

Writing Exhibition Reviews

Like other kinds of reviews, exhibition reviews are designed to help readers understand the value or importance of a particular exhibition according to specific criteria that the reviewer uses to evaluate it. Some readers will use this information to determine whether to attend an exhibition. Others will use it to compare their own experience of an exhibition to a reviewer's. Still others will use it to find out about exhibitions that they missed.

How you write your review depends entirely on the kind of audience you are writing for and what it is you want to communicate about a particular exhibition.

INTRODUCING THE EXHIBITION

Unlike books or films, an exhibition is not necessarily something that readers can read or view unless they happen to be in the particular location where the exhibition is taking place. So it's particularly important that you provide some context for the exhibition for those readers who haven't seen it or won't be able to see it. The following are questions that you could answer to provide this context:

What is the title of the show? Who is the artist or performer? Who was/is involved in the creative process? Is this a group show, or a performance piece? Is the artist directly involved in the performance? What is the duration of the exhibition? Where is it showing? What kind of venue is it? And, perhaps most importantly, what does the work look like? Does it have characteristics besides the visual? (Does it make noise? Smell?)

It can often be helpful to also provide some description of the exhibition: you might imagine that you are a tour guide to the exhibition describing what you see as enter the space, as you move through the space, as you round a corner, etc.

CRITICALLY EVALUATING AN EXHIBITION

Critically evaluating something doesn't necessarily mean that you criticize: it means that you evaluate its importance or meaning on the basis of certain criteria. In some cases, the criteria will be defined by your course assignment. In most cases, however, the criteria for evaluation are entirely up to you. The following provide some examples of criteria used to evaluate an exhibition:

What effect does the work have on the viewer? This can be positive, negative, "apparently indifferent," or some combination of these. You might consider what's missing, what's worth seeing, what it is you value the most.

Is the exhibition compelling? Difficult? Complex? Overwhelming? Aesthetically appealing? Humorous? Predictable? Too theory based? Too abstract? Not abstract enough?

In Jane Marco's latest work, she seems to have moved away from focusing on alienation and identity as key themes. In doing so, her work has become less cryptic and more inviting. Yet she still leaves the viewer perplexed...

If the artist is working within or responding to a particular genre or theoretical model, is s/he conforming to that genre or model's expectations? Is s/he attempting to deconstruct that model, or undermine the viewer's assumptions?

Racine's work is obviously influenced by de Kooning's Woman and Bicycle. The excessive brushstrokes and the huge staring eyes haunt the viewer and demand...

How does the physical space work to enhance or detract from the work? How does it contribute the overall effect or meaning of the exhibition?

The circular walls of the gallery and scattered spotlights highlight the shape of the masks and drums hanging from the twenty foot ceilings...

What contributions does the work make to the artist's portfolio? How does the work relate to a previous show, to the kind of work they do in general?

Cindy Sherman's first show of new photographic work in nearly four years ... shocks by the raucousness of its imagery and, no less, by the unusual blandness of its style ... Sherman is the doyenne of an epochal evolution of photography into 'photographic art,' by which the mechanical medium has usurped painting's traditional function." (Peter Schjeldahl, The New Yorker).

What abstract idea, theme, concept, or topic does the exhibition emphasize or communicate?

Breaking Through Ellipses is primarily a show about how language can work on its own as an illusive, cryptic and disintegrating identity. Jason Thibault's Simulacra is made up of six wire mesh panels with three words cut from each of three corners. Each word relates to an aspect of time and space, and attempts to make concrete the most abstract, yet elemental, aspects of our lives.

USING SOURCES

If you are writing a review for a course assignment, or even if you're not, you may want or need to consult other sources of information, such as artist's statements, the exhibition catalogue, recent articles or reviews in newspapers and journals, the didactic panels, academic essays in journals, or interviews with the artist(s) or curator. How does this additional information change or deepen your response to the exhibition?

In her introduction to the catalogue of C.D. Hoy's photographs, now showing at Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver, Faith Moosang accurately describes the show as 'exotic ... even exquisite.' However...

MORE INFORMATION

“Writing a Review of an Exhibition” from *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*, 8th Ed.: Sylvan Barnet, 2005. Via UCLA & DMA.

http://classes.dma.ucla.edu/Fall11/495/handouts/Writing_a_Review_of_an_Exhibition.pdf

Notes on Writing Exhibition Reviews: Judy Radul for Simon Fraser University, 2000

<http://www.sfu.ca/~jaradul/reviews.html>

There are numerous examples of published exhibition reviews available in Artforum and Magenta Magazine:

<http://www.magentamagazine.com/exhibition-reviews>

<http://artforum.com/inprint/>

<http://artforum.com/picks/>