What can philosophy do for critique? One philosophically serious reply to that question is, “I’m not sure.” Another reply is, “Which philosophy?” What follows comes out of my experience. For me, three phenomena occasion the question.

First, philosophy attracts fine artists. Many sign up for the existentialism course I teach at Moore College of Art and Design. Art historically, the attraction is noteworthy. One example is Jacques Louis David’s *The Death of Socrates* (1787). The painting substitutes a Greek, sentenced to death for commitment to critical questioning of authority, for Christ as the heroic martyr of Enlightenment, hence revolutionary, consciousness. If anyone doubts the power of art to animate a philosophy—like the one that says every man has inborn reason and hence has the right to govern himself or choose who can govern him, as in “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” self-evidence the work of imperishable mind—then let him ponder David’s work. If Enlightenment ideas of rational republicanism and universal self-evidence have fallen on hard times, then the role of art to convert despair to philosophical encouragement presumably has not. Socrates gives us his method: anytime we begin a critique with a question, and respond to someone’s (or our own) answer with another question, then another, toward a clearer, perhaps humbler sense of at least what we do not mean to say, then we practice, we personify, a philosophy. Personifying it is the point, otherwise lost: we practice a questioning ethos.
Second, fine art since Duchamp has become a form of philosophy, if Arthur Danto’s formulation is no fanciful dictum. Danto means that art is now conceptual—more about its ideas than its formal properties. If the work or performance increasingly resembles ordinary objects and activities, then what distinguishes it is its concept, its critique of life and world. Paradoxically, this makes the art less accessible, which in turn requires the engagement of critics and interpreters in some sense equal to the artists themselves—an institution of philosopher-artists and philosopher-critics. The studio during critique is such a space. Notice how our anxiety in it has shifted from whether various skills and crafts have been mastered to whether we can make sense of the work, whether, indeed, we can justify it as meaningful work, as work that society should regard as such. That we spend so much effort critiquing students’ work implies both our belief that their arts training needs no justification, and our anxiety that it does.

Finally, and most recently, philosophy, paradoxically against all odds of recessionary times and utilitarian expectations—as Marco Rubio pronounced it, “We need more welders, less philosophy majors”—has seen enrollments surge and departments expand. If philosophy is suddenly, perhaps always already, wanted in the unlikeliest of settings—the high school, the two-year college—then the art school, that anxious, sometimes haltingly articulate quest to defend and explain what artists now do, may want just as much its clarifying, or its philosophically questioning, terms. So, what might philosophy do for artists, and for the critique as a vital and fraught moment of the art school experience? And what might they do for philosophy?

I’ll focus on three things, moving from the general to the specific.

Existentialist philosophers argue the priority of philosophical questions, like what is being, how do I feel about being, and should I be. They do this because they are philosophers,
nervous about the impressive knowledge and reach of scientists. And they do this because they think which questions you ask of the world in the first place is a matter of expressing your being in it, of how, primordially that, you feel about it. Science knows reality objectively, but what this means for me in a world of objects remains open to question and feeling. Science therefore cannot exhaust the answers I seek of my being, the question of why, not simply that, I am here, which only I can answer, or keep from answering. This may sound like academic philosophy pretentiously claiming priorities for itself. But Heidegger’s point is at least as generous as it is grandiose, in that he thinks everyone is philosophical, not in the professional sense, but because everyone interprets their being, asks questions about it, wonders about its future. He thinks many people forget this, and so live less true to themselves than they’d otherwise choose. So when students bring philosophy and philosophers into their artist statements, it’s not just a pretense, dropping names and concepts. It’s not just that they want their projects to mean something, though they do want this. They want them to mean everything, as in mean the world. Heidegger’s thought helped me to appreciate more seriously that this may be what is going on when many of my students self-consciously turn to philosophy, or, more accurately, turn from philosophy to their projects again, committing their beings to their questionable art.

A second use of philosophy goes to Danto’s point about conceptual art, which now is much art. No surprise then that students use theoretical terms; their statements bristle with the argot of contemporary theory. If they are expected, urgent, anxious, to do this verbal work, then conferring with a theorist may help them use such terms or save them from the embarrassment of misusing them. The discourse is collaborative, as the theorist confronts the relevance of theory. Confront is not too strong a word. His own embarrassment is as much at stake as the artist’s—
his own learning most tested, perhaps, by having to teach it around a public object, which stands for the student’s time, if not the student. I am impressed, and made anxious, by how many art students migrate in four years from traditional forms and formal practice to conceptual work of little formal emphasis, and how often this is true of even the most formally skilled students. This confirms the institutional, if not always existential, pull of conceptual art, that conceptual art is probably, dominantly, here to stay, a good thing, a hazardous thing, for artists, their teachers, and their publics—philosophers all, but only if some concepts clearly take.

Philosophers, whatever else they do, practice making such sense of concepts. They try to make definitional distinctions. They link or contrast them toward a conceptual frame, a way of thinking afresh, or more clearly, about something confusing. This conference recalls that art critique is a densely, deliriously verbal practice; Homo artifex remains a verbal species. For all of our visual saturation, we talk. We talk about art, and talk about it, and talk some more. Our critiques aren’t conducted in mime, music, or visuals by proxy. As long as language remains at the center, at the depth and surface, of our philosophically artistic lives, then we grope toward a language both public and philosophical, the one our work deserves. An unfortunate stereotype of our discourse, whether of artist or critic, is its slackness and obscurity. Criticism can’t and shouldn’t drain its subjects of ambiguity; art is as ambiguous as life. Paradoxically, linguistic clarity can focus which concepts are ambiguously in tension, or in ironic play, or in unstable emergence, or, as it sometimes happens, too messy or unfocused to signify. But even if an artist never talks about her work—and she doesn’t have to—someone else will. And that someone else may not have her interests at heart. One critical practice I’ve learned the hard way: take time to
define terms and concepts, and start with just a few. A jargony discussion is too often a sign of terminological insecurity. Working definitions are a small antidote to this.

A third use of philosophy goes to helping the artist’s practice as much as the public’s understanding it. I doubt these aims can be unraveled, so here I’ll give an example of my teaching experience, regarding a student I had several conversations with about her work. She took my class and was impressed by the term *phenomenological* and its implications for her art. Phenomenology is the study of consciousness and experience from the subjective point of view; it implies the lived experience as a starting point for perceiving and knowing. A sculptor, she constructed jagged metal domes and boxes with openings and wings, illuminated from within. The light from these abodes produced faint streaks and flickers, with penumbral visible on the walls and floor. At her senior critique, she used the word *phenomenological* to describe her work in these forms. The ensuing discussion, with her work as focus, helped us explore and feel what she meant. We noted that in Western thought light has been a symbol of pure, stable, rational knowing, like in David’s brilliant painting of Socrates. But here, it was unstable and ambiguous. Here, light was fraught with the doubts, anxieties, and tentative hopes of lived experience. How witty, and moving, of her work, to use light itself as the element of doubtful awareness.

When a philosophical idea helps us imagine the work before us, when we feel the work in that moment of word and object, object and word, disclosing each other, then philosophy matters, by taking the form of matter. It leaves behind the page, the classroom, the instructor in his sometimes empty discursive effort. The idea takes form—in two senses of “takes.” It *assumes* form, giving some real meaning; it *requires* form, receiving the same.

Thank you.