

*A CASE STUDY OF THE CRITIQUE EXPERIENCE IN
A MASTER OF FINE ARTS (MFA) PROGRAM*

TQR 13th Annual Conference

Research “For a Change”: Time to Evoke, Provoke, and Invoke

January 19, 2022

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My experience

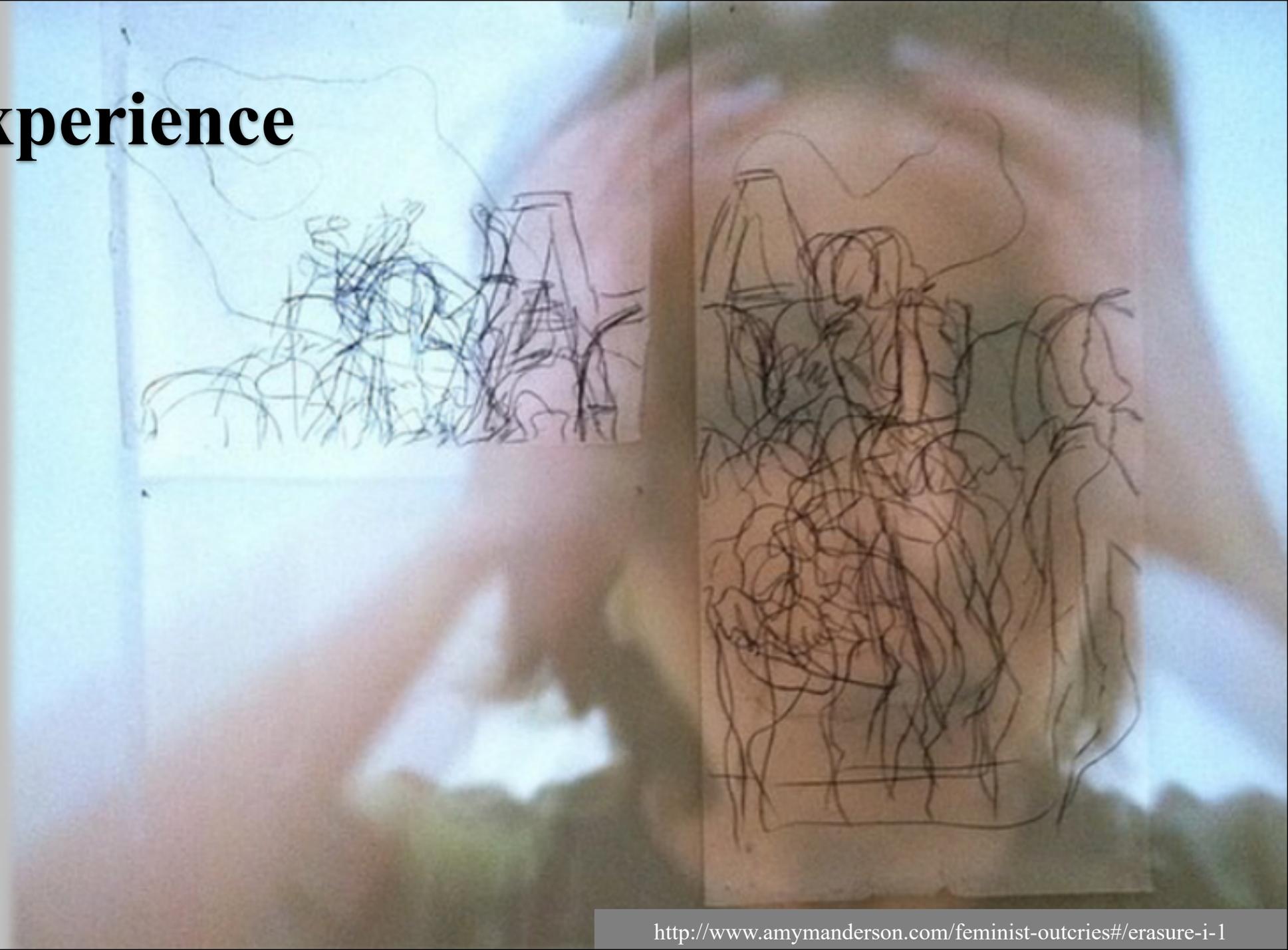
PhD

MFA

MALS

Artist

Instructor



Critique, aka “crit”

An event where a student presents artwork

1:1 (individual): student and professor

Small group: 3-4 people

Large group: All faculty, sometimes other students

Closed: Only student and faculty

Open: Student can invite others

Final: End of the semester, typically associated with assessment

This one is too accurate. 😂



ArtReview 
@ArtReview_

Some of y'all have never been roasted in a critique and it shows.

 4 January at 14:11 · 



Reading this post brought back painful memories. You know you went to art school when you and your classmates have all made each other cry via constructive criticism.



<https://www.facebook.com/amy.r.guthrie>

Goes to art school, has a class critique
cries

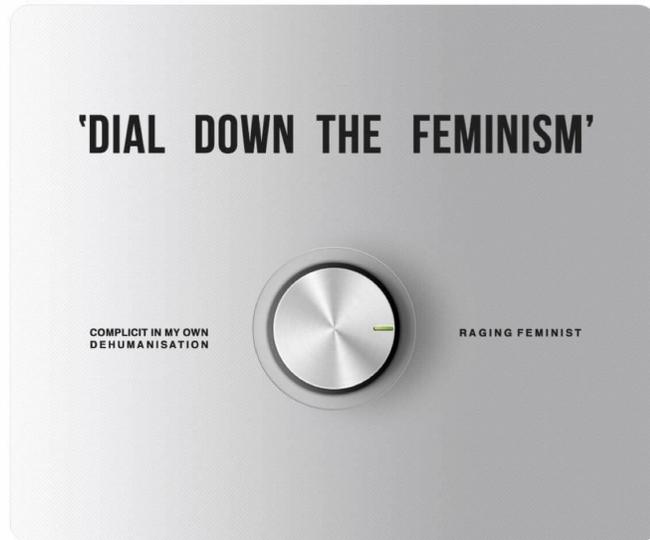


<http://www.quickmeme.com/meme/35x9jm>



AlexBertulisFernande
@alexbertanades

Last week one of my art teachers suggested I 'dial down the feminism.' Today I showed him my newest piece:



https://www.reddit.com/r/TrollXChromosomes/comments/83qq29/dial_down_the_feminism/

a recurring complaint concerned instructors being too dominant. One instructor lamented critiques that became "an opportunity for the instructor to impress the students with the disparity between his or her experience and ability, and theirs." Another wrote that "the process of reflection is stifled by an assertive and aggressive teacher whose own personal needs dominate the critical dialogue." A common complaint iterated by many instructors is when

amy_just_amy Conducted a study EIGHTEEN YEARS later and received [...]



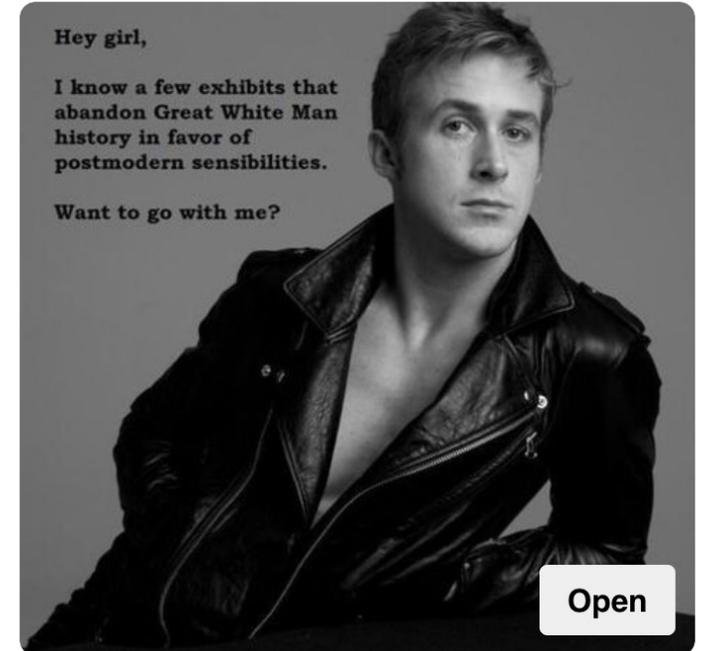
OMFG. Reminds me of a guy we know 😂

Yesterday, 6:47 AM

Yeah and I'm about to write a dissertation on this issue



My favorite memory of him is from the last critique before [redacted] thesis exhibition. He basically told her how she should feel about feminism.



Michelle Williams



<https://pin.it/729Nvz8>

Driving Research Question:

How is critique defined, perceived, and implemented by faculty, students, and alumni in a Master of Fine Arts, Studio Art (MFA) program?

Study structure:

- One MFA program at a regionally accredited state university
- Participants chosen for diverse representation based on self-identified categories
 - 30-minute telephone call
 - 1 – ½ hour recorded interview
 - Transcribed
 - Follow-up email
 - Analyzed

... Single ...

CASE STUDY

P#	Gender	Ethnicity	Sexual Orientation	School Role	MFA Year	Primary Medium
1	Male	Mixed	Straight	Student	<5 yrs	Clay
2	Male	Descended from Europe	Mostly heterosexual	Instructor	5-10 yrs	Wide-ranging
3	Female	White/ Jewish	Straight	Alumni	<5 yrs	Painting
4	Female/ Non-binary	White/Irish	Queer/Bisexual	Student	<5 yrs	Painting/ drawing
5	Male	White	Straight	Alumni	<5 yrs	Painting/ drawing
6	Female	Caucasian/ Asian	Heterosexual	Alumni	15-20 yrs	Painting
7	F	White	Heterosexual	Alumni	<5 yrs	Textile installation & Performance
8	F	White	Hetero	Alumni	<5 yrs	Paint
9	Cis-Man	White	Heterosexual/ Straight	Alumni	<5 yrs	Sculpture and Performance
10*	[skipped]	[skipped]	[skipped]	Instructor	5-10 yrs	Multi-media

Participant Self-identified Demographics

Not all versions of reality hold “equal legitimacy if the purpose of research is to challenge the status quo and bring about social change”

(Mertens, 2012, p. 811).

Mertens, D. (2012). Transformative mixed methods: Addressing inequities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 56(6), 802–813.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764211433797>

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“I'm really interested in this study, and am really interested in exploring better ways to help artists grow and learn, because the traditional crit format just does not work for many people. I would love to hear about the results of your research. I'm glad that someone is researching this!!”

“I am personally very upset about my graduate school experience.”

“I am eager to share my experience on an anonymous basis, or if my name doesn't get published for 5-10 years. I strongly disagree with the way critiques are done here, but am hesitant to voice my opinion in public while attending school or looking for a job for fear of retaliation.”

anything?
else.

**In an optional open-ended box for
further comments**



Questions given to participants:

- 1 – If you are/were in the role of critique instructor, how do/would you facilitate critique?
- 2 – In your opinion, what is the purpose of critique?
- 3 – Will you tell me a story or experience about receiving art critique?
- 4 – Have you experienced critique that impacted you in a positive way, and if so will you elaborate on that experience?
- 5 – Have you experienced critique that impacted you in a negative way, and if so will you elaborate on that experience?
- 6 – In your experience, has the role of critique ever been particularly clear or unclear, and if so will you elaborate on that experience?
- 7 – How would you describe the elements or nature of an effective critique?
- 8 – How would you describe the elements or nature of an ineffective critique?
- 9 – Can you describe any short or long term effects of critiques as you experienced them?

Critique Story, Participant 1 - Straight, Mixed, Male, Clay

This has truly been the worst experience of my life. My first critique here was the event that started everything. I was extremely unprepared for what was expected. I just thought I'll make the work and everybody would discuss their thoughts and feelings about it, but apparently the purpose of critique here is to present your research. Every single critique is really like a defense of your ideas. When I came to that first critique, I was bombarded with questions and accusations, and it was a really horrifying experience. And honestly, it sounds kind of silly to say this, but it was honestly the worst experience of my life.

Critique Story, Participant 1- Straight, Mixed, Male, Clay

I was being publicly humiliated. It was embarrassing, and when I was having a hard time – visibly having a hard time responding to questions in an articulate way – there were some professors who were visibly upset and very angry that I couldn't articulate myself. They expressed those views in front of everyone. That was deeply impactful in a negative way. I'm just not very good at responding on my feet. I think best sitting in a quiet room. When I feel like I'm being attacked in public, I don't know how to respond. It seems like in a critique situation, if you show any sort of sign for weakness, it's just like you're pounced upon. They point that out, and tear you apart.

Critique Story, Participant 1- Straight, Mixed, Male, Clay

During that first critique, one professor got very upset that I was taking notes, and told me, “When I’m talking to you, you look at me. You do not write things down.” The culture is, you know, I can’t take notes. I just don’t believe it’s for my benefit. These big group critiques – I don’t want to remember them, because it’s not for me.

That night, I woke up in the middle of the night in a heavy sweat, filled with more emotional pain, panic, and dread than I have ever felt in my life. It was truly overwhelming. For the first time in my life, I seriously contemplated killing myself to escape how I was feeling.

Critique Story, Participant 1- Straight, Mixed, Male, Clay

I think it would be beneficial for your research for me to go into a little bit more detail about how negatively impactful critique was. It's something that I've brought up to professors, and I was chastised for saying it was difficult. I've never really been depressed before, maybe a little bit in junior high, but I really did not want to be alive anymore after that critique. It was horrific. And that kind of feeling stayed with me the rest of the school year. It was terrible, and I would tell people I just want to survive and I was being pretty literal.

Critique Story, Participant 1- Straight, Mixed, Male, Clay

My personal relationship with my professors has been really terrible. I felt backed against the wall, and was honest with how this was affecting me. I thought I would get some sympathy, but I received the opposite, like “how dare you question how we’re doing things. This is the way it’s been, and this is the way it’s going to be.” Like being open and honest with my feelings was an immature action on my part, and that wasn’t just a professor, they had an administrative role. Maybe my professors think we’re just entitled, but I don’t think someone should have to go through trauma and torture in school. I don’t think it’s too much to ask that they be decent individuals, treat people with decency, and maybe I’m just part of a generation that’s willing to say, “enough is enough.”

Critique Story, Participant 1- Straight, Mixed, Male, Clay

I did think, why am I doing this to myself? Should I quit? How is this worth it? I started seeing a therapist and that helped. And then I talked to a lot of my peers, and they were also seeing therapists, like most of them. I don't understand how it's beneficial to have a structure where most of the students are seeing therapists to get through it, because after a horrific critique, any comment that was made that could have been constructive and perhaps helped the work, was tainted. After a terrible critique I don't want to think about it, I just want to move on. My mantra became, "I want to die. I wish I could die. I want to die." I would repeat this to myself over and over.

Critique Story, Participant 1- Straight, Mixed, Male, Clay

I honestly thought, “how could I make my situation better? What would it take?” The things that are said in critique are so hurtful, but I don’t think people even realize they’re being hurtful. Just this is how it’s been done for so long that they forget you’re having a conversation with real human beings. I thought, “what would it take?” Maybe a psychologist or somebody would have to come in and be in on critiques as a referee to say, “wait a second. You can’t say that.” I hope that my professors aren’t being hurtful knowingly. I hope they’re not trying to hurt me.

Critique Story, Participant 1- Straight, Mixed, Male, Clay

The littlest thing would have made a big difference. If after the critique my professors would have come up to me and pat me on the back and said, “you’ve got this, you can do it”, you know – some kind of encouraging gesture or comment, but you don’t get anything like that. They tear you apart, and then they leave, and you’re just kind of left...

Critique Story, Participant 1- Straight, Mixed, Male, Clay

The second year, I was more prepared to act like, to be, the monkey they wanted me to be. I only kind of understand that a little bit better – what they were expecting. But then at the end, it totally fell apart. One person explained it to me that it's like adding salt to a dish, and you know a little bit too much salt is way too much. When you go into a critique, you don't know how much salt the student has already added to their own dish, and adding just a tiny bit more can ruin the whole thing.

It certainly makes me not want to make art. It has affected me in the way that I do not want to be in the studio, maybe even on a subconscious level just because making work in the studio leads to trauma. And let me say one more thing. I've never been less productive as an artist than I was in graduate school. I don't think that's a good thing. Looking at not just myself, but my peers, whenever we didn't have to be at the studio, none of us were there. None of us chose to be in the studio unless we absolutely had to be. If there was an excuse not to be in the studio, I happily took it.

Critique Story, Participant 1- Straight, Mixed, Male, Clay

I was really hesitant at first to be involved in this study, because I went through a really difficult time with my faculty, so I somehow thought maybe you were collecting information for my faculty – which obviously isn't the case. I have never been depressed, but now I am clinically depressed – which is a disability.

I have been disabled by this program.

Themes

- a) Role *in* and *of* Critique
- b) Who is it for?
- c) Culture of Fear
- d) Assessment
- e) Romantic Notions and Antiquated Ideals
- f) Positive Themes
 - a. Trust.
 - b. 1:1 versus The Group.
- g) Participants' Perceived Challenges for Faculty

g) Perceived Challenges

- **No Theory**
 - MFA programs teach artists, not educators of art.
 - No pedagogical theory - “We didn’t have a lot of theory. Theory is essential. I didn’t have the tools. I didn’t have the strategy for teaching. It’s tricky. It’s embarrassing, and it hurts. I think a lot of artists who are teaching don’t want to think of the burden or responsibility of calling themselves a teacher. It’s so stressful to think of taking on the burden of learning another discipline. Teaching is its own practice.”
- **Overworked with unattainable expectations by university**



So what do we do now?

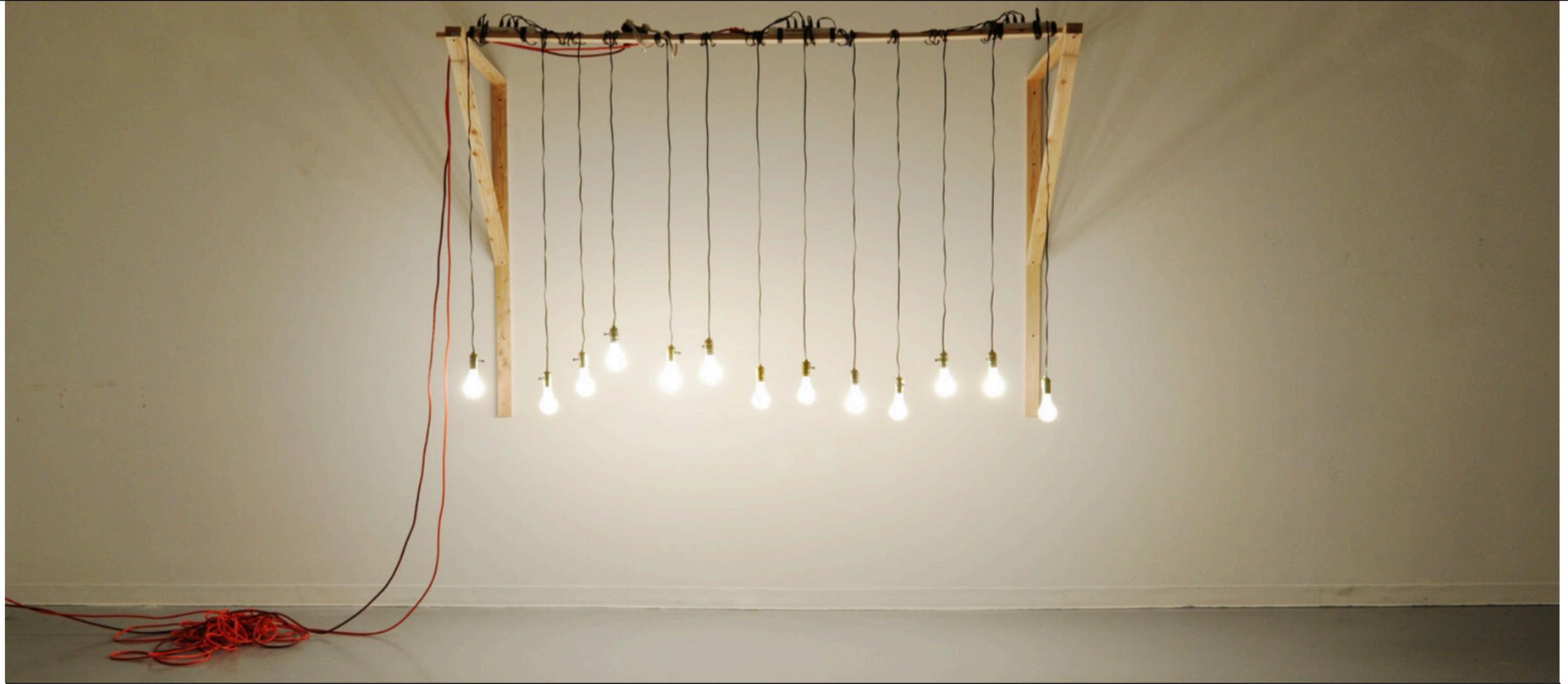
- Quantify grad engagement
- Continued education
 - Contemporary practices
 - Pedagogical theories
- Clear assessment criteria
 - Students set intentions
- Put subjectivity in its place
- Clarify the role of critique
- Alumni follow-up
- In lieu of large-group critique



Paradigm shift

Alumni follow-up

- 5-years after commencement
- Anonymous
- Open-ended questions
- In tandem with job placement surveys



**In lieu of The Large Group Critique
Exhibition**



Benefits

- **Faculty**
 - less time
 - equal playing field
- **Students**
 - Celebration
 - elevation of work
 - real-world experience

**There's never
really an end,
is there?**

Knowledge is a growing moving entity that shifts and changes over time. As cultures shift, it follows the way information is exchanged and knowledge is constructed also shifts.

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