



Teaching Design Criticism

Are Design Critics Born or Made?

Critic n. 1. one who judges, evaluates or criticizes. 2. a person skilled in judging the qualities or merits of some class of things, especially literary or artistic works, dramatic or musical performances etc. 3. a person who tends too readily to make trivial or harsh judgments.

—Random House Dictionary

In the fall of 2008 the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York City will offer what it describes as the first MFA Design Criticism program in the country dedicated to critical writing and thinking about product, fashion, Web and graphic design and urban planning. The school's ambitious goal is to establish design criticism as an academic discipline and professional practice. Although the graduate program already has established courses in Art Criticism and Writing, Art Education and Art Therapy, for an art institution considered primarily as a studio school and not known for providing academic credentials, this is a radical departure. What has prompted this shift, and can SVA now earn a broader and more profound educational role?

What is the Design Criticism MFA?

The two-year program promises to prepare students for careers as design critics, journalists and curators as well as yet to be defined roles in writing and design. SVA encourages students from a range of academic backgrounds and professional experience to join the program. Sample courses include Design History, Researching Design, Architecture and Urban Design Criticism and Exhibition Curation. The faculty represents some of our leading writers and design experts: Paola Antonelli, curator in the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art; Michael Bierut, partner, Pentagram; Karrie Jacobs, contributing editor, *Metropolis* magazine; Steven Heller, co-founder, SVA Design Criticism program; Janet Froelich, creative director, the *New York Times Magazine*; Ralph Caplan, journalist and contributing editor of *Print* magazine; and visiting scholars, journalists and critics. Each student will be responsible for a final thesis and the first graduating class will plan and produce a public conference in 2010.

Limited to a class of 12, the program will be held in a sleek 4,000-square-foot studio in SVA's new space on 11st Street in Manhattan. Classes begin at 5:00 P.M. with studios open 24/7. With no daytime classes, this program essentially amounts to night school, the advantage being that students may be employed full- or part-time while attending.

How much does the program cost?

Tuition for two years is \$52,240 plus departmental fees. Living expenses, on average according to the SVA financial advisor, are \$35,200 for two academic years (no summers), include room, board and personal expenses. The estimated grand total is \$85,240. Compare this to the MFA at the Yale University School of Art in which critical writing is a central component. The tuition for two years is \$54,600 including health care services. A dormitory room with bath averages around \$10,000 for two years with board and personal expenses averaging the same as SVA. The estimated total for two years at Yale is \$75,100. Which diploma do you think will provide the more impressive credentials?

Are there any other schools that have similar graduate programs?

Graduate degrees in design history, design writing and criticism are offered at Cornell University, North Carolina State University, University of Michigan, California Institute of the Arts, University of Houston, Arizona State University, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and California College of the Arts. For example, the program at Arizona State "applies critical methods to design as material culture, evaluates achievement vs. intention." California College of the Arts offers "an exploration of the connections between design, history and culture and their influence on the design of products, services and communication." At Cornell's College of Human Ecology, Department of Design & Environmental Analysis, it is considered an important aspect of design history, theory and criticism and the University of the Arts in London has an honors program that teaches Criticism, Communication and Curation of Arts & Design. The advantage of attending a full-time university is that students can avail themselves of a

variety of other departments on campus with the option of adding courses of interest, like business or psychology or any others relevant to design criticism. Other schools put design criticism within a context essential to any career in the art world whether as a curator, teacher or journalist. Proficiency in critical writing and thinking are basic tools for every kind of design-related business that requires the ability to communicate effectively and position itself within contemporary culture. Today an advanced degree in design writing and criticism must be seriously considered as a valid educational plus. Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, director of studies in graphic design at Yale supports this direction, "Design lacks the deep history of critical writing that architecture has, so I welcome all efforts to strengthen informed and well-crafted writing about design."

What are the graduate's future career opportunities?

The SVA program plans to teach the requisite skills for professional writing on design or other critical practices like curating, publishing or teaching. One example of the new opportunities available for this generation of design critics comes from the prestigious architectural firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) in New York where the position of writer/design critic requires an individual with the ability to

write intelligently about concepts for briefs and presentations, as well as develop critiques and theoretical strategies as a member of the design team. Ideally this person will have some architectural background. Ivan Pazos, associate of SOM'S Interior Architecture Department says, "Although some of our architects and designers do write well, we are still lacking good writers. We need someone who will be focused on critical writing that communicates our creative concepts in a language that differs from our marketing copy." What is the salary for this position? "Most everyone here has a master's degree, it is expected, and the applicant with an advanced degree has a definite edge. A junior person with a MFA will earn between \$40,000-60,000 depending on the level of work experience and skills." Professor Leslie Becker at the California College of the Arts teaches Visual & Critical Studies in the MFA program. She sees a degree in visual criticism as especially useful in teaching undergraduate and graduate level courses in art and design schools. Keep in mind that the salary range for writers in general, regardless of advanced degrees, is underwhelming; according to the *Wall Street Journal's* www.careerjournal.com the top salary for an editorial director editor-in-chief is around \$73,000 with writer salaries about \$46,000. In 2005 the Creative Group, a staffing firm in Menlo Park, California, reported annual salaries for Web-content writers with 1-5 years

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experience from \$33,500—\$47,500. Freelancers are paid between \$1-\$2 per word. Highly sought after art and history museum curatorial jobs that offer prestige and a degree of security, pay less than \$50,000 on average. (Source: American Association of Museums www.aam-us.org.) Unlike designers who have the option of opening their own office with or without a partner, a solo design critic relies on connections to publications, cultural organizations or, in rare cases, may join a large design firm as a staff writer/critic. The earning potential and job openings are limited.

According to a recent article in the *New York Times*, "More students than ever have started master's programs this fall and universities are seeing these programs as potentially lucrative sources of revenue. The number of students earning these degrees has nearly doubled since 1980." Although university degrees are generally expensive, they are in great demand and are considered necessary for career advancement and future salary increases in the fields of business, science and law. However the MFA in Design Criticism discussed here is no guarantee of success. With armies of newly hatched graphic designers hitting the job market every year, many will not easily find work, so developing additional communication skills is clearly a wise career strategy.

Who are the **prospective design critics**?

Questioning some of the potential applicants to SVAS Design Criticism program provided some insight into the attraction to this special curriculum. As seen by Kristen Lukiewski, a senior at Carnegie Mellon University with a major in communication design as well as creative and professional writing, the appeal is strong: "The chance to combine design and writing is perfect for me because it allows me to become more critical, questioning and analytical about design. This program has the power to make design more important to everyday life. I would like to be an entrepreneur, start my own magazine and, ideally, make a name for myself as a design critic." Someone who has worked in the design profession for twenty years finds the opportunity to grow in an existing role particularly important. Benita Raphan, projects coordinator and an instructor at SVA, envies people in the design profession who are able to put their thoughts and discoveries into words and be proactive in their roles as educators. "With an MFA I will be able to expand my repertoire so that I can write books and create new concepts to expand arts education in general while continuing to work at SVA." After working as an editorial intern and freelance writer, Shirley Surya is currently a project manager for the Design Singapore Council and assistant editor for an art and design publishing house in Singapore.

From Asparagus to Zucchini...



LEFT: EDOUARD MANET, A BUNCH OF ASPARAGUS, 1880 WALLRAF-RICHARTZ-MUSEUM – FONDATION CORBOUD, COLOGNE, GERMANY PHOTO CREDIT: ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY
RIGHT: SQUASH EFFIGY VESSEL. MUSEO NACIONAL DE ANTROPOLOGIA E HISTORIA, MEXICO CITY, D.F., MEXICO PHOTO CREDIT: MICHEL ZABÉ/ART RESOURCE, NY

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"I see the growing trend toward interdisciplinary collaboration and the importance of dialogue between the different disciplines. We need to be well-versed in everything from product design to urban planning to anticipate solutions when boundaries of influence are crossed. New York City is one of the world's major creative hubs, thus presenting great resources for learning and opportunities for practice and debate." So far most of the prospective applicants are graphic design students, but the school is keen on attracting students from a variety of disciplines including architecture, product or environmental design and hopes to have a mix of people with work experience as well as young people just out of school. Some of the applicants, however, have expressed concerns about the program such as whether it will give them an edge over a museum curator or magazine editor who already has five years of experience.

How relevant is the MFA with regard to finding a job, and what value do graduates offer over someone who assumed a design critic role without formal academic training?

Aside from acquiring an appropriate critical vocabulary and historical perspective, a professional critic needs to have a distinct individual voice, be passionate, witty, provocative, angry or possibly ambivalent, but always, unequivocally, well-informed. Critics need the courage of their convictions since they may express a point of view that is not popular. The fact is, critics are always outsiders. Team players need not apply. Yes, one can be taught to write well, learn design speak and the history of every area of design, but cannot be trained to express why design matters culturally and socially. The primary role of critical writing is to create attention to areas of design that are commonly accepted without question. The critic questions: Is this the best use of the space or materials? Does this sign or poster really communicate the intent of the message? Is this object functional or merely a frivolous, hip statement?

What are the additional areas where this education can be applied?

Heller believes that although criticism is still in its infancy, "The range of venues for critical discourse has increased in the multimedia era, enabling students to apply critical skills to a range of media, including radio, television, film and exhibitions." For the practicing creative professional with a fully realized career, this course would be rewarding as a scholarly pursuit—an end in itself. Most of today's critics are self-appointed, without advanced academic degrees. But the majority of them have come to the position after years as designers; they know the history, the origins and context of contemporary design. With the introduction of the Internet and its spontaneous, unregulated platforms, people with little or no credentials can invent themselves as critics and comment on design while infiltrating the creative community.

The dogging question here is how can a twenty-something recent graduate become a design critic with little or no work experience in this field?

Can criticism be taught?

What is that saying, "Those who can, do, those who can't, teach" or become critics? Obviously the sva faculty is enthusiastic about the program, explaining how they learned their craft after much stumbling, but can there be a shortcut to real experience? There is a lot to be learned from stumbling. At the Open House introduction to the Design Crit MFA, the faculty members described the labs, the proposed tours of some of the well-known New York offices and a roster of excellent future guest speakers, but never really got into where this was all leading—a job. Most thoughtful, seasoned pros in the design business would love to take this course, regardless of the degree, simply for the pleasure of learning, as well as improving their communication skills and critical thinking. The point is not whether design criticism is of value, but whether perhaps the focus is too narrow.

How many "critics" does the world need?

Jacques Giard, Ph.D, director and professor at Arizona State University College of Design, is a pragmatist. "The issues facing many in the design world are much more pragmatic and unfortunately less prone to deliberate scholarly reflection. This is not to say that reflection via design criticism isn't necessary, but as a stand-alone area of study it is not central to our mission here (at the College of Design), not when sustainability, globalization, digitization and off-shoring are irreversibly changing the design professions." Arizona State University offers bachelor, master and doctoral degrees in planning, architecture, landscape architecture, interior design, industrial design and visual communication design. The MSD degree is essentially a research degree in design and their Ph.D is interdisciplinary in nature, much as the practice of design has now become.

We are accustomed to reading criticism of music, films and theater. A negative review has serious consequences at the box office and these reviewers have the power to make or break a new production. In the world of fine art and architecture criticism either enhances or devalues the work and reputation of the artist. When a newly published book receives a "glowing" review this not only translates into sales of the book but also its future potential as a film plus product and franchise tie-ins. Restaurants live or die by the number of stars they are given. But what happens when the public reads a review of a piece of graphic or environmental design? What are the lasting consequences of negative criticism of landscape or interior design?

Positive, informative reports to the non-design public are rare. Gary Hustwit's widely released documentary film *Helvetica*

reveals this ubiquitous typeface, and some famous designers who love or hate it. After 50 years, even in its most bastardized form, Helvetica is still widely used simply because it works. Michael Bierut, one of the instructors in the sva program says, "At this moment the field of design criticism is immature and undefined; the role of an academic program is not only to serve the needs of a mature profession, but also to help rear those still in their infancy. Intelligent, accessible writing on any subject is not the easiest thing to find. In the field of criticism, design remains largely unexplored territory. There is plenty of room for new writers."

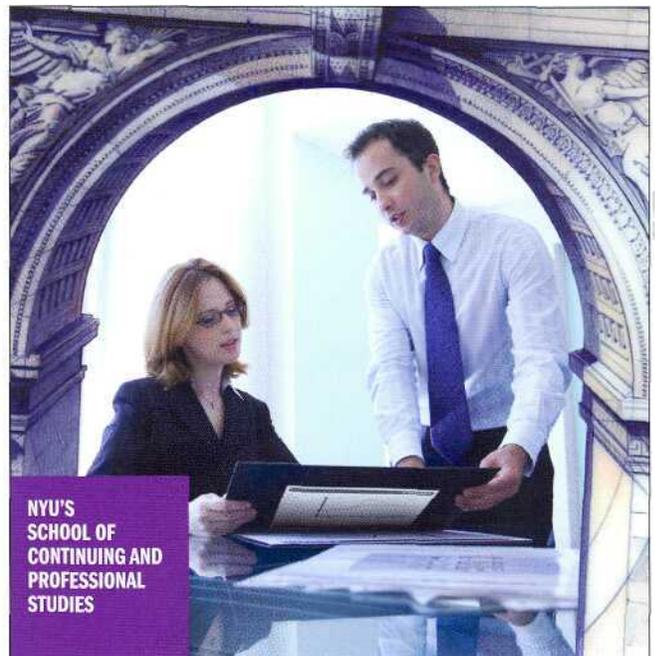
What makes a good critic or design writer?

Alice Twemlow, chair of the MFA Design Criticism Program at sva, puts a great deal of emphasis on history. "I think they have to be historically informed. It is somehow overlooked that one needs to know that there is a whole history that led up to this point in graphic design. When I am looking for good critics I am looking for good historical writers. We will be devoting 30 weeks of the first year to design history classes. The other thing is the development of an interesting, personal voice. We focus deeply on the ability to analyze and formulate a rationale, a sense of a network of objects that a critic has to understand, not just how it looks but why it works and how it connects to similar objects."

Twemlow describes the difference between design writing and design criticism, "Criticism can play out in many different ways. It's critical thinking that is refined and developed, then applied to different formats: radio, TV documentary, magazine, conference, blog. In terms of format, criticism is purer than writing, but writing is at the very core of everything we teach." Creative director of *GOOD* magazine, Casey Caplowe, sees it this way, "What we understand as 'design' is beginning to extend beyond the confines of an esthetic denotation to encompass a broader way of thinking and solving problems. We will benefit from those who are trained to critically view, analyze and communicate. The critical perspectives they bring can enhance our understanding of the designed and undesigned world, how it works and how it can work better."

Alone or as part of a team, a good design critic acts as an intermediary between design and viewer. Today an MFA seems less an option and more a necessity. Objective, intelligent commentary provides the essential view and we need influential writers who convey a powerful message. As the field of design grows, it will demonstrate the profound environmental and economic impact of good design on our society and its ability to solve complex problems. Critical thinking is the engine of positive change. **CA**

Editor's note: We pay the ultimate price if we are not effective critics of our own education—whether in school or on the job.
—DK Holland



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