

OLIVE BLACKBURN

Feeling Your Feels, or the Psychoanalysis of Group Critiques

In recent years, I have become fascinated by the scenes and spaces of cultural criticism—the post-performance Q&A, the group crit in art school, the poetry workshop, the conversation that unfolds over drinks at the bar. The social dynamics of these contexts seem to shape so much about how these conversations play out, who says what and why, how groups can elevate or denigrate various works. There are clearly some sociological factors at play: how aesthetic dispositions can stand in for race, gender, and class identifications; how one’s social location shapes the kind of claims one makes about what is good, interesting, and/or liberatory work; how institutional mechanisms and material conditions foster certain aesthetics or so forth. There are also what we might consider to be a set of psychoanalytic factors, by which I mean the emotional dynamics that structure a group and its relationship to an aesthetic work. Groups have their own psychoanalytic structures that shape how members interact and what will be taken up or repressed within a group. These often unspoken emotional dynamics accompany and cut through the intellectual or political concerns that drive a conversation’s content.

Andrea Fraser, an artist associated with practices of institutional critique, has turned her attention over the last decade to the psychoanalysis of art criticism. In the spring of 2015, I participated in a graduate group critique class facilitated by Fraser in the art department at UCLA. We read psychoanalytic theory, focusing on the work of Wilfred Bion (a key figure in developing what is known as group relations). We also had weekly critiques of work by members of the class, in which we discussed interpersonal and emotional dynamics that emerged in the room. The crit was an experiment in observing how projection, introjection, identification, splitting, and repression played out in the here and now of the group crit.

For the occasion of my personal crit, I offered a poem to the class titled “The Current Climate of Studio Critiques: A Round Table Discussion.”²¹ The poem took the situation of a group crit as its subject matter. What follows is a transcription of the class’ crit of my poem, reconstructed from my notes. I have changed the participants’ names.

²¹ published in *It’s Raining in San Francisco but it’s Sunny in Oakland*, Timeless Infinite Light, 2014.

This exercise gestures to a type of emotional work that is to be done when discussing poetry or cultural production more broadly. In addition to engaging with work intellectually and politically, we also need to interrogate our feelings, our projected and introjected affects, our anxiety and ambivalence towards ourselves, and how all of these mediate our relationship to aesthetic works. It asks of us a kind of emotional tuning to the situation of criticism: how is anxiety distributed in a room, who feels comfortable or ill at ease, who do we want to be or befriend or sleep with, who becomes a container for feelings that we cannot tolerate within ourselves. When engaging as critics or respondents, one can learn to be as rigorous with emotional reflexivity as one is with questions of aesthetics and politics.

Annie: It feels like we are slowly wading into this discussion.

Leah: I'm interested in knowing what Kelly wants to talk about.

Kelly: I don't know. Don't put me on the spot. I just think we are pretending we have so much to say about this so we don't have to talk about the poem. We can keep chatting it out, but it seems like we don't want to have to deal with it.

Theo: We do have a lot of time for this discussion.

Landon: I share Kelly's frustration. It feels like we are skirting around addressing the poem.

Lauren: I think the group is performing the aggression that the poem brought into the room.

Leah: I have a question about humor. The poem was silly as well as aggressive. Can we talk about this?

Annie: I want to talk about it, but I am so self-conscious about going step-by-step as in a normal crit. I'm second-guessing myself. I feel made fun of by the poem, its aggression and mockery. I think this is left over from the previous class when Olive said she was not in solidarity with me during the discussion of Eli's paintings. She is making fun of individuals in this poem.

Eli: It was published a year ago. She was not writing about you.

Annie: It's the tone of the poem, not that she wrote it specifically about this class.

Maalav: I see it as anti-art or an art joke. It's making fun of itself.

Annie: But it's at my expense.

Maalav: I think there is uneasiness about how we fit into the poem.

Jasmine: It has a satirical quality. It is more direct and aggressive than the other works we've seen.

Annie: I see a cynicism in it.

Lauren: Are we splitting what the work wants from what it does not want? Doesn't it also have a positive relationship to art? Doesn't this ambivalence have to be a part of the picture?

Maalav: I don't see it as cynical, but more of an inside joke. A poem about art critiques in an art critique class is a joke that only we can get.

Theo: There is a line in here about the artist who capitalizes off social antagonisms. Isn't that exactly what Olive is doing?

Annie: What about this publication that the poem appeared in? Is it even a reputable or viable press?

Landon: We don't know if it was published. She could have made that up.

Magda: It seems like we are trying to find fault with the poem, because we are implicated in what it critiques and don't want to face that. I read it as a call to arms, not a thumbing of the nose.

Gwen: The poem seems to parallel to what we are doing in this class. However sincerely or ironically, it asks us how we perform or behave in a crit. I think this is actually a valid question.

Aniyah: We asked Olive to read the poem out loud when she made individual copies for everyone. Why did we do this?

Annie: She did get up to read the poem. I don't absolve her of reading it.

Eli: I think it's important to hear a poem through the author's voice.

Brian: The poem refers to itself as "a round table discussion." There seems to be some tension between the single authorship and the multiple voices in the poem.

Lauren: The ambivalence about the presentation of the poem suggests uncertainty about what it is, whether it is a poem or a performance.

Brian: If its a poem, do we critique what it is critiquing or do we crit the poem itself?

Magda: The poem!

Landon: I asked Olive whether she was going to read the poem out loud. I think she is trying to have a meta-critical view and step out of the situation. I wanted her to be implicated in the situation, as she implicated all of us. This is why I asked her to read.

Annie: Olive doesn't put herself on the chopping block. I don't think we should give the poem what its asking for.

Magda: Olive does say what she likes, what she advocates.

Maalav: The line 'that shit is sick' has an informal enthusiasm. It certain provides some spaces of joy and ways out.

Leah: I read it as having a self-deprecating aggression. She is not trying to separate herself from the situation. She is not trying to absolve herself or her own position.

Maalav: I think our reaction is about Olive's position within the group. She's a person outside of the art program who is criticizing art critiques.

Gwen: Who do we think the 'I' and the 'you' are in this poem?

Brian: It's us, I think. There are situations that the poem describes that have happened amongst us.

Lauren: What is this poem doing to the dynamics in this room right now? The poem wants to be read and it wants to implicate. How is it affecting us?

Magda: It feels like we are finding ways to make the poem be untrue. Or we are making the poem be the antagonistic force in the room. Its a container for our projected anger. We don't want to feel angry so we make the poem angry.

Annie: Actually, I am angry at Olive. She said in a previous class that she likes work that puts all the cards on the table. Her poem is certainly not doing this. This poem is ironic and cynical.

Aniyah: I read the poem as so sincere. It expresses a desire for a type of crit we are not having.

Landon: I think the poem activates competition in the room, in its stance as knowing more than. Olive's interventions in the discussions usually feel like she is trying to manipulate the group situation.

Chloe: There is an arrogance to it. The poem states "I hate artists" to a room full of artists.

Landon: This wants us to get angry. Let's ignore it and talk about something else.

Lauren: I think the poem is being attacked because it activates envy.

Maalav: It ends with a nod towards political struggle. There are things in it that I identify with. Do we feel closed to it because the anger is coming from outside the art department?

Leah: Is it envy or anger?

Lauren: The poem seems to have two poles: fragility and satire. We are not here to read or decode it. We are here to unpack ourselves and work through what it has activated in you.

Theo: It feels strange to talk about the work when we are really trying to talk about ourselves.

Lauren: The presenter is an outsider to the art program. The poem is holding a sense of outside-ness for the group. We feel a sense of belonging because of its outside-ness.

Lauren gets up from her chair and moves outside the circle of chairs. Leah follows. Eli leaves the room. Silence in the group. Annie walks away. Still silence in the group.

Maalav: I feel sad now.

Vlad: Why?

Maalav: I don't know. Just a sense of melancholy.

Eito: I feel comfortable.

Jasmine: I think we have failed at achieving group cohesion. At the end, certain members are still outsiders.

Kelly: The poem has a revolutionary tone. We are too invested in everything to take it on, to have that conversation. We have to stomach the art world everyday and live the big lie to try to make it. We are not being willing to be vulnerable. Eli was willing to be vulnerable, but we didn't back him up. The revolution is a big lie, too. Maybe I'm being a downer.

Brian: Don't feel guilty.

Gwen: The group has a strong desire for resolution, a way to solve everything. The poem does not propose a model. Maybe we could see it as an investigation, and the point is not to have the correct position or solution.

Lauren: Let's follow the affects in this group discussion. Olive's poem brought out aggression. It's the first time we've seen it in the group.

Landon: It seems like when Lauren makes an observation about the group, we then enact it even if something else might be happening. I wonder if Lauren produces the affect she ascribes to the group.

Leah: I agree. Sometimes I think to myself, 'we all didn't say or feel that. Only one person did.'

Lauren: Maybe the group makes me responsible because it does not want to own these affects. Or the group is uncomfortable asking itself about the feelings in the room. Maybe this a good place to end. We started with a crit of the work, and it has lead to a crit of the class.

Olive Blackburn lives in Oakland. She likes dance, communism, and group experiences.