

Book Review

***Crits: A Student Manual*, by Terry Barrett. London, England, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019, 188 pp., ISBN:978-1-3500-4159-2**

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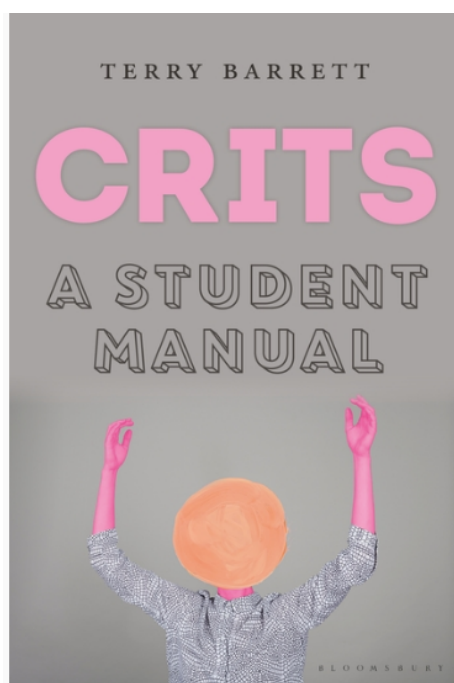


Figure 1. Book cover.

Critiques: I fear and loathe them, and yet I regularly perform them as part of my signature studio pedagogy. Lacking confidence in my ability to lead a critique that students will find beneficial and that demonstrates effective teaching, I support James Elkins' (2001) contention that, "No one knows what an art critique is" (p. 112). Successful or unsuccessful, for Elkins all critiques fail because we have "no model, no history, no guide" (p. 112). Terry Barrett is out to change that. In his book, *Crits: A student manual*, he offers students and instructors like me clarity, strategies and hope.

Barrett (1988, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2017), an art educator who has devoted his long academic career to helping students and teachers actively engage in informed dialogue about art, is the ideal person to write a book about critiques. For over five decades, he has gathered data as a participant observer, as a facilitator of group discussions in a variety of settings, and as a professor of art education. He has interviewed numerous studio instructors, artists, art educators, and

students to find the answer to an essential question: what is a good critique? In *Crits*, he distills this valuable information into a resource that has the power to transform studio critiques.

Barrett begins by telling the student reader, “You are essential to a successful critique” (p. 31). This is indispensable advice for those students who view critiques as something done to them, not done for or by them. In the brief narratives of former art students responding to the question: “What was your worst critique?” presented in the first two chapters, many recollections include dismissive or hurtful comments made by instructors. At times, bullied students remained silent while fellow students acted as bystanders, jumping in to attack the wounded. Other negative examples include narratives recalling instances where instructors physically altered student work without the student’s consent and some destroyed the work entirely. These examples give credence to findings by Chris McKillop (2006) who asked design students to draw metaphors of assessment. He was surprised to receive only negative images of critiques, some suggesting acts of violence, public humiliation, and suicide.

Barrett provides an equal number of narratives that recall good critiques and, through them, clearly articulates their desired outcome:

The student and the teacher both learn about the student’s work, the student feels heard and empowered, the student is able to return to the work with the benefit of a different point of view, and the student begins to take the viewer into account in the conception of the work. (p. 38)

There is consensus among students and instructors that a good critique involves active dialogue, sharing ideas, and discovering meaning (Barrett, 1988). It is one where everyone in the class is involved. In order to participate in a significant way, students need to know what to say about art and have the vocabulary with which to say it. They need an understanding of how their work fits into the larger context of the art world. Barrett’s aim in this book is to aid student learning and to create a community of learners by giving students the tools they need to play an active role in the critique process. He applies practices gleaned from communication theory to discuss the skills, attitudes and strategies necessary to improve communication skills and to suggest formats that foster effective group interaction.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 recap Barrett’s (2003, 2017) previous books about art criticism, with each respective chapter dealing with describing, interpreting, and judging art work. Description is defined as the data gathering phase, which will inform interpretation. Barrett positions description as a low-risk activity that gives students opportunities to listen to others and be more attentive to a work of art. Students who interpret artwork seek meaning and consider its expressive qualities. Barrett notes that, “interpretations are not so much right, but more or less reasonable, convincing, informative, and enlightening” (p. 105). The chapter on judgment is the longest chapter of the three and addresses two concerns: the value of art and whether or not a particular piece of art is good. Often, critiques are synonymous with assessment and students may ask, “Is my art good enough? Am I good enough to be an artist?” Barrett couches his answer to art’s value and quality in the philosophy of art, aesthetics, and art theory. He presents both modernist and postmodern criteria for judgment and offers the reader Gude’s (2004) criteria, which she derived from teaching art to Chicago teens, which combines aspects of student culture with postmodern artmaking practices.

Each of these chapters provides exercises and suggested topics for critiques. There is space for students to write notes, which reinforces Barrett’s premise that the student is an active agent. However, many of Barrett’s suggestions for conducting critiques are aimed at instructors, and undergraduate students, particularly those in beginning courses, may be hesitant to make suggestions about the content or shape of the critique. For example, a student cannot break the

class into small groups to discuss an art work. This book will be most effective when assigned as class reading, and when both instructors and students are on the same page, literally. Alternatively, Barrett notes the value of peer critiques and reminds students they do not need to wait for an instructor to schedule a critique. They can set one up anytime.

Crits is a pleasure to read. It is written in lively, accessible language. Barrett eschews Elkins' cynicism about critiques and finds the positive in even the worst examples. He writes, "Optimism is a choice and this book is optimistic about the present and future of art and society" (p. xviii). He offers critiques as opportunities to learn about art, learn about one's self, learn about others, and to become independent and self-motivated art makers. Although it should be included in every studio major's university admissions package, preservice art educators are the best audience for this book. They are simultaneously learning how to make and teach art, and are keen observers of their studio instructors. Art educator Karen Carroll (2011) supports the adage that we teach how we were taught, positing that most K-12 art educators base their teaching practice on their experiences as undergraduates in studio courses. Some will be fortunate to have had studio instructors who model exemplar critiques. For everyone else, there is *Crits*.

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