

Doing Art Critique

Workshop summary Morten Riis – edited transcription

Morten Riis

I will talk about how I approach the notion of art critique, the good and bad. It's important, when you engage in this feedback situation, whether the student is presenting to a group or if it's a one-on-one feedback situation. The most important thing is that it's an honest space – an honest and safe space for the students and the supervisors. If you create a space where the students don't feel free to pose critical questions, or where the supervisor is not saying what he or she means, that creates a negative situation. Creating this honest space is the most important thing.

For the students, presenting their work can be fragile. It can be emotional and therefore it should be a very welcoming situation. You create this honest space by relating very in a recent and to some extent very factual way to the work of art that is being presented. So always relate to the piece, to the art work and not the person. But do it very specifically. Show the students that you take their work very seriously. It's something that is often forgotten, at least when I talk to my colleagues, but it's very important to be as specific as possible. Then of course you can have different schemes, points that you go through when you are looking at a piece of art. Even though I'm a sound artist, I mostly critique music so some of the points are very genre-specific to music. But of course you can look at it with a different analytical gaze, looking at form, repetition, variation, development and so on. You could look at the instrumentation, the qualities of different registers, look at harmony and melody, at how each voice is relating to the others. That's an almost 'objective' gaze. That could be a good starting point. Then you could talk about broader perspective. What defines the piece? What are the ground rules that the piece itself makes for itself? Then you can talk about how it's made – so you slowly unravel what this piece is consisting of. Then trying to talk about what kind of sensual experiences are being activated. And then of course it's important that you take the starting point in yourself as a supervisor. What sensual experiences are being activated in you?

Many comments have come from supervisors about emotional responses. Why does this piece bring me to this emotional state? Is it wrong to talk about emotions? No, it's not wrong to talk about emotions. But it's very wrong to say: this is a bad piece of music; I don't like it.

But again, be as specific as possible. Why don't you like it, why do you think it's bad? Maybe because it gives you certain emotions? Emotions are not wrong, but explain why you get specific kinds of emotions when you experience this piece. Then you can talk about what this piece creates in terms of our relationship to our body, to society, to different cultural themes and so on. That's again taking a broader and broader perspective.

And then, does the piece pose questions? And does it provide answers? And what is the relationship between these questions and answers? Is there something that is hidden on purpose? Or is everything laid out, so that it's very easy to read the piece? Then you can talk about what is the meaning of the piece, and is that an interesting meaning or not. And again, be as specific as possible. Am I touched by the piece? Am I not touched by the piece? And why am I not touched by the piece? Could it have been done differently, and is there something that is missing?

All these points and comments, are they presented by the piece itself or do they need some kind of context? Written comments, visual context? So lay out all these things for the students, but do it in this very

honest space, where you as a supervisor can be factual in laying out these different topics. You are the mirror of the student's artwork. And the more clean that mirror is, the easier it is for the student to see both themselves and the artwork. If you create a dishonest, vague mirror, it can be very frustrating for the student to see themselves in this mirror. And that's also why at the beginning of a feedback session, in a group or individually, it's very important to make some ground rules. So there are ground rules for the person giving the feedback and ground rules for those receiving feedback. For the person giving feedback it is important to be as specific as possible. It's not allowed to give critique that cannot be elaborated. That is the ground rule of giving feedback.

The ground rule of receiving feedback is that you have to be open. And you have to be sure that you have understood the feedback. When something is vague, ask for concrete examples. And reflect on what you want to do with this feedback. Be very aware of when you go into a defensive position. It is a common thing that happens: You have a supervisor critiquing a piece, and the student defending the piece. Again, there's nothing wrong about this, but you have to be honest about it. Get the student to be aware of when they enter the defense position, because that's when you start to close down, and you are as open when you start defending yourself. It's not a matter of who is right and who is wrong; the important thing is to create this honest space. If you feel the student is closing themselves down, address it and make them aware: why are you being defensive about this critique?

This is the way I normally approach doing art critique. Being as concrete as possible. Not being afraid to talk about emotions, but being concrete about it when you do so. Then you create a clear mirror for the students. That's the finest task of the supervisor: to be the mirror that students can reflect themselves in. For some students it can be a very big thing to start talking about all these things in their own practice, and to be able to receive feedback and critique. And that's why when I lead a critique module for MA students, I give them a theoretical framing in which they make small pieces and then we talk from that framework. And this can help them develop language with which to talk about their own music. That's why I propose reading the Heidegger text 'The question concerning technology' – one of the texts that I give to my students. Especially when you make art that uses or reflects upon technology it's very central text. Heidegger says that the essence of technology is not technological. To open that up you need a realm that is both invested in technology and at the same time distant from it, and that realm is art. So he proposes that art has a central position in the way we engage in technological society. How can you make a piece of art that shows that you are both heavily invested in technology and at the same time able to take a distance? That could be an exercise. Where in the piece you can find that you are both inside technology, but still reflecting on its role. As another exercise, you might take Theodor Adorno and his philosophy of new music, and talk about what can be authentic music today. What is an example of authentic music? Or Umberto Eco's history of beauty and talk about what is beautiful music? Kierkegaard talking about authenticity: what is an authentic piece of art? Or Brian Massumi on the autonomy of affect: what is affective experience? All these theoretical framings can be used to open up the students' language. Some have difficulties talking about their own music or art because it's personal; these can be steps to opening up. That's normally the way I propose the notion of art critique.

Questions raised in the workshop:

What values to bring when you're not familiar with the art tradition of the student?

Embrace the value of the outsider

You come from an artistic tradition that is very different from the student's tradition. How can you make a valid critique when you don't know where to start from? And that for me is a very central question; it offers a unique outside perspective to the practice. Instead of being nervous, thinking you can't critique this because you don't know the tradition, embrace the unknowing, embrace that you are this outside perspective.

So lay out how you understand it: the piece consists of this and this, and I feel this and this emotional response when I experience it. Don't hide the lack of knowledge or insight into this specific tradition. Have the courage to be fragile, to be open, to say: I'm not familiar with this tradition but I understand it in this and this way. Then you become the mirror. It can actually be very fruitful, not knowing the specific details of the specific artistic tradition, the references they are referring to. If there is something in the piece that is not clear, that could be a good way to expose it. It can be intimidating for the supervisor to not be familiar with the art tradition of a student. But I see this situation not as a problem but as a gift.

What to do when the psychological condition of the student is fragile?

Show that you care by taking the work seriously

It is difficult to address a piece when you know that the student is in a bad place at the moment or when the work is emerging as a way of dealing with something psychological.

Artists can have a fragile mind. I supervise students with almost all kinds of psychological conditions: stress, anxiety, depression, split personality and so on. I have experienced all of them; all of humanity has psychological fluctuations. What it's important is that you as a supervisor need to talk about what you have professional knowledge about. You are not the psychologist of the student. But it's important that you're not afraid to give critique. If a student is in a fragile place in his/her life – the more seriously you take the student and the student's work, the more honest, safe space you create. You show you care by taking the work seriously. Of course you're not the supervisor of how the student should live their life, but show that you care about the art that they make by taking it seriously and by critiquing it very seriously. The best outcome is to be very concrete about the piece of art, and not be dishonest in not saying what you think about it. We are very sensitive to this sort of dishonesty.

Co-supervising with an expert from another discipline, in a situation where the student is developing separate work in both areas but neither supervisor feels they have the expertise to comment on the other area.

You could be totally honest and say that you don't understand this because it effectively has no context. From a purely artistic point of view, it would be very difficult to critique this without any context. One way would be to directly address the elements that constitute the work. Another would be to insist that there should be a connection between the two areas. Remember the discussion earlier – that a dissertation is not a statement, but a question. As part of an artistic research project, the piece should be open to

questions, not closed, not a final statement. That could be a valid mode of critique. Shintaro Miyazak's *Algorhythymics* is an interesting example of text and artwork combining to create something new.

Investing oneself fully as a supervisor can be frustrating; it can be done in a productive, non-destructive way if you are as concrete as possible and dare to describe the emotions that you feel in response to a piece of art. That takes courage, but it's a way of retaining some professional distance; that means taking a step still further in describing these emotions. This is a path towards an honest space for both student and supervisor.