

“ Photographs reveal as much by the way a subject is photographed as by what is in them. Photographs communicate first visually, then emotionally”

Wendy Ewald

Talking About Photographs - The Critique

We often find ourselves uncomfortably short on things to say about photographs. Often we find ourselves saying, “This is a great show”, or “I don’t like this stuff”. Frequently a discussion does not go beyond a comment of approval or dismissal, especially if others agree with our comment.

Critiques can be very boring if no one except the teacher talks.

Here are some suggestions:

1. Describe what you see

Describing a photograph to a group when everyone can see the image may seem a bit silly, but someone else might overlook what is apparent to you. If a group of twenty people describe a photograph, each person may attend to different parts of the image and with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

2. Consider both subject matter and form (design/composition)

Photography discussions tend to focus on form or design and shy away from talking about subject matter. However, considering the photographers subject matter is essential in many cases (though not all) to get the full understanding of the work.

3. Interpretation of a photograph is a group effort

We should consider both the photographers intended meaning of a photograph and the class’s interpretations of that image when talking about or deciding upon the photo’s meaning. In other words- a photograph is never solely about the meaning it’s creator (the photographer) intended.

4. Avoid hasty judgments - Be honest and open

We should avoid quick judgments and try to have reasons for the comments we do make. We should also be willing to listen to points of view that challenge our own. An honest and open attitude will improve critiques and all class discussions.

In any discussion it is important to actively listen and acknowledge to the speaker (classmates) that you have heard what he or she has said. Also try to respond to their comments even if you disagree. Speaking aloud can be a risky act, but the more comfortable we can make the situation for others and ourselves, the more enjoyable the discussion will be.

This material is drawn from the book *Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Images* By Terry Barrett