

**Thesis**

**Group Critique – Facilitating an alternative framework**

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## Introduction

This thesis is my final work for the MA program Education in Arts at the Piet Zwart institute (PZi) in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. With this thesis I am proposing an alternative space for art education at the Willem de Kooning Academy (WdKA) using Group Critiques (GCs) as method and a space where art education can change its focus from a more traditional object-based approach to placing the focal point on the students themselves in order to empower them and, by that, to give them the necessary tools to learn and grow in their own ways.

My research is based on third year Fine Art students from the WdKA and has been taking place during the last three years. What I am proposing is a framework in which the figures of the *teacher* and the *student* can change into becoming *peers* as GC participants. I am not going to talk about art making specifically, although within the context of an art academy it will be constantly implied and the examples I will give have to do with the art making process. Instead, I will try to show the importance of focusing art education on the maker rather than on the work. The idea behind this approach is to move art education to a different space than the use of the atelier or the following of classes, to a place where the students are empowered to be able to decide by themselves what it is that they need. And, also, how the teacher, after becoming a moderator and a peer, can help them achieve that. This is not an easy road to follow, so I will explain some of the problems that GCs can have, as well as trying to offer some possible approaches and solutions to those issues. Critiques do not have a fixed structure, so what I am writing here is not a user manual or a set of fixed instructions, nor a way of changing art education in its entirety. I will however describe what works and what does not work in GCs, how they are different for every participant, and how can some of the problems that this approach may have can be tackled, always keeping in mind that the goal of education is always to help the student.

I consider Group Critiques to be a vital part of the art education process and the development of any artistic practice. But what are Group Critiques and how can they be used is something that differs depending on who you ask or read. In many cases, GCs are considered as evaluation moments where the students show their work to teachers and classmates and get some sort of feedback from it. However, throughout this thesis I will argue that they are much more than that: GCs are a place and a situation where artistic and personal development occurs. And I will also affirm that GCs are the perfect framework to start discussing the need for a different perspective regarding what teaching is within the context of art education.

I started working on this thesis with what I considered to be a relatively clear and simple research question: *what is the role of the teacher within the context of Group Critique?* But as J. Halberstam writes in the introduction to her book *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011, p. 12), to begin an ethnographic research project with a goal and object of research, blocks one's ability to learn something that exceeds the frameworks which one enters.<sup>1</sup> Instead, she suggests to resist this impulse by investing in counterintuitive modes of knowledge such as *failure* and *stupidity*: failure as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing, as an opposite to the capitalist connection between success and profit and the idea of *mastery*; and stupidity as a way to inhabit structures of knowledge. For this, she proposes conversation, as opposed to mastery,

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<sup>1</sup> HALBERSTAM, J. (2011). *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press

<sup>2</sup> ELKINS, J. (2001) *Why Art Cannot Be Taught: a Handbook for Art Students*.

as a way of relating to the other without seeking to measure that other by external standards; and to privilege the naïve or nonsensical, the ignorant, as something that may lead to a different sense of knowledge practices. Learning, she adds, is a two-way street and one cannot teach without a dialogic relation to the learner (Halberstam, 2011, p.11, 12, 13).

It is in this sense that this thesis is a personal journey that involves vulnerability, communication, trust, openness, respect, failure and time. Each critique is different, so it is impossible to give one fixed set of rules on how to approach or use them. Instead, they are a place where one will get lost as in a situationist *dérive* (Debord, 1958), where not knowing is very important because it opens up the space for, as Halberstam writes, “the unplanned, the unexpected, the improvised, and the surprising” (Halberstam, 2011, p.16); and that gives the possibility of having alternative realms besides what happens in academia that can lead to more cooperative ways of being in the world.

Having these notions in mind as starting point, for the literature review I will start by analyzing the book *Why Art Cannot Be Taught* by James Elkins.<sup>2</sup> With this book as base, I will explain the history and uses of critiques and I will offer an alternative to the method he proposes. In order to outline that alternative, I will also describe the DasArts method of giving feedback and my own action research combined with two other books, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* by Jacques Rancière<sup>3</sup> and *Support Structures* by Céline Condorelli.<sup>4</sup>

One of the aims of this thesis is to try to explain the reasons why I conclude that GCs work much better when the students and the teachers become peers, thus breaking the teacher-student binary, based on the development of a relationship of trust among all critique participants. I am trying to look for an alternative regarding what seems to be the current trend in education in the Netherlands, where quantifiable results appear to be the main objective. It is a struggle to think of education without falling into, for example, grading or mandatory classes. In that sense, the idea of GCs is to offer another kind of space, one where the students can choose to use instead of being forced to follow it, and where they can grow without judgments. This goes against the system in the Netherlands (and Europe in general) where grades lead to the necessary ECTS to be able to, for example, follow an MA program after finishing a BA.

As well as writing this thesis, I have developed an Educational Project (EP) together with six former GC participants from the WdKA. In it, they wrote their ideas regarding GCs with the aim of giving future participants different strategies on how to use GCs: they explain in their own way how to use this framework to their advantage in order to continue learning and growing. My intention is to give this EP to future GC participants so they can read them, draw their own conclusions and come up with questions and strategies that would match their urgencies.

For this thesis, and due to the nature of Group Critiques, I used naturalistic, ethnographic and action research, with elements of experimental and participatory research as explained by Hennie Boeije in her book *Analysis in Qualitative Research*

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<sup>2</sup> ELKINS, J. (2001) *Why Art Cannot Be Taught: a Handbook for Art Students*. University of Illinois Press.

<sup>3</sup> RANCIERE, J. (1991) *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> CONDORELLI, C., WADE, G. and LANGDON, J. (2009) *Support Structures*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.

(2010). Action research allowed me to try new ways of structuring GCs that would draw conclusions from past experiences, and address what works and what does not work due to its cyclic character, giving me the chance to refine and improve the processes we went through in each session in order to use these findings during the next critiques. Its elements (work on the participants' problems, improvement of my own practice, collaboration, participation, and the need for reflection) within the action research cycle of planning, act, research and evaluation were the perfect context for my own research and, at the same time, development of the GC framework. I have also used participant observation recorded on field notes for the different GC experiments, and changes of settings and formats. Additionally, I have asked the students for feedback and I have encouraged them to continue using peer feedback during all these stages.

By extension, both this thesis and the Educational Project are also for teachers to read and to see if there is anything that could be useful to add to their practices. In spite of all the problems that art education faces nowadays, from funding cuts to lack of time to overcrowded classrooms, etc., it is important to remember that the goal of education is always the students. I think everybody involved in art education should put themselves in the situation of the students, try to see what their needs are and, from there, to look for alternatives in order to find the best way of helping them.

## Mitch

In the first half of 2014 I was moderating Group Critiques with third year fine arts students at the Willem de Kooning Academy in the Netherlands. The meetings were taking place weekly, in the late afternoon and early evenings on Mondays at the external atelier that the academy had and the group consisted of regular WdKA students and exchange students from several schools around the world.

The GC sessions consisted of three presentations per evening plus one back up just in case one of the presenters could not make it for whatever reason. We would meet at five in the afternoon and have dinner together, everybody bringing something to eat and drink to share with the rest. So the structure I thought of was to have dinner plus one presentation, a short break to smoke, and then two more presentations. Each presentation would be as long as each student needed to, but the idea was to have about 10 minutes for the presentation and 20 for questions & answers. The reason behind this was to try to stick to the two hours of the contract I had at the time. So 30 minutes dinner at the beginning and three times more or less 30 minutes presentations, plus a break in between.

Delftseplein, that was the name of the atelier, was a white rectangular building, almost a soviet-like. Built in the 1950s, nowadays it is an office building that has a big rectangular open space at its center. That rectangle, of roughly twenty five by ten meters, is covered with windows on the longer sides to let the light in in a very Dutch fashion. GCs were held on that rectangular space, with a view of the Rotterdam central train station.

Importantly, as it turned out, it was a non-smoking building, but most of us were smokers. Having to go downstairs and outside to smoke was somewhat of a problem, as it would disrupt the dynamics of the group, as it would kill the mood of the presentations. It was the only moment in those two hours that we could feel that something alien was cutting in half what we were doing, and this was a problem. So after a couple of months of going out to smoke downstairs we made an agreement with the non-smokers: we would use one of the windows of the atelier to smoke, and we would take turns, in pairs, to smoke there while the presentations were taking place. This way we did not need a break at all, as people did not need to leave, and the window was next to the dinner space and couch area that we used as main place for the presentations. It was not the only space where the presentations took place, as the atelier was big and most students usually presented in their own space within it, but it was the place where we would normally gather and have dinner.

After we realized that the start of the semester and these sort of gatherings were making the atelier very dirty and disgusting to be at, we came up with a couple of rules, some given by me due to my position as their 'teacher', and some that we came up with together, to be able to continue being there in the best possible way. Besides the necessary we-should-all-clean-everything-after-we-are-done-because-if-not-tomorrow-this-will-smell-pretty-awful, one of the rules was that each 'student' would have to present at least twice in the course of the semester. What were they going to present? That was up to the presenter. How was that going to be presented? Also up to the presenter. When to present? Yes, up to the presenter as well. We agreed on the fact that they were completely free to do whatever they wanted as long as it would help them continue developing their artistic practice.

One day, one of the regular WdKA students, Mitch, was going to present for the first time. Mitch was, and still is, very quiet, and prefers to speak Dutch to English,

something that is problematic in an international setting where most people speak English. He is also a writer, something he does also in Dutch. So I was curious as to what he would do for his presentation.

We had dinner and one of the presentations took place in the student's space. Mitch was going to be presenting next and he told us to go to the couch area. We all did sit down and I remember that I went for a smoke next to the window together with someone else.

When I sat down on the windowsill I noticed that something was there, something that did not belong. It was a piece of wood of approximately 20 centimeters by 20 centimeters and with a thickness of around 2,5 centimeters. There were three nails roughly 7 centimeters long each nailed to it forming a triangle of more or less 10 centimeters each side. In the center of the triangle there was a copper coin glued to the wood. On top of the nails, loose, as I found out really quickly, there was a circular magnifying glass. The whole object was placed diagonally on the windowsill, supported by the column next to the window and the window itself. Mitch decided to make an object.

I picked it up and as soon as I did the magnifying glass fell off. I thought I had broken it and looked around only to find Mitch smiling, looking back at me. I smiled back, looked at the object and passed it around. Very soon everybody was already talking about it and wanted to hold it. We all did. We asked questions about it and he answered some of them, shortly and always in English, and we all talked about the object and about him. The conversation took us into discussing what art is, what objects are, what is their function and what are they meant to be and trigger in us, the need for objects in art, what an artist is, can be, is supposed to be, whether or not he wanted to be an artist (he did not), whether or not he was an artist already (he was) and how many of us, having studied art or still doing so, wanted to become artists at some point (out of the more or less twenty people that were there only three wanted to be artists and just one said that she was an artist already). His critique lasted for more than two hours, and the whole GC session that day lasted almost six. We ended up having cheap beers all together in the studio until way past eleven in the night.

## Elkins' Group Critique – history, uses and analysis

After giving a comprehensive account on the history of art teaching throughout history in his book *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*, James Elkins explains that critiques are descended from the Romantic master classes. Back then, with the exception of some Renaissance competitions where the audience was encouraged to participate in describing and judging the works they were seeing, most art was judged in private by people trained in art classes. Those works were ranked and the ones considered best were placed in easels to be used in future drawing classes. The purpose of critiques was to avoid these unexplained and non-appealable rankings given by the masters or teachers, which were the norm throughout the Baroque. Today critiques are still in force, and they take the place of final exams in art classes (Elkins, 2001, p.111).

According to him, there is no way of knowing when things go wrong or well in GCs, as opposite to tests where results can be quantified, and he adds that GCs never make sense and there is no good way to judge when a critique is a success. Throughout his book, Elkins bases his views on the fact that he is an art teacher and it is the teacher who carries the weight of being 'right'. This is the way most GCs work nowadays: the figure of the teacher is the one that remains central and it is the work made by the student what is judged. But he also states that critiques are impossible to understand and gives several reasons to explain why:

- No one knows what an art critique is* because there is no good definition of what an art critique is: no model, no history and no guide.
- Critiques are too short.*
- Critiques drift from topic to topic.*
- Teachers make their own artworks, different from the students'.*
- Teachers make idiosyncratic pronouncements* when they judge the works.
- Critiques are like seductions, full of emotional outbursts.*
- Critiques are like bad translations* as students and teachers do not speak the same language.
- Teachers waste time giving technical advice* and that whilst technique and meaning are entangled, the trick is to learn to listen properly to be able to hear where each of them influences one another.
- Some teachers are more prone to pass judgment and others are more descriptive, trying to translate the work into words*, adding that both concepts, in practice, are always mixed.
- The student's presence can be confusing* as the teacher has to decide how to look at the work, either by the reconstructed intention implied by the works, the persona implied by the artist's appearance, and the explanation that the student offers, arguing that the student would be best off refraining from talking at all.
- Artworks are usually unoriginal*, saying that there will always be some lag between the students' work and the avant-garde, and adding that if the teachers finds something genuinely new, they will not recognize it and they will usually dislike it; and that if the teachers really like a work, they will try to make it themselves.

But what would happen if the student would be the most important part of critiques instead of the work? Is it possible to have a *personal* framework? Here, the student is needed in order to be able to think about the purpose and the outcome of a GC. Issues like the structure or the length of a GC can be quite easily solved by

asking the students to organize the critique themselves based on what they need, want, or are looking for from that specific GC.

This is where being a moderator instead of a teacher shows its importance. A moderator who is a peer that can acknowledge the needs of the students to the point that this moderator becomes one of the students for the moment the presentation takes place. It is not a matter of quantifying a result regarding what is 'objectively good' because that is impossible to agree upon (what is 'good' for me may be 'good' for you, but it may also be 'absolutely uninteresting', 'bad', or 'meaningless'). My point is that the idea behind GCs is for all the participants to grow and develop: the presenter by further developing their art, and the audience by learning about what is being presented and keeping what they consider important. This is not a literal exchange where something from person A goes into person B and stays there but, instead, it is a way of gaining and sharing experiences.

Changing both the position of the teacher (to moderator and peer) and the interest behind the critique (from the work made to the maker of the work) is a possible way to stop judgment, and it also allows all participants to engage in the conversation. It allows everyone to be equally empowered during the moment of critique, granting the opportunity to be able to be and act in a safe environment where, instead of judgment, exchange occurs. But at the same time this can also lead to problems, such as moments where the teacher who became moderator and peer has to go back to being a teacher in order to solve a specific issue. Here one has to consider that knowledge of psychology is an important tool for critiques in order to deal with the personal issues of the different individuals. I will talk more about the process of this changing in position, from teacher to moderator and peer, in the *Trust* and the *Problems* section of this thesis.

That shift in position is what I am proposing in this thesis. Here, notions as 'Narratorship (talking art)' as defined by Wright can come in handy:

*Isn't it invariably more stimulating to hear artist present their work than to have to go and look at their exhibitions? [...] One might then contend that in the case of off-the-radar practices, talking art [...] is a means of activating a proposition as art. Narratorship as a mode of using art seems to point the way thorough overhaul of how art is apprehended, and where it takes place.<sup>5</sup>*

It is very difficult, if not impossible, not to put oneself in front of one's own opinion. One speaks from one's own position, knowledge and values, but it can be valuable to try to place oneself outside of that position as well. When I was studying my BA, a teacher once told me that inevitably he always carries with him his own set of values from which he can look at a work. But does this, on its own, help the student? He did not think so. What he tried to do instead was to place himself in the position of the student and to look at the work from there, and only then to try to establish what does and does not work, what could be better, etc. Afterwards he would go back to his own place, himself with his ideas and values, and try to combine both positions in order to try to help the student develop. I consider this an approach that comes very close to the idea behind GCs as it does intend to help while placing the student first, and at the same time acknowledging one's own position.

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<sup>5</sup> WRIGHT, S. and AIKENS, N. (2013) *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*. Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum.

After moderating and researching GCs for over two years, I agree with some of the issues Elkins raises (for example the constant lack of time and the need for a descriptive approach) and one of the main issues regarding GCs, which is the fact that there is no model, no history and no guide to follow. But the biggest problem I have with the critiques Elkins proposes is that at no point he seems to be trying to help the students. In general, Elkins starts from a position of quantification: it is impossible to teach art because it is impossible to know what makes a successful artist. As the author writes, “out of a thousand art students, maybe five will make a living off their art, and perhaps one will be known outside her city” (Elkins, 2001, p.67).

To conclude, the author does say that it makes no sense to try to understand how to teach art and, because of that, to try to understand how Group Critiques work, because they work out of the principle of not being understood. It is not that he says that GCs do not work, but that we as teachers cannot know what kind of result we will get out of them. But what he means as result is to have successful, famous artists coming out of art schools. GCs do not aim for that result. GCs aim for the development of the student practice regardless of fame and success. The aim is to learn.

## DasArts method

In that sense, GCs are closer to the DasArts method.<sup>6</sup> This method, as presented by transformative thinking philosopher Karim Benammar in the Gothenburg Dance and Theater festival in 2012, is a very structured way of approaching giving and receiving feedback while working in groups. It is used at the DasArts Master of Theater in Amsterdam with the intention of helping the student develop their work.

In spite of its fixed set of rules, which includes several steps during a period of ninety minutes per work presented, I do think that DasArts is much closer to the ideas I propose for GCs. There is a structure in which to work, and there are also different roles that are played by the participants: the presenter, the group, and the moderator.

The presenter asks two questions, presents the work, and then has a break while everybody speaks about it. The group gives feedback and they are the ones with the most active role throughout the whole session. Benammar explains that, at first, when the method is just implemented, all the members will try to talk and contribute, but eventually they will realize that maybe the best contribution is silence. The moderator or facilitator makes the whole structure possible. They have the task of staying within the time frame limit and to try to keep everybody focused, and they are in charge of writing the key words and the core of the concepts that come up out of the group during the session. At the same time, they also have to be emotionally involved with the group and the session so they are able to stop anyone who may be doing something 'wrong'. The intention of the method is to make the teacher teach people how to be their own filter, instead of the teacher having to do that; and whilst empowering everybody in the group, to be disempowered as teacher by the direct response of an audience, the group. The idea, then, is to have no hierarchies. This way the group would be able to give the presenter feedback regarding the work in a respectful way, balancing personal approaches to the work with more 'objective' views to be able to go through many of the different aspects that the work could present to the audience.

There are some key differences between DasArts and GCs. One of them is the fact that the moderator is always one of the teachers and they are in charge of making the situation work for everybody; whilst at the WdKA the idea is to eventually let the group moderate itself, changing this specific role depending on the needs of the presenter in each GC. Another difference is that the DasArts method only functions if work is presented. But many times during GCs no work will be shown but instead an idea, a question, or a possible path to follow, that does not necessarily has to do with making art (although in most cases it is) but that it is more related to the students themselves and whatever it is they are going through at the moment. GCs occur in an art context and the presenters are art students, but that does not necessarily mean that the presentation will be a work of art.

Having said that, a structure like the DasArts method can help some students present, and can help the group respond to whatever is presented and add to the discussion of what is happening both during the GC and also afterwards. In this sense, using the DasArts method for some specific critiques can be very beneficial for all parts. I will talk more extensively about this in the *Trust* and *Support structure* sections of this thesis.

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<sup>6</sup> VIMEO. (2014) *A Film About Feedback*. [Online] Available from <https://vimeo.com/97319636> [Accessed: 14th January 2016]

## Ignorance

Group Critiques at the Willem de Kooning Academy are, to draw a comparison with Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, moments of emancipated ignorance where the teacher does not know more or less than the students, the teacher knows different. This starting position has clear consequences on the function, aim, development and results of GCs.

In her introduction to *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), Kristin Ross, professor of comparative literature at the New York University known for her work on French literature of the 19th and 20th century, juxtaposes two ideas regarding what teaching is. She first quotes Louis Althusser who in 1964 wrote that the function of teaching is to transmit knowledge to subjects who do not have it, this being a condition of complete inequality between knowledge and non-knowledge. Ross continues with Rancière's reaction to that idea and she writes that if theory forms an enclave of freedom in a world of ideological enslavement, then the only way for students to criticize their masters is to become their peers.

To Rancière, Ross states, the educational theories of Bourdieu, Althusser and Milner are a lesson in inequality. The poor stay in their place, the teacher and the student and the worker remain separated; but this separation is fake because all people are equally intelligent and "knowledge is not necessary to teaching nor explanation is necessary to learning. 'Explanation', he writes, 'is the myth of pedagogy'" (Ross, 1991, p.xix). Rancière writes that because he states that we are all equally intelligent, which means that we can all learn if we want to learn, and that we do not need someone explaining whatever it is we would like to study, but rather what we do is to tell each other stories regarding what we want to learn.

So instead of explanation there is storytelling, narration. Mitch sat down, waited, at first almost did not speak, he let the object do that for him. We all started assuming different meanings, we all made our own links towards the work. We then asked, and Mitch answered. He said he could not really speak English, but he still tried and we all helped if translation was necessary. It was a moment where we started with an object, continued with questions about it that eventually lead to questions regarding art practices, studying art, making art, being an artist, and not being an artist. And that was different for each of us because we were all different. We were all learning a new language by translating one unknown to us: Mitch's. So in this case it was Mitch who wanted to make a particular use of the language, our intelligence translating what he was (and was not) saying to our own equivalent.

Mitch never explained what the object was; he left it there for us to make up our own minds regarding it. We wanted to know more about the object and about him, we wanted to learn, so we asked questions about it, but there was not much to know from it. What we did get were more questions that we could carry with us to continue developing our practices.

But of course for all of this to happen there had to be a framework in place. The students learned without a 'master explicator', but not without a 'master' (Rancière, 1991, p.12). So yes, at the very beginning the context of GCs are a class situation, an art class to be precise, where the students come in and expect to learn from the teacher. But it is this notion that can and should be changed: do not expect to learn from your teachers because they do not know more than you, then know different than you. Once this happens (the intelligence of the student not obeying the intelligence of

the teacher but rather both intelligences obeying only themselves) then emancipation happens (Rancière, 1991, p.13).

So clearly within the framework of GCs my role as a teacher eventually disappears. I am not there to deliver knowledge, plainly because I do not know what is going to happen in each GC. In order for that situation to work, all of us have to be emancipated. “What do you see? What do you think about? What do you make of it? And so on, to infinity. But that infinity is no longer the master’s secret, it is the student’s journey” (Rancière, 1991, p.23). It is up to the student to learn, it is their intelligence the one that will lead them towards knowing.

Based on this, the emancipated student can emancipate others, and that emancipation will lead to a consciousness of equality, and this can only be done on an individual bases (Rancière, 1991, p.39). This is why GCs are aimed at individuals learning within a group context. The group itself will not emancipate its participants, but each of us will. That is part of the role I have, at first, when I am introduced as a teacher but I explain that I will not be their teacher but a moderator, and that my intention is that we can all become peers, emancipated people.

So what is, then, my role within this situation? My role is, at the beginning, to generate this framework. My role is, afterwards, to moderate these moments so that the students can participate in this context, so that they take part in the questioning, in the critique, in the group to which they want to belong to, and that they apply themselves to this idea. My role, then, is to be their peer. This can only happen when there is a relationship of trust among all parts.

## Trust

From the very beginning, if the person who starts as a teacher in front of the class wants to become a peer, then s/he should state the reasons behind that decision. This openness will most likely lead to openness from the students, and will generate a dialogue where all parts can discuss the pros and cons of such a decision. Such shift should be stated from the start, but it will take time for it to actually happen. Because having an art practice is a very personal activity and each participant will have their own individual trajectory in order to achieve it, it is in the interest of all parts to be able to talk and express their ideas as freely as possible. That way each person will be able to learn from one another in an open and respectful environment. If each participant expects respect from the rest of the group, all parts will be aware that each of them is expecting that as well, and this will create a safe atmosphere. This respect will lead to openness that, at the same time, will make everybody very vulnerable, and it is this vulnerability by all parts that will allow learning and growing to happen. These actions have to be done first by the teacher, because at the start of a series of GCs it is the teacher who is in charge, the one who generates the space, the situation and the framework for the critiques to happen. This is a complicated process that can lead to problems, of course, something that I will explain further in the chapter *Problems* of this thesis, but it is also the only way that GCs as an alternative space for learning can work.

What I am proposing is not flawless nor is it a fixed method but, instead, a different approach to art education. A successful GC, to me, is when the presenters can get an answer to the questions they are asking, but more importantly, when they also get new questions. For this to happen, all the participants should be committed and involved in the critique.

Communication is vital for GCs. It is the way all participants will get critique and feedback regarding their work, ideas, presentations, etc. Although some participants prefer to have a dialogue in order to get answers, some others will ask the rest of the participants to, for example, write down their thoughts. This is the reason why it is very important that the students decide in advance what would they like to get from the critique: what kind of critique they want to have, how will they present, what kind of feedback they want, what specific questions will the presenter ask in order to get that information, etc. These elements will change per critique, but in all cases, some pre-established conventions are developed throughout all the sessions:

- As a presenter, it is important ask specific questions to be able to get specific feedback.
- It is essential to be open to new ideas. This way the participants will be able to get to know things that they probably have not thought of.
- It is very important to let all the participants talk. This way, everyone can get to know new ideas and opinions. In order to do this, all the people taking part should feel safe to speak, included and have a feeling of belonging in the group.
- Always be respectful of your peers.

For all of this to happen, and GCs to work, it is very important to establish a relationship of trust between all parts. At first, it is the teachers' responsibility to trigger this trust because they are the ones who start in front of the class. This may bring up some problems, because this approach requires a lot of time and, like every method, it does not work with everybody. In order to build up trust, openness in communication from the start is important. This is something that can also be seen in

the DasArts model, although it is put into practice in a different way because of the difference in context. This openness puts the teacher in a vulnerable position. I have mentioned before that a position of knowing different instead of more is a good way of setting GCs, but at the same time it does mean admitting that in spite of being a teacher there are things I do not know. This is very logical, of course, but it is also problematic when a student is expecting the teacher to know everything and to always be right. This is where failure, with a negative connotation, also takes place within GCs: none of the participants can know everything, and things can always go wrong.<sup>7</sup> But still, this also gives room to a positive approach to failing: an approach where instead of disappointment and despair, it also provides an opportunity to use these effects as opposed to what Halberstam calls “the toxic positivity of contemporary life” (Halberstam, 2011, p.3).

All these elements combine with one more, which is time. Spending time with the students both individually and in groups, getting to know them, talking and listening to them and their situation both inside and outside of the academy, being able to know not only their work but how that connects with their own personal situation outside of the academy, gaining their trust and knowing that they will do for you as much as you have done for them is so far the best way I have found to get the most out of what I think GCs are for. In this sense I oppose a more traditional approach to critiques, like the one Elkins describes, in which a panel of teachers will see the work of a student for the first and probably only time, and judge it in the context of an evaluation. In order to avoid this, there is the need of regular contact between all parts. This is why GCs work best when they happen in regular intervals, preferably once a week, and at roughly the same time of the day each time (see the *Support Structure* section for more information on this). This way, all the participants in GCs get to know each other better, get to help one another more and, by doing so, they learn and grow from this situation, instead of getting into conflict with teachers and waiting for them to judge the end result of their work.

This is very time consuming and it does not work with every student or teacher simply because some of them just do not want this kind of relationship. In my case, I am very aware of the fact that, in order for my practice to be successful and to be able to help students develop their practice, I need to get to know the students personally. This, of course, can be problematic sometimes. Within the academic structure, a teacher is by definition not a student, and in most cases it is only natural that a student expects to learn from the teacher. It does take quite a lot of time for a student to realize that, in actuality, they will learn a lot more from their fellow students than from a teacher (a simple reason for that is that they will spend much more time with their classmates than with the teachers). During GCs I stress the need for everyone participating to be responsible for each other’s development. It is not up to me as a teacher to solve every single one of the issues that may come up. I often tell my students, inside and outside of the GC framework, that it is impossible for me to know or have an answer to everything they ask me, as much as it would be impossible to me to expect the same from them. At best, I may have more experience in some things than they may have, but at the same time, they have a lot more experience in some things that I have no idea of. It is based on this idea that I start to try to break the idea of the teacher-student binary.

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<sup>7</sup> I will go deeper into this idea in the *Problems* section.

## Problems

GCs are problematic as a method. As Elkins concluded by saying that there is not one way of teaching art, there is also not one fixed way of moderating critiques because each of them is different from one another. It has happened that there were critiques where nobody talked, or where the presenter did not prepare anything for their presentation, and trying to have a conversation in such a context can be complicated. Added to this, in critiques it is the participant who decides in advance when to present, so it is really disrupting when no preparation is made. A possible solution to this is to openly explain what consequences, in the short and long term, these actions can have. Not preparing for a presentation means lack of commitment, and commitment is one of the things asked to and from all participants from the very first GC. It is important to talk about these issues because they do affect the whole group and the dynamic of that critique; and also because, if this happens often, it can affect all future critiques, making the building of a trust relationship impossible.

I also would like to add that I am relating this description to my own practice because it is what I have been experiencing for the last years, but of course I know that this does not work for everybody. As much as it is fine for some students to see me outside of the academic context, some other students find this strange and do not feel at all like sharing their private life with 'a teacher'. My role as a GC moderator is different than the one of a friend or an acquaintance or a teacher or a confidant, and separating these moments can be complicated at times. This is precisely the reason why it has to be openly spoken.

One of the most ambitious GCs I have moderated happened in the spring of 2015. I was having critiques with fine arts students of second and third year at the WdKA and we decided to go to TENT, arguably one of the most important art spaces in Rotterdam, where the exhibition *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* was taking place. I arranged to visit the exhibition with students from both years who had never had a GC together, and with two other teachers. The idea was to visit the space, talk to the curator, and then have a discussion regarding it all together. Other than this, nothing was planned. We arrived at the space around 13:00, walked around it for half an hour, took a short break, and then the curator explained his intentions before a Q&A round. Things went wrong pretty fast. The curator decided to talk in very complicated language that the students, afterwards, agreed it was both unnecessary and very difficult to approach. That meant that the Q&A round was really short, and then the round-the-table discussion we had afterwards revolved a lot more on his way of speaking than the exhibition itself. In that conversation the two other teachers were involved as well, one of them a complete stranger to the students as they had never met with him before, which also meant that most of them kept their opinions to themselves. After that conversation we went to a bar. The curator and the teachers had already gone by then, and it was only at that point that most of the students started talking about what they really felt and thought of the exhibition, which were mostly negative comments. This means that they were comfortable with the usual setting of GCs, but once outside of that setting they just did not use the opportunity for making the new context theirs. This is also a problem that needs addressing. GCs are complementary to regular classes, but the ideas behind critiques can be used also during other moments that are not exclusively GC moments. It is here where the idea of having a structure like the one proposed by DasArts can be handy. I consider this moment very important in my research, as it provided me with the notion that GCs

should not always happen in the same context, and this has to be brought up with the group of participants to try to find new alternatives to solve this problem.

Another problem is that many students do not want to have a moderator or a peer; they want a teacher in front of a class. Here I had to ask myself again what seems to be a very simple question, but one that does not have a simple answer: how can I help? Education is about the students, not about the teachers, but sometimes a teacher realizes that s/he cannot help. What I decided was to be open and honest regarding my position saying that unfortunately I could not help them, which to me is heartbreaking, but I did recommend them to talk to other teachers as a possible solution. GCs are only part of the WdKA curriculum, and there is a team of teachers that can suit the needs of students better outside of the GC context. Sometimes, then, the teacher aiming at becoming a moderator and a peer has to stay (or go back to being) a teacher and try help from that position, and from there assess what s/he thinks is the best approach.

Each problem has its specific solution, so they have to be dealt with in an individual way. This is also where learning about psychology becomes really important, both in the group setting and on individual basis. What happens, for example, when a student breaks down during a presentation and starts crying? Teachers from the Fine Arts department, in general, lack psychology training for dealing with these situations. It has happened to me that a student is so involved with their work in such a personal level and has invested so much in the making of their piece that they just cannot talk about it without crying. My approach would be to have an individual talk with that person, but that does not necessarily mean that the issue will be solved. These kinds of situations lead me to what will be one of the next steps of my research: studying different psychological approaches to be able to handle these moments in order to be able to help the student. This will be a long process, but it is something that I consider absolutely necessary for the improvement of my role as a moderator.

It is also important to mention that the idea of having a democracy in GCs does not work. Critiques are not about what the majority wants, but what all parts want. This is also very problematic, but it is something that can be tackled nevertheless. To bring an example, for a series of critiques with ten participants we had to decide on a day and time to meet. We started by saying the days that were impossible for us to meet due to each participant's schedules (Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays). Saturdays quickly became a problem as well, as most of us like to go out that day and do things related to our families and friends. Because we were all aiming at having dinner together as part of the GC setting, that left us with Tuesdays and Thursdays evenings. Everybody could do both days, but for a couple of people Thursdays were complicated, so we all agreed on Tuesdays at dinnertime, with the possibility of using Thursdays as a possible option if needed. Again, this is just an example that I am proposing as a possibility. I am aware of the fact that if the group would have been bigger maybe the solution would have been more complicated to find, but at the same time it does show that it is possible to come up with solutions that are inclusive for everybody.

But maybe the biggest difficulty that this method presents is the time. GCs are a situation that demands trying many different possibilities in order to learn what is the best context for each different setting. It does take months to find out what is the best way of meeting with a specific group, and it requires spending many hours of working with a group in order to build the trust relationship that is so needed. But while GCs take place within the academic context of a Fine Arts Bachelor program, that same

program does not include all the hours needed to develop critiques as a method. Bluntly said, you do not get paid for all the extra time. This may be seen as hindering the possibility of constructing the necessary setting for GCs to happen within the academic context. However this can also be seen as a failure, as explained by Halberstam, and it is this very situation that can be the trigger to new ways of dealing with these issues: to use failure as a tool for finding alternatives.

## Support structure

Starting by their framework, Group Critiques can be seen as a support structure for the further development of future artists within the academic system, something that carries some of the notions postulated by Céline Condorelli in her book *Support Structures*. She writes that support structures (in this case, to me, Group Critiques) represent “a particular way of engaging in and with subjects in a desire towards emancipation” (Condorelli, Wade and Langdon, 2009, p.10).

My action research was based in a series of exercises that we would all follow throughout these three years with the objective of trying to build the best setting for GCs to happen. Throughout my practice as GC moderator I have tried several formats in order to find out what is the best format is, mainly focused on 3<sup>rd</sup> year fine art students and Erasmus exchange students at the WdKA. I conducted GCs on weekly bases in different locations, settings and formats trying to find out what is the best way of giving Group Critique to the students.

In that regard, I have moderated GCs at the WdKA, in the atelier of some students, in open air spaces like the Vroesepark and Museumpark, in the ateliers Delfseplein and Vasteland, in exhibition spaces like TENT and foundation B.a.d, and in the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen. We made art routes and exhibitions consisting of our own works, and we visited exhibitions by other artists to be able to learn new approaches on how to learn and teach art. We also went to different locations in order to test new audiences.

We tried different times of the day to see how that would influence the way GCs happen. We tried all five days of the week starting at 13:00, 15:00 and 17:00, all three options with a meal to share by all. We changed the format of the meetings in length and context, varying the ways of presenting the works and adding new activities that were not part of the GC sessions we had so far. The different ways of presenting included showing work and asking for opinions; presenting process regarding a specific work; showing their work in progress without talking; doing performances, watching films; presenting someone else’s work; and doing experiments with the group as part of their research, including performances, drawings, actions and games. The reasons for all of these presentation forms is that it is the student who decides the way of presenting, and the context of GCs lets the participants try different settings where to show the work. Also, the atmosphere of GCs is relaxed, which allows for exchange of ideas and conversations in a playful way. We also invited people from outside of the GC group to get new insights regarding each other’s practice and looking for new alternatives for the future.

There were also combinations with practical research classes, walks outside through Rotterdam, the common reading of texts, the making of a newspaper, visiting students ateliers outside of the WdKA, and beer critique, where we would get together in the weekend in a park and eat and play games together with the excuse of sharing and rating different beers.

It is important to mention here that GCs are non-mandatory and non-graded moments. Durm (1993), professor of psychology of the University of Athens, argues that, for some students, achieving a higher grade can be seen as more important than acquiring knowledge. He also explains that grades were (and are) used as a way of differentiating students from one another, something that started by separating the students by the position of their families in society and that evolved into different systems combining descriptive adjectives, letters and numbers (Durm, 1993, p. 1).

And he adds that the history of grading, at least in the USA, is replete with trial and error, and asks himself if this is the best that they can accomplish, concluding that probably not.<sup>8</sup> There are a couple of reasons why I think grading in the context of GCs does not work. For starters, if the idea behind critiques is to learn by creating a situation of peers, so differentiation makes no sense. Also, because there are students that do not want to participate in GCs, it would be at the very least unfair, if not downright dishonest, to try to make them mandatory for all students. Having said that, the biggest issue I have with grading is that it leads to judgment and creates an atmosphere of competitiveness that can go in detriment to learning. But, at the same time, I understand the students' need for that extra boost in their chances of continuing studying under the current educational system. Because GCs are not graded, it is very important to be clear regarding the uses of GCs so the student can decide if to participate or not.

After trying all these different settings, locations and activities, and having consulted with GC participants, I have concluded that the best situation for GCs to happen is around dinnertime with food prepared by some of the participants and snacks and drinks brought by the rest, and in a fixed space that every once in a while could change if the presenters want to. The time of the day helps because there are no other classes, so nobody is in a hurry, it is dinnertime and nobody needs to go home in order to eat and food brings people together. Secondly, I have also concluded that my research is not over, and it will never be: my action research is a path that never ends where I try to keep trying to be ready for any possible future scenario. I cannot separate myself from my own practice of moderating GCs because, as method, critiques are a very personal experience.

Instead, critiques should be seen as alternative spaces for learning and growing. Facilitating this alternative framework is extremely important because all participants need to feel safe in order to be able to share their experiences. In the GCs I have moderated during the last years, most students used to talk about the works that they were doing for other classes. How to improve them? How to continue? How to present it to an audience? It was quickly clear that the overwhelming majority of students work from a very personal starting point, but at the same time, they would never explain that personal link in depth to anyone, teachers or students. In many cases, explaining this personal approach to art making was the necessary context for the audience to be able to approach the artwork. It does take time to create a situation where the people would feel comfortable to share and to listen to this kind of experiences. One of the next steps in my research is to learn how to deal with the problems that a personal and intimate moment such as GC can have from a psychological perspective. In that regard, I have already started contacting people who can help me start this new path in my research.

An example of why this framework is so important is a student that came to GCs in the second semester of her third year after being on exchange. She was interested in performance art and rarely spoke during critiques, although she was always present, and she decided that she would make a series of unnoticed performances during the critiques. She told me that in two months she had to do a performance in a museum and she wanted to practice and try something new. What

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<sup>8</sup> INDIANA UNIVERSITY BLOOMINGTON. (1993) *An A Is Not An A Is Not An A: A History Of Grading*. [Online] Available from [http://www.indiana.edu/~educy520/sec6342/week\\_07/durm93.pdf](http://www.indiana.edu/~educy520/sec6342/week_07/durm93.pdf) [Accessed: 5th May 2016].

she decided was to do a very short, maximum two minutes, almost invisible series of performances in which she would do something completely mundane, but out of context for an atelier situation, for six weeks in a row. She brushed her teeth, she greeted some of the participants in a bit of an exaggerated manner, she walked around the main table of the atelier two or three times, casually, before sitting down for the critique and some other actions like that. On week six, the day of the exaggerated greeting, she had her presentation. She explained what had happened throughout the last weeks, and discussed her reflections of each action with everybody as a conversation and, also, brought pen and papers so the participants could write what they saw, their thoughts and what improvements could be made in the future. The reactions were that some people had noticed her doing things that were different than her normal way of behaving but not every week; some participants had not noticed anything at all, and some others were uncomfortable with some of the actions. She herself was satisfied with the fact that she could pull off her a series of performances, and that helped her overcome some of the fears she had regarding the performance she had to do at the museum. This kind of presentation would have not taken place if the framework of GC would not exist.

This very personal experience with GCs is why, for my Educational Project (EP), and as part of my research, I asked some former students to try to define Group Critiques and, through all those definitions, to attempt to answer what GCs are, what is the best way of conducting them and what is our role in the GC context. They answered that Group Critiques are an opportunity, an interview, a game, a way of introducing something new to someone, a vital part to continue growing as an artist and a cooking recipe. These six ideas of GC confirm, yet again, that critiques cannot be defined or understood and they have no fixed model or guide, but that they do offer a support structure where, in a situation of ignorance, and as peers, we can all learn and grow.

## Self-reflection

The making of this thesis has not been easy. Besides my own struggles with the negativity of my own starting position during the process of writing this thesis in itself, there was the combination of such a personal practice as my own together with the theory I touched upon, and my willingness to explain all these elements in an uncomplicated language to future GC participants and teachers that may find some of them interesting for their own practice.

Group Critiques are a complicated method, yes, but they make sense in the context of Rancière, where the aim is to grow, develop, challenge, learn, to remain humble and to continue to do what is intended to do in education: to think of the student first. Thanks to my research I can conclude that as teachers we should focus on the students, not only on the work they make, and maybe that way art can continue to teach and be taught without having to worry about any form of success other than that development. This means that I as a teacher have a lot to lose, and that is a complicated situation to be in; but this, at the same time, denotes the vulnerability needed for GCs to work. As a GC moderator sometimes I have been at the limit of what I can give, and that is also something that cannot be pinpointed as a specific line in the sand, but I have found myself exhausted because of the emotional involvement that critiques have, and the long trajectory that going from teacher to moderator and peer require. I know that the method that I am proposing and trying to sketch in this thesis is not for every teacher, either because of the time, the involvement, the vulnerability, etc., but I also know that GCs as an alternative space are necessary for the development of the students both as artists and as people. Critiques provide a safe space of empowerment, and that is something invaluable for any practice, and for any life, but they also involve the risks that all these variable elements entail.

Having said that, I still think that GCs are the perfect place to fail in the way Halberstam proposes: as the opposite of the capitalist success of accumulation. We tend to forget that failing is important, that from failure we can learn, and that we should embrace this notion of failure in order to continue searching and experimenting. As I tried to explain with this thesis, GCs can be the perfect place for this change of paradigm to happen. I have tried to write some guidelines that have helped me throughout my practice, things that went well and things that did not, but still I conclude that this space is necessary as a way of mirroring what the art academy as it is today has to offer, and how it can be changed for the benefit for the students.

The challenge for me now for is to be able to remain vulnerable and to be open from the very start, while I am still a teacher in front of students all the way until the situation of becoming peers occurs. In that sense I have tried to read literature that would help me with my practice as GC moderator. I thought that I would agree with Elkins and that I would disagree with Rancière, but the opposite happened. Their ideas, together with the DasArts method, can be helpful to continue developing GCs as alternative spaces for art education. Condorelli gave me a very good metaphor for GCs from the very start by publishing pictures of Italian scaffoldings, and moving into the terrain of being friends as a starting position for learning. And Halberstam, introduced to me by my dear friend and sister Mariana Fernandes, whom I met thanks to this MA, is the next step into getting to know more about how to fail. I think that to describe the idea behind GCs and behind my own practice, I can quote Halberstam when she writes *I believe in making a difference by thinking little thoughts and sharing them widely. I seek to provoke, annoy, bother, irritate, and amuse; I am*

*chasing small projects, micropolitics, hunches, whims, fancies* (Halberstam, 2011, p.21). I still have a lot to learn, a lot to read, a lot to do, and I hope I am be able to.

Thanks to combining my research with the literature I have read, I discovered that GCs are a framework that works as a support structure that is constantly changing, adapting to the needs of all the participants, in order for all of us to keep on learning starting from the humble position of being ignorant peers helping one another. Because of all this I can say now that, in the context of GCs, we can all help each other take part in this alternative framework to keep on learning, growing and developing, and that for this to happen the figures of the teacher and the student should be made redundant.

## Conclusion

This thesis presents Group Critiques as an alternative space and a method for art education, moving away from a more traditional object-based approach to placing the focus on the students in order to empower them. GCs are a place and a situation where artistic and personal development occurs, and the perfect framework to start discussing the need for a different perspective regarding what teaching is. To do this, teachers and students should become peers, starting by the teacher shifting position towards becoming a moderator, keeping in mind that the goal of education is always to help the student.

This thesis is a personal journey that involves vulnerability, communication, trust, openness, respect, failure and time, based on the literature review I have presented and my action research conducted during the last three years. These elements combined allowed me to try new ways of structuring GCs in order to draw conclusions from past experiences, giving me the chance to refine and improve the processes we went through in each session, incorporate students' feedback, and use these findings during the next critiques.

Considering my findings, I have concluded that the most suitable scenario for GCs so far is for them to happen around dinnertime with food prepared by some of the participants and snacks and drinks brought by the rest, thus creating a peer group atmosphere, and in a fixed space that every once in a while should change if the presenters want to. This also aims at the commitment that all participants should have to make this space possible. Because of the flexible structure of GCs, this commitment can be very time consuming as sessions can last from two to six hours depending on how they are set, and this is something that does not work with every student or teacher. GCs can be problematic, but facilitating this alternative framework, with all its different elements, is extremely important so all participants can feel safe in order to share their experiences. As I said, it does take time to be able to create this situation, but the examples I gave of Mitch and the student with her series of performances prove that this sort of space is necessary.

The critiques' structure is open, but at first, from the position of the teacher, I propose rules that are set up together with all participants to give parameters to the sessions. Three presentations per session during a timeframe of roughly two hours, how to take care of the place the critique will be held, and how to be respectful, non-offensive and constructive-criticism oriented towards one another during the presentations. Besides that, where, what, how and when to present is completely up to the students presenting, based on their own needs. This setting allows all participants to not only to talk about the presented artwork, but it also gives room to a broader questioning that can include what art is, what art objects are, what is their function, what are they meant to be and trigger in us, what an artist is, can be, or is supposed to be, among many other ideas.

Changing both the position of the teacher (to moderator and peer) and the interest behind the critique (from the work made to the maker of the work) is a possible way to go into dialogue instead of judgment, and at the same time also allowing all participants to engage in the conversation from the same starting position. Acknowledging the needs of the student, being able to see the work made through their eyes and, only then, adding one's own values and ideas to the ones presented, is a way of helping the student learn and grow from a different perspective than the one already given in art education. This is where being a moderator instead of a teacher

shows its importance, because acknowledging the needs of the students leads to this moderator becoming one of the students for the moment the presentation takes place.

Group Critiques at the WdKA are, to draw a comparison with Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, moments of emancipated ignorance where the teacher does not know more or less than the students, the teacher knows different. At the very beginning, the context of GCs is a class situation where the students come in and expect to learn from the teacher. But this notion can and should be changed: do not expect to learn only from your teachers because they do not know more than you, then know different than you. This is evidence that within the framework of GCs my role as a teacher, in the end, disappears.

So what is my role within this situation? My role is, at the beginning, to generate this framework. My role is, afterwards, to moderate these moments so that the students can participate in this context and that they can apply this idea to themselves. My role, then, is to be their peer. The fact that GCs are not mandatory allows my role to shift in a fluid way, as it reduces expectations or pressure regarding grades that can go in detriment of learning in this context. GCs are complementary to regular classes, but the ideas behind critiques can be used also during other moments as well.

What I am proposing, then, is not flawless nor is it a fixed method. It is, instead, a different approach to art education. That is why I have also concluded that my research is not over, and it will never be. I do not aim at a perfect method, but what I am proposing is an approach that has the ability to morph and adapt to the students needs.

As this is a very personal method to approach, as part of my research I have also asked six former GC participants to write their own experiences regarding GCs to be read by students who would like to use GCs as part of their development. They wrote six different ways of explaining how to use this framework to their advantage in order to continue learning and growing. This has become the Educational Project that accompanies this thesis. These answers prove the importance of GCs, the relevance of such a space and the impact it has had on (former) students.

Both the thesis and Educational Project are for students to read, but they are also written for teachers. I want to emphasize the importance of looking at education in a way that it can adapt and transform itself according to the students' needs and, from there, to look for alternatives in order to find the best way to continue helping them.

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## Appendix – Photos



Group reading at the Museumpark, Rotterdam



Dinner is served



Group Critique at TENT, Rotterdam



Beer Critique

## Educational Project

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## Introduction

by Juan Beladrich

This Educational Project (EP) started as part of my research regarding Group Critiques (GCs) at the Willem de Kooning Academy (WdKA) and how can they be used as an alternative space within the art education institution context for students to gain new tools in order to grow and learn.

As a first step, I gave all GC participants, twenty-four in total, two questionnaires asking them to give me their opinions regarding what we were doing, my role as moderator, their expectations and their ideas for future critiques. For this EP, I asked six of those participants to write a text for students that would like to join GCs in the future where they could explain in their own way what Group Critiques are, and to give tips on how to use them in order to continue developing their practice both inside and outside of the Willem de Kooning setting.

The original idea came from my willingness to know more about the participants' ideas regarding GCs, how to improve them taking each of their needs into consideration, and also in order to know more about my own position and my role which within this setting. But as my research developed, both my own practice as a GC moderator and the literature that I used for my thesis helped me discover much more than that. Based on, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* by Jacques Rancière, *Support Structures* by Céline Condorelli, *Why Art Cannot Be Taught* by James Elkins and *The Queer Art of Failure* by Judith Halberstam, I could re-formulate the ideas behind Group Critiques. In their own different ways, these books helped me reflect on a very intuitive practice giving me new ideas and frameworks that could be used within GCs, and at the same time providing words that I could use to address future participants.

To quote Halberstam while she talks about Rancière, “while the ‘good’ teacher leads his students along pathways of rationality, the ‘ignorant schoolmaster’ must actually allow them to get lost in order for them to experience confusion and then find their own way out or back or around”.<sup>9</sup> She states that education and social transformation are mutually dependent. I see Group Critiques in a similar way as her concept of ‘low theory’, a counterhegemonic theorization of alternatives that proposes to work at many levels at once, “as a mode of transmission that revels in detours, twists, and turns through knowing and confusion, and that seek not to explain but to involve” (Halberstam, 2011, p.15). GCs are an alternative place for learning to happen. At first, I start as a teacher in front of a class, but my intention from the very beginning is to be able to achieve a relationship of peers where all participants have their necessary space and a voice. That situation can help the whole group develop both as artists within the art academic context, and as people in the world at large.

The process that I as a teacher go through is one that shifts from being a teacher to becoming a moderator and a peer. For the students, that route goes from being students to becoming peers. What I propose here is not an instructional guide on how students and teachers can use GCs, but instead I have asked six former GC participants to explain what critiques are for each of them and how can they be used. Their ideas are absolutely personal, and each of them describes in their own way how they have experienced this space themselves. Group Critiques are a very personal

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<sup>9</sup> HALBERSTAM, J. (2011). *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.

group situation. This may sound like an oxymoron or a contradiction, but it is not. Each of us will experience, reflect on them draw conclusions from each GC differently; but still the main objective is a common one: to learn and to grow. Through my research I have concluded that my role as a teacher-moderator-peer is to be able to provide that space in the right conditions: a safe, respectful, open space where all participants can be vulnerable and not get hurt in the process.

Each critique is different from one another, and to claim that I have succeeded every time would be a lie. There have been moments where people, including myself, have gotten hurt. But my research of this space is not over. I still have a lot to learn regarding how to be able to moderate GCs, and to be able to create the situation in which I am no longer the only moderator but, instead, each participant can assume that role depending on the context. This is how I learn and grow: failing, hopefully in a graceful way.

The goal of this Educational Project is that students who would like to attend GCs can read what former participants think of critiques, how they have used them, what each of them sees as valuable and what things should be changed. My intention is that they can use this information to learn more about what critiques are, can be and how can they be used in their advantage. This is not an instruction manual, but each of the five texts and the audio file works as a sort of personal guideline in which tips and tricks are given, things to avoid are mentioned, ideas are shared, and comparisons are drawn. Hopefully by using the different elements of this EP, students that are willing to participate in GCs can find their own way of approaching them, and use them to continue developing, learning and growing.

Because GCs as a method do not have a fixed way of working (each of them are different from one another), the reason behind asking former participants to write this text is to offer different perspectives regarding how to approach critiques based on their individual ideas. GCs take time, and for them to work a relationship of trust between all parts is needed, together with a position of vulnerability and openness from the very start, communication, respect and failure. These elements combined lead to a safe space where a relationship of trust can be established, but it can be very complicated process. Vulnerability comes first from the teacher, telling the students very openly that, in spite the hierarchical position of being in front of the class, s/he doesn't know more than the student, only different. And vulnerability comes later from the students, when they can speak about themselves without judging.

But sometimes this does not work. For many students, this approach is something that goes against what they are looking for from an education institution. Critiques are not the whole curriculum at the WdKA, they are only part of it. Based on this, teachers and students can come up with strategies to follow for the growth to continue happening. Maybe another teacher with a different approach is a better option at that time, but maybe, if the student wants to, trying to participate in GCs may help them nevertheless. Through my action research I have realized that this process is very personal, as it has all to do with how I will act in each different situation. Generating different contexts for different moments of critiques is what has given me some experience regarding how to react to different situations. This is also part of the cycle: sometimes the teacher who became moderator and a peer has to return to being a teacher in order to solve a very specific situation. This also does not have a specific and fixed rule, but it is up to each person to learn how to deal with the situation in front of them, regardless on how unexpected it may be.

It is important to remember here that all participants started coming to critiques in the same way: as students coming to class. But not all left in the same way. Yes,

some of them did not get anything out of GCs, but many of them did. It is here where the idea of being in a situation of peers becomes important. Each of the six people who wrote and verbalized the texts that are part of this Educational Project have been through the process of being vulnerable on their own and in front of others, while at the same time having to deal with personal issues of their everyday lives. GCs take time and effort and not everybody will agree on how to participate in them, and this can lead to dissent. But dissent does not mean rupture. Dissent can be seen as what Halberstam calls failure, an alternative to what capitalist society usually considers success. GCs have nothing to do with wealth accumulation but all to do with finding new ways of learning. This is how the students become empowered.

In the texts that follow you will see Group Critiques as an opportunity to practice how to present your work, as a tool to get new perspectives on it, as a place for common and individual reflection, as an interview in bed, as a joke, as a challenge, as a place for laughter, as a place for exchange of ideas between different disciplines, as a situation where you can ask questions, share troubles, hopes and inspirations, as somewhere you can discover what you want, as a game open to different interpretations, where there are rules only if you want rules to apply, as a place to talk, to have fun, to catch up, to be together and to get honest feedback, as a good learning experience where you become very vulnerable, as a place that can always be improved by you as long as you commit to it, as a place open to shared experimentation, as a safe environment to express and receive thoughts and practicing having a critical eye and language, as a place to share a meal while others help you develop whilst you help them develop as well. Also as a place for honesty where you can ask questions, and keep on asking them, where you return favours, where you are honest, where all ideas are welcome, where you are there for one another and where you learn from everyone's mistakes, including yours. GCs are a vital part of growing as an artist and as a person, and in these texts you will find many ideas and lists on how to get the most out of each GC, together with tips, tricks and ideas to take into consideration on how to use Group Critiques in order for you to continue developing.

These texts are how each participant of this EP sees and uses GCs. The goal of this project is that you, the reader, whether you start as a student or as a teacher, see where you can find yourself within all of these ideas. Some will be closer to you, some more foreign, some may seem ridiculous, and maybe some will be things you have never even thought about. These five texts and one audio file will give you some ideas that you may want to use when you start taking part in GC sessions. They are not instructions, they are also not a fixed method form which to choose most suitable one for you, if any. It is you who will decide what is what in this space, what to take home with you and what to leave behind, maybe for later on, maybe forever. As GCs, each text will be different, and each will give you new things to think and consider.

So be vulnerable, be open, and be respectful, just as everybody else will be. That is the idea behind Group Critiques: to learn and to grow in an alternative situation to the one offered as part of an academic institution.

**Come as you are**  
by Michelle Koppelmans

To me Group Critique is the opportunity to present your current project and discover what might be unclear to a semi-objective viewer. Or to discover what might be overly clear. Or a way to practice your presentation skills. Or a tool to obtain a different angle to the work you're presenting. You're basically asking for a whole bunch of opinions, so be ready. It's called Group Critique for a reason.

I can't remember the first group critique that I presented, but I remember two experiences. One of which was very satisfying, maybe because I don't remember there being a lot of questions from fellow students, which might have meant that my presentation was clear as well as my project. It was about superheroes and I presented the way I displayed this project to my evaluating teachers, so you could say it was finished and didn't need more feedback anyway.

The other presentation I remember was very confronting and emotional. I was having some personal issues and since my projects involve quite some influences of my personal life and/or experiences, I tried to reflect this in new work. I was trying out some new things and I wasn't sure about showing them, but because I felt it was 'abstract' enough I felt I could safely show it without actually being confronted with the personal stuff I'd been going through. But obviously I was wrong.

And although I haven't yet continued with the types of work that I presented that very evening or felt comfortable at that specific moment, in a way I do feel I took some learning to the concept of being critical to my own work in combination with my personal life and/or experience, which helped me a lot later on. It also worked as a wake up call to stop fucking around and get a grip on the type of work I actually wanted to make.

For a student in an art related curriculum, especially in an academic environment, I think it is of the utmost importance to learn to have a sense of self. On the plus side, you don't have to gain this all by yourself. Reflection is sometimes easier gained together.

In all honesty, I'm convinced that every type of situation or any kind of project could be presented or discussed in Group Critique. It just takes a bunch of people, some imagination, dedication and honesty. Maybe some beer, it's optional. It works if you work for it. How to use Group Critique is in my opinion either up to you as the presenter or you as the audience.

Train yourself in speaking to a group of (unknown) people? Check, but prepare yourself with different texts or voices that you can try. Discuss your use of light in a photograph? Check, but bring everything that you have tried already or something that references to the specific thing (look, feel, place) you're looking for. You have some (artistic) concerns about your flashmob marriage proposal performance? Show us your preparation of everything. Discuss that shit and dance to Beyoncé afterwards (also optional).

As a part of the audience as well as the presenter, you can reflect your critical abilities in art.

If there is one thing I regret doing in Group Critique it's not speaking/asking enough. Maybe that's because I was afraid of coming across silly or ignorant, so sometimes I took notes to check out later. At the end of the day, because of the atmosphere being relaxed and not as pressuring as a regular class, you bond with the people in the group. This builds up and works both ways. Be there for each other.

So ask questions if something is unclear to you, you can learn just as much of asking a question as from being asked a question. As an audience, the saying 'two know more than one' is at hand. There is a possibility of a ton of references to check out. And the fact that someone might have seen something similar or completely different but somehow the same should be relevant to you. Be open to it, it might bring you to a whole other course of direction, that you might wanna be on without you even knowing about it. Happened to me (: Cheers.

**A conversation in bed about Group Critique *[audio file]***  
by Mitch Nemmers

## Game Critique

by Dimitris Poteas

A digital artist, a feminist performer, an abstract painter and a conceptual photographer walk into a bar. If that sounds like the impossible setting to a corny joke, we only have to change the word “bar” to “classroom” to describe the everyday reality of an art academy. This diversity of mediums, practices, techniques and specializations are one of the most productive and rewarding aspects of being an art student. But it can also be one of the most frustrating. While the co-existence of different points of view, mentalities and expertise inside the class or the studio can boost creativity and generate new ideas and directions, the overload of opinions – especially when they lack a deep knowledge of your discipline- can lead the creative process to a halt.

This is the biggest challenge that GC faces. How to make the most out of the exchange of ideas between different disciplines? What does an emerging video artist have to learn from a critique of her work by a sculptor? I believe that the first thing students that engage in GC should keep in mind is that the answer to that question might as well be: “nothing”. But it is as likely to be: “everything”. And although intuitively we might want to think that most of the times the answer would lie in between these two binaries, personally, I have found that more often than not, the answer is closer to “nothing” or “everything” than somewhere in the middle. If the GC process is to be successful, the filtering of the information, suggestions and ideas, is vital for a student whose work is being critiqued. Some of the suggestions might miss the student’s intentions, some might misunderstand the work, some ideas might sound like the greatest solution to the student’s problem, and some can feel irrelevant at the moment but prove to be extremely inventive much later on. In any case, what the GC organizer should transmit to the students who participate, is that all ideas are welcome, but it’s the student who’s being critiqued who should actively think if she/he wants to keep some of the things that were heard. Asking in the end of each session what the student found more helpful is a nice way both for filtering the overload of information and making the student actively think about it, and for retaining the advice that will assist her/him in their practice. Asking specific questions about the student’s intentions (“why are you making it like this?”), troubles (“what is it you don’t like in your work?”), inspirations (“how did you start this?”) or about her/his hopes of the process (“in what way do you hope we will help you for this specific work?”) can also be very useful in keeping the student active and making the critique more specific and targeted.

I mentioned before about the GC organizer. I believe that an experienced teacher who can lead the discussion is necessary at the beginning, so that the discussion doesn’t become stagnant. After a few sessions however, the leader of the discussion can become one of the students. This way, the leader-student –who doesn’t criticize, just steers the discussion/asks questions- will be encouraged to actually think what will be useful for the critiqued student, and try to get into her/his point of view. Because in the end, the problem of having too many ideas from different disciplines has its root in the difficulty of understanding the actual intentions of the critiqued student and getting into her/his shoes: someone with preference in modern art, for instance, will try to “modernize” the student’s work, while someone with classical tendencies will attempt to “classicize” it. But the question is what does the student want? The GC organizer should offer enough changes for the student who’s being

critiqued to discover what she/he wants, help her/him to make it clear during the discussion, and then guide the fellow students to provide their opinion based on that perspective.

This is of course much more difficult than it sounds. I know of experienced teachers who fail to do this and instead provide feedback that's coming from *their* artistic aspirations and not the student's. So expecting students to do it might not always be realistic and that's why I mentioned the importance of filtering. But in general, it should be up to the group to decide the rules of the GC –*if* they decide that there should even be rules- since the dynamic of each group plays an important role in how the GC sessions will play out. Giving the ability to the students to offer their own suggestions about how to make GC more productive can result in inventive new modes of doing the sessions that might lead to deeper engagement and understanding of each other. Or loosening up the sessions by allowing written criticism, can give the opportunity for more thoughtful observations and allow students who might not be comfortable expressing their opinion verbally, to participate in a different way. What is important for me is that GC resembles more of a game that has some general structural rules but is open to different interpretations, than a strictly guided classroom activity. Maybe then, a digital artist, a feminist performer, an abstract painter and a conceptual photographer walking into a GC session, can be the setup for one of the most meaningful, inventive and creative encounters inside an art academy.

## **Vague Recollections of Group Critique** by Doris Sparreboom

(Written almost 2 years after the first group critique I followed)

### **January/February 2014, London, UK**

Almost two years ago I was in London, staying at my cousin's apartment while studying at CSM for three months as an exchange. I was trying to adjust to studying there, but I was constantly reminded of everything happening back home, because of a lot of emails coming in.

So one day I got this email saying we had to choose a teacher/project for the next 'Kwartaal' [*quarter*] and there was a list with teachers and their plan. All familiar names were there, and one new name, *Juan Beladrich: Group Critique*.

So I asked my boyfriend who was back home in Rotterdam, what is this?  
This is a summary of what he said:

*'Juan is this new guy from Argentina who studied at the WdKA before and he is back now to teach. He does group critique, it's talking about your work in groups. Oh and Juan is this very big guy and he says 'fuck' a lot.'*

I decide to sign up for Group Critique.

### **Two or three months later (March/April 2014), back in Rotterdam, Netherlands**

The Boyfriend says there is a group critique lesson with the international students\*. We go to the studio building at Delftseplein and we are running a bit late. We walk in and there are some students, but there is no class. We ask why and I meet the exchange students for the first time.

Some email conversations between Juan and me followed here, I think, I don't really remember when, but I remember introducing myself to Juan via mail.

A week or so later there is a Group Critique with the regular students. We go there.

I don't remember if that was also the first time I presented during Group Critique. But I do vividly remember my presentation about my obsession with English road signs and how I wanted to use them for a new project. From the exchange students that were present that day I learned a lot about these signs.

Then it all became some sort of blur of Group Critiques.

But I remember the one where everyone really brought food for once. Simcha, one of my classmates, and me really pushed everyone to bring something, and then it became the best Group Critiques ever. There are still photos of this meeting on Facebook,

that's how much fun it was.\*\*

Also I really remember the last one because it was summer and the exchange students were about to leave and the Dutch football team was playing and everyone wanted to leave to watch the game but Juan wanted to do his class and he made a little booklet for everyone. I was really touched by this.

And I remember that time that Maggie, an exchange student from the States who went on summer camp a bit too much, wanted to do a group hug, because it was so weird.

Anyway, some Group Critique memories are kind of a blur, and some really stand out. But it was always a fun get together. It was a moment to really see your fellow students, whom you rarely see because everyone is always doing something somewhere else. It was a good moment to talk, catch up and talk about your work, and get honest feedback, mostly from Juan though.

### **January 2016, Rotterdam Reflections**

Group Critique is and was a good learning experience in the sense that it is a way of learning how to open up about your work and your process. You become very vulnerable when you have to present a process that you have been working on, so it is hard to get up there and talk and then receive feedback. But it makes you think about your work and the way you might present yourself in the future. We never really had classes like that before Juan did this. The WdKA Fine Art department never did a class like Group Critique, which is strange, because it is such an important part in learning to be an artist. When I studied at CSM [*Central Saint Martins*] in London we had many classes like Group Critique, where a student gave a presentation and we all discussed the work. Also I read about other academies where this is very common. So I truly believe that Juan improved the Fine Arts department of the Willem de Kooning by coming up with the concept of Group Critique.

But there are some things though that might improve Group Critique. I think it would have been better if there were a real time and place to meet, and a schedule for the students when they have to present their process so far. This would create more commitment, because commitment can be a problem with art school students.

Also, the teacher might want to hold back giving his or her opinion. I find that during our times in GC, Juan was always talking the most, and this makes it easier for other students not to participate. But other students should participate in the conversation. What might also be interesting is for one student not really presenting their work, or explaining it, but let the others tell what they think. This might really help in understanding how your work is perceived. I think there is a lot of variety possible within the format of Group Critique, different ways of presenting and giving feedback. Teachers and students should try this out and see what works best for them.

Also if you want people to bring food and make it a dinner party, really push people. Artists are lazy as hell, so you really need to organize this well.

For any future participants I would say, be open, join in the conversation, show your process and try to learn. Be vulnerable. I think that is the key to improving your work, to get honest feedback and to learn and get the most out of Group Critique.

\*The lessons were always in the evening, so everyone could be there and be awake and on time and bring some food to eat; this was a very good solution to common artist problems.

\*\*Juan's idea of Group Critique was to also make it a shared meal. The plan was that everyone would bring something to eat or drink. But in reality it usually turned out that everyone brought a six-pack beer and some crisps and mandarins. So it never really became a meal, just beer and snacks. Really art school-ish, but not so healthy and 'Gezellig'

## **Group Critique for two continents - double lessons learned** by Sonja Stedt

Critique in general, to me, is a vital part of progress and growing as an artist. What Group Critiques gives is a good, “safe” environment to express and receive thoughts of what others and I present. Both in WdKA and SVA [*School of Visual Arts, New York*] they’ve been very informal and comfortable situations. With the current demands on artists I think it’s crazy to even think of art education without these critiques. Artists have to learn to take feedback and turn that into their advantage, use it for making better work and evolve along the world.

First of all, I have to say that the biggest thing I realized about group critique while in New York was the importance of standing on the ‘same page’ about what Group Critique means. From the very first sessions we had, I realized a lot of the kids didn’t know how to give and especially receive critique about their own work. I believe we are more on the ‘same page’ in Europe and in my class, but I think this is still a point to think about and maybe refine in the first classes: What is actually critique? What to expect from it? How to give and receive it? There is of course not a single right way to it, but in a (kick-off) group discussion, everyone could express their own thoughts and ideas to create a common ground. I’m sure this could be useful for giving the best to help others and get the best out of others, because everyone has a bit different things going on. If I remember right, you, Juan, did some sort of introduction to Group Critiques (in second year), but it would be sure useful to involve the students in this and make it a discussion.

Giving critique right after the work is presented is quite natural but sometimes the works take a bit longer to chew. What happened with one teacher was that we could give critique right after, but the works presented previous week were brought up again for a moment. This way we got quite good discussions actually, as everyone was able to think it through and make their associations with their own pace. Not everyone’s work will do this, but I think it’s worth a try for some. It was just like making my own work, but then I just spent some moments of the week thinking about someone else’s work and got this “light bulb” realization to share.

Critique of our work is of course most important, but actually visiting and critically viewing and discussing exhibitions is a good way to also practice having a critical eye and language. In New York I felt Group Critique was also making me think my whole art practice. I know in Europe the school system works very differently when it comes to teaching hours, but we had a weekly 6-hour class during which we discussed the shows we had seen in the past week, our ongoing work and the thesis/artist statement we were writing. I felt these classes were sort of bringing it all together: the art world – the art practice – and the work still in process. This kind of structure was very helpful, bringing coherence to my thoughts about what I wanted to do as an artist.

Bringing all this together might not work on the first years of education, but I think Group Critique should be also an evolving element, not the same through the years. I befriended very well with a guy with whom we became sort of sparring partners outside the class too. It was good to talk in depth about our works and everything

related to them, and I think it could be also a form of Group Critique “homework”. I find it also important that I still remain in touch after graduation with some of those classmates with whom I can freely and comprehensively criticize and discuss. During the semester in New York, the SVA students could sign up for feedback sessions with artists, curators and art critics outside the school. I think this was a really interesting idea, but could only work with those who have already learnt how to deal with critique. Maybe this could be also though for 4th or maybe even 3rd years (spring, the studio semester) students.

The group size is quite important because with huge groups I feel a lot of things remain unsaid, while smaller groups (in New York we had 15-17 students per class) is more connected and everyone can actually have their voice heard without having to go back and forth too much.

In both schools the teachers’ role has been relatively background style (e.g. to other subjects). I think now especially in the last year(s) it’s good to let the students lead the conversations and the teacher to complement if necessary. You, Juan, do step in the conversation in between as well, but in New York my teacher said what he wanted to speak only in the end. For me both ways were working fine. I think a teacher has a role though, because sometimes the conversations gets off the track and it’s good to have someone to bring it back. As a critiqued, I mostly like to just focus on listening to the feedback and the conversation on how others experience my work. I could not do this fully unless someone else keeps an ear on the conversation subject.

It’s hard to say what ‘to do’ because, like I said, Group Critique should to evolve with the level (year). I think it’s good if the group is a bit more directed at the beginning (especially because in the Netherlands the students begin college so young) and loosen it with the years when the students have a better understanding of it.

Whether it’s mandatory or not, I can only say it would be good to get the basics at least and then let them choose if to continue or not. But I’m sure that if they get help from it and have a good vibe in the group, most people will continue.

For future participants:

I would say be open minded in the class and don’t reject opinions, but ask why/why not. This creates discussion and brings you and everyone else much further. You can still keep your opinion, but you might experience also a realization moment, (which is always amazing!) Don’t worry if you don’t have something to say right away, you can always go back to the person later on. Ask others to come talk with you too.

There are no right or wrong things to say (ok, something can be unsaid, keep in business), you come from elsewhere than somebody else, so everyone’s point of view is valuable!

PS. Keep the classes in the evenings, we are fine arts students and our brains are mostly working after 5PM! :D

## **A recipe for a successful group critique and its complications**

by Anne Simone Tullemans

*For this text I felt compelled to write a recipe, a homage to one of Group Critique's most pivotal aspects: food. Glorious food. I have tried to convince people to compose a recipe book with all the delicious dishes and snacks that have been served during last years' Group Critiques but unfortunately this has never happened. If you ever feel the urge to take up this idea, please do, and send me a copy.*

Ingredients:

- 1 piece of art, made by you, of dubious quality. This needs to be a work that is either recently or nearly finished.
- Pieces of paper, the same number as the people attending the Group Critique, preferably in some happy colour.
- Pens or pencils, also in the same amount as the people attending.
- Installation materials, such as tape, blu-tack, wire, pedestals, paint, etc.  
(optional)

In my eyes, Group Critique has an odd resemblance to the way advertisers test their products. Sure, Group Critique has a much more informal atmosphere and arguably better snacks; however, the principle stays the same. A [person] has a [product] which they want to test out on an [audience]. I have found that approaching Group Critique in this way has benefitted my work greatly. Now, Group Critique is pretty much the same.

1. You pick a work that you have made or are in the process of making (honestly don't pick something you are already completely done with because what do you need the critique for if you're not willing to change anything about it) and ask yourself: What is it I want to say with this? What is this piece about? What do I want people to think or feel when they look at this? Do I want them to feel or think at all? (This is already a good exercise for yourself to understand what your work is about).
2. Bring the work to your Group Critique location, physical is always better than pictures. Try to show in the most ideal way possible. What I mean by this is, don't put it on a table if ideally it would be on a pedestal. If it should be dark or warm or if there should be music playing in the background, then arrange that. Create the ideal environment for your work around it.
3. Show it to your audience. Give them their time to look at it. Don't answer any questions, don't explain anything. Just say: this is my work, please look at it, later I will ask you some questions.
4. When everyone has seen it, sit them down and give them some questions. What did it make you feel? What do you think it is about? What did you experience? Does it work for you as an artwork? It is particularly effective to make people write this

down, because some people are not comfortable speaking in a group setting or might not be totally honest in their critique when speaking to your face. If you make people write things down, give them the pens and papers so your session is not interrupted by people looking for them. Preferably have the questions already written on the papers, to make it crystal clear. The length of your paper is important. You can expect a more in depth answer from an A4 with one question than from a post-it. Keep your questions short and low in number. Asking for keywords sometimes works better than asking for entire experiences.

5. Take them back in, and now answer any questions people may have. This might change some of the answers that some people have, if they do, write this down.

6. If you have the time, have a quick glance at the answers people gave you. Did they understand what it was about? Did they feel what you wanted them to feel? If not, it is worth asking why they did not think or feel what you wanted them to feel? Did they need more context or perhaps the work simply doesn't work? In the end you will have what you need to know, if your piece is fine as it is, if it needs more work or if needs to be presented differently or if it needs to be chucked out the window.

This is a basic recipe for a successful Group Critique. It is comparable to a recipe for basic cookies, tasty but they could use some frosting, nuts or chocolate. What I mean is, it can be elaborated on, for which I would like to point to the following complications:

- The people in your audience are most likely your classmates and are most likely acquainted with your work and you personally. This may influence their judgment. Tell no one who made the work they are looking at. Ask someone else to present your work. Present someone else's work.
- If you're having a Group Critique with your classmates, they can give you a good idea if your piece works or not. However, consider how homogeneous your class really is. Art students are in their twenties, tend to be middle-class and the majority is usually white. Factors like race, class, age, gender or sexuality can radically change the way people look at and perceive your work. (If you don't believe me I suggest you read the revised article *Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary* by Kobena Mercer). Your classmates also have a background in arts and culture, allowing them the background knowledge to interact with your piece. So when making an artwork, consider what audience you are making it for. Do you make work for your classmates, or do you make work for a wider audience? How will you know if your work will be understood and well received by your desired audience if they are not your classmates? There are many ways to go about this. Don't be satisfied with Group Critique. Ask everyone what they think of your work. Ask your grandma, your neighbour, your five year old nephew, ask the man standing on the street corner. Invite others to your Group Critique. Ask for guest critics. Demand diversity from your academy.

- Now that you have all these people together, don't stop at showing them your work. Let them help you make your work. Experiment. Let them make drawings for you. Use them as guinea pigs in a laboratory experiment. Play charades. Make a performance together.
- These people are helping you making your work better, return the favour. Say everything that comes to mind when looking at someone's work. Be critical. Tell them if it is not good enough. Be polite but not pandering. Ask questions. Keep asking questions. If you like it, explain why. Be honest. Learn from their mistakes. Allow others to learn from your mistakes.