

SCRIPT

ART CRITS: 20 QUESTIONS – Talking About Talking About: An Introduction to Visual Art Critiques – by Giles Bunch.

PART THREE THE PROBLEMS AROUND CRITIQUES AND SOLUTIONS TO THESE

(Narrated scene – Jheni is looking at Giles' painting)

Giles Bunch: {Oh, no, she's not saying anything, she probably can't think of anything good to say about the}

Jheni Arboine: I think the way you've composed this image is really interesting, and the way you've done the outline, leading the eye around the image

Giles Bunch: {That sounds encouraging, that means she likes the background colour, right?}

Jheni Arboine: You know something, I think if you experiment with different parts of it, maybe change the scale, it would do something to the strange and contingent elements of it

Giles Bunch: {Ah, she hates the way the monkey fills the frame, I knew that was a silly idea, I only did it like that because I ran out of red to fill in the sky with. She said something about it being deranged and incontinent, I don't even know what she means by that}

Jheni Arboine: I think you want to look at Gillian Ayres' paintings because she seems to use a similar palette to what you've done here around your subject area. I think you've still got to do some work on it.

Giles Bunch: {I think she hates my painting, I'm going to scrap it completely and work on something else instead}. Thanks for your feedback Jheni, I really appreciated it

(Throws painting out the window)

THE END?

Jheni Arboine: Whilst these critique situations are invaluable for creators to learn more about their practice, how the thing they've made communicates to an audience, and for understanding wider contexts and techniques...

Giles Bunch: ...there are also many issues associated with this format of learning which sometimes impacts on a person's confidence, self-esteem, willingness to participate, even in some cases affecting their motivation to continue the thing that they do. As you saw earlier, I was pretty anxious about showing that painting to Jheni. This is fairly normal and in many respects it shows that I care about the thing that I've made

Jheni Arboine: But as we also saw, there was a big difference between what was coming out of my mouth and what Giles thought I was saying. So, remember, always have a sound recorder

Giles Bunch: Most mobile phones have a sound recording facility, and most people have mobile phones, right? And, if you don't have a sound recorder, then why not assign someone as a note taker, to make notes when you're presenting the work, this will help to take away a lot of the pressure of having to listen to what's being said whilst also making comprehensive notes

Jheni Arboine: Making a sound recording of your critique allows you to listen back when you're not in that stressful moment. As a result, you can listen back in a more dispassionate way and make more rational

Giles Bunch: Or irrational

Jheni Arboine: Decisions about your practice

Giles Bunch: Recording your critiques can also help if you have dyslexia, or if English is your second language, since it gives you repeated opportunities to listen accurately to what is being said. Let's go back to this emotional response that we were talking about earlier

03.20

PUTTING YOURSELF OUT THERE:

(Talking Heads – facilitators and participants)

Linda Lencovic: I did my BA in Canada and I did my MA here in the UK. There wasn't a lot of difference between the two styles of critiques, and I found that a lot of the time it was more, you felt as if you were being judged, you felt as if your work was being judged, and those two are quite closely linked in the sense of the work and the ego being so inter-wound for students. That is something that is really stressing for students when they come in to show their work. They feel that they're being exposed, and it's that sense of vulnerability that freaks you out, right? I think a lot of the time it felt like you were there for either the tutor to judge you, or other students to judge you, and it didn't feel constructive to me

Peter Day: The students, in the feedback that I got, were talking about the fact that somebody had been very critical about their work and it's almost as if somebody had been very critical about them. So the distance between the student and their work, seems to have disappeared, and it seemed to become something that was about a personal comment, or a personal attack

Rita Keegan: They're talking about your baby; they're talking about your artistic energy

Peter Day: The students seem to be putting themselves almost like in front of the work, you know, that the crit was actually placing themselves under attack, and not the piece of work even

Linda L: The thing I sort of do with my students is get the group together and open up the dialogue: "What it is that you're afraid of?" "What is it that you want to do?" "What is it that you want to get out of the crit?" and set up these series of rules as to how they would like the crit to progress as a group.

Mark Dean: One of the tips I give to people is, try not to be too defensive

Peter Day: That this is a positive thing, even though some of the language might not appear to be so. I'm trying to say that being critical is not necessarily being negative, I think that's one of the things, and also to try and not have students feel like it's a criticism of them, within the process of being in a crit

Mark Dean: Less these days, but earlier I remember seeing people, and they would come in and they're literally, almost defending themselves. They get through the half hour, they heave a huge sigh of relief at the end of it, they go back and sit down in the crowd kind of thing, and then the next person comes in. Five minutes after they come off stage so to speak, I look over at them, and you can see they're sort of, "Wow", you know, "Ha! I got through that"; it's like this kind of deflation and you could almost read their mind of, "oh dear, I didn't really need to do that, what I defended myself from was the opportunity of really open up my work".

06.19 DEVELOPING INDEPENDENCE

(Narrated section)

Giles Bunch: In these situations, it's important to listen to the advice of others, and be receptive to critique. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean the feedback is necessarily correct, other people can be wrong. The decisions you make about how you develop your art work can be informed by what others say; but they don't have to be guided by it, and ultimately you must do what you feel is right

(Talking Heads – facilitators and participants)

Luis Ignacio Rodriguez: I might say to you, "stop doing performance, silly, it's not working, carry on painting". But then one I could be wrong, I might not know enough about performance; and two, I could just be doing the wrong thing, because if you were to throw yourself into painting, just because I said it, who am I? but then your heart is not in it, then your work would be crap. Not very good, rather.

Kristine Omandap: When I was in foundation, they critiqued a certain piece of my work, a typographic piece in front of the whole studio. And when it came to the end of my foundation course, I had to create a portfolio, and by following one particular tutor's suggestions and not the others, I arranged this typographic piece in a particular way. Then when it came to creating my portfolio, they completely slated it. They said it was terrible, it was rubbish, and I was like, "but I followed the tutor's advice, you know, this is what they told me to do"

Matthew Randle: So what you're trying to say is, "don't listen to Luis, but do what your heart says?"

Luis Ignacio Rodriguez: Ultimately

Kristine Omandap: They tried to make it clear that although this is what your tutor says, you should take it with a pinch of salt, sort of thing. If, if you feel very strongly about it, you take a part of it, you know, you don't have to take it completely, because it's your work, it's not theirs

Nathan Chenery: One of the things where you trip yourself up with that, is when you're making suggestions and students go "oh, yeah, but I have to do that because this tutor suggested it". And I felt like, well, you know, that was a suggestion, that's part of it, that's opening the work up

Graham Crowley: You give somebody a methodology. You don't give them your approval or disapproval, you teach them how to be critical and analytical, right?

Roddy Hunter: And then you understand as a practitioner, that, you know, in mid-career, you go, "yeah, I've been through this one before, I know what happens if I take this route, because I know myself, I know my creativity, I know how I make decisions. I remember when I did that, now, I'm going to do that". If the students are still depending on the tutor by the end of their degree to identify issues in the work for them, and to identify the remedy for it, then that's not going to be successful because they don't want to be dependent on that judgement.

09.08

USE OF LANGUAGE:

(Narrated section)

Giles Bunch: When you're involved in any discipline, you tend to pick up a specialist language associated with it. This language is useful since it equips you with the tools needed to speak about the things you do, and gives you a greater understanding of your field. But it's also important to remember that people have different ways of describing things, different cultural backgrounds, and varied levels of experience, so you need to make yourself clear and be aware of the experience of those you're speaking to

(Talking Heads – facilitators, participants and industry professionals)

Katherine Fishman: I've noticed that after a certain point people all tend to speak in the same way, and use the same vocabulary

Bernadette Blair: Students often end up sort of voicing the same wordings they've heard their tutors do

Katie Streten: You start picking up on how other people criticise work, using new vocabularies, because you're having a new experience

Bernadette Blair: Part of that is learning a terminology

Katie Streten: That can sometimes overwhelm your own language, and one of the most important things in speaking, is that you make yourself clear and make yourself known. If you start using other people's words, that will disappear

Graham Crowley: You know, Wolheim said, it takes a lot more effort, and a lot more intelligence and application, to address complex subjects, sophisticated ideas and thoughts in a language register that anybody and everybody can understand

Luis Ignacio Rodriguez: Sometimes when people drop names, at crits, they don't make it easy for the person listening, or to who that information is directed at, to actually find those names

Graham Crowley: Oh, yeah, hold on. I think it should be a matter of etiquette, and a rule that if anybody, in a crit, or seminar, or lecture introduces a name, whether it's Russell, Wittgenstein, Plato, you know, or Elizabeth Taylor, to explain, just to contextualise. Because not, and I'm not joking about all of those characters, because there're always somebody in the room, who has other, who comes from some other cultural background where people like Elizabeth Taylor aren't as significant, aren't as conspicuous as they are here

Sarah Rowles: Perhaps there's a role of a facilitator, or a brave audience member to immediately say to the person who's cut in with quite a hefty reference, to say, "can you unpack that please?"

Alison Coward: When I facilitate sessions, often I'm not versed in that particular sector, which is sometimes, well, often, a benefit of it, as I don't know the jargon, I don't know the acronyms and so I'm using pretty straight forward language. If I don't understand something, I'm asking that person to explain to me, and then maybe there are other people in the room that feel more embarrassed about asking that question...

Sean Cummins: They have to hear themselves say things out in the open, rather than assume that everyone has a common understanding of certain technical words or phrases

Alison Coward: ...So, the fact that I'm asking that question because I really don't understand, or I don't know, and then I'm reinterpreting it back to the group, may mean that there's people in there that will understand too

12.23

THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR:

(Narrated section)

Giles Bunch: In part two, I spoke about how the size of the group can affect the way that people interact with each other in critiques. As well as an awareness of this factor, the role of the facilitator, or chairperson can also play a big part in fostering an environment in which people feel comfortable getting involved in the discussion. Nevertheless, these situations aren't always about talking and a moment of silence from the group, or individuals can be an important part of this process. Alison Coward talks about the role of the facilitator in more detail

(Talking Heads – facilitators, participants and industry professionals)

Alison Coward: One of the roles of being a facilitator is just, kind of keeping an eye out and being aware of the dominant person in the room, and if there are a lot of people in the room that haven't had the opportunity to speak

Katherine Fishman: It didn't happen in every crit, but sometimes at the end of the session the tutor would ask everyone in the group, "if this was your piece of work, what would you do next?" We would go round the circle and everyone would answer the question; and I think that was really nice because it gave everyone a chance to speak if they've been thinking about something, but they hadn't got the chance to say it; it was kind of well now would be the time when you could say it

Sean Cummins: I think the group's briefed at the beginning that sometimes, someone may say only one thing over a three week period, but how can that person still be active there. Also that sometimes someone can say something at every possible opportunity and not really be saying that much

Bernadette Blair: About sort of the quality of what they're saying, it's very much about the quality of the conversation we are having with them

Alison James: And I think it's about making the student audience, really think about, the kinds of questions that they're going to ask and maybe do some preparatory work on those kinds of questions

Katherine Fishman: And it also puts everyone in a position of responsibility. It felt like more of a problem-solving thing, that you were kind of solving, not the problem of the work, but that we were all working on it together. But then you also get a really nice diverse set of responses

Alastair Payne: And also, I also think you've got to be careful about which way around you look at this. I guess it's not always about trying to get people to speak, but actually the listening aspect of a crit is equally, if not slightly more important at times

Jim Hamlyn: Sometimes people, teachers, especially, dominate crits because they're uneasy about the silence

Sean Cummins: Sometimes, it's appropriate for the group to say nothing, for quite a long period of time, and that, that's not comfortable, that's quite uncomfortable,

Alastair Payne: So it's not about trying to force people to engage through speaking, it's the construction of a learning environment that whether they speak or listen, they are learning

Joanne Lee: During the discussion, to note we might have been silent for a long time, I think it's quite good to make it visible and potentially to allow space. I mean people might be able to say, "well I didn't know what to say", which can open up the, "but why didn't you know what to say", kind of dialogue

15.28

AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE & ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

(Narrated section)

Giles Bunch: In critique situations, you'll meet people from various parts of the world, who have brought with them different cultural experiences, and native languages. The anxieties or doubts that you may encounter in critiques, will be shared by many, regardless of your place in the world, but it is important to be alert to the position of those bringing with them different languages and backgrounds

(Talking Heads – facilitators and participants)

Alastair Payne: Particularly international students, maybe coming in, might have a really different experience in the country that they have studied in previously

Mark Dean: There are two issues here, one is English as a second language

Alastair Payne: They might not have crits, in the institution they've come from, and it's a radical thing for them to actually engage with other students in that environment

Mark Dean: And the other is a sort of broader cultural language

Bernadette Blair: I think there needs to be an awareness of what culture they're bringing with them, and especially that interaction sort of culture

Nim Kook: You know here it's very natural to ask questions, but in my country, I think when the students ask questions, it's not only the teacher but other students, they give you the kind of impression that it's not really good to ask questions because everybody knows but they just don't speak it

Bernadette Blair: I think the way that I've done it and the way that you can do it is to actually make the whole group aware of each others background, by having some sort of introduction

Nim Kook: Because English is not my first language, I think it's harder to improvise. I don't know how to express it, but it's a bit harder to, you know, speak out loud what you think

Roddy Hunter: Yeah, you must be patient, you mustn't vocalise for someone else what it is that they're thinking, you must wait for someone to find the words that they want to use

Nim Kook: First year wasn't easy but as time goes by, you get more used to the people around you, you get more relaxed and it's getting easier to talk to people. But the first time, because you don't know many people, it's more nervous and you don't know how to speak about your work. I think you're just learning through time

Roddy Hunter: Obviously, that's going to be terrible for someone's confidence if you're suggesting that you know what they're thinking

Miz Nakaishi: It's not just about whether language is well spoken or not, it's also about confidence, I think. I think we have to have more confidence than national students because it's very easy to get hide, because of the cultural differences, or because of the language barrier. It's such a complex feeling, because I still have it sometimes, to be like, outsider. We always have to push ourselves more than national students, to get into the situation as we are not visitors at all, this is our university too. We have to have that kind of attitude; otherwise we're going to miss things

19.08 DEALING WITH DOUBT

Ann Hlland: I talk to the fine art students in the first year, about how it's a subject where we have to deal with doubt, positively. There will never not be doubt, and if you could eliminate doubt, we wouldn't be doing it. I don't mean the crit, I just mean the subject, it's inherent in the subject. It's very important to talk about these things and make students aware that it is a shared thing, that everyone feels doubt, that people that are teaching them have the same fears about putting their work in an exhibition as they do, you know, will it be understood? Will it be misunderstood? Will people like it? Is it relevant? The same fears are there no matter what stage you are in the creative process; it's just that the younger you are in the process, the more overwhelmed you are with those. I think teaching structures have to acknowledge that, but not eliminate them, not, not pump them up, not make them horrible encounters, but you can't eliminate them

(Narrated scene)

20.18

Jheni Arboine: I've had some more thoughts about the painting of the monkey that you showed me earlier

Giles Bunch: Oh, yeah?

Jheni Arboine: Can I see that painting again?

Giles Bunch: Erm, yeah, sure, just give me a moment will you?