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## Affective and Sensuous Critique in the Undergraduate Art Classroom

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Art History

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## Abstract

Drawing on the ways that art history, art theory, and art criticism have used affect theory, I ask how an affective approach can align the undergraduate classroom art critique with the historical definition of aesthetics, or *aesthesis*, and create a space for sense and feeling. The first chapter reviews literature in the field and demonstrates the perceived benefits and drawbacks of current critique models. In the second chapter, I consider how affect has the potential to disrupt traditional approaches to critique in order to assist in rethinking stated goals, disrupt power dynamics in the classroom, and generate transformative knowledge. In the last chapter, I examine affect in relationship to sensory knowledge, and discuss how critique can engage the full spectrum of the senses, and create a space for students to experience art as embodied ritual, with potential to move them in a transformative way.

## Summary for Lay Audience

This research examines current approaches to the critique in the undergraduate classroom. Specifically, I use theories about how feelings (affect) and the senses (sensory and embodied knowledge) are used in art history, art criticism, and curatorial studies. I draw from this theory in order to disrupt traditional critique approaches in the studio art classroom.

## Keywords

Art critique, crit, classroom critique, affect theory, sensory knowledge, embodied knowledge, art pedagogy.

## Acknowledgments

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## Foreward

Recently, I noticed something. When I look at artwork through the eyes of friends and family who aren't formally trained in art or art history I notice something particular; they often go to the art first, trust their intuitions, and allow for personal stories and interpretations. But, when I go to galleries or museums, the first thing I do is read the exhibition text or artist statement. I am not sure when this habit formed, but it seems somewhere along the way I learned that the "right" process to engage with art is to gather the available information – artist intentions, process, background, influences – and then measure the artwork within this context.

I am not implying that a critical and informed engagement with art is wrong, and as an artist and studio art educator – both at a university and in a community environment – I know the importance of learning how to think about and discuss art in a critical and objective manner. However, I was surprised to find that I no longer seemed to be able to connect with art in an emotional, subjective, and passionate way.

As an art student, I often found critiques boring, frustrating, simultaneously too short and too long, repetitive, fumbling, and lacked guidance. In the back of my mind, I knew critiques were important and valuable, but they felt like a wasted opportunity. In fact, as a student, I often wanted critiques to be "tougher" or "more honest." Looking back, I think I believed that a harsher critique would make the experience into that inspiring, transformative, and indescribable process I thought it should be. In truth, it probably would have just left me insecure, isolated, and emotional.

I can easily acknowledge all the benefits of my formal education (BFA Art History, BFA Drawing & Painting, MFA Studio Art), and in particular the skills and knowledge I learned in critique, such as critical thinking, historical and contextual knowledge, an understanding of systems of representation and interpretation, technical skills, and disciplinary language. However, I have found that critiques rarely emphasized the subjective experience of making art, or the emotional or physical manner through which most people experience art. As a result, it seems my heart and body, in relationship to making, seeing and thinking about art, have been

displaced by the above laundry list of practical skills. And so, the habit of looking at information in galleries and museums before the art is the result, in part, of critique.

In doing this research, I realized what I was actually looking for in critique was the opportunity for discovery, transformative discussions, and a sense of connection, to both the art and my peers. Therefore, I came to this thesis, broadly questioning the current format of the traditional critique, which focuses on critical thinking skills through an objective and detached observation and analysis of work, instead of encouraging or even allowing for the emotive, personal, physical, and subjective responses that are so integral to the making – and viewing – of art.

Throughout my research, I kept my undergraduate self in mind and it slowly became apparent that it was, in fact, my experience and behaviour as a peer audience that was the wasted opportunity. I was excited and engaged to speak about my own work, but was distanced and dispassionate about my peer's work. And I don't think I was an anomaly.

To that end, I think of this thesis as an appeal for a new method of critique to take hold, one that is more affective and sensuous. There needs to be space for the audience to experience transformation and discovery when engaging with all of the artworks in critique, not just their own, as a way to ensure we don't forget the passion, feeling, and physical responses when we look at art, instead of being solely passive observers who use analytical and objective language. Through this research I am looking at how critique can be a space for fully engaged participants, who are learning how art is actually functioning through the senses and feelings.

## Introduction

As a signature pedagogy, and one unique to the arts, the classroom critique is an important aspect of studio learning. However, as demonstrated in the following literature review, it is a practice with “no model, no history, no guide.”<sup>1</sup> It is, therefore, important to consider some of the traditionally held assumptions about critique.

Much of the current research on critique examines student academic and artistic development, and provides tools and resources for instructors and students to make the current format of critique a valuable pedagogical experience. However, missing from the literature are discussions of a critique approach that emphasizes “what art does best: effects a transformation.”<sup>2</sup> That is, critique which: encourages emotive, personal, and subjective responses through diverse ways of knowing; engages the full spectrum of the senses in the audience; encourages a participation in the experience of art with a multiplicity of meanings, and; allows a space for students to experience art as an embodied ritual that has the potential to move them.

The research and literature on critique demonstrates a tension between the potential benefits and perceived negative outcomes in critique, and between the subjective experience of art-making and the objective practice of critique and evaluation. Ultimately, the literature demonstrates that critique has moved away from historic Greek origins of aesthetics or *aesthesis*: “the transmission and communication of sense and feeling.”<sup>3</sup> Drawing on art history, curatorial writing, and art criticism, this research considers how affect has the potential to lessen these tensions, and asks how an affective approach can align the undergraduate classroom art critique with the historical Greek definition of aesthetics, or *aesthesis*, and create a space to communicate and experience those senses and feelings in art.

The first chapter reviews the literature in the field, including student and faculty handbooks, pedagogical research, newspaper and magazine articles, artist writing, and

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<sup>1</sup> James Elkins, *Why Art Cannot be Taught: A Handbook for Students* (Illinois: University of Illinois, 2001), 112.

<sup>2</sup> Simon O’Sullivan, “Writing on Art, (Case Study: The Buddhist Puja),” *Parallax* 7, no. 4 (2001): 119.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Harris, *Art History: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2006): 10.

personal blogs. Drawing from this mostly qualitative research, the chapter first defines critique and provides a short history of the practice, then considers the potential benefits and drawbacks of critique from faculty and student perspectives.

The second chapter focuses on affect theory and its potential to disrupt traditional approaches to critique in order to assist in rethinking stated goals, shift power dynamics in the classroom, and generate transformative knowledge. This chapter examines how affect has been employed in art theory and questions how similar affective approaches — through techniques such as ‘looking away,’ ekphrasis, soft talk, silence, emotive responses, and/or free association — can respond to some of the obstacles students perceive in critique, such as unequal power dynamics, fear and anxiety in the performance of critique, and the transactional nature of grading. The chapter focuses on how an affective approach to the undergraduate classroom critique can produce transformative knowledge of how artworks operate to create a multiplicity of meaning through feelings.

While the second chapter focuses on the communication of *feelings* in *aesthesis*, the third chapter considers the transmission and experience of the *senses*. This chapter examines affect in relationship to sensory knowledge, and discusses how critique can engage the full spectrum of the senses, and create a space for students to experience art as embodied ritual, with potential to move them in a transformative way. Again, drawing from art theory, I consider how the detached ritual of the museum experience is mirrored in critique and how a different, more embodied, ritual can better communicate the senses in critique. This chapter also examines how the five senses were historically divided from one another and how the operation of sight became isolated and championed as the best way to engage with art. I look at how the five senses — sight, taste, touch, smell, and aural — can shift critique from a difficult ritual students have to endure to an embodied ritual that has the potential to effect a transformation.

# Chapter 1

## 1. Literature Review

In April 2006, the *New York Times* published “Tales from the Crit: For Art Students, May is the Cruellest Month.” Over the length of the 2,000-word article, author Jori Finkel describes the many horror stories art and design students experience during end-of-year critiques, or “crits” as they are colloquially called in art school. This negative approach to discussing critique is not unique – there have been numerous articles, blogs and research recounting stories of awful, destructive, and/or embarrassing critiques. In 2013, *Art in America* magazine published the article “Crits from Hell” where they “invited seven artists to recount their most harrowing experiences with that time-honored rite of passage, the art-school crit.”<sup>4</sup> There are unbelievable stories of these nightmare critiques, from ceramic instructors breaking student’s pots or faculty marking large black Xs over weaknesses in student’s drawings and paintings to the professor who apparently threw a painting out the window stating that “it would look better flying.”<sup>5</sup> There are stories of professors grandstanding, giving only negative and harsh feedback, and purposely embarrassing or making students cry.<sup>6</sup> Students recount being ridiculed, ignored, and told they just didn’t have it “in them” to become an artist.<sup>7</sup> Less cruel, but still troubling, students also tell of the never-ending and mind-numbing critiques where some fall asleep, are on their phones, or are too scared to participate.

As a practicing artist who has completed both an undergraduate and graduate degree in studio art, I have heard similar stories from peers and faculty, and unfortunately played witness to a few myself. This telling and retelling of crit “horror” stories is a common feature of art school, one that reinforces the idea that “intellectual

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<sup>4</sup> “Crits From Hell,” *Art in America*, 101, no.11 (2013):

<sup>5</sup> Terry Barrett, “Studio Critiques of Student Art: As They Are, as They Could be With Mentoring,” *Theory Into Practice*, 39, no. 1 (2000): 31-32

<sup>6</sup> See Margo Blythman et al., “Crits From Hell, Jenni Lloyd, Jori Finkel and Sarah Rowles.

<sup>7</sup> Amy Gilles, “The Worst Critique,” Northwest Nazarene University, Jan 4, 2018, accessed Nov 4, 2018, <https://news.nnu.edu/story/the-worst-critique>

breakdown is an essential component”<sup>8</sup> of art school pedagogy and establishes the crit as a fundamental experience that just “has to be gone through.”<sup>9</sup>

As Finkel notes in the *New York Times* article, “if the crit dynamic has not fundamentally changed over the last couple of decades, student awareness of the ritual – and the attendant horror stories – has grown.”<sup>10</sup> The crit has become a ritual or rite of passage, and something to survive.<sup>11</sup> As Bernadette Blair points out in her aptly-titled article “At the end of a huge crit in the summer, it was ‘crap’ – I’d worked really hard but all she said was ‘fine’ and I was gutted,” it seems that the crit-from-hell is “something to aspire to, even though no systematic evidence demonstrates that this atmosphere is necessary for the training of professionals.”<sup>12</sup> In fact, there is very little research available and apparently “no standard literature on critiques”<sup>13</sup> – they are ostensibly “so fundamental that there appears to be no need to talk about [the crit], much less study its effectiveness and what students learn about the creative arts through the process.”<sup>14</sup>

When literature on critique is to be found, it comes in the form of handbooks or guides, student or faculty reflections, and occasionally pedagogical or academic research. *Art Crits: A Guide* by James Elkins and *The Critique Handbook* by Kendall Buster and Paula Crawford are the most cited resources for students on critique, and provide a basic understanding of what to expect and how to navigate crits. Such handbooks, including John Healy’s “The Components of the ‘Crit’ in Art and Design Education,” are also geared toward instructors, as they often include suggestions on improving critique. Academic research is where most of the writing on the topic is found, specifically within the field of pedagogy, where critique is defined as a “signature

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<sup>8</sup> Sarah Thorton, *Seven Days in the Art World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 50.

<sup>9</sup> Bernadette Blair, “At the End of a Huge Crit in the Summer, it was ‘Crap’ – I’d worked Really Hard but all she said was ‘Fine’ and I was Gutted,” *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education* 5, no. 2 (2006): 90.

<sup>10</sup> Jori Finkel, “Tales from the Crit: For Art Students, May is the Cruellest Month,” *New York Times*, April 30, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Blair, “At the End of a Huge Crit,” 92; Lori Kent, “Studio Conversations: Approaches for a Post-Modern Context,” *International Journal of Art & Design Education*. 24, no. 2 (2005): 160; Kurt Ralske, “The Crit,” Kurt Ralske. May 2011. Accessed Oct 26 2018. <http://retnull.com/index.php?/texts/the-crit/>

<sup>12</sup> Blair, “At the End of a Huge Crit,” 92.

<sup>13</sup> James Elkins, *Art Crits: A Guide*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, (Washington: New Academia, 2014), xiv.

<sup>14</sup> Helen Klebesadel and Lisa Kornetsky, “Critique as Signature Pedagogy in the Arts,” in *Exploring Signature Pedagogies: Approaches to Teaching Disciplinary Habits of Mind*, ed. by Reagan Gurung et al. (Sterling: Stylus, 2009): 104.

pedagogy.”<sup>15</sup> This academic research includes studies and surveys that examine student and faculty perspectives on critique, such as Blythman, Orr and Blair’s “Critiquing the Crit,” Peter Day’s “The Art Group Crit: How do you Make a Firing Squad Less Scary?” and Sarah Rowles *Art Crits: 20 Questions, A Pocket Guide*. This research is mostly qualitative in nature and relies on self-reporting, memory, and individual experiences. In addition, much of the academic research comes from a pedagogical background, and examines critique specifically and only as a pedagogical tool. Finally, there is also a range of writing in newspapers, online and print magazines, and blogs that provide personal narratives and subjective responses to the critique.

The following literature review will cull from this available research and discuss the definition and history of critique. It will then outline the perceived aims of critique and the student perspective, and how they perceive critique in the undergraduate classroom. It is important to note that much of what I have pulled from the literature focuses on the negative aspects of critique. This is in part because most of the literature that engages with the student perspective of critique also centers around their negative responses. While my research focuses on the affective possibilities of art and critique, I must therefore draw from the negative perceptions of the critique experience. And to that end, I believe the features that make the critique process difficult for students – but build important technical, professional, and creative thinking skills – also preclude the possibility of critique being a space where art has capacity to evoke feelings and meanings.

## 1.1. Definition of Critique

In *Why Art Cannot be Taught: A Handbook for Students* author James Elkins asserts “it’s important to acknowledge that there is no good definition of ‘art critique’ – no model, no history, no guide.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, certain authors confirm there is no consensus as to a

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<sup>15</sup> See Motley ““Critique and Process: Signature Pedagogies in the Graphic Design Classroom,” Sims and Shreeve, and Klebesadel and Kornetsky.

<sup>16</sup> James Elkins, *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, 112.

specific format or design of the critique;<sup>17</sup> others, however, note that “the format is always the same,” and suggest crits generally follow a similar traditional structure.<sup>18</sup> Either way, while each critique is unique in the specific arrangement of artwork, the participants, and the conversations and debates that arise, there are nonetheless commonalities between them. The basic structure includes students, their respective artworks, an instructor, and a discussion. That said, the components of this structure can be rearranged in several ways: many artworks being discussed simultaneously; critique solely between a student and a faculty member; the involvement of external faculty or guest critics; informal peer-only critique; silent crits where the presenting student doesn’t speak, etc. Critiques are, as critic Terry Barrett explains in his article “Studio Critiques of Student Art: As They Are, As They Could Be With Mentoring,” “dialogues between instructors and students that engage the different perspectives of the instructor, the student whose art is being critiqued, and the student artist’s peers. The talk is sometimes interpretive (What is the work about?) and often evaluative (Is it good work? What would make the work better?).”<sup>19</sup> And I would further suggest the discussion is sometimes technical and process oriented (How did they make the work?).

The confusion between those who define critique as following a traditional or standard format, and those who argue there is no specific or defined version of the critique, stems from the fact each school and each instructor develops their own “crit culture”<sup>20</sup> and its respective structure might vary. One institution might prefer private informal and individual crits, while others engage within the large public group crit. An instructor might encourage students to participate, while another expects silence. Despite the differences in delivery, the critique is in essence a “process in which the creator has a visual artifact assessed by others through a method characterized by

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<sup>17</sup> John Healy, “The Components of the ‘Crit’ in Art and Design Education,” *Irish Journal of Academic Practice* 5, no. 1 (2016): 11; Peter Day, “The Art Group Crit. How do You Make a Firing Squad Less Scary?” *Networks University of Brighton*, July 2012, accessed Oct 12, 2018. <http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/projects/networks/issue-18-july-2012/the-art-group-crit.-how-do-you-make-a-firing-squad-less-scary>.

<sup>18</sup> Doren, “Is the Critique Relevant?” *Visual Inquiry: Learning & Teaching Art* 4, no. 3 (2015): 196; Elkins, *Art Crits*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Barrett, “Studio Critiques,” 30.

<sup>20</sup> Ralske.

observation, reflection, and verbal articulation.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, it is not the format or process that defines critique, but its stated goals of developing critical thinking skills.

In general, crits are “focused – activities focus around specific works; reflexive – students must consider what is successful and why; verbal – students must articulate their observations; and forward thinking – critiques are designed for improving future efforts.”<sup>22</sup> The triad of “observation, reflection, and verbal articulation”<sup>23</sup> is repeated often in the literature, with minor variations, as a definition of critique. As early as 1973, the critique is defined by “description, analysis, characterization, and interpretation.”<sup>24</sup> Authors of, “Critique as Signature Pedagogy in the Arts,” Helen Klebesadel and Lisa Kornetsky repeat the triad differently in three instances: “describe, analyze, and interpret,” “Define [...] examine [...] and investigate,” and engage with “descriptive analysis, interpretive argumentation, and evaluation.”<sup>25</sup> In “Critique and Process,” Philip Motley uses a slight variation with “observe, evaluate and articulate,”<sup>26</sup> whereas Mariah Doren asserts in her article “Is the Critique Relevant?” that through crits “meanings can be developed, sustained and defended.”<sup>27</sup> And so, for most, the defining characteristic of critique is that it encourages critical thinking in the form of observation, analysis, and reflection.

## 1.2. History of Critique

The crit is a “distinctive, unique communal practice,”<sup>28</sup> and exists mainly in the undergraduate art classroom, which is the contextual focus of this paper.<sup>29</sup> That said

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<sup>21</sup> Phillip Motley, “Learning—to and from—the Visual Critique Process, *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 141 (2015): 77.

<sup>22</sup> Lois Hetland, *Studio Thinking: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Motley, “Learning,” 77.

<sup>24</sup> Motley, “Learning,” 78.

<sup>25</sup> Klebesadel and Kornetsky, 99; 102; 114-115.

<sup>26</sup> Phillip Motley, “Critique and Process: Signature Pedagogies in the Graphic Design Classroom,” *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 16, no. 3 (2016): 238.

<sup>27</sup> Doren, 197.

<sup>28</sup> Ralske.

<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that the MFA studio critique is an integral part of the graduate experience. Much of the literature reviewed above focuses specifically on the undergraduate critique. Many of the issues outlined later in this chapter are particular to the class size and structure of the undergraduate curriculum. I wish to acknowledge that experiences in the undergraduate critique differ from those of the

critiques are also common in other creative settings such as design, dance, theatre, music and architecture, and I occasionally draw on research from these disciplines as well.

Despite its wide use in creative and arts-based university programs, the history of the critique is murky, at best. In her article, “Studio Conversations: Approaches for a Post-Modern Context,” Lori Kent connects the tradition of the academic critique to the tradition of conversation between masters and students in the Renaissance art academy. She points to an educational handbook from the Italian *Accademia del Disegno*, which guides master artists to discuss with novices their artistic faults, but to do it gently.<sup>30</sup> This is surprising, since there is a documented hierarchy that existed within the art academy system. Despite an established power structure, there was apparently an atmosphere and a curriculum that encouraged friendly dialogue and debate.<sup>31</sup> According to Kent, these formal artistic dialogues continued in the European academies from the Renaissance through to early Modernism, a process which also extended out into more informal conversations in cafes and bars.

In the High Renaissance and Baroque academies, discussions or critiques of works would not have been about creativity or originality, for the artist in the academy was being trained to copy. Discussions would have focused on formal qualities, including errors in proportion, line, shape, perspective and value.<sup>32</sup> A sort of critique at the French Academy involved monthly examinations where students were judged on their drawing abilities, often based on the separate categories of invention, proportion, color, expression and composition. However, students weren’t present at these discussions and no feedback was provided, other than whether they could continue studying or not.<sup>33</sup> John Healy, professor of game design at the Dublin Institute of Technology, states that the critique is formalized with a closed jury-format in the mid-nineteenth century at

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graduate critique.

<sup>30</sup> Kent, 161.

<sup>31</sup> Kent, 161.

<sup>32</sup> Elkins, *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Elkins, *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, 25.

the Beaux-Arts School of Architecture.<sup>34</sup> In the early twentieth century, the Bauhaus shifted the closed critique to the open session, which included the student artist, their peers and any other interested participants.<sup>35</sup>

Sometime near the beginning of Modernism there was a shift from the gentle conversation of the Renaissance to a more defensive critique, as outlined in artist Helen Klebesadel's article where she explains that for over a century "studio art critiques were played out as skirmishes. They were modeled on an attack-defense interaction between faculty and students."<sup>36</sup> Conflictingly, in her interview-based book *Art Crits: 20 Questions, A Pocket Guide*, author Sarah Rowles quotes current art instructors, who attended school in the 1960s and 1970s, and don't recall having formal or scheduled critiques. Instead they remember an environment of tacit knowledge building, informal conversations in class, and casual discussions after class at the pub.<sup>37</sup> To that end, I have found no information as to when the standardized formal critique came to dominate undergraduate art education, but I'd suggest the shift was the result of several factors, including the move of art school from the domain of private institutions to that of the accredited, often public, university; the rise of written and perhaps more formulaic art criticism; and the emulation of critique as a form of instruction from other disciplines.

### 1.3. What's the Point?: Instructor Perceptions of Critique

#### 1.3.1. Student Development

In almost all the literature surveyed, authors list a range of goals critiques are supposed to fulfill. Taken together, these aspirations are lofty, varied and often out of touch with the reality of how a critique unfolds. In her article, "Is the Critique Relevant?," Doren succinctly outlines the complicated and varied goals of critique: they are about "interpreting meaning, determining effectiveness, helping students improve their

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<sup>34</sup> Healy, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Healy, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Helen Klebesadel, "Reframing Studio Art Production and Critique," in *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, ed. Janet Marstine (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 253.

<sup>37</sup> Sarah Rowles, ed, *Art Crits: 20 Questions A Pocket Guide* (London: Q-Art, 2013) E-Book, 89.

practice as artists, as well as developing the vocabulary of art criticism.”<sup>38</sup> For Klebesadel and Kornetsky, it is “through the process of critique [that] art students consider what it means to define a work as ‘art’, examine diverse systems of representation, investigate differing approaches to and perspectives on interpretation, and confront issues of values and judgment.”<sup>39</sup> Looking at the literature as a whole, the key purpose of critique seems to promote growth or student development.<sup>40</sup> Many agree with this assessment, but the specific focus of student growth differs between personal development, professional development, or the specific development of the artwork being critiqued.<sup>41</sup>

As discussed earlier, in the literature most art instructors characterize critique as having some combination of the following attributes of critical thinking skills: observation, reflection, analysis and evaluation. Doren specifically states that critique “develops critical or higher order thinking skills,”<sup>42</sup> and Motely concurs that the “primary objective [of critique] is concerned with encouraging critical thinking skills.”<sup>43</sup> For some, these critical thinking skills center around the development of language skills, including specialized and discipline-specific language, visual literacy skills, and dialectic or debate competences.<sup>44</sup> For others, the development of critical thinking skills centers on the ability of students to contextualize their work within the broader art world. Klebesadel and Kornetsky speak to the importance for students to develop an understanding of value systems in the art world. Many instructors emphasize the ability to step back from the critiqued object and see the work from a new and, more importantly, objective perspective. As Doren points out, “we can organize critiques to highlight form and compositional choices. This formula for analysis unveils the dialectical relationship between works of art and their context and allows us to

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<sup>38</sup> Doren, 197.

<sup>39</sup> Klebesadel and Kornetsky, 102.

<sup>40</sup> Klebesadel and Kornetsky, 103.

<sup>41</sup> See Day and Ralkse for personal development, Rowles, Klebesadel and Kornetsky for professional development and Lloyd for focus on specific art work.

<sup>42</sup> Doren, 197.

<sup>43</sup> Motley, “Learning,” 78.

<sup>44</sup> See Motely, Elkins for discipline specific language, Doren Motley, Klebesadel and Kornetsky for visual literacy skills and Doren, Motley for dialectic or debate competences.

approach objective meaning in artwork.”<sup>45</sup> Ralske puts it this way: “The premise of the crit is that the group can convey insight to the student, bringing a degree of objectivity to the highly subjective directives of his or her creative process.”<sup>46</sup>

In Terry Barrett’s article, “Studio Critiques of Student Art: As They Are, As They Could Be With Mentoring,” the author outlines many of the ambitious goals instructors have for critique. They want critique to be a learning exercise that is encouraging, positive, and provides students with “new ideas, new energy, enthusiasm, self-confidence, and a sense of her own progress and accomplishment.”<sup>47</sup> In Rowles’ book, instructors outline the goal in critique is to gain critical distance from your artwork and to bridge the gap between theory and practice. It is through critique students should learn how to talk about art, exchange knowledge and ideas, and build a community of peers.<sup>48</sup> Instructors also believe that critique is about self-discovery, and helps prepare students for life after university.<sup>49</sup> Instructors want critique discussions to be lively, energetic and honest, but also intelligent and include diverse and unique perspectives.<sup>50</sup> Many instructors point to critique as an opportunity for peer learning and believe that student opinions should be shared more than the professors.<sup>51</sup>

In Table 1, I have compiled, based on my research, all the stated aims of critique instructors identify, in order to demonstrate the “narrative [that] represents what most art professors would like to see and believe is valuable in a traditional critique format.”<sup>52</sup> In addition to developing, understanding, recognizing and providing the listed aims, students are also supposed to “deliver *sublime* insights, understanding, comprehension and success.”<sup>53</sup> And they are to do all this objectively, while being assessed and graded. To say this is ambitious, is an understatement.

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<sup>45</sup> Doren, 196.

<sup>46</sup> Ralske.

<sup>47</sup> Barrett, “Studio Critiques,” 32.

<sup>48</sup> Rowles, 17-24.

<sup>49</sup> Rowles, 17-24.

<sup>50</sup> Barrett, “Studio Critiques,” 32.

<sup>51</sup> See Motley “Learning” and Ralske.

<sup>52</sup> Doren, 197.

<sup>53</sup> Day (Emphasis added).

|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| Students Develop    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New ideas</li> <li>Confidence</li> <li>Dialectic and debate skills</li> <li>Critical thinking skills</li> <li>Professional skills</li> <li>Technical skills</li> <li>Disciplinary language</li> <li>A community</li> <li>Critical distance from own work</li> </ul>   |
| Students Understand | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formal analysis</li> <li>Symbolic and metaphoric analysis</li> <li>The connections between theory and practice</li> <li>How to contextualize art within a broader context</li> <li>Different approaches to interpretation</li> <li>Systems of representation</li> <li>About yourself as a person and an artist</li> <li>Value systems</li> <li>How to define art</li> </ul> |
| Students Recognize  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Personal progress and accomplishments</li> <li>Self-discovery</li> <li>Strengths and weaknesses in others art</li> <li>Strengths and weaknesses in your own art</li> <li>Personal growth</li> <li>Places for improvement</li> <li>That critique isn't "personal"</li> </ul>   |
| Students Provide    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enthusiasm</li> <li>Honest feedback</li> <li>Critical ideas</li> <li>Encouraging words</li> <li>Interpretation of meaning</li> <li>A sense of community</li> <li>Judgment</li> <li>New insight and ideas</li> <li>Objective feedback</li> </ul>   |

**Table 1 – [Aims of Critique](#)**

### 1.3.2. Assessment

Almost all of the literature reviewed pointed to assessment as another fundamental objective of critique: “the main purpose of the critique is to evaluate;”<sup>54</sup> “the main purpose of critique is to judge the student’s progress;”<sup>55</sup> critique “is a process fully devoted to assessment;”<sup>56</sup> the crit is “the main formal point for formative assessment;”<sup>57</sup> “critique is the format for assessment, the ‘final exam’ for a given project;”<sup>58</sup> “the crit is a well-established tool for formative assessment;”<sup>59</sup> critiques are “are summative and formative assessments;”<sup>60</sup> “at its core [the crit] is an assessment mechanism;”<sup>61</sup> “the critique is evaluation,”<sup>62</sup> and so on. In a potentially less succinct description, Barrett suggests that, “for most professors interviewed, the major goal of the studio critique was said to be the evaluation of student artwork. Most explicitly equated ‘critique’ with ‘evaluation’ or ‘judgment’ and many emphasized negative rather than positive aspects when judging their students’ art works.”<sup>63</sup>

Detail aside, it is clear that critique has been inextricably linked to evaluation, and this can happen through both formative and summative assessments. Formative assessment “looks at the work leading up to the final piece, the knowledge gained, and the process.”<sup>64</sup> This type of feedback is often informal and happens in small groups between peers, through personal self-reflection, and via one-on-one interactions with the instructor. The idea is to encourage students early in the process and help them reflect on their work, develop their ideas, understand next steps, and solve technical and conceptual problems. Summative assessment happens at the end of the assignment and is generally when grades are allocated. Even though more emphasis is placed on

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<sup>54</sup> Klebesadel, 253.

<sup>55</sup> Barrett, “Studio Critiques,” 30.

<sup>56</sup> Motley, “Learning,” 78.

<sup>57</sup> Blair, 83.

<sup>58</sup> Doren, 195.

<sup>59</sup> Healy, 8.

<sup>60</sup> Rowles, 57.

<sup>61</sup> Phillip Motley, “Critique and Process: Signature Pedagogies in the Graphic Design Classroom,” *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 16, no. 3 (2016): 232.

<sup>62</sup> Terry Barrett, “A Comparison of The Goals of Studio Professors Conducting Critiques and Art Education Goals for Teaching Criticism,” *Studies in Art Education* 30, no.1 (1988): 26.

<sup>63</sup> Barrett, “Comparison,” 25.

<sup>64</sup> Rowles, 57.

summative critiques, some argue that formative assessment is “generally more beneficial for the students, as the timing allows them to receive and respond to considered opinions about their work.”<sup>65</sup>

## 1.4. Student Perception of Critique

### 1.4.1. Fear and Anxiety

Many students report feeling emotionally hurt, discouraged, embarrassed and a loss of motivation by the end of critique.<sup>66</sup> Because of this, students experience anxiety and fear prior to a formal group critique, and in turn they report not being able to remember any feedback provided.<sup>67</sup> According to Bernadette Blair, as they anxiously wait for their turn to present, and during the decompression afterwards, students become inwardly focused, unaware of the discussions going on around them and cognitively “switch off.”<sup>68</sup> As a result, students often have difficulty listening to what has been said about their own or others’ artworks, and thus can’t remember any feedback or discussion during the crit. Anecdotally, I have heard professors mention that the fear and anxiety of critique is beneficial because it prepares students for the cut-throat professional art world. However, if all of the other benefits of critique (developing disciplinary language, constructive feedback, self-discovery, building technical skills, community building, etc.) are negated because student anxiety results in them “switching off,” then this suggests such a process may be fundamentally flawed.

### 1.4.2. Power Dynamics

In all classrooms there is an inherent imbalance of power – even if the instructor attempts to create a peer-based and supportive environment – because the instructor is generally an expert in the field, has more experience, and is the arbiter of student

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<sup>65</sup> Motley, “Critique,” 232.

<sup>66</sup> Barrett, “Studio Critiques,” 31-32.

<sup>67</sup> See Blair; Healy; and Margo Blythman, Susan Orr and Bernadette Blair, “Critiquing the Crit: Final Report,” *Higher Education Academy*, August 2007, accessed Oct 2, 2018. [https://www.academia.edu/586074/Critiquing\\_the\\_Crit](https://www.academia.edu/586074/Critiquing_the_Crit)

<sup>68</sup> Blair, 89-90.

grades.<sup>69</sup> This can lead to faculty having too much sway regarding student artwork, in promoting hesitation in student contribution of honest feedback, and in fostering a confrontational environment. When students provide opinions on their peers' artwork, Doren notes it can threaten the position of the professor's expertise, to the extent that "if students speak at all they are reluctant to be critical. They self-edit because of fear of retaliation"<sup>70</sup> from the instructor. One student reported "developing a 'crit stance' [... which was a] truly defensive position."<sup>71</sup> Establishing a defensive stance isn't surprising, as many students tell of faculty who feel the need to establish their authority and expertise, grandstand via displays of their egos, and to show up their colleagues, thus pitting students' logic and opinions against that of the instructor.<sup>72</sup> In his article, "The Art Group Crit: How do you Make a Firing Squad Less Scary?," Peter Day explains that "the crit environment can be gladiatorial, combative and unforgiving, with few places to hide and yet we expect students to prosper and survive this with little instruction."<sup>73</sup> In these contexts, students may find that the critique is about defending their work and choices, as opposed to being open to reflection, learning, and self-discovery.

#### 1.4.3. The Performance of Critique

In his handbook, *I Got an A+ in Art School and You Can Too*, artist and author Tonik Wojtyra has a small chapter on crits. Unlike the other handbooks referred to earlier, such as James Elkins *Critique Handbook* or Sarah Rowles *Art Crits: 20 Questions, A Pocket Guide*, Wojtyra's book is a tongue-in-cheek guide to succeeding in art school. It is an honest account of his experience as an undergraduate art student and puts forth his good, bad, ironic, and frustrating experiences. In the critique section, he suggests that "the better you talk, the better your Art."<sup>74</sup> Much of the literature reviewed supports this assessment. Students report that they often felt the critique was more about the success

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<sup>69</sup> Doren, 198.

<sup>70</sup> Doren, 198.

<sup>71</sup> Jenni Lloyd, "In Praise of Art School Crits," Medium, April 5, 2017, Accessed Oct 26, 2018. <https://medium.com/@jennilloyd/in-praise-of-art-school-crits-f85a7e7a2de7>

<sup>72</sup> Day.

<sup>73</sup> Day.

<sup>74</sup> Tonik Wojtyra, *I Got an A+ in Art and You Can Too* (Toronto: Standard Form Press, 2007), 100.

of their performance, not the success of their work.<sup>75</sup> As Bernadette Blair elegantly puts it, “from a student perception, it is not always the quality of the reflection and critical analysis of the learning that is important, but the quality of the performance of the crit [...] Students who successfully engage with the *performance of the crit* become members of the fraternity, but those who cannot find a way of participating become isolated and alienated from the discourse.”<sup>76</sup>

Ultimately, it is perceived by students that the art of those who are confident when discussing their work is deemed better than those who falter in front of the class. Students are being asked to be the salesmen of their art and convince the audience their work is worth looking at.<sup>77</sup> As a result, this leaves little room for students to honestly discuss any difficulties, questions or concerns they may have about the work they are presenting. As well, it doesn't let artwork speak for itself, and thus demonstrate to student-artists how artworks often operate in the world. As Wojtyra candidly notes, “when you put your work in front of the class, don't ever say something like, ‘I'm stuck on this one’ [...] If you don't [present your work] with conviction and passion and enthusiasm, you're dead and you risk a bad grade.”<sup>78</sup>

## 1.5. Conclusion

Evident in the literature, critique has traditionally been used to develop critical thinking skills (observation, reflection, analysis, evaluation), and as a tool for assessment. However, as a result, it has fostered unequal power dynamics, anxiety and fear in students, and an emphasis on student's verbal performance in critique over the strength of their artwork. In addition, as Healy notes, it is difficult for students to ever separate themselves fully from the knowledge they are being graded, even with formative assessment,<sup>79</sup> and as such, “students can sometimes have difficulty in associating the crit experience as a supportive learning environment where they can demonstrate weakness

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<sup>75</sup> Day

<sup>76</sup> Blair, 88, *emphasis added*.

<sup>77</sup> Wojtyra, 98.

<sup>78</sup> Wojtyra, 98.

<sup>79</sup> Healy, 8.

or doubts, and feel comfortable in voicing their own opinions.”<sup>80</sup> To that end, students become overly reliant on assignment rubrics or project briefs with the critique as the end goal for which their artwork is being produced.<sup>81</sup> According to Peter Day, “students seem to be asking ‘what do I need to do to pass?’”<sup>82</sup> rather than ‘how can I make a great artwork?’ Instead of critique being a place of learning, growth, and self-discovery, it has become a test or exam. Instead of using critique as a space to experience their peers’ art, and learn how artworks have the capacity to evoke feelings and meanings, students are simply worried about what they can do to pass. Part of this stems from the fact that one of the main tenets of university assessment practices is objectivity: “The process of critique as it is situated within educational institutions serves as evaluation and as such requires fair and objective standards of assessment.”<sup>83</sup> Students are often told critiques aren’t personal and the critique is about their work, not them. And, despite their importance to the context of art making, emotional, personal, aspirational, and subjective language is discouraged and devalued in critiques. As Doren explains, “the attempt to develop objective criteria for establishing meaning assumes a kind of passivity, a removal of the individual’s subjective response, in the interpretation of the artwork. There is a tension between valuing the subjective experience of making art and then seeking objective criteria to evaluate its merits.”<sup>84</sup> Emphasizing objective responses and criteria in evaluating student artworks is at odds with the belief that art holds a multiplicity of meanings, and that students should learn how to engage, in both a critical and an embodied way, with the diverse interpretations.<sup>85</sup>

While research indicates that there are potential benefits to critique – with art instructors noting that students develop debate skills, disciplinary language, artistic growth, and professional and technical skills – the literature demonstrates that critique focuses on developing critical thinking skills and is primarily used for assessment, at the expense of developing an understanding of how artworks operate through feelings. The

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<sup>80</sup> Blair, 89.

<sup>81</sup> Healy, 2; Klebesadel and Kornetsky, 102.

<sup>82</sup> Day.

<sup>83</sup> Doren, 198.

<sup>84</sup> Doren, 197.

<sup>85</sup> Doren, 201.

literature also shows there are potential negative outcomes, such as the student perception of critique as a hierarchical environment that creates fear and anxiety, and that students are judged more on their performance of critique as opposed to their artwork. The following chapter will consider how affect has the potential to disrupt these traditional approaches to critique and rethink its traditional goals. It will draw on art history, art criticism, and curatorial studies to examine how affect theory can respond to some of the perceived negative outcomes of critique, and create an environment where students can engage with the multiplicity of meanings in art through feelings.

## Chapter 2

### 2. Affective Critique

Evident in the literature review is a disconnect between the goals of critique and the reality some students experience. While there are perceived benefits to critique, such as development of critical and creative thinking, the traditional and institutionally bound approaches present unintentional problems. At worst, critique reflects and perpetuates some of the structures at play in the broader art world, such as rampant capitalism, hierarchies and power structures, and an emphasis on reductive judgement, interpretation and objective knowledge over subjective and emotional knowledge. However, even when critique doesn't function in these often-problematic ways, I believe the research shows that critique can still be limiting in how students experience it. While critique has the benefit of being a tool for assessment, and the potential to develop critical thinking skills, it can foster unequal power dynamics, anxiety and fear in students, and an emphasis on student's verbal performance in critique over the strength of their artwork. I posit that introducing affect theory can disrupt the traditional critique framework and respond to these obstacles. This is not intended as a means to wholly replace current structures, as they hold certain benefits, but to use affect as a lens to rethink the goals of critique, disrupt power dynamics, and encourage diverse ways of knowing.

While the undergraduate in-class critique is in effect a pedagogical approach, I believe that looking to art theory as opposed to educational theory can provide a compelling way to disrupt our conventional thinking and approach to critique. It is important to note that in this context I am not using the term "art theory" in its historical and academic sense, but as a way to encompass the spectrum of art-related discourses and disciplines I am examining, including art history, art criticism, and curatorial practices. Placing these interrelated, but distinct disciplines under the umbrella term of "art theory" is an efficient and shorthand way to refer to them simultaneously. For the purposes of this paper, I am linking these three kinds of practices in order to examine a range of discipline-specific texts that all turn to affect in order to negotiate entrenched

art world structures, such as capitalism, hierarchies, and an emphasis on reductive judgmental approaches, and objective knowledge.

In the following chapter, I will first contextualize and define affect theory and the affective turn. I will then look to specific art theory texts to consider how affect has the potential to disrupt traditional approaches to critique and rethink its stated goals, and disrupt conventional power dynamics. To do so I will first consider Susan Sontag's, "Against Interpretation," as a call to affect in art criticism, and how her proposition for an "erotics of art" can help us rethink the role and goals of critique in the classroom. Then, looking through the lens of Sarah Ahmed's "The Cultural Politics of Emotion" and Steven Cottingham's "No One Cares About Art Criticism," I will consider how capitalist and hierarchal structures can be disrupted in critique. Each of my subsections will summarize the articles, noting how they use an aspect of affect to respond to entrenched art world systems, and subsequently how these ideas discussed can be translated in reframing the classroom critique.

## 2.1. Affect Theory

Derived from the latin, *affectus*, affect means passion, emotion, to touch or to afflict.<sup>86</sup> In current academic contexts, affect theory has influenced a range of disciplines including, but not limited to, philosophy, anthropology, neuroscience, biology, psychology, literary studies and aesthetics. As a theoretical framework, affect theory is researched "in the context of social and political practices, of research on the everyday and the body, as well as animals, things, materiality, race, class gender, capitalism, and nationalism,"<sup>87</sup> to name only a few. As a result of this breadth of disciplines and contexts, there is "no single, generalizable theory of affect,"<sup>88</sup> and in fact, the term is often used to mean different things. As such, "it does not come as a surprise that the terminology [affect theory] uses has become somewhat muddled and heterogeneous."<sup>89</sup> Below, I briefly

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<sup>86</sup> Doss, 9. Van Alphen, 23.

<sup>87</sup> Luiza Nader, "An Affective Art History," *Teksty Drugie (English Edition)* 2 (2015): 244.

<sup>88</sup> Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 3.

<sup>89</sup> Michel Vandebossche, "'You Do Feel Something, Right?' An Affective Comparison of John Taggart and Mark Rothko," Master's thesis, Ghent University, 2016: 18.

summarize the context of affect theory as it pertains to this paper, and attempt to construct a definition of affect as it relates to Sontag's call for a recovery of the senses.

Affect theory was first popularized by theorist Silvan Tomkins in the 1960s. Working in the field of psychology, Tomkins "considered how individuals negotiate social and personal relations via complex and interrelated structures of feelings and response."<sup>90</sup> Tomkins categorized a taxonomy of eight affects which he believed are biologically determined – affects being seen as "neural firing" – and are the motivating factors to people's actions and reactions.<sup>91</sup> Often put in opposition to Tomkins' theories is the Deleuzian understanding of affect. For Deleuze, affects are "intensities," which have no content in and of themselves, but result in emotions and feelings.<sup>92</sup> Scholars Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Brian Massumi pulled from these two different roots to create a renewed interest in affect theory in the late nineties and early aughts; the former drawing on Tomkins and the latter on Deleuze. Using a literary studies and queer theory framework, Sedgwick looks at the potential of affect to question, subvert, and reclaim our current culture.<sup>93</sup> Massumi theorizes affect as an automatic and unconscious process and argues that thoughts and feelings cannot be separated from one another.<sup>94</sup> Despite working from different perspectives, both theorists approach affect "as a means of overcoming Western binaries (like the mind/body divide) and reinserting 'the body,' and hence physical sensation and emotional conditions, into contemporary cultural theory."<sup>95</sup>

Affect theory was, in part, a response to the dominant hermeneutic approach of the humanities, which emphasizes "intellectual knowledge, systematic methods, and prearranged services to mediate, conceptualize, and organize direct experience for us."<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Doss, 9.

<sup>91</sup> Vandenbossche, 15.

<sup>92</sup> Ernst Van Alphen, "Affective Operations of Art and Literature," *RES Anthropology and Aesthetics* no. 53/54 (2008): 24.

<sup>93</sup> Marta Figlerowicz, "Affect Theory Dossier: An Introduction," *Qui Parle* 20, no. 2 (2012): 13. Carolyn Pedwell and Anne Whitehead, "Affecting Feminism: Questions of Feeling in Feminist Theory," *Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (2012): 117.

<sup>94</sup> Doss, 9. Alana Marie Traficante, "Sensing the Image: Embodied Art Criticism," Master's thesis, Ontario College of Art and Design University, 2016: 20.

<sup>95</sup> Doss, 9.

<sup>96</sup> Bersson, 35-36.

The privileging of rational thought over subjective experience has long been an academic tenet, both within and outside art theory, and has been applied in art history and art criticism to strengthen and legitimize those disciplines. Often presented as the Cartesian mind/body split, this dualism has been a topic of inquiry since the Greeks. In Enlightenment thought, and with the rise of scientific rationalism, the mind/body split became further entrenched. As Robert Bersson explains, “[...] more often than not the two principles have bitterly confronted each other in society. Their appearance throughout history, under the guise of diverse appellations, has always been in polar embrace — mind and body, spirit and flesh, intellect and intuition, conceptual and sensuous, and so forth — with first the one, and then the other triumphant.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, it is not just the belief in a split between objective thought and subjective experience that has predominated, but since the Enlightenment, objectivity and reason based in scientific inquiry were considered superior to subjectivity and emotions. According to this rationalist approach, “emotions are deemed untrustworthy and slippery, too incoherent for qualitative analysis; emotions seemingly refuse the disciplined distancing that is central to much academic practice.”<sup>98</sup>

The affective turn, starting with seventeenth century philosopher Baruch Spinoza and marshalled into modernity by theorists like Sedgwick and Massumi, is a shift away from epistemology and scientific objectivity towards a valuing of ontology and subjective experience.<sup>99</sup> Spinoza upheld the mind/body split, but instead of pitting them against one another and ranking them, he proposed that they exist on parallel planes. For Spinoza, the mind and body, or reason and passion, are interrelated and dependent on one another. While affect had previously been treated with suspicion in academic circles, the affective turn validated feelings and emotions as subjects of academic inquiry and challenged the idea that reason and objectivity are scientifically superior to the emotional and subjective. With the affective turn, objective and embodied knowledge came to be treated as indivisible, or at least put on the same plane, as Spinoza argued, and this gave affect the potential to produce new and transformative ways of knowing.

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<sup>97</sup> Bersson, 37.

<sup>98</sup> Erika Doss, “Affect,” *American Art* 23, no.1 (2009): 10.

<sup>99</sup> Pedwell, 117.

As Micheal Hardt explains in the forward to *The Affective Turn*, affect can be considered as a “mandate for research: each time we consider the mind’s power to think, we must try to recognize how the body’s power to act corresponds to it—and the notion of correspondence here is importantly open and indefinite.”<sup>100</sup> Thus, using affect to both examine and disrupt critique asks us to consider the difficult relationship that has developed between mind and body, between reason and passion, in the making, displaying, and discussing of art.

Perhaps most important here is not the need for a concrete definition of affect, but a general understanding of the affective turn and acknowledgement of the fact that affect studies themselves have become far reaching; this points to the scholarly valuing of the affect, or whichever way one chooses to define this slippery term: emotions, feelings, embodied knowledge, visceral forces of encounter, unconscious knowing, subjective experience, or intensities. Overall, “the common point is the attempt to understand the subject beyond divisions into body and mind, nature and culture, and to ask questions about embodied experience and agency that cannot be reduced to social structures.”<sup>101</sup>

## 2.2. Rethinking the Roles and Goals of Critique

### 2.2.1. Against Interpretation

In 1964, Susan Sontag wrote “Against Interpretation,” in which she advocates for art historians and critics to move from being content and knowledge oriented to being more subjective minded and experience focused. For Sontag, the objective and ocular-centric approach to art writing had culminated in a split between form and content, with the latter deemed to be the most important. As a result, art invariably needed to justify and defend itself as containing something more than aesthetics or beauty. Thus, art theory had come to focus on the content of what an artwork, or artist, appears to be trying to

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<sup>100</sup> Micheal Hardt, forward to *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. Patricia Clough (Durham: Duke University, 2007), x.

<sup>101</sup> Nader, 242

say.<sup>102</sup> Sontag terms this fixation on content as the never-ending project of interpretation: a conscious, intellectual, and focused activity based on a set of codes and rules.<sup>103</sup> For Sontag, “[...] the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities [and creates] a hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability.”<sup>104</sup> According to her essay, the over-intellectualization of meaning and content-based judgement impoverishes the mind, and weakens the potential for art to make us *feel*. Interpretation simply reduces the work to understandable, digestible, and manageable pieces of content and meaning.

The author goes on to claim that infecting art with theories of content and analysis is an act of violence against the artist and the artwork; specifically, Sontag asserts that "interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, *violates* art. It makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories.”<sup>105</sup> For Sontag, the act of judgement and interpretation is a process of endless excavation, which eventually results in hitting rock-bottom, and ultimately destroys the potential of the artwork to move the viewer. Sontag argues that interpretation is about logical understanding and an attempt to resolve and find the one “true meaning” in the artwork, as opposed to engaging with the experience that is art.<sup>106</sup> In Sontag’s words, the act of searching for content is reactionary, stifling, and aggressive; interpretation tames the artwork and removes its capacity to create a bodily reaction.<sup>107</sup> Ultimately, Sontag argued that art has more potential than the capacity to elicit thoughts or ideas; it has the capacity to physically engage or move us.<sup>108</sup>

In critique there is a fundamental assumption that the artwork isn’t complete or perhaps as good as it could be. As a result, the professor and students pick apart the work, diving into ways the work doesn’t fulfill its supposed intended message or

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<sup>102</sup> Sontag, 2.

<sup>103</sup> Sontag, 2-3.

<sup>104</sup> Sontag, 4.

<sup>105</sup> Sontag, 6.

<sup>106</sup> Sontag, 3-4.

<sup>107</sup> Sontag, 4-5.

<sup>108</sup> Sontag, 5.

meaning. Critique encourages a competitive and performance-based environment, where some students are better at explaining the content of their work, while others fail at it; it is not about how the audience *feels* or *experiences* the work, but how close the explanation of the work is to the formal qualities of the artwork. This way of approaching art as an intellectual project of interpretation, “inevitably closes down the possibility of accessing the event that is art.”<sup>109</sup> It is a bit akin to someone trying to explain why a joke they heard was funny, instead of just retelling the joke for the listener to experience the humour for themselves. In trying to explain art, we are missing the experience that art can proffer. O’Sullivan says:

Art may after all invite a reading. It might even invite a deconstruction. It always exists in the register of representation. But to remain solely within this remit is to miss what art does best: effects a transformation. As such art [...] calls for a different mode of interaction: participation. To miss — or elide — this magical — and *immanent* — function is to remain unaffected by art. To remain within one’s own boundaries — to remain within one’s own, known, world. In this latter place art might still have a role; as self contemplation and shield from mortality. But it is a role at once fascistic and conservative. It restricts the possibilities of life and reifies the notion of what art is. As such, art becomes a machine for increasing alienation rather than a means with which to overcome it.<sup>110</sup>

In response to the purported violence committed to art by interpretation, Sontag calls for a focus on sensory, subjective, and embodied responses to art that resist hermeneutics.<sup>111</sup> By doing so, Sontag believes we will be able to truly see and feel the work for *what it is*, not just for *what it means*. Put succinctly, “what is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more.”<sup>112</sup> Famously, Sontag tasks those involved with aesthetics to recover the senses and replace hermeneutics with “an erotics of art.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> O’Sullivan, “The Aesthetics of Affect,” 127.

<sup>110</sup> O’Sullivan, “Writing on Art,” 119.

<sup>111</sup> Traficante, 30.

<sup>112</sup> Sontag, 10. Italics in original.

<sup>113</sup> Sontag, 10.

### 2.2.2. An Erotics of Art in Critique

Sontag's call for an erotics of art is a call to our senses; she is asking for a subjective, and embodied experience of art. In today's academic language, Sontag's appeal to erotics could be reframed as an appeal for affect in art theory. I argue that this affective approach, or an "erotics of art," can shift the goals of critique from one that focuses on interpretation and reductive judgement (resulting in silence, competition, anxiety, hierarchies, etc.) to one that opens up the possibility to let us feel and experience the event of art.

In her 2018 article "Soft Talk: Notes on Critique," artist, professor, and author Leslie Dick demonstrates how affect – or what she calls "soft talk" – has the potential to instill an erotics of art in critique. Dick advocates for critique that allows for participants to truly experience the artwork as it is, instead of hypothesizing about what it could be. She argues against the critique format I previously described: one that asks the artist-student to describe their intentions and then have viewer-students use those explanations as proof to measure the intentions against evidence in the artwork. Like Sontag, Dick believes this format shuts conversation down and "merely short-circuit[s] both our process of discovery [...] and the possibility for the artist to find out what her artwork is doing."<sup>114</sup> On the surface, the words "violence" and "violates" in the context of a critique of art theory might seem overstated or extreme. I would argue, however, based on the literature review in Chapter 1, that, like Sontag's violence of interpretation, there is a type of violation that occurs in critique, evidenced by unequal power dynamics, a pressure to perform, a silencing of participants, and a competitive, pressure-filled environment. Instead of this type of scenario, Dick advocates for a critique that engages with the work as if it is already compelling enough to have been accepted by the greater art world as successful. The idea isn't to pick apart the work and find deficiencies, but to engage with the artwork as it stands. Like Sontag, Dick isn't asking for judgement and interpretation of content, but for embodied reactions, and space for

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<sup>114</sup> Dick.

experiencing the art. As such, critique isn't about making someone else's art better, but about "[...] responding to new ideas and new forms that may unsettle and disturb us."<sup>115</sup>

One way Dick suggests we do this is through her notion of "soft talk." The example, Dick provides for soft talk is the use of the word "weird." She points out that describing the work as "weird," as opposed to discussing its formal elements, has the capacity to help students understand how artworks are active agents that produce viewer reactions.<sup>116</sup> Words like "weird," "icky," "funny," and "strange" are affective responses to art; they aren't immediately helpful in that they don't point to a specific change the artist could make to improve their artwork. Emotional and reactive words like "love," "cool," "interesting," and "beautiful," are often banned in critique because they are also seen as non-actionable. However, Dick argues that this soft-talk has the potential to open up discussions about how artworks operate to evoke feelings and reactions, which in turn promotes the capacity for students to learn how to make better work. Soft-talk, or affective responses, allow the student-artists to understand how intentions don't always produce one-to-one audience reactions and in fact, these unintended aspects of the artwork are sometimes the most effective, affective, and interesting. For Dick, "that unintended leakage and ooze at the level of meaning is generative and alive,"<sup>117</sup> and if we rely on logical, structured, and interpretation-based conversations, we lose the "ooze." And the "ooze" is what produces generative, productive and complex conversations where students can experience, discuss and be moved by art. And so, an erotics of art allows for emotive, unspecific, and subjective language in critique, without the required "because" that usually follows. As curator Anthony Huberman states in his article, "Take Care," "*I Love It* is always more compelling than *I Get It*."<sup>118</sup>

If an erotics of art is about moving away from interpretation towards the experience of art – or what art historian Simon O'Sullivan calls above the "participation"

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<sup>115</sup> Dick.

<sup>116</sup> Dick. Van Alphen, 25.

<sup>117</sup> Dick.

<sup>118</sup> Anthony Huberman, "Take Care," *The Show Room*, accessed January 13, 2019, 3 <https://www.theshowroom.org/library/take-care> (emphasis in original).

in art – I want to argue for more than just a shift in accepted language. Critique almost always happens in the classroom or a “crit room,” a small white cube room set aside in the university for students to hang their work for critiques. In both settings, the work is being viewed in the context of a class and an assignment, which brings its own context, baggage, and expectations. The hanging of works individually on white walls of the classroom, or in a separate crit room, implicitly connects the critique environment to the white cube of the gallery or museum and the student-audience thus participates in these structures. In the chapter, “Looking Away: Participations in Visual Culture,” from the book *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, author Irit Rogoff argues for an alternative manner to engage with art and culture, a mode that consists of inattention or what she calls ‘looking away.’ This dynamic act of ‘looking away’ breaks the traditional subject/object relationship and shifts the subject (audience) from being a viewer to being a participant.<sup>119</sup> For Rogoff, this participation results in a rhizomatic response to art, in place of the hierarchical structures, or what the author call the “singularity of attention.”<sup>120</sup> In her summary of Rogoff’s chapter, artist Kate Hawkins explains, “throughout the text Rogoff questions what forms of response replace the old vertical/reader model and suggests that new horizontal/viewer models might move us away from the viewer as galvanized receptacle to a new politics of active engagement.”<sup>121</sup>

In response, I ask the following questions: How would students experience an artwork differently if it was in a hallway, an elevator, an office, or even outdoors? What happens if we critique the work mediated through a computer screen and viewed on a website or social media? What happens when the audience views the work on their own time and individually, as they might if hung in a gallery? If works are removed from this structured and expected environment, it might provide the opportunity to shift the experience of students from that of being a student-audience to being an active and participatory audience.

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<sup>119</sup> Rogoff, 122.

<sup>120</sup> Rogoff, 127.

<sup>121</sup> Hawkins, 1.

I believe the affective critique is ultimately looking to art as a mode of engagement, not simply an intellectual activity; an affective critique is one where “the observer becomes a participant. Empathy overcomes abstraction. Immediacy prevails over mediation. Aesthetic feeling, for a rich if short-lived interval, breaks through the vice grip of thought.”<sup>122</sup> In very simple terms, I am arguing that an affective critique can be a space where art has the potential and capacity to *move* the students and instructor. In critique, there is the creation of intellectual *and* emotional – or affective – knowledge which “involves the percipient in a non-linear, goal-less experience of immediacy (i.e., presentness) [...]”<sup>123</sup> Thus, the affective critique is about being in the here and now, and giving yourself up to an affective response, whether positive or negative, with no specific or desired outcome. “Seen in this light, the aesthetic experience of sensuous immediacy has a very ‘countercultural’ cast;”<sup>124</sup> an erotics of art (in critique) calls for a pedagogy with no specific outcomes other than the imperative to participate in the experience that is art.

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<sup>122</sup> Bersson, 32.

<sup>123</sup> Bersson, 32.

<sup>124</sup> Bersson, 36.

## 2.3. Disrupting Power Structures

Affects have critical social and political implications — they have the capacity to shape bodies and contribute to social hierarchies. Recognizing this can open a discussion of the use-value of affects in critique as it encourages viewers to question their emotional response to artworks within a cultural and/or political framework. However, as Ahmed states “within contemporary culture, emotions may even be represented as good or better than thought, but only insofar as they are represented as a form of intelligence, as ‘tools’ that can be used by subjects in the project of life and career enhancement (Goleman 1995).”<sup>125</sup> Given this, it is important to move beyond the intellectual analysis of affect and consider the other possible contributions that affect can have in critique.

### 2.3.1. Political Power of Emotions

The use of “soft talk” by Leslie Dick takes on further complexity when read in the context of Sara Ahmed’s, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. In her introduction, Ahmed discusses the nature of how a “nation come[s] to be imagined as having a ‘soft touch’”<sup>126</sup> in order to examine the political implication of emotions. Ahmed uses the example of how right-wing propaganda accuses British citizens of being “soft” towards illegal immigrants. This soft touch thus becomes a character of the nation and in turn demands the opposite: toughness. For Ahmed, “the use of metaphors of ‘softness’ and ‘hardness’ shows how emotions become attributes of collectives, which get constructed as ‘being’ through ‘feeling’. Such attributes are, of course, gendered: the soft national body is a feminised [sic] body, which is ‘penetrated’ or ‘invaded’ by others.”<sup>127</sup> Ahmed uses this example to demonstrate how emotions shape bodies and subsequently enact collective politics and social power. Put more succinctly, for Ahmed emotions are not psychological states but social and cultural practices.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Ahmed, 3.

<sup>126</sup> Sarah Ahmed, introduction to *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: University Press, 2004), 1. <sup>127</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2.

<sup>128</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 9.

Ahmed is not dealing “with what the emotion *is* but rather with what it *does*, how it functions as a very powerful social drive, shaping bodies – individual and collective bodies, creating communities and legitimizing political decisions, through the work of ‘affective economies’.”<sup>129</sup> Emotions are not passive dispositions that happen to us, but active agents that connect individuals within communities; emotions work in active ways and Ahmed asks “how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective.”<sup>130</sup> In effect, Ahmed is looking at how affect and emotions have been used in power relations and also to create social and political hierarchies. Power circulates through affect and “politically salient ways of being and knowing are produced through affective relations and discourses.”<sup>131</sup> Our social bodies are shaped through learned affective and emotional rules that are tied to our gender, race and class, which perpetuate hierarchical power.<sup>132</sup> We are strongly bound to these rules and social norms and therefore “emotions can attach us to the very conditions of our subordination.”<sup>133</sup> Thus, bringing attention to emotions and affect is important as it demonstrates how our bodies are shaped by them and subsequently become part of particular power structures.<sup>134</sup>

### 2.3.2. Power Structures in Critique

As discussed earlier, the classroom critique has typically been based on operations involving interpretation, reductive judgmental approaches, and objective knowledge, often to the exclusion of feelings, emotions, and subjective experience. As Rowles explains in her handbook: “I think students need to understand that in a critical arena, anything can be said, provided it can be substantiated and it is *not emotionally based*.”<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Maria Serena Sapengo, review of *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, by Sarah Ahmed, *Feminist Theory* 7, no.3 (2006): 371.

<sup>130</sup> Sarah Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22 no.2 ( 2004), 119.

<sup>131</sup> Carolyn Pedwell and Anne Whitehead, “Affecting Feminism: Questions of Feeling in Feminist Theory,” *Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (2012): 116.

<sup>132</sup> Pedwell and Whitehead, 120.

<sup>133</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 12.

<sup>134</sup> Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 12.

<sup>135</sup> Sarah Rowles, ed, *Art Crits: 20 Questions A Pocket Guide* (London: Q-Art, 2013) E-Book, 68. Emphasis added.

When only “substantiated” and objective knowledge is permitted, it creates a situation where only certain people’s experiences are validated; where there are those who know (or are in the know), and those who don’t (or aren’t). According to Leslie Dick, this approach to critique produces an environment where the authority figure in the classroom (the professor, guest critic, guest artist) becomes the one who determines and defines what “better” or good art is. She goes on to conclude that “[...] judgement (this worked, that didn’t) seems to me like a power move, where I get to be the authority figure, and I get to say it’s good, or better, or you’ve made progress, or you haven’t.”<sup>136</sup>

In traditional pedagogy, a deferral to the authority of the professor is common and perhaps even warranted: the mathematics professor often has the right answer.<sup>137</sup> In the studio arts, a professor’s opinion can be warranted based on their professional and academic experience. Nonetheless, the problem, Dick points out, isn’t that art professors share their interpretations, judgments, or opinions; it is that their voice becomes the *only* voice that matters; their judgement becomes equal to that of the math professor and is taken to be the “right” answer. An art professor’s authority in the classroom can shut down productive discussion and alternative responses. Students become used to the idea that one person has the capacity to validate their work, and they proceed to take this into the art world. As a result, the traditional critique structure has the potential to replicate, and to a certain degree perpetuate, some of the hierarchies or power structures within the broader art world, such as the hierarchical gallery system, and the lack of artist diversity (gender, culture, race) that regularly exists in museums, art fairs, and exhibitions. This perpetuation of reductive structures can also include the commodification of art writing, which has had to shift from involving critical responses to being long-form advertisements in support of the already powerful galleries and museums.

If a traditional approach to critique preserves these hierarchies, I am arguing that an affective approach can disrupt such power structures, even if it is only for the short

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<sup>136</sup> Dick.

<sup>137</sup> There has been a shift in recent pedagogy towards a dismantling of the top-down, information dump approach, with an emphasis on peer learning, active learning, and a recognition of the valuable knowledge students come with.

period during critique. This is more than simply an experimental or novel way to approach art, but a “shared project of deterritorialization”<sup>138</sup> and decolonization. Historically, affect was seen as nebulous and treated with suspicion in academic circles: “feelings in the history of art are treated as not particularly serious and useless for research, and therefore seldom reflected upon.”<sup>139</sup> But perhaps feelings and emotions have been opposed, not only because they are difficult to define and difficult to engage with, but because affect has the potential to expose the student-artist, student-audience, and the instructor to change.<sup>140</sup> In disrupting the traditional hierarchies in the classroom through affect, the effect could be to equalize all voices. As Leslie Dick says in her article, the undoing of these hierarchies is unsettling and difficult, and “indeed it can be a harsh awakening, opening up a radical space of uncertainty and vulnerability.”<sup>141</sup>

### 2.3.3. Affective Critique

In a 2015 article in the *Temporary Art Review*, artist Steve Cottingham made a call to art critics to resist capitalism in their profession through an embodied approach to writing. Cottingham feels that art writing has been too entrenched in capitalist production and believes that experimental and embodied approaches to art criticism have the potential to break these chains.<sup>142</sup> Cottingham, like Simon O’Sullivan, is looking for a kind of art writing that doesn’t “seek to colonize, but instead parallels in some way the ‘work’ of the art object.”<sup>143</sup> The author asks: “How can art criticism be so close to art but fail to reflect any of its spirit? [...] Does art criticism need to remain a venue for objective, removed reflection?”<sup>144</sup> I ask the same thing of critique and make the same call for an embodied and affective relationship to art. And through this embodied, sensual, and affective approach, “the conditions of a dominant hierarchy (whether social, ideological, or

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<sup>138</sup> Simon O’Sullivan, “Writing on Art (Case Study: The Buddhist Puja),” *Parallax* 7, no. 4 (2001): 116.

<sup>139</sup> Nader, 245.

<sup>140</sup> Nader, 260.

<sup>141</sup> Dick.

<sup>142</sup> Steven Cottingham, “No One Cares About Art Criticism: Advocating for an Embodiment of the Avant Garde as an Alternative to Capitalism,” *Temporary Art Review*, March 23, 2015. Accessed March 15, 2019. [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research\\_and\\_citation/chicago\\_manual\\_17th\\_edition/cmos\\_formatting\\_and\\_style\\_guide/web\\_sources.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/chicago_manual_17th_edition/cmos_formatting_and_style_guide/web_sources.html)

<sup>143</sup> O’Sullivan, “Writing on Art,” 115.

<sup>144</sup> Cottingham.

aesthetic) can be suspended to allow for spaces of full sensory engagement, thus accounting for the formation of multiple unique subject positions.”<sup>145</sup>

The obvious challenge here is this: what does an affective critique model look like? So far, I have discussed affective approaches such as soft talk, the encouragement of subjective and emotive responses, the potential of looking away, and embodied participation as opposed to passive observation. For Steven Cottingham, looking to contemporary poetry is the solution to “stolid, academic, and *serious*”<sup>146</sup> art criticism. According to Cottingham, poetry is unique in its position within capitalism, because its production and consumption doesn’t fit neatly within the capitalist system. As the author puts it, poetry is “radical in its production, distribution, and democratization,”<sup>147</sup> and thus has the opportunity, even obligation, to be experimental. Cottingham argues that art critics should look to this radical structure to create more experimental, creative, and ultimately, more interesting writing. And if the art critics should do this, why shouldn’t the critique? Looking to poetry to discuss the visual arts has a long history, going as far back as the Greeks. Called *ekphrasis*, it is the tradition of elaborately describing artworks, usually paintings or sculptures, in narrative form. Drawing on this tradition, an embodied or affective critique can be mobilized by making artworks that respond to other artworks; to demonstrate how an artwork moved you through another artwork. This could be in the form of poems, stories, drawings, monologues, dance, or sculptures, which incorporate a response to the original artwork. A poem, for example, that demonstrates how a painting made you feel; a painting that argues against a sculpture; a monologue that tells a personal story that an installation reminded you of. Responding to a work through art becomes experimental and focuses on individual embodied responses; it asks students (and the instructor) to experience the art, not dissect it, and inherently all responses are equally valid. Ekphrasis can be seen as a way to both actively engage with an artwork, while also participating in Irit Rogoff’s idea of ‘looking away.’

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<sup>145</sup> Traficante, 16.

<sup>146</sup> Cottingham.

<sup>147</sup> Cottingham.

In her think-piece, Leslie Dick also mentions the psychoanalytic practice of free association as a way to affectively engage with artworks. She states that free association “is far from free, because following the chain of associations brings us to deeper meanings that we cannot access otherwise. [... It] takes us places we might otherwise never go, and allows for something to be revealed.” Free association opens the floor for every person to speak on equal terms and doesn’t require specific academic language or knowledge. No person (student or instructor) can hold the floor longer, as only one word at a time is allowed. Taking the idea of equalizing voices in the classroom further, removing the instructor’s voice (through silence), or through physical removal from the classroom (with students reporting back on conversations), are also possibilities.

While not necessarily an affective approach, a way to move away from a capitalist and consumption-based environment and open the door for students to experience art in a participatory and affective manner is to remove the grading aspect of critique. As seen in the literature review, students find it difficult to separate themselves from the fact that they are being graded and thus feel they must perform their confidence in their work and agree with instructor’s opinions. As noted in the first chapter, “If you don’t [present your work] with conviction and passion and enthusiasm, you’re dead and you risk a bad grade.”<sup>148</sup> Meanwhile, Mariah Doren suggests, “if we could separate the assessment – its pretense of objectivity and its authority-driven overtones – from classroom conversations around the work, we really might have an open dialogue about meaning.”<sup>149</sup>

If we move away from the tenet of objectivity, then we have the possibility of other approaches to critique that might fulfill some of the earlier-mentioned goals. One of the few authors who spoke about subjectivity in the critique is Kurt Ralske, who explains that crits “offer the unusual potential for intimacy within a group setting. Suddenly very deep connections can form between strangers, based on spontaneous trust and respect, resulting in profound exchanges of insight and generosity.”<sup>150</sup> By

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<sup>148</sup> Wojtyra, 98.

<sup>149</sup> Doren, 198.

<sup>150</sup> Ralske.

removing grading from critique, there is a possibility that the pressure to perform will be lessened, leading to a more open and meaningful dialogue; students will feel more secure in participating in experimental and affective models of critique if they aren't worried their grades will be affected. Perhaps, even more importantly, critique might then resist becoming transactional: if a student performs well in critique and says, X, Y and Z, they receive an A. The goal here is a shift away from the business of grades, where the instructor is the authority and arbiter, into a more levelling environment, where opinions, responses, and ideas are legitimate according to their value within discourse and not for their capacity to impact student grades.

## 2.4. Conclusion

In “The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking Art Beyond Representation,” O’Sullivan states, “there is no denying, or deferring, affects. They are what make up life, and art. For there is a sense in which art itself is made up of affects.”<sup>151</sup> Or, as theorist Erika Doss puts it, “works of art are the physical and visual embodiment of public affect.”<sup>152</sup> It is clear that affect is pervasive in contemporary North American culture and it is generally how the public engages with art.<sup>153</sup> However, those entrenched in the art world, such as artists, writers, and curators, often ignore affect: they “pretend to know how to *look*, and how to draw the highest semiological and visual satisfaction from that *looking*.”<sup>154</sup> On the other hand, “untutored art enthusiasts make aesthetic judgments in an entirely different way. For them, appraisal is read off the ‘sounding board of the body.’ They use their emotions.”<sup>155</sup> This alone should be reason to encourage affective responses in critique. However, as is evident in the theory outlined above, the affective critique (through techniques such as ‘looking away,’ ekphrasis, soft talk, silence, emotive responses, and/or free association) can respond to some of the obstacles students perceive in critique, such as unequal power dynamics, fear and anxiety in the participation and the

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<sup>151</sup> O’Sullivan. “The Aesthetics of Affect,” 126.

<sup>152</sup> Doss, 9.

<sup>153</sup> Doss, 10.

<sup>154</sup> Boshoff in Lauwrens, 1.

<sup>155</sup> Jesse Prinz, “Can Critics Be Dispassionate? The Role of Emotion in Aesthetic Judgement,” accessed January 24, 2019. <http://subcortex.com/PrinzDispassionateCritics.pdf>

performance of critique, and the transactional nature of grading. In addition, attention to affect also has the potential to produce different and transformative knowledge from traditional hermeneutical and objective knowledge; knowledge about how artworks create feelings. An affective critique is ultimately about a “deepening and extending of the keyboard of human feeling, rendering it more subtle and complex, helping people to achieve a measure of aesthetic wholeness [...]”<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Bersson, 38.

## Chapter 3

### 3. Sensuous Critique

Taking an affective approach to art, one that allows the viewer to be a participant and to be moved by the art, is not necessarily a new or unique position. In 1982, art historian and educator Robert Bersson wrote the article, "Against Feeling: Aesthetic Experience in Technocratic Society." In it, Bersson called for a pedagogy of "sensuous aesthetic education."<sup>157</sup> This sensuous aesthetic that he calls for is akin to affect and the idea of allowing students to be moved by art in a transformative way. In particular, Bersson was interested in "the consciousness of sensuous experiences-of the myriad sounds, smells, sights, movements, textures, and tastes possible to human perception. Sensuous aesthetic immediacy also involves the consciousness of emotional states—feelings of tenderness, love, hate, and fear. It involves any feeling that we, as human beings, can have."<sup>158</sup> In the following chapter, I examine the idea of sensuous knowledge and the "sensory turn" in art history as another way to access affective knowledge in critique.

As noted earlier, the term "aesthetics" or *aesthesis*, upon which critique is partially based, historically means to access or recognize sensation and/or feeling in art, in contrast to rational or intellectual knowledge. Over time it became more concerned with the visual perception of art and "with issues surrounding the creation, interpretation, and ultimate appreciation of works of art"<sup>159</sup> In this chapter, I consider the theories of sensuous knowledge and the "sensory turn" as a way to align critique with the historical notion of aesthetics as something that is sense-based, not just perception- or knowledge-based. First, I outline a history of embodiment in art theory, and specifically how the senses were divided, and the faculty of sight eventually became isolated and championed as the best way to engage with art. Then, I examine how an emphasis on sight encouraged neutral, detached, and objective engagement with art.

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<sup>157</sup> Bersson, 38.

<sup>158</sup> Bersson, 35.

<sup>159</sup> Lesley Martin, "Aesthetics," The University of Chicago, 2003, accessed July 9, 2019. [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research\\_and\\_citation/chicago\\_manual\\_17th\\_edition/cmos\\_formatting\\_and\\_style\\_guide/web\\_sources.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/chicago_manual_17th_edition/cmos_formatting_and_style_guide/web_sources.html)

Next, I look at how the museum, as a site of ritual, reflects a neutral and detached observer who is able to analyze the artwork in isolation and apart from the clutter of everyday life. I examine Carol Duncan's chapter, "The Art Museum as Ritual," and demonstrate how this form of ritual is currently mirrored in critique. In addition, I consider Jenni Lauwrens' article, "Welcome to the Revolution: The Sensory Turn and Art History," which posits how an embodied approach to engaging with artworks has the potential to bring different knowledges to critique. Finally, I return to the notion of ritual, but instead of looking at the museum as a model, I suggest that Simon O'Sullivan's model of the Buddhist puja could reflect an approach to critique that would encourage sensorial knowledge. In particular, I look to how the five senses — sight, taste, touch, smell, and aural — can open critique up, transforming it from operating as a difficult ritual that students have to endure, to an embodied ritual that has the potential to move them in the way that "art does best: effects a transformation:"<sup>160</sup>

### 3.1. Context to Embodiment in Art Theory

If you walk through a museum today you will notice the never-ending stanchions, signs, written directives, and glass, which are strategically placed to deter visitors from touching the art. Audience members have been educated to experience the art through visual contemplation, and observers often hold the same "gallery stance": hands behind their back, a foot away from the artwork, but carefully leaning in towards it in order to *see* all the details. In his article "The Aesthetics of Mixing the Senses," author and sensorial researcher David Howes calls these enforced codes of conduct and carefully designed architecture, "spaces for the production of 'single sense epiphanies.'"<sup>161</sup>

Remaining a passive observer who doesn't touch the art is accepted and expected in Western culture, but historically this has not always been the case: "the single-sensed understanding of art, although has deep roots in Western thought, only reached its full

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<sup>160</sup> O'Sullivan, "Writing on Art," 119.

<sup>161</sup> Howes, David. "The Aesthetics of Mixing of Mixing the Senses: Cross-Modal Aesthetics." p. 76. Accessed June 3, 2019. <https://www.david-howes.com/senses/aestheticsofmixingthesenses.pdf>

fruition in the modern period.”<sup>162</sup> In the Middle Ages, artworks, mostly made by craftsmen, invited physical interaction. Touching religious carvings, illuminated manuscripts, sculptures, and paintings was akin to touching religious relics, in that this provided “physical contact with the divine.”<sup>163</sup> The sense of devout touch was more powerful than distanced contemplation and reflection. In seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century museums, tactility and touch was also encouraged. German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder argued that “sculpture was the highest form of art precisely because it was perceptible to the sense of touch.”<sup>164</sup> English philosopher Robert Hooke “explicitly stated that ‘ocular inspection’ must be accompanied by the ‘manual handling [...] of the very things themselves.”<sup>165</sup> In the eighteenth century, with the formulation of aesthetics theory and philosophy, a division of the senses started to become entrenched. In the nineteenth century, museums instituted eyes-only rules, in part a move towards conservation and anti-theft, and by also subscribing to the tradition of detached contemplation, the “museum made it clear that looking at art was a concentrated act that should not be united to any other activities, such as praying, listening to music, or dining, as would often have occurred when art was situated in churches or homes.”<sup>166</sup> The sense of sight was considered a removed or distanced sense that was able to objectively take in and synthesize facts, in comparison to the operations of the other senses (touch, taste, smell, sound), which were considered to be immediate, personal, and subjective experiences. As a result, and perhaps logically since the field is *visual arts*, vision became the privileged sense. As Patricia Di Bello and Gabriel Koureas write in their introduction, *Art, History, and the Senses*: “the visual has been privileged as a rational source of knowledge, able to transcend lowly sensuality, while the proximity senses have been marginalized by aesthetics, art history and criticism [...]”<sup>167</sup> In looking at art, we are almost always separated and distanced from the object being observed,

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<sup>162</sup> David Howes and Constance Classen, *Ways of Sensing: Understanding the Senses in Society* (London: Routledge, 2014), 18

<sup>163</sup> Howes and Classen, 18.

<sup>164</sup> Howes and Classen, 19.

<sup>165</sup> Howes and Classen, 19.

<sup>166</sup> Howes and Classen, 21.

<sup>167</sup> Patricia Di Bello and Gabriel Koureas, introduction to *Art, History, and the Senses* (Farnham : Ashgate, 2010): 1.

which gives the impression that the viewer is a detached observer.<sup>168</sup> And so, “vision is often valorized for its detachment from objects; it maintains supremacy as an intellectual sense by highlighting the distance between stimuli and the body.”<sup>169</sup> This hierarchy of the senses was further used to exploit the divide between “fine art” and “craft,” as the latter was associated with the tactility of utilitarian objects whereas the former was tied to intellectual and contemplative pursuits of the mind.<sup>170</sup>

Strengthening the detached experience of viewing art was Immanuel Kant’s philosophy of aesthetics, which prescribed judgement of art and beauty through “disinterested” contemplation: “the less we are aware of our bodies when we perceive, according to Kant, the freer we are to think and form aesthetic judgements.”<sup>171</sup> Following upon Kant, art was to be interpreted, judged, and experienced in a neutral, passionless and disinterested manner.<sup>172</sup> Art interpretation was to be an intellectual exercise based on the isolated sense of sight and remain autonomous from other sensory experiences. And so, sight became the “noblest” sense, the only sense that was detached enough from the body to make objective aesthetic judgements. In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant “isolated and defined the human capacity for aesthetic judgment and distinguished it from other faculties of the mind (practical reason and scientific understanding).”<sup>173</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century and onward, there were several responses to this privileging of sight in philosophy, critical theory, literary studies, and aesthetics. Several theorists and philosophers, including Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Jean-Paul Sartre, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida, among others, took up various anti-ocular positions.<sup>174</sup> For the benefit of this essay, I will outline some of the artistic and art criticism responses to the primacy of vision, such as artists Rene Magritte and Marcel Duchamp, the political and artistic organization Situationist

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<sup>168</sup> Lauwrens, 3.

<sup>169</sup> Owens qtd in Traficante, 13.

<sup>170</sup> Di Bello and Koureas, 3-4.

<sup>171</sup> Howes and Classen, 21

<sup>172</sup> Howes, *Aesthetic Mixing*, 75.

<sup>173</sup> Carol Duncan, “The Art Museum as Ritual,” in *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 2005), 14.

<sup>174</sup> Juhani Pallasma, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chicester: Wiley & Sons, 2005), 20.

International, and various feminist approaches. It is important to note that most of the works in question were not exclusively responding to the privileging of sight; it is that the primacy of disembodied and objective contemplation was part of bigger structural and ideological issues in art theory and broader society (such as racism, classicism, misogyny, elitism, and being Western-centred), which will be discussed later in the chapter in the conversation around social art history and the sensory turn.

Rene Magritte's 1929 surrealist painting *The Treachery of Images* simply, and paradoxically visually, illustrates the structuralist response to a privileging of sight. The famous painting depicts a pipe with the words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" ("This is not a pipe") written underneath. The viewer is immediately reminded that they are not looking at a pipe, but the image or representation of a pipe and thus like structuralism, it "stresses the incompatibility of visual representation and reality."<sup>175</sup> The development of structuralism was an important shift towards anti-ocularcentric beliefs in the mid-1950s. Specifically, the theories of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure "proved hugely influential as it marked a profound shift towards language and narrative. Since language is fundamentally about speaking (and hearing), we identify the development of structuralism as a 'metaphorical redescription' from a paradigm based on vision and sight to one based on speaking and hearing."<sup>176</sup> Structuralism looks at the world in terms of the systems or structures that constructs it; nothing can be studied in isolation, but has to be understood in the context of the larger system of which it is a part. Thus, the important point is less fixed on the specific interpretation of an individual artwork or how one *sees* the artwork, but focused on understanding the contexts that surround it and that created it. Dada artist Marcel Duchamp also criticized what he called 'retinal art'; art that focuses purely on visual aesthetics.<sup>177</sup> Duchamp's readymades, artworks made from commercially-found objects, didn't focus on aesthetic value and thus

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<sup>175</sup> Nasrullah Mambrol, "Structuralism," *Literary Theory and Criticism*, March 20, 2016, accessed June 18, 2019. <https://literariness.org/2016/03/20/structuralism/>

<sup>176</sup> Donncha Kavanagh, "Ocularcentrism and its Others: A Framework for Metatheoretical Analysis," *Organizational Studies* 25, no 3 (2004), 453.

<sup>177</sup> Martin Jay, "Returning the Gaze," in *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture*, ed. Gail Weiss and Honi Fern Haber (New York: Routledge, 1999), 172.

challenged the “traditional privileging of cultivated aesthetic taste”<sup>178</sup> achieved through contemplative sight.

Influenced by Surrealism and Dada, the Situationist International (SI) (1957-1972) were a group of avant-garde artists, writers, and philosophers who rallied against consumer culture, and the proliferation of media and images. The group used various strategies, such as *détournement*, to critique and revolt against consumerism and capitalism. *Détournement* consisted of taking consumer images and mixing them in order “to highlight the underlying ideology of the original image.”<sup>179</sup> The most prominent member of the SI was Guy Debord who wrote *Society of the Spectacle*, a sort of manifesto for the SI. The book outlines how commodity culture has “colonized” the public who “have increasingly [been] rendered as passive and isolated spectators and consumers, contemplating what was presented to them, rather than active political agents who were collectively and freely able to shape their destinies.”<sup>180</sup> Debord railed against the incessant propagation of images in mass media and advertising, because he felt that the bombardment of images removed us from the experience of everyday living with all the senses.

In the 1960s and 1970s, feminist artists and critics also countered the privileging of vision in several different ways. Stemming from Simone de Beauvoir’s phenomenological theories, some feminists “urged for a discursive undoing of a singular woman’s experience toward pluralist understandings of situated knowledge.”<sup>181</sup> Understood through embodied knowledge and an investigation of the body as individual, subjective and unique, and able to experience knowledge, these artists and theorists “helped call into question the hegemony of the dispassionate eye.”<sup>182</sup> Their work includes the “abject theory” of Julia Kristeva, the theories of the “male gaze” by Laura Mulvey, haptic research by Laura U. Marks, and Rosalind Krauss’s anti-ocularcentric article “Antivision.”

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<sup>178</sup> Jay, 171.

<sup>179</sup> Richard Pallardy, “Situationist International,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed June 18, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Situationist-International>

<sup>180</sup> Ray Hutchison, ed, *Encyclopedia of urban studies* (California: Sage, 2010), 726.

<sup>181</sup> Traficante, 31.

<sup>182</sup> Jay, 171.

### 3.2. Museum as Ritual

In the first chapter to *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, author Carol Duncan makes the argument that the art museum is a site that has “strong affinities to modern Western notions of the aesthetic experience—that mode of receptivity thought to be most appropriate before works of art.”<sup>183</sup> Duncan demonstrates how architecture, curatorial choices, and social expectations in the museum reflect the type of knowledge outlined previously that is the accepted manner in which audiences are to encounter and experience art in “a state of ‘detached, timeless and exalted’ contemplation [...]”<sup>184</sup> The author argues that the museum is a site that mirrors the Kantian expectation of the neutral and detached observer who is able to analyze the artwork in isolation and apart from the clutter of everyday life.

In this chapter, Carol Duncan argues that art museums are sites of secular ritual, which have developed first, a “‘liminal’ zone of time and space in which visitors, removed from the concerns of their daily, practical lives, open themselves to a different quality of experience; and second, the organization of the museum setting as a kind of script or scenario which visitors perform.”<sup>185</sup> For Duncan, the museum creates a ritual space and thus a framework for viewers to escape mundane experiences and practical concerns of the everyday.<sup>186</sup> Related to ritual, Duncan emphasizes the importance of museums creating a liminal space: “liminality refers to the period during rituals of passage in which the subject is held to be in between the categories of normal social life. This is a moment of special importance in many ritual activities and is often accompanied by a suspension or reversal of social norms and values.”<sup>187</sup> This liminal zone is a marked-off time, space and place that points to certain rules and expectations which are outside those of normal social behaviour and cultural experiences. The ritualized liminal space is often one of disconnection from the everyday and of

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<sup>183</sup> Duncan, 11.

<sup>184</sup> Duncan, 11.

<sup>185</sup> Duncan, 20.

<sup>186</sup> Duncan, 11.

<sup>187</sup> Craig Calhoun, ed, “Dictionary of Social Sciences,” *Oxford Reference*, last modified 2002, accessed June 5, 2019. <https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780195123715.001.0001/acref-9780195123715-e-972>

rejuvenation. Duncan argues that “art museums [are] sites which enable individuals to achieve liminal experience—to move beyond the psychic constraints of mundane existence, step out of time, and attain new, larger perspectives.”<sup>188</sup>

Museum design and curatorial choices further reinforce the aesthetic museum and its emphasis on distanced, isolated, and neutral observation. The development of the “white cube” emphasized how artworks should be experienced; artworks are segregated from one another against a neutral white wall, in rooms with high walls, pin point focused lighting and interpretive texts set at a distance. As Duncan explains, “nowhere does the triumph of the aesthetic museum reveal itself more dramatically than in the history of art gallery design. Although fashions in wall colors, ceiling heights, lighting, and other details have over the years varied with changing museological trends, installation design has consistently and increasingly sought to isolate objects for the concentrated gaze of the viewer and to suppress as irrelevant other meanings the objects might have.<sup>189</sup> And so, the museum has been carefully curated to create the time and space for the distanced observer to focus solely on the aesthetic experience of looking.

Important here is that this controlled liminal space is one that mirrors the idea of the neutral observer and reinforces the notion that sight is the most important sense in the experience of art. This control of the museum “means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths. It is also the power to define the relative standing of individuals within that community.”<sup>190</sup> And so, the museum ritual further entrenches what type of and whose knowledge is acceptable, and the supposed “right way” to experience art; as a neutral, detached observer who sees the works and themselves as isolated from the everyday world. I believe that the critique format mirrors the museum ritual. In critique we attempt to mimic the controlled white cube where artworks are isolated from one another and judged by sight alone. As noted in the first chapter, critiques follow a basic historical structure that they rarely deviate

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<sup>188</sup> Duncan, 12.

<sup>189</sup> Duncan, 17.

<sup>190</sup> Duncan, 8.

from; there is a specific script and students are asked to perform. Distanced and neutral observations are expected in the form of description, analysis, and evaluation. As demonstrated in the literature review, “describe, analyze, interpret” is the ritual format of critique. When students walk into critique, everyday life is put on hold; feelings, emotions, and what is happening outside class is rarely discussed, and critique becomes what Duncan calls a liminal zone. However, unlike the museum as ritual, where the liminal zone gives the audience a positive, even transformational, experience, the critique is a ritual that students have to survive.<sup>191</sup>

### 3.3. The Sensory Turn

In the late twentieth century, analytical and hermeneutical art history shifted to a radical approach called the new or social art history. Art historians started looking beyond the distanced and objective analysis of the artist’s intentions to consider the political, economic, cultural, and social context in which artworks were made and circulated.<sup>192</sup> Influenced by critical and literary theory and political change, such as the May 1968 student protests in Paris, this new art history showed how artworks and their reception are not made in a vacuum, but are culturally produced.<sup>193</sup> These new and increasingly social art historical methodologies, including semiotics, feminism, Marxism, post-colonialism, and psychoanalysis, looked to “reveal the ‘ideological agenda[s]’ at work in art.”<sup>194</sup> Meanings in artworks were no longer static and isolated, but contingent on their specific social, political, and historic context. Johnathan Harris calls this a ‘socio historical hermeneutics’ and argues that it radically shifted “the nature and purpose of art historical work – away from concentration on artists’ intentions and the circumstances of production, toward questions around audience or viewer reception, interpretation, and consumption.”<sup>195</sup> The idea that an artwork held one interpretable meaning and objective truth began to fall apart; it was now understood that individuals

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<sup>191</sup> See chapter 1.

<sup>192</sup> Jenni Lauwrens, “Welcome to the Revolution: The Sensory Turn and Art History.” *Journal of Art Historiography* no.7 (2012): 5

<sup>193</sup> Johnathan Harris, *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2001), 21. Lauwrens, 5.

<sup>194</sup> Lauwrens, 5.

<sup>195</sup> Johnathan Harris, *Art History: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2006), 139.

from different social, economic, and political contexts could experience the same artwork and produce vastly different readings of it.<sup>196</sup>

The new art history is critically important in that it “set about to expose the racist, sexist and classist ways of seeing that are constructed in images and also engendered by them.”<sup>197</sup> What emerged from the new or social art history was a different approach to audience reception; spectators were no longer neutral, dispassionate, and disembodied spectators. Multisensory and affective responses to artworks were being recorded and interpretation took into account cultural and emotional effects of the artwork.<sup>198</sup> As Veerle Thielemans explains in her article, “Beyond Visuality: Review on Materiality and Affect,” “the line of inquiry on spectatorship has started to take on a different tone. With attention shifting from the predominantly visual to the physicality of artworks and their sensory/affective reception.”<sup>199</sup> One aspect to the new art history was a critique of the neutrality of looking and autonomy of vision, dismissing the idea that there is a singular, objective, neutral, and disembodied way to interpret art. Thielemans demonstrates that through identity studies, feminist, queer, and gender studies, institutional history, and visual studies, the scholarship of social art history was “reshuffling values” and examining ideological agendas and social orders in art.<sup>200</sup> This move away from privileging the visual, therefore, critiques the “neutrality of the operations of looking and visual representation”<sup>201</sup> and opens the door for sensorial studies.

To summarize, sensory experience and bodily knowledge were historically considered inferior to logic, reason, and intellectual knowledge and experience.<sup>202</sup> In order to “achieve ideal aesthetic disinterest,” sight became isolated and elevated from the rest of the senses, and the sensual experience was devalued as a mode of intellectual

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<sup>196</sup> Harris, *Key Concepts*, 139.

<sup>197</sup> Lauwrens, 5.

<sup>198</sup> Veerle Thielemans, “Beyond Visuality: Review on Materiality and Affect,” *Perspective* 2 (2015): 1.

<sup>199</sup> Thielemans, 1.

<sup>200</sup> Thielemans, 4.

<sup>201</sup> Thielemans, 2.

<sup>202</sup> Lauwrens, 7.

and aesthetic inquiry.<sup>203</sup> As demonstrated by Carol Duncan, this privileging of sight and the distanced observer is further entrenched by the ritual of the museum. However, the new art history demonstrated that the privileging of sight was culturally produced “by showing how the emphasis on pure opticality concealed a control over individual subjectivity, [revealing] the ideological underpinnings of this visual regime, [and] contesting its supposed transparency.”<sup>204</sup> But even with social art history, the traditional emphasis on looking held tight. The example sensory researcher David Howes uses to demonstrate this hold on the isolation of sight is James Elkins’ book from the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, *How to use your Eyes*. The book asks readers to use the traditional approach to aesthetic appreciation outside of the museum. In the book, Elkins speaks about sight as a solitary activity that doesn’t require talking, or listening, or smelling, or touching; in essence, he speaks about seeing as an activity that is isolated from all the other senses.<sup>205</sup> Elkins is attempting to approach the world, not just art, from an art historian’s perspective and asks the reader to use their eyes more concertedly to look at everyday and mundane objects “until the details of the world slowly reveal themselves.”<sup>206</sup> While Elkins’ ideas are somewhat outside traditional art historical writing, his approach is, as Howes states, “profoundly revealing, but at the same time curiously stultifying insofar as the non-visual senses are concerned.”<sup>207</sup>

The senses — sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell — have been historically divided, ranked and studied individually. One way this division of the senses has been explained is using the metaphor of faculty disciplines in a university. In the foreword to *Art, History, and the Senses*, Simon Shaw-Miller compares each sense to a faculty in the university, which were historically siloed from one another.<sup>208</sup> Like university faculties, the senses were divided into “cultural categories” such as art, music, culinary arts, craft and dance, and further entrenched through academic disciplinary studies.<sup>209</sup> However,

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<sup>203</sup> Lauwrens, 16

<sup>204</sup> Thielemans, 1-2.

<sup>205</sup> Elkins in Howes aesthetics of mixing 76.

<sup>206</sup> James Elkins, *How to Use Your Eyes*, (New York: Routledge, 2000): ix.

<sup>207</sup> Howes, Aesthetics of mixing, 76.

<sup>208</sup> Simon Shaw-Miller, foreword to *Art, History, and the Senses*, ed. Patricia Di Bello and Gabriel Koureas, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010): 1.

<sup>209</sup> Simon Shaw-Miller, 2-3.

as Shaw-Miller explains, in recent years the university has seen the emergence of inter-disciplinary, cross-disciplinary, and multidisciplinary research, and the senses too are moving from being mono-sensory towards trans-sensory.<sup>210</sup> While the senses can work in isolation, they more often than not work “together, multi-, trans-, and inter-sensorially.”<sup>211</sup>

What emerged from this over-prioritizing of sight was various bodies of research that looked to consider the body’s role in producing knowledge and the interconnection of the senses. Since the nineties, numerous fields of study including history, anthropology, sociology, aesthetics, and literary studies, have engaged in sensorial research. This research is diverse, but it generally “emphasize[d] the dynamic, relational (inter-sensory — or multimodal, multimedia) and often conflicted nature of our everyday engagement with the sensuous world.”<sup>212</sup> Engaging with these other fields of research, art history responded to the isolation of the sense of sight from the other senses through phenomenology, affect theory, and sensorial studies. Parallel to and stemming from these frameworks is what Jenni Lauwrens calls the “sensory turn” in art history. The sensory turn considered the embodied experience of engaging with art and what it meant to engage with art using all the various interconnected senses, and not just sight alone. With the sensory turn, vision was understood not as separate from the body, but fully embodied; the body is accepted as central to perception, and seeing (and thinking) is understood as a physical experience. The isolation of the sense of sight from the whole embodied experience doesn’t recognize the fact that “spectators see because they are embodied and not despite their embodiment.”<sup>213</sup> According to Lauwrens, the sensory turn looked at art “through the ‘lens of an aesthetics of embodiment’ taking into account not only sight but all the bodily sensations including both the pleasant and the unpleasant, in sum, the affective responses activated in the process of seeing the work.”<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Simon Shaw-Miller, 1-2.

<sup>211</sup> Di Bello and Koreas, 7.

<sup>212</sup> Lauwrens, 3-4.

<sup>213</sup> Lauwrens, 6.

<sup>214</sup> Lauwrens, 12

The sensory turn is in fact a return to the original Greek meaning of *aesthesis*: "pertaining to sensuous perception; received by the senses."<sup>215</sup> The original meaning of aesthetics did not prioritize sight or emphasize an analytical or neutral reading of art. Instead, *aesthesis* "meant the transmission and communication of feeling through the body's senses: touch, hearing, sight, smell, and taste."<sup>216</sup> Thus, the sensory turn in art theory is an aesthetics which emphasizes the embodied experience of each audience member. In this way, the audience is a collection of engaged observers whose memories, beliefs, narratives and cultural history are mediated and experienced in the body.<sup>217</sup>

### 3.4. Art as Sensorial Ritual

In her article, Lauwrens contextualizes and defines the sensory turn and its relationship to engaging with art. She calls for an embodied, phenomenological, and sensorial approach to art history, but she isn't clear as to what this would look like in actuality. Like much sensorial art history, her research considers artworks that include or evoke the senses beyond vision. Sensorial writing tends to focus on installation art, multimedia practices, sound art, kinetic sculpture and/or interdisciplinary exhibitions. Research concentrates on artworks that inherently arouse multiple senses, as opposed to asking what an embodied approach to any artwork looks like, whether it intends to evoke all the senses or not. In other words, sensory research in art tends to rely on artworks that are multi-sensory, and not necessarily on the question as to how to be an embodied viewer of all art. For example, in the article, "When Art is Experienced Through All Five Senses," Andreja Velimirović discusses the exhibition *Out of Sight! Art of the Senses* at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in 2017-2018. The article discusses the tradition of sight being the primary tool for experiencing art and the neglect of taste, smell, touch, and sound in art.<sup>218</sup> However, this is the premise of the exhibition itself and not a unique position of the author taking a sensory approach to writing. In her article, Lauwrens also references an interdisciplinary and multi-media exhibition that included

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<sup>215</sup> Bersson, 35.

<sup>216</sup> Harris, Key Concepts, 10.

<sup>217</sup> Lauwrens, 12.

<sup>218</sup> Andreja Velimirovic "When Art is Experienced Through All Five Senses" Widewalls, November 4, 2017, accessed May 22, 2019. <https://www.widewalls.ch/art-senses-albright-knox-gallery/>

sounds, projections, and textiles. She states that the exhibition was a “feast for the senses,” and wonders “how an art historian might investigate, not only the possible meanings of Moore’s installation, but also the expanding and immersive experience of the work in its exhibition space, which encompassed far more than only the visual and the auditory.”<sup>219</sup> Starting with this exhibition she asks how to write specifically about art that intends to be multi-sensory, as opposed to rethinking all art as multi-sensory. I wonder, isn’t all art a “feast for the senses?”

In his article, “Writing on Art (Case Study: The Buddhist Puja)”, author Simon O’Sullivan examines how to approach art in a sensuous and embodied way; he doesn’t ask what affective methods can create a new reading of art, but instead attempts to rethink art itself as “a kind of event. And writing (on art) as another kind of event.”<sup>220</sup> In rethinking art writing, O’Sullivan uses the Buddhist puja as a case study or metaphor as a means to approach art in a sensuous embodied way. The puja is an encompassing term that refers to ritual practices and devotional worship centered around a shrine, often including a statue or image of the Buddha.<sup>221</sup> The puja is “an experience, a ritual, in which words are spoken, actions are performed, and other realities are accessed. The puja is then an immersive space, one in which all the senses are engaged [...]”<sup>222</sup> O’Sullivan describes the puja, not as a singular experience, but as an embodied ritual in which different moments of intensity engage various sensations; all of the senses are engaged through the performance of specific actions, chanted mantras, offerings, focused listening, and meditation. The puja isn’t about transporting ourselves to another place, but “rather it activates an awareness of that which accompanies, and has always accompanied, our sense of self [...]”<sup>223</sup> Thus, the puja is about activating the senses in the body and thus leaving the puja transformed. The puja is an embodied experience and one that highlights bodies as temporary, insubstantial, and connected.<sup>224</sup> In the model of the puja, “we are interested in *affects* rather than meanings. In *experience* rather than

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<sup>219</sup> Lauwrens, 2.

<sup>220</sup> O’Sullivan, *Writing on Art*, 116.

<sup>221</sup> O’Sullivan, *Writing on Art*, 116-117.

<sup>222</sup> O’Sullivan, *Writing on Art*, 117.

<sup>223</sup> O’Sullivan, *Writing on Art*, 117.

<sup>224</sup> O’Sullivan *Writing on Art*, 118.

understanding. And in *transformation* rather than representation. [...] We return from the puja different from when we entered that sacred space.”<sup>225</sup> O’Sullivan proposes the ritual of the puja as an access point and model for all art:

For all, art is ritual in this sense. It may invite a *reading*. Indeed, it may invite a *deconstruction*. But to remain solely within this remit is to miss what art does best: Effects a transformation. As such art, like the puja itself, calls for a different mode of interaction: participation. To miss — or elide— this magical — and *immanent* — function is to remain unaffected by art. To remain within one’s own boundaries — to remain within one’s own, known, world.<sup>226</sup>

By using the puja as an access point or metaphor for the ritual of experiencing of art, O’Sullivan argues that participants (not just observers) can enter a zone of transformation. Like Carol Duncan, O’Sullivan is proposing art as a site for ritual, but unlike Duncan, the puja as model doesn’t result in a detached observer, but in an embodied participant. O’Sullivan and the puja model reconsider the form of the ritual as one that values and encourages the use of all the senses. Instead of withdrawing from the everyday world as a dispassionate, neutral, and thinking observer, the participant is transformed by the embodied experience of art.

### 3.5. The Sensory Turn in Critique

In the first chapter, critique was discussed as a ritual and rite of passage that students have to endure and survive. In the *New York Times* article, “Tales From the Crit: For Art Students, May Is the Cruellest Month,” author Jori Finkel speaks of the awareness of the ritual that students come to critique with. But such ritual isn’t one of liminal contemplative detachment, as Duncan proposes, or the transformative type of ritual that O’Sullivan hopes for. Ritual in critique has come accompanied with “attendant horror stories”<sup>227</sup> and is something students have to battle through. However, if we look to O’Sullivan’s model of the puja, the ritual of critique is something that can be transformative through an embodied experience of the event of art.

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<sup>225</sup> O’Sullivan *Writing on Art*, 118.

<sup>226</sup> O’Sullivan *Writing on Art*, 119.

<sup>227</sup> Jori Finkel, “Tales from the Crit: For Art Students, May is the Cruellest Month,” *New York Times*, April 30, 2006.

According to Jenni Lauwrens, “[...] an aesthetics of embodiment would acknowledge the audience’s bodily participation in the works of art, which include memories, beliefs, and attitudes mediated through the body.”<sup>228</sup> Thus, instead of being a space for description, observation, interpretation, and evaluation, I suggest that critique can be a space for bodily reaction; students and instructors share how artworks feel in their bodies. Looking to the condition of synesthesia might provide a model in critique to experience art through embodied knowledge or using all five senses. Synesthesia is a condition where one sense is automatically and involuntarily tied to a second sense.<sup>229</sup> For example, a synesthete might always experience the letter “A” as red, or the number 10 as blue, or experience a bitter taste with the sound of C sharp. Coming from two Greek words meaning “together” and “perception,” synesthesia means “joined perception,”<sup>230</sup> and “scrambles conventional notions of the senses as discrete channels.”<sup>231</sup> What sort of discussions could come from questions like: What do you hear when you observe this work? What images does this work conjure? What smells does this artwork arouse? What does this artwork taste like? Where in your body can you feel this work? What narrative does the texture of this work tell? Do you want to touch this artwork? If you consider two different artworks together, how do their smells, tastes, or sounds react to each other? This type of discussion isn’t intended to work against the traditional aims of critique such as developing “critical or higher order thinking skills.”<sup>232</sup> In fact, it is to broaden the idea of critical thinking and imagine it as something that can include more than description, observation, interpretation, and evaluation; like the *puja*, critical thinking can be about *affects* rather than meanings, about the *experience* of art rather than the understanding of it, and *transformation* rather than representation.<sup>233</sup> As Di Bello and Koureas state in, “Other than the Visual: Art, History and the Senses,” participants create meaning from engaging in an embodied manner: “the sensual effects and affects of the material qualities and properties of paintings,

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<sup>228</sup> Lauwrens, 12.

<sup>229</sup> Melissa Lee Phillips, “What is Synesthesia?” *Synesthesia*, accessed June 8, 2019. <https://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/syne.html>

<sup>230</sup> Phillips.

<sup>231</sup> Howes, Introduction: Sensory Art and Design, 4.

<sup>232</sup> Doren, 197.

<sup>233</sup> O’Sullivan *Writing on Art*, 118.

sculptures, photographs, art objects and installations are that which engages us as embodied participants in a process of creating meaning.”<sup>234</sup>

So far, I have proposed engaging in the senses in critique in a hypothetical manner: participants imagine or report on how an artwork affects their senses and body. However, critique itself is already multi-sensorial: sight is inherent in observation; discussion is a common component and thus includes the oral and aural; some instructors encourage students to bring snacks to share in critique or allow eating during class time, thus attaching taste and smell to the experience; standing and moving around to better observe artworks often happens, engaging the whole body in critique. And yet, sight is still often primary the way to engage with art. Taking the hypothetical one step further, what happens if we literally engage the senses and truly make critique a “feast for the senses?”<sup>235</sup> A straightforward, albeit somewhat radical approach, would be to experience the artwork in critique only through touch and/or smell. Sit in a dark room or trust students to close their eyes and pass an artwork around to feel and smell. Discuss what arises from this experience. Students could be asked to bring a smell, taste (food), or sound in to accompany their artwork; this could be experienced before, after, or in tandem with the artwork. Students could access their peers’ work ahead of time and bring in a smell, taste (food), or sound that they feel best engages the artwork. Using meditation or mindfulness practices is another way to engage the body and its various senses and connect in a new way to art. Important in these critique approaches is that they don’t have to be linked with specific assignments that focus on sound, touch, smell, or taste; in fact, the most interesting results could be when students don’t know what kind of critique is going to happen. For example, imagine the effect (and affect) of blindly feeling different paintings that were made to be seen: how does the texture of paint react in your body? How does scale affect your engagement? How do you feel being allowed to touch something that is usually not available to be touched? What memories does the tactility or smell raise? The goal here is to engage the knowledge we hold in our bodies and to enhance the senses that are already present, and bring critique closer to

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<sup>234</sup> Di Bello and Koureas, 8.

<sup>235</sup> Lauwrens, 2.

the historic Greek origins of aesthetics or *aesthesis*: the “transmission and communication of sense and feeling.”<sup>236</sup> If we shift how we engage with art in critique, we can shift the knowledge that comes from this experience. Perhaps in approaching critique in a new ritual way, it will no longer be something for students to endure, but something they positively experience. As Leslie Dick says, “I like the implication that we’re maybe doing something gooey and awkward and generous, and that our discourse gives, like a pillow, rather than cuts, like a knife.”<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Harris, *Key Concepts*, 10.

<sup>237</sup> Dick.

## Chapter 4

### 4. Conclusion

As a signature pedagogy there are obvious benefits to critique, such as developing critical and creative thinking skills, professional and technical language, and engagement with a community. However, I have focused this research on the negative perceptions of critique that students have reported, such as fear and anxiety around participation, unequal power dynamics, the quality of the critique performance having more value than the quality of the student's artwork, and the transactional nature of grading. Comparing the perceived benefits with the perceived negative outcomes in the literature has demonstrated that there is a disconnect between the goals of critique and the reality some students experience. The literature shows that there is a tension between the subjective experience of art-making and the objective practice of critique and evaluation. Instead of critique being a place of learning, growth, and self-discovery, it has simply become a test or exam. As a result, critique has moved away from historic Greek origins *aesthesis*, as art having the potential to communicate sense and feeling.

As such, my research looks to disrupt the traditional critique framework. My goal in this research is not to replace or completely eliminate current structures, as they hold particular benefits, but to consider how a different approach has the potential to lessen some of the tensions stated above. Students are often told critiques aren't personal and the critique is about an objective analysis of their work, not them personally. As such, emotional, personal, aspirational, and subjective language is discouraged and devalued in critiques, despite its importance to the making of art. Emphasizing objective responses and criteria in evaluating student artworks is at odds with the belief that art holds a multiplicity of meanings. In critique, students are taught to be passive observers, as opposed to embodied participants who are learning how art is functioning through the senses and feeling in the world. Thus, in order to move away from the objective tenets of critique, my research has drawn from the various ways that art history, art criticism and curatorial studies have used affect theory and sensuous knowledge to disrupt their individual practices.

In the second chapter I considered how affect theory has the potential to rethink the stated goals, shift power dynamics in the classroom, and generate transformative knowledge in critique. Various affective approaches evident in art theory, such as 'looking away,' ekphrasis, soft talk, silence, emotive responses, and/or free association can respond to certain obstacles students perceive in critique, such as unequal power dynamics, fear and anxiety in the performance of critique, and the transactional nature of grading. Taking an affective approach to the undergraduate classroom critique can produce transformative knowledge in students and faculty and demonstrate of how artworks operate to create a multiplicity of meaning through feelings.

The chapter on affect theory focused on the communication of *feelings* in *aesthesis*, whereas the chapter on the sensory turn considered how art critique can be a space to transmit the experience of the *senses*. The sensory turn and sensuous knowledge was explored in relationship to affect theory and demonstrated how critique can be a space for students to experience art as embodied and sense-based ritual, with potential to move them in a transformative way. This chapter also examined how the five senses — sight, taste, touch, smell, and aural — can open critique up, from operating as a difficult ritual that students have to endure, to an embodied ritual that has the potential to effect a transformation.

Through affect theory and in turn, sensory and embodied knowledge, I have asked how an affective approach to critique has the capacity to align the undergraduate classroom art critique with the historical notion of *aesthesis*, and create a space to communicate, understand, and experience the senses and feeling in art.

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