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Critiquing Art While Fostering Creativity: With Experienced Artist John Kissick

Our Friends · Thursday, November 19th, 2020

Whether you're an artist, student, or teacher, it can be extremely beneficial to understand the 'art of critique'. From receiving criticism to delivering it with intention, critique can be a vehicle for improvement, growth, and creativity when it is done correctly. As a practicing artist, author, and educator based in Guelph, Ontario, [John Kissick](#) has spent much of his professional life thinking about the idea of critique. From the perspective of a practicing artist who has used critical thinking skills and broader forms of criticism to fuel the continual development of his own work, John Kissick is here to outline the best way to provide commentary on someone's work without inhibiting their creative spirit.

If you have ever participated in a critique situation, you know how nerve-wracking the experience can be. Imagine you have just completed a piece for an assignment, have brought it into class, hung it on the wall in front of your peers, and are now bracing yourself for impact. Everyone, including your professor, will share their subjective opinions about why your work is successful/unsuccessful and what can be improved. For many students new to critique, this is a terrifying experience—and it is easy to see why. Not only have you poured your heart and soul into your work, but you are also opening yourself up to criticism. If you do not respond well to the assessment, it can re-affirm your insecurities and make you loathe receiving feedback. However, John Kissick explains that when you give students and teachers the tools they need to succeed, critiques can be an explorative, stimulating, and even enjoyable experience.

What is an Art Critique?

An art critique, in short, is a detailed analysis and evaluation of a work of art. John Kissick explains that it is vital to remember that no two people will experience the same reaction to a work of art or interpret it in the same way, which makes a critique unlike any other academic evaluation. On the other hand, art is a language, with accepted conventions and means of creating communication between artist and viewer. As an artist, you are often put in the impossible position of being both the creator and interpreter of your own work. It is up to you to use the critique situation to learn how others interpret your creation, evaluate the relevancy of the commentary and adjust your work accordingly—after all, not all critiques are created equal. Whether you are a teacher or a student, the best advice comes first and foremost from a position of trying to understand the intentions of the artist and provides an informed, thoughtful, and in-depth analysis of an artwork.

Knowing What to Look for

So how do you conduct a productive critique? John Kissick explains that as a professor, he has found it imperative to provide a framework or outline at the beginning of class on how critiques work. Fundamental to the success of group critiques is the commitment to community, respect, and trust among participants. Creating a safe environment for the open discussion of work is key. Not only can this improve the way students comment on one another's work, but it can also help students better understand how their work is evaluated how others might view their intentions. John Kissick suggests focusing solely on the artist's own description, analysis, and then interpretation before opening the discussion up to the larger group and critiquing work. The discussion should focus on whether the artist's intentions are clear to the audience and if certain decisions have added, retracted, or changed the meaning of the work. Some questions you might consider are: What is the artist trying to say? Does the artwork communicate such intentions effectively? How does it make me feel given my own experiences and context? Does it feel finished or resolved? How do the decisions around materials, size, and presentation inform or shift meaning? John Kissick explains that by focusing on specific questions related to communication and art as a language, the critique generates a conversation that is less 'critical' than it is analytical. It will give students an idea of what to look for and consider when creating their work.

An Opportunity for Artistic Growth

Sadly, 'critique' often has a negative connotation in the larger world. John Kissick explains that the best critiques propose alternatives to perceived problems. Such alternatives can be technical or theoretical in nature. For example, if a piece is attempting to look representational but feels flat, it might be useful to suggest that the artist increase the contrast and add more depth (turning up the highlights and darkening the shadows). Likewise, the issue might suggest reconsidering the impact of digital media on how we perceive depth. Here, the result is not simply 'this work looks flat' but posits multiple solutions and or alternatives to a problem. In the same sentiment, if a piece is strong, it is still useful to understand why it is successful.

John Kissick understands that every artist is different and each individual has a varying level of tolerance for feedback, especially in group situations. Throughout his career as a professor, John Kissick recognizes that evaluations are not received by all students equally. While some students can handle more rigorous criticism, others may feel defeated. As a result, John Kissick explains that criticism can be given in the form of a 'sandwich': a positive comment, constructive feedback, and a positive comment. This will allow new students to become familiar with the critiquing process and feel that their work is being taken seriously.

The Bottom Line

Lastly, [John Kissick](#) explains that as an artist, critiques are a vital way to improve the work that you produce. As a teacher, he explains that it is important to outline these benefits to students. Everyone has a different background and skill level, so hanging your work alongside your peers' work can often be intimidating. As a result, John Kissick explains that it is important to re-iterate that you are not competing with anyone other than yourself. Your trajectory, growth, and success as an artist is entirely reliant on better than you were yesterday—not anyone else. John Kissick stresses that staying open-minded to criticism will help you develop and grow as an artist, which is invaluable.

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