

CRITS: a student Manual, by Terry Barrett

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Book Review of CRITS: A Student Manual

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Book Review of CRITS: A Student Manual

According to Orson Wells, there are only two emotions experienced when flying – boredom and terror. To anyone who has been to art, design and architecture school the same could be said about the crit, although some crits have been known to last longer than flights. The place of the crit in creative education is somewhere between performed ritual and rite of passage. The crit has loomed large in the folklore of art school, and in *CRITS: A Student Manual*, Barrett recounts plenty of war stories. However, this book aims to do much more by examining the different purposes, functions and mechanics of the crit in a refreshingly straightforward way.

Crits, Barrett tells us, are ‘the occasions in which you talk about the art that you and others are making, [and] are an important means for learning about art’ (Barrett 2019: xv). The place where students learn what objects say, mean, do and how to speak about them. Educational research has long been fascinated by the crit (Oak 2000; Webster 2005; Dannels 2005; Blair 2006). Perhaps the source of this fascination resides in the fact that the crit is one of the few visibly orchestrated learning events in art, design and architecture education. As research over the last 20 years has demonstrated, the crit is the key site where students learn to think and act like practitioners (Shreeve, Sims and Trowler 2012). So, it is perhaps fitting, if a little late, that the crit gets its own user-manual.

In *CRITS: A Student Manual*, Terry Barrett, Professor Emeritus and art educator of nearly 50 years, sets out to explain how crits work and the purpose of them. His mission is to help students get ‘maximum benefits’ from these important learning events. The book is designed to be both ‘practical and positive’. It draws on Barrett’s published research and extensive teaching experience. However, CRITS is also guided

by the larger motive of improving studio critiques. As Barrett rightly observes in the introduction, crits are ‘examined less often and less thoroughly than they should be’ (Barrett 2019: x).

This book begins by describing its own ‘implicit and explicit assumptions’, much like I imagine the author would want to see in a good crit. Barrett’s writing is calming. A strange thing to say perhaps, but through his writing, I got the sense of a highly experienced and capable explainer. At pains to avoid ambiguity and dense language. In this accessible way, Barrett sets out his vision for crits as places of optimism and cooperation. Places to forge independence and an ongoing commitment to change.

CRITS: A Student Manual is a book of three parts. In the first, Barrett explores definitions, personal stories of good and bad crits and the required skills and attitudes. In the section on good and bad crits, we hear students and educators recount stories of transformation, terror, critical moments of learning, and embarrassment. Barrett touches on issues of power dynamics, the pitfalls of singular voices in crits, the lack of constructive criticism and students’ engagement in the process.

Having established the contexts in which the crit operates, Barrett turns his attention to the content (and potential content) of crits. He does this by identifying three types of crit: i) the crit as description; ii) the crit as interpretation; iii) the crit as judgement. I found these categories exceptionally useful, and although crits may simultaneously draw on all three categories, Barrett’s observations tease out the way they can serve different ‘learning functions’: “To describe is to identify with words what you see in a work, to interpret is to infer meaning about what you see, and to judge is to assign value to what you see.” (Barrett 2019: 71)

The three chapters covering description, interpretation and judgement are excellent and Barrett covers a lot of ground. We are reminded that description is a valuable activity for both the interpreter and the maker and crucial to ensure comments do not deviate from the work itself. In the chapter on judgements, Barrett identifies the differences between preferences and values; “preferences are about individuals; values are about objects, ideas and occurrences rather than the individual who holds them,” (Barrett 2019: 133). However, perhaps the best thing about these chapters (and the book) is that each comes with examples of how to run crits.

In the process of reviewing this book, I tried some of Barrett’s crit examples. They were imaginative and thoroughly student centred. Each designed to make the purpose of the crit explicit to the student and the tutor while providing ways to decentre the tutor’s presence. So, with the example, *Everything counts: when I see x, I think y*, the focus is on the importance of every ‘artistic decision’, while also building participants confidence in making contributions to the crit. *Ratings without reasons*, asks the crit participants to rate work 1–10, but the emphasis is not on the ratings assigned, rather the process and feelings attached to making judgements. *Ratings, reasons, and rules* builds on this and asks participants to justify their ratings and then use these justifications to establish rules about what constitutes a good work of art/design. My students also enjoyed *Write your own criteria*. This crit demonstrates how adept students are at writing criteria when given the opportunity, how broad criteria can be, and how these criteria are always underpinned by values. The example crits in this book do three things: i) they make visible the intentions of a given crit ii) they invite the student to both construct and contribute to the crit iii) they form part of an ongoing meta-examination of crit processes.

However, this book is not without issues. And really, most seem to stem from whom Barrett (and the publisher?) have constructed as the readers. First as the title suggests, this book is aimed at students. Yes, students would benefit from reading this book. However, the real audience seems to be educators (and potential educators), particularly if Barrett's mission is to improve studio critiques. Second, I struggled with Barrett's use of the term 'art'. In the preface, Barrett remarks:

the term 'art' refers to all objects and events made within art and design courses across all disciplines. The use of 'art' is meant to negate any presumptions of a hierarchy of values pertaining to arts, crafts, design, illustration, performance, video, photography and any other media. (Barrett 2019: xiv)

I found this generic use of the word art a little disingenuous because the vast majority of crit contributions, contexts and examples in this book come from fine art. Yet, as a design educator, I have observed significant differences between art, architecture and design pedagogies. The crit is a good example of this. In design education, users and clients are often absent from crits and this provides its own set of problematics. In design education, the crit is often aimed at building on ideas. This kind of crit doesn't neatly align with Barrett's categories of description, interpretation or judgement. The fine art focus is particularly evident in the last chapter – *Artist Statements and Biographies* – somewhat tangential, I would argue, to the central theme of this book. So, why not be clear? This book is about the art crit, not the design or architecture crit, but I will add the caveat there is still much to recommend for design and architecture educators.

Despite these issues, I would highly recommend this book to any art, design or architecture educators or students. Barrett's writing is accessible and clear-sighted. The book is exceptionally good at guiding the reader through different variations of the crit while making explicit its many and complicated intentions. It provides a range of

original crit examples that have been intelligently constructed to engage students in crits, both as an event but also as an ongoing approach to their creative, professional and personal development. CRITS, is a product of the authors sustained attention to the crit, and is full of practical and thoughtful art (design and architecture) pedagogic advice, and if heeded, the two emotions experienced on hearing the word crit will no longer be boredom and terror.

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