The Braid Diagram and A Critique Template: modeling studio critique as process in support of articulating evolving artistic practices in context

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Abstract

To be published in symposium proceedings. This contribution casts studio critique as the situated refraction of artists' practices. Performed by a group of participants, the process allows their perceptions and forms of tacit knowledge to emerge into awareness, through articulation. As a pedagogic tool, critique has been nurtured in this specific, dialogic and performative form (among other variants) in US academic contexts.

Using objects or other, artistic expressions as a catalyst for engagement, studio critique participants can contribute to articulating an artist’s practice. I see art practice – the work an artist does – as a complex whole consisting of three tightly braided strands: 'making' (epistemic and material work processes, in the studio or equivalent), 'mediating' (reflection on all aspects of art practice and verbal articulation of narratives by and among stakeholders), and 'managing' (attending to agency and opportunity).

These strands may expand or contract at different times. In order to perform studio critique meaningfully, a construct such as 'The Braid' needs to be available to participants on a conceptual level, along with a model for the critique process itself. Thus, both of these meta-topics - what constitutes practice (work), and how to critique practice through its outcomes (works) - should be included in curriculum. Two diagrams are included here that condense these meta-themes, to open them to discussion. Work and critique necessarily take place within and contribute to the further development of their discursive-material context, or ecosystem. A brief sketch of the academic ecosystem within which critique is performed closes this presentation.
The Critique Template visualizes a dialogic, performative critique - the kind of critique I deem fruitful. Sketched out is a bounded arena, indicating a specific setting, which may be a studio or classroom. A set time is allocated. Having entered, participants take on roles including that of maker, respondent and moderator, possibly also others, such as observer or guest. Each participant is understood to hold knowledge and perform knowing in specific ways. With a work of art as the focal point for entry into action, participants find their way into performing as a group, aided by the moderator - an emergent ensemble.

In spite of its reliance on bellicose metaphor, which I do not otherwise associate with critique, I find Deleuze’s essay "To be done with Judgment" helpful in distinguishing the dialogic, performative mode of critique from another that might be called evaluative. (see: Gilles Deleuze. Essays Critical and Clinical. University of Minnesota Press. 1997)

Deleuze lays out two modes of response to crisis, or division, the root word for the critique/criterion pair. They are 'war' and 'combat'. War is fought in organized formation; a contest backed by externally imposed criteria that are cast as just and accepted. A critique modeled on war is static and coercive - one knows the criteria, or not. One measures up, or not. A typical question in such a critique might be if a work of art is
successful. Combat, on the other hand, is presented as a struggle among those who find themselves within a bounded arena, addressing crisis affectively, with the tools they have at hand. This form of critique is experimental. It improvises. It gets to know the knowledge in the room. It relies on available skills. That makes it generative. Participants may share observations and associations. Absent an injunction to judge an object, parts of a practice may be fleshed out. Performative critique is akin to Deleuze’s combat, where criteria are jointly evolved and reflected upon.

To support performance and towards its emergence into awareness and forms of language, the Critique template lists a series of actions that may contribute to creating behaviors for a successful cure of the crisis, the division that the group had met to expose itself to when it convened around an object. Commit to the process; Care about the outcome; Attend Meticulously; Permit Emergence; Share Exemplars; Evolve Criteria; Be accountable. Healing or cure should not be misunderstood as ‘being nice’ or ‘lacking rigor’. On the contrary, what these terms are meant to evoke are a joint effort to weave meaning. An effort like that is not undertaken for the benefit of the ‘presenter’ alone, but sustains the entire group. Process and outcomes are of equal value.

Fig. 2 The Braid - http://adelheidmers.org/intro_9_16_sub1/Mers_Braid.pdf
The Braid diagram condenses art practice into three, highly interdependent areas: making, mediating and managing. Making encompasses aesthetic knowing, or poiesis, including forms of attention to self and world and interaction with materials and collaborators. Mediating refers to reflection on and narration of any aspect of art practice, among artists, and also by educators, curators, historians and/or critics. Managing has a broad scope, including assessment of constraints, including available forms of capital (social, cultural, economic), the resulting access and agency, and the creation of and interaction with opportunities. Each of the above strands may recede or advance at different times, in fact creating a topological model. Artists benefit from articulating their positions within these discourses, to achieve greater self-determination, by positioning themselves to both create work and exert cultural leadership. Forms of critique that look beyond an object to the circumstances of its emergence, deployment and narration are well suited to teasing this out. With that I do not refer to questions about artistic intent. Instead, I am evoking a discursive and material ecosystem, versions of which working artists are embedded within. In the following, I am giving an example how such an ecosystem might be constructed for an academic context.

An academic ecosystem
Artists, historians and more recently also curators and arts administrators educated in the US and other, predominantly Western contexts find their original communities of colleagues, critics and audiences within the academy. A brief sketch of this academic setting may be helpful to set the scene, to get a sense not only what is part of it, but also how transparent elements might be to participants at different locations within and in the vicinity of academia.

Broadly, the delivery system of academia is composed of institutional and curricular strata that interact with each other. Affirmative, market and government interests tend to be institutionalized through organizational allotments (schools, departments, professorships), while critical material is more likely to be represented through shorter term curricular framing and content (degree emphases, course offerings by full and contingent faculty) and student activity. Organizational power and the transparency thereof vary at different levels of participation. New topical currents may be present
immediately through intra- or extra-academic professional participation (for example conferences and exhibitions) and may fade out or evolve into either stream. An increased role of academia within national economies has made itself felt more recently, both organizationally and critically, particularly as the growth of a managerial cohort also impacts curriculum. This occurs, for example, by introducing assessment (which also involves critique), and in formulations of art research that serve both to access resources and as critical project.

Largely negotiated within the curricular stratum, well-established, mostly US-based Institutional Critique and mostly European New Institutionalism focus on interests that predominantly underwrite the exhibitionary apparatus students are educated towards, in their respective contexts. In terms of funder priorities, European cultural policies invite artists to help broker system-wide, national, cultural diversity, while US foundations and government agencies now tend to drive attention to issues of identity, diversity and equity.

Urban development is equally of interest. Attention to digital access and mediation is rising in some contexts. Inserted into these conversations are artists’ efforts to participate in markets, but also towards self-organization, recently going as far as considerations of withdrawal from and alternatives to the apparatus. These narratives in turn are embedded in art historical, aesthetic and theoretical constructs that have spawned parts of the apparatus itself, and also critically reflect on it. Increasingly, students from other areas of the world move through these systems, bringing and demanding attention to additional, theoretical and economic frameworks.

This comprises a rough outline of the context within which student work is created and studio critique is staged. It necessarily informs both.