or any other issues that you want included in your critique discussion. For some students, the artist's questions do not come easily. Consider times when you were making the work and you were unsure whether to do this or that, and are still unsure whether you ended up with the best solution. Consider struggles you have had with craft. Do you already know that there are some technical problems with this work? Are these problems that you intend to resolve with time and experience?

Perhaps the questions are not just about craft or material choice, or composition or placement, but ideas that inform the work, which also are fair game. What kinds of investigations are going on in your work? What would you find helpful for your peers to address? Anything goes with what you choose to ask. Keep in mind that questions such as "Do you like it?" or "What do you think of this piece?" are not as helpful as those that focus the conversation. Remember that the more specific the questions the more helpful your answers will be.

Don't be afraid to solicit criticism! If you know that you still haven't mastered a technique, if you know that there are some problem areas in your work, if you know you are grappling with a controversial subject, you will be all the better for having actively addressed it in a dignified manner, rather than becoming sullen and defensive when your classmates bring it up.

Girl in a Box

On critique day, a student arrives carrying a medium size plastic sweater storage box. When it's her turn for critique, she takes the box out onto the sidewalk in front of the school and climbs inside. Miraculously, she is able to fold her 5'7" frame into the box and pull the lid on. She remains inside long enough for everyone in the critique group to get a little nervous. Is there enough air in there? Could she suffocate? At last she opens the lid and steps out, picks up the box, and walks away.

Her questions:

In the performance I was unsure whether I should have someone pick up the box that I had folded myself into and carry it away. What do you think?

Should I have used a wooden box instead of the clear plastic tub? Did it matter that I didn't make the box I was in? Would that have made the work more interesting for you?

I am not sure what the work is about for me. I just had a notion to do it. It seemed almost like a childhood memory, but also dangerous. What did it make you think of? Did it stir any memories?

Was it too long? Did you get bored? Were you ever worried about me?

Is the work less interesting because it is in front of the school? That is, everyone figures it was an art stunt. What if it were in a public place or even a discount store? Is it unethical to bring performances into people's lives in that way?

How do you see this work relating to Chris Burden? I like his work, but mine is not so hectic. What about a series of short performances?

Should I do a series of these? Does this seem lame compared to Brian's work, which took him the last three weeks to complete?

How could I have best documented this?

How would the work be different if I had titled it *Claustrophobia? Girl in a Box? 14 minutes 32 seconds?*

EXERCISE 2

Five Categories

1. Immediate Response

What are your immediate responses? (These are uncensored, irrational, un-self-conscious impressions of the work; what you notice first, what stands out and how it affects you):

2. Objective Description

Objectively describe what is in front of you. Describe the work as if to someone who can't see it:

3. Formal Matters

Formal complaints and praise: Look hard at formal matters in play in the work: presentation, material choices, composition, draftsmanship, line quality, palette, placement in space, and so on:

4. The Story It Tells

This is the category that deals with *meaning*. Does the work tell a story? What is foregrounded? Is there a title? What associations does the work evoke? Try naming the work with a simple noun, then with a phrase.

5. The Work in the World

How does it connect to the rest of the world? With other works of art? With history?

Thinking and Preparing Five Categories

How to write about your immediate reactions to the work.

Immediate reactions are the uncensored, irrational, un-self-conscious initial impressions of the work. One way to begin is with a free association exercise. Write down the first single word or phrase that comes to mind when you look at the work. Another option is to free write for a minute in front of the work.

You might go immediately to a part of the work that has been intentionally foregrounded on a formal level, such as scale, color, material, or location in the space. Perhaps your first response to the work is irritation with the craft or the presentation. This is fair game and leads you right to the category of formal complaint. Conversely, if your first impressions of craft and presentation are positive, these lead to formal praise.

Your immediate reactions might take you to some specific image in the work. Name this image. In some works, immediate reactions take you directly to a narrative. Describe this narrative as you read it.

How to write about your formal complaints and acknowledgments.

Begin with careful looking. Write a very detailed description of what you see. Consider the work in front of you as a neutral object, not a work of art. Write your description as if you are trying to convey an image of the work to someone who cannot see it. Consider material, process (if evident), scale, texture, color, composition, proportion, and the relationship of the object (or objects) to the space.

Look hard at the formal matters at play, including the way the work has been made and presented, the material choices, composition, draftsmanship, palette, and placement in space.

Ask yourself if the work relies on realism. If so, assess the work's effectiveness. Consider craft by standards appropriate to the work. Ask yourself if the work relies on a specific craft or crafts. Name these. Is your formal assessment informed by a particular craft convention? (For example, is the canvas stretched without ripples and the corners neatly folded? Are the staples evenly placed? Is the stretcher bar square? Should it be? Is the sculpture well modeled? Is the aluminum casting without cracks and breaks? Is the video shot with appropriate lighting and edited without glitches? Does the armature have messy welds? Does the wooden display case have secure joints?)

Ways to approach the story it tells (meaning).

The story the work tells may be the trickiest part of the critique, because as we discussed earlier, *meaning* in a work of art is such a varied and multilayered thing. We can name the subject matter in the work and seek to interpret the message.

To help you think about it:

Make up a title for the work.

Ask yourself what is foregrounded in the work. Is it some formal quality, such as color, scale, texture, composition, or relationship to site? Is there some specific imagery in the work? Name this imagery in as descriptive a language as possible.

Ask yourself what associations the work evokes.

Ask if the artist's identity affects your reading of the work. Think about the relation of authorship to meaning, and how who is telling the story can become part of the story.

Also, consider if there is some information that the work refers to outside of itself. If this is the case, note whether this information is provided by way of common knowledge, additional text, verbal introduction, or some other means.

How to write about the work in the world.

This category addresses the work in context. Consider how the work being critiqued is *in conversation* with other contemporary artworks or with work from other historical periods. Consider what happens if the work being critiqued is taken out of the neutral space of the critique room (a white cube) and put somehow into the world. Ask yourself how its meaning is affected by its placement or location.

To look at the work in the context of contemporary art:

Imagine that you are a curator and assembling a group exhibition with this work and a group of at least five other artists. Who would these other artists be and why? What might you call the exhibition?

Imagine that you are a co-curator in a large international exhibition project. You have been asked to place this work:

With a work from a different century

With a work from another country

At a special site

Think about how this work would change if it were placed in a different site outside the critique room.

Think about how it might operate if it were not recognized as a work of art.

EXERCISE 3

Teasing Out a Story

First, name the image in front of you with a single simple noun:

Girl

Still life

Army footlocker

Bicycle

Now take the naming to another level so that you have a more descriptive phrase:

Video projected onto a wading pool filled with water, showing a girl shivering in a small pond with eyes covered.

Billboard size poster showing a still life of fast-food burgers made into sushi.

Three army footlockers. One open. Contents scattered and covered in shaving cream. Recorded sounds of drill sergeant screaming.

Found bicycle modified with attached percussion instruments that are played when bike is ridden.

EXERCISE 12

Things to Think About (Worldview) Questionnaire

- Do you think that art should serve a higher cause?
 What higher cause?
 Are you suspicious of such an idea?
 Why or why not?
 Do you think that the best art is art that *anyone* can understand?
 Do you think that the best art is art that shows some talent or special technical skill in its making?
 Do you think that art should serve some social function?
 What do you think is the function of art in society?
 Do you think that art should interface with the world?
 How?
 Do you think that art should be primarily a personal expression?
 Do you think that art should be about itself?
 Do you think artists are gifted people?
 Can everyone be an artist?
 Is everyone an artist?
 How is everyone an artist?
 If everyone is not an artist how do we know who is?
 Where would you like your art to be shown?
 Where and how would you like your art to exist in the world?
 Does the meaning of an artwork change if it is shown in a different culture?
 At a different time?
 Can a work of art be unethical and still be beautiful? Elaborate.
 How do you define beauty?
 Describe something you would define as beautiful.
 Describe something you thought to be unethical.

FORMAL MATTERS IN PAINTING CHECKLIST

Look at the support:

- What kind of material support is being used?
- Is it a stretched canvas?
- Is it a board or panel of some kind?
- How deep are the sides?
- What are the physical edges like?

Look at the shape:

- Is it a rectangle?
- A square?
- Something else?

Look at the scale:

- How big is the painting?
- Bigger than you?
- Smaller?

Look at the surface:

- Was it painted with a knife?
- A brush? What size? Were a variety of brushes used?
- What kind of paint or other material was used?
- Is there a mixture of materials on the surface?
- Was paint poured or dripped? Something else? Scraped or sanded?
- Is the paint thin or thick?
- Is it even paint?
- Is the surface smooth or rough?
- Are there many thinly glazed layers of paint or one thin layer?
- Have layers of thick paint been applied?
- Can you see evidence of brush strokes? Evidence of the act of painting?
- If so, have the brush strokes been made with speed?
- Has the paint been glopped on?
- Thinly patched in?
- Are there other things on the surface? What are they made of?

Look at the ground:

- Is there a ground that operates against a figure?
- Is it dark or light?
- Bright or earth-toned?

Look for a figure/ground relationship:

- Is there a figure of some kind?
- What is its relationship to the ground?
- Is one more powerful than the other?
- Do they feel balanced?
- Are they connected (and separated) by a color relationship? By contrast of value? By line?
- Can you tell which is figure and which is ground?
- Do they ever merge?
- Is there a lot of empty space?
- Or does it feel dense?

Does the painting appear to be a window into an illusion?

- Does your eye linger on the surface? Or pass through it?
- Has a perspectival system been used?
- Is it linear perspective?
- Atmospheric perspective?
- Has the illusion of volumetric space been achieved through something else?
 - Positioning of figures?
 - Overlapping?
 - Stark value relationships?
 - Relative scale?
 - Modeling of light and shadow?
- Is the surface made of thin layers of transparent paint?
- Is the smooth surface broken by thick brushmarks of paint?
- Are they light in relation to a dark transparent ground?
- Are there mechanically reproduced images?
- If so, are they made of materials other than paint?

Look at the value relations:

- Does the pictorial surface contain a wide range of values?
- Is the painting mainly dark?
- Mainly light?
- Is there a strong contrast of value but little in between?
- Does the painting seem to be organized by value relationships?
- Are the values very close but the colors different?
- Is volumetric space created through value?

Look at the color:

- Is there a great contrast of hue or color?
- Is the palette limited but saturation varies a lot?
- Is the palette varied but there isn't much contrast of value?
- Does the painting have a temperature? Very warm or very cool?
- Is this a monochrome?
- Is there a discernible color scheme? Triads? Tetrads? Compliments?
- If so, have extension and saturation been considered?
- Is the color balanced and harmonious?
- Does it create an emotional or evocative space?
- Is local color used?

Look at the edges within the picture plane:

- Are the edges that connect areas hard edged?
- Do they look like they were masked?
- Have they been softly scumbled?
- Are they hard to see?
- Have they been done carefully?
- Do they vibrate or shimmer?

Look at the composition:

- Are shapes, lines, and forms related through juxtaposition (x,y axis)?
- Or are they related by means of layered spatial planes (z axis)?
- Is it an all-over composition?
- If so, is it a repeated motif? A pattern of some kind?
- Is the pattern organic or geometric?

Is there one dominant shape or form?

- If so, is it angular or rounded?
- How does it relate to the edges of the picture plane?
- What is its relative scale to the whole picture plane?
- How is it positioned?
- Is it positioned in relation to other shapes or forms?
- Is there a variety of shapes or forms?
- If so, are they close in scale or varied?
- Is there an emphasized contrast of scale between shapes and forms?
- How are they organized? By color? Value? Line? Scale?
- Is there a dominant mark or gesture?
- Is there a linear understructure that you can see?
- Can you detect an overall organization created by the parts?
- What shape is it?
- Is it stable or unstable?
- Does it make the painting feel static or create a sense of movement?

FORMAL MATTERS IN SCULPTURE CHECKLIST**Is the sculpture a single object?**

- Dense?
- Transparent?
- Varied in character?
- Full of negative spaces?
- Forming a single interior space?

Is the sculpture a group of objects operating as a whole?

- Are the units identical? Are the units varied?
- Do they vary in scale?
- Do they vary in color?
- Are some built and some found?

- Are the units connected physically?
- How is each unit physically connected to the other?
- Are the units not connected physically, but visually?
- How does configuration/arrangement operate in this?
- Are there areas of density and open space within the connected units?

What is the sculpture's relationship to the space around it in terms of orientation?

- What is the position of the sculpture in the space?
- Is it in a corner or other intentional place?
- Does the sculpture exhibit an extreme vertical orientation?
- How is this in operation?
- Does the sculpture exhibit an extreme horizontal orientation?
- How is this in operation?

What is the sculpture's relationship to the space around it in terms of scale?

- Is it a dense sculpture whose scale is less than 1 percent of the room?
- Is it a dense sculpture whose scale is greater than 90 percent of the room?
- Is it a sculpture whose volume is less than 1 percent of the room?
- Is it a sculpture whose volume is greater than 90 percent of the room?

What is the sculpture's connection point with the space?

- Is it placed directly on the floor?
- What are its footprints?
- Is it placed on the wall?
- How is it attached to the wall?
- Is it suspended?
- By what means?
- At what distance from the floor?
- At what distance from the ceiling?

- Is there a pedestal being used?
- What is its scale in relation to the sculpture?
- Out of what material is it made?

Is the sculpture operating as a field?

- Is it a group of objects operating as a field?
- Are these identical units?
 - Are these studio manufactured units?
 - Are these found manufactured units?
 - Are these units from the "natural world"?
- How do they relate in terms of color?
- In terms of scale?
 - Are these units varied?

What is the sculpture's:

- Texture?
- Level of transparency?
- Lack of transparency?
- Color?
 - Is it local color (the color of the material or object as found)?
 - Is it applied color?
- Weight?
- Volume?

Is it evident how the sculpture was made?

- By what process?

FORMAL MATTERS IN TIME-BASED WORKS CHECKLIST

Think about time:

- Is it what you would consider to be a short work?
- Is it a long work?
- Do you control the amount of time that you view/experience the work?
- Does the work have a recognizable beginning, middle, and end?

Think about action:

- Does most of the action occur in front of you?
- How close is the action to your body?
- Can you control how close the action is to your body?
- Does the action affect your body?
- Do you touch the work?
- Do you have to move to experience the work?
- Do you have a firsthand experience of the action in the work?

If you do not have a firsthand experience of the action in the work, how is this communicated to you?

Think about movement:

- Does the work move?
- Can you see how?
- Does it move all the time?
- Can you control the movement in any way?

Think about palette and rhythm:

- Does the work have a palette?
- What is the palette?
- Does the work have a rhythm?
- Describe the rhythm.

Think about parts:

- Is the work made of parts?
- How are the parts connected? (These can range from transitions in film to fasteners in kinetic sculptures.)

Comment on how the following operates in the work:

- Texture
- Scale
- Composition
- Gesture