



Understanding Criticism Part One: The Many Faces of Criticism

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1 - Introduction

This essay addresses one of the most important aspects of creating art: how to deal with criticism. Fear of criticism is the number one thing preventing individuals from being creative. In this essay I present knowledge that has helped me conquer my fear of criticism.

The essay is divided in three parts. In part one, Understanding Criticism, I cover the main characteristics of criticism. In part two, Responding to Criticism, I describe effective ways of responding to criticism in a non-emotional manner. Finally, in part three, Staying Motivated, I offer solutions to the most problematic outcome of criticism: discouragement and depression.

2 - About Criticism

We all have to face criticism, but only some of us know how to deal with it rationally. Most of us deal with it emotionally, in a reactionary fashion. Our response is impulsive rather than composed. It is a reaction rather than a controlled action. This is both ineffective and frustrating. It is far better to deal with criticism rationally, in a composed manner. However doing so takes learning and practice. It is far from being intuitive!

The natural reaction when we are exposed to criticism that we deem unfair is frustration, then discouragement, then rebuilding (if it happens). In other words, it is an emotional roller coaster. However, there is a better and more effective way to deal with criticism, and that is to acquire a personal understanding of criticism. While it may not be possible to be in total control of ourselves all time, understanding criticism better, and learning how to respond to it appropriately, will go a long ways towards improving our attitude and our relationship with our audience. It will also prevent us from getting unnecessarily emotional when we hear critical commentaries about our work.

3 – Art and Opinions

It is the nature of art that we do not all agree on what is art. Opinions about art are often polarized. They go from one extreme to the other. People looking at the same exact work of art will have widely different reactions. Some will love it, some will hate it, and some will respond with every nuance between these two extremes.

This response to art is unrelated to subject matter. When I started selling art, being inexperienced, I assumed that polarized reactions were caused by the subject represented in the photographs. Understandably, certain representations are objectionable because they go against personal beliefs. Those include art that features nudity, political statements or religious statements for example. However, I was confronted with polarized reactions when selling my own work, even though my subject matter, landscapes, is hardly objectionable. I am not making a political or religious statement in my work, I am not showing nudity, I am simply depicting the beauty of the landscape. Yet, some people love it while others despise it.

Intrigued by this reaction I asked other artists what their experience was in regards to criticism. All were experiencing the same phenomena. One artist in particular, whose work focuses solely on beautiful flower compositions, told me that she had people coming to her saying "I love your flowers" and others saying "I hate your flowers."

If photographs of flowers can elicit a polarized reaction, then any subject can elicit a similar reaction. The viewer's reaction is therefore not caused by the subject matter but rather by the act of looking at art. Art, whatever the subject might be, generates polarized reactions. In a way, you can use this fact as a test if you wonder whether your work is art or not. Just look at the reaction your work elicits in people. If this reaction is polarized, it must be art. It may not be the most scientific

test in the world, but it seems to work quite well.



4 - Facts and Opinions

When confronted with criticism it is important to decide whether this criticism is fact-based or opinion-based. While some people will tell you why they do not like something, most will simply say that they do not like it. In this situation the only way to find out what they find objectionable is by asking questions.

If somebody tells me "I don't like your work," I say, "if you don't mind me asking, what is it that you do not like in my work?" If the answer is "There's too much blue," or "I don't like rocks" or "flowers shouldn't be cropped that much" their criticism is opinion-based. They do not like the color palette, the subject matter, or the artist's personal style (the flowers are cropped for example). The solution is to explain that this is my style and my approach to the subject. While I do understand that it may not be to everyone's liking, it is to the liking of the majority of my audience, and I have no intention of changing it.

On the other hand, if their response is "this photograph is not sharp," or "I can see banding on the print," or "there is dust under the glass," their criticism is fact-based. The problems they point out can be verified by checking if indeed the print is not sharp, if there is banding on the print or if dust got stuck between the mat and the glass. If so, their criticism is justified because none of these things were intentional. The solution is simply to thank the person for pointing to those issues, then fix the problem as soon as possible.

5 - Personal Taste, Tradition and Cutting Edge

Art is about opinions and about personal taste. Not all of us have the same opinions, and not all of us have the same taste. That's a good thing. The world would be a very boring place if we all agreed on what is art! It is something important to keep that in mind when confronted with people who dislike our work.

Personal taste is also influenced by tradition. When something has been around for a long time, when it has become a tradition, it tends to be more widely accepted than something that just came out. Therefore, if your work is traditional, you will tend to face relatively little criticism. On the contrary, if your work is cutting edge, you have to expect a far more polarized response from your audience. The more cutting edge your work is, the more pronounced this situation will be. At an extreme, your audience will be split in two groups, people who love what you do and people who hate what you do.

There will be no nuances of position because no one will be taking a middle-ground position.

6 - Critics Are Loud

People who have issues with what you do are more verbal than people who are satisfied with what you do. In other words, those who are critical of an artist's work tend to be far louder than those who appreciate this artist's work.

This means that you may hear more people expressing critical comments about your work than comments praising your work. However, this does not necessarily mean that the majority of your audience is unhappy with what you do. It simply means that those who are unhappy voice their opinion vehemently.

When people like what you do, they rarely 'jump for joy' and start yelling how wonderful you and your work are. However, when people are dissatisfied with something they tend to make a public display of their displeasure. When the government passes a law that people dislike, people take to the streets in protest, write articles, give interviews and otherwise express their discontent loudly and publicly. However, when the same government passes a law that people like, there is no street parade to display satisfaction, few essays are written to congratulate the government, and little or no formal displays of approval are made.

Unhappy people scream louder than happy people. This is human nature and there is little we can do to change it. All we can do is keep in mind that people who dislike what we do are by nature more verbal than people who appreciate what we do.

If you receive negative criticism about your work, and if you want to check whether the majority of your audience feels that way or not, simply do a survey over email or on your website, for example, asking people how they feel about your work. Once you tally the answers you may be surprised to find out that only a minority dislikes your work. What happens is that this unsatisfied minority expresses their issues publicly, while the satisfied majority remains silent and keeps their opinion to themselves.

7 – Attention Seekers

Some people who make critical comments simply want to get the artist's attention. At an art show, an onlooker making a particularly flippant remark often seeks to get the artist to react to their remark. They are no different than students trying to get the attention of the teacher by being disruptive. However, while this behavior is to be expected from children, it is surprising to see adults behaving that way.

There is no reason to be offended by this behavior. It is certainly not to be taken seriously. It does not deserve much attention, so the simplest approach is to ignore it. If I do acknowledge it, I do so with a smile. Occasionally, if the remark is funny rather than insulting, I might laugh or answer with another joke.

Similarly, somebody who had a bad day, or who for whatever reason is feeling frustrated, may decide to take their frustration out on the artist. In that case their attitude is unrelated to your work or to yourself. You are simply caught in a situation you did not create. The best solution is to leave these people alone by walking away and not responding to their remarks. If you can tell what is going on, saying something like "Long day, isn't it?" may put things in perspective. When they realize that you are not taking their attitude personally, they may change their mind and be more social. Who knows, they might actually enjoy looking at your work!

All in all it is not worth paying attention to everything that you hear. Some people should not be taken seriously because their purpose is not to provide you with useful feedback. Instead, their goal is to get noticed and feel important. It is about them, not about you. I look at them as jokers in a deck of cards. They come with the deck but they are taken out before the deck is used. In other words, they are unnecessary.

8 - Skeptics, Cynics and Other Frustrated Souls

Some people critical of artwork are disappointed with what life offered them and skeptical about other people's endeavors. Skepticism and cynicism have nothing to do with us or our work. It has everything to do with the person who is commenting on our work. In fact, they are not really commenting on our work. They are commenting on themselves and of their view of the world.

Skeptics and cynics often come with personal convictions about what you do even though you have never met them and they have not seen your work before. I had people tell me that the only motivation for my work is greed. Others believe that I cheat the public by using low quality material and by having employees print and frame my work. None of this is true of course, but no amount of explanation will change their mind. Their mind is made up and they do not want to be bothered by the facts. At first I took these remarks personally, but I soon learned to not pay attention to them. These are opinions, not facts. Most importantly, these remarks are not generated by what I do. They are generated by skepticism and cynicism.

9 – Conclusion

Finding what people's motivations are goes a long ways towards understanding criticism rationally and objectively. Doing so opens a door towards a new understanding of criticism. While criticism is directed towards us and our work, the majority of this criticism is not generated by us. It is generated by people's personal beliefs, frame of mind, education, cultural background and, sometimes, temper.

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Alain Briot creates fine art photographs, teaches workshops and offers DVD tutorials on composition, raw conversion, optimization, printing, marketing photographs and more. Alain is also the author of *Mastering Landscape Photography* and *Mastering Photographic Composition, Creativity and Personal Style*. Both books are available from Amazon and other bookstores as well from Alain's website.

You can find more information about Alain's work, writings and tutorials as well as subscribe to Alain's Free Monthly Newsletter on his website at <http://www.beautiful-landscape.com>. You will receive over 40 essays in PDF format, including chapters from Alain's books, when you subscribe.



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