

Writing a Review of an Exhibition

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Sylvan Barnet

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WRITING A REVIEW OF AN EXHIBITION

Pleasure is by no means an infallible guide, but it is the least fallible.

—W. H. Auden

That which probably hears more nonsense than anything else in the world is a picture in a museum.

—Edmond and Jules de Goncourt

WHAT A REVIEW IS

Your instructor may ask you to write a review of an exhibition at a local museum or art gallery. Like other writing about art, a review should deepen the reader's understanding of art history, or enhance the reader's experience of works of art, or both.

Writing a review requires analytic skill, but a review is not identical with an analysis. An analysis usually focuses on one work or at most a few, and often the work (let's say Picasso's *Guernica*) is familiar to the readers. On the other hand, a review of an exhibition normally is concerned with a fairly large number of works, many of which may be unfamiliar. The first paragraph or two of a review usually provides a helpful introduction, such as the following, in which a reviewer writing in a newspaper—i.e., a publication read by nonspecialists—gives some background material about Mary Cassatt, not an unknown figure but not known in the way that Rembrandt or van Gogh or Picasso is known:

The Impressionist painter Mary Cassatt (1844–1926) was a character of intriguing contradictions. The daughter of a wealthy Philadelphia banker, she led a social life of impeccable gentility, but as an artist in Paris in the late 1870s, she fell in with a disreputable gang of outsiders—the officially denigrated Impressionists.

While she worked on the cutting edge of avant-garde style, she made no overtly challenging images. Over and over she depicted women like herself engaged in polite social or domestic activities or tending their children (though she never married or had children). Her fiercely precise and intelligent art acquired an undeserved reputation for saccharine softness.

—Ken Johnson, “Childless But Fascinated by Intimate Family Life,”
New York Times, December 1, 2000, B37

Notice that in these opening paragraphs Johnson

- gives us a bit of background about Cassatt’s life, in a nutshell, and he
- gives us some idea of his view of her work (he says that her art is “fiercely precise and intelligent” and that it has “acquired an undeserved reputation for saccharine softness”).

By tipping his hand, Johnson here is following the sound principle of letting his readers know where they will be going; we are now prepared to read a favorable evaluation of Cassatt’s work.

Next, consider Rita Reif’s first two paragraphs from yet another general publication, this time a newspaper. She is reviewing an exhibition of African beadwork, a kind of material that she doubtless correctly assumes most of her readers are unfamiliar with.

In West Africa a century ago, beadwork was a status symbol reserved for kings and priests. Skilled artisans, using gloriously colored glass beads and cowrie shells, devised the ritual artifacts of great fantasy assembled in “African Beadwork: Traditional Symbols,” an exhibition at the Tambaran Gallery, 20 East 76th Street in Manhattan, through June 28.

The 53 pieces on view—crowns, masks, bags and figures—were probably made between 1870 and 1950. The majority were crafted by Yoruban artisans in lands now known as Nigeria. The rest were strung and stitched by Bamileke, Fang and Bamum craftsmen in regions that are today called the Cameroon or by the Kuba people in the area now known as Zaire.

—“African Beadwork,” *New York Times*, May 19, 1991, H37

In both of these examples, the writers are gently educating their readers, giving the readers—who are assumed to be nonspecialists—information that the readers need. If, however, Reif had been writing in a journal such as *African Art*, she would not have provided this elementary information.

If the exhibition is devoted to an artist whose work is likely to be fairly familiar to the readers, for instance work by Monet or Rodin or van Gogh or Norman Rockwell, you will not need to do more in your introduction than to announce the topic—though in an interesting way—and then to get down to business. If, however, the material is relatively unusual, for instance Japanese calligraphy or prehistoric Inuit carving, you probably will have to educate your reader at the outset.

A review usually includes:

- Description
- Analysis
- Evaluation

A description, you recall, is not the same as analysis;

A *description* tells readers what something looks like: A description in a review tells us how big the exhibition is, how the works are displayed (e.g., crowded together or with plenty of space, on white walls or green, brightly lit or in what John Milton called “a dim religious light”), and it tells us what some of the works look like (“He is a large man, and he fills the canvas”);

An *analysis* tells readers how some aspects of the exhibition work (“The paintings, crowded together, convey a sense of bristling energy”; “The chronological arrangement makes sense, but in this exhibition it unfortunately means that the last objects a viewer encounters are the weakest”) and what all parts of the exhibition add up to (“Although the show is chiefly devoted to African ritual objects created between 1880 and 1920, it includes a few recent works, all of which are clearly designed for the contemporary tourist trade. These last are interesting in their own way, but their only connection with the other works is that they were made in Africa.”)

An *evaluation* tells readers whether the exhibition was worth doing, how well it has been done, and whether it is worth seeing—and of course these judgments must be supported with evidence.

If you read reviews of art in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New Yorker*, *The New Criterion*, *The Nation*, and *The New Republic*, or a newspaper, you will soon develop a sense of what reviews for a general public normally do. And of course some journals devoted to art include reviews of exhibitions; these reviews will give you an idea of how to write for a specialized audience. You will quickly notice that reviews of a single artist, whether

in general or specialized publications, are for obvious reasons different from reviews of group shows (“Cubist Art,” “Rivera and His Circle,” “Japanese Photography Today”), and they are different from reviews of exhibitions that cover a fairly large period of art history (“American Women Artists: 1900–1950,” “Art of the Maya: 1000 BCE–1000 CE”). You will also notice that the problems facing a reviewer of “Rothko: A Retrospective” are different from those facing the reviewer of “Rothko: The Last Works.” The first reviewer probably takes note of how Rothko’s style changed over the years, explains the changes, and evaluates the periods; i.e., the review may well be more historical than evaluative. The reviewer of “Rothko: The Last Works,” however, probably briefly puts the paintings into the context of Rothko’s earlier work and then concentrates on discussing a few works at some length; i.e., he or she may offer more analysis and evaluation than history.

Drafting a Review

In brief, in drafting and revising a review—as in drafting and revising almost any other piece of writing you produce in college—keep asking yourself two questions:

- What do my readers need to know? (You will have to provide the necessary background information.)
- What do I want my readers to think? (You will have to offer evidence that supports the thesis you are arguing.)

Speaking broadly, a review commonly has a structure something like this, though the position of the paragraphs on strengths and on weakness may be reversed:

- A title that engages the reader.
- An opening paragraph that informs the reader of the subject—the name or names of the artist(s), the time period and subject matter covered—and that establishes the tone of the review (more about tone in a moment). By the end of the opening, the reader should also sense the reviewer’s thesis, the main point.
- A few paragraphs that go into further detail about the theme, purpose, or idea, or scope embodied in the exhibition, perhaps within the context of related exhibitions; e.g., “Unlike last year’s show of van Gogh’s self-portraits, the current exhibition gives a broad overview. . . .” Some exhibitions treat the objects as works

of art, perhaps giving them a sort of jewel-case setting, whereas other exhibitions treat the objects as artifacts that encode the values of a society, and display them as a historical society might. As an example of this second approach, consider Stephanie Barron’s remarks in the foreword to a catalog entitled *Made in California: Art, Image and Identity, 1900–2000*, an exhibition at the Los Angeles Country Museum of Art: “In general, questions of cultural or historical relevance took precedence over issues of aesthetic innovation.” Some reviewers wondered why an art museum was exhibiting (among other things) pamphlets, newspaper clippings, tourist brochures, and labels from orange crates. Barron’s foreword indicated the approach, but not all of the reviewers accepted it. In any case, at some point you probably will want to comment on the curator’s conception and on the designer’s installation.

By now, too, you should give the reader a strong idea of the thesis of the review, the general point that you will soon support with details.

- A paragraph or two about the setting and the installation. For instance, Robert Hughes in a review (in *Nothing If Not Critical*, page 207) of David Smith’s sculpture says, “The National Gallery’s East Wing, with its choppy transitions of level, is a confusing place for large sculpture; the background is always in the way.” Hughes then goes on to say that Smith’s sculpture triumphs over the environment. Reviews often comment, too, on whether the installation of the material helps or hinders the viewer’s experience. You will probably consider the lighting (an overall wash of light, or spotlights?) and the wall texts and brochures (minimal, adequate, or intrusive?). Remember: The curator has shaped the exhibition by choosing certain works, and the designer has collaborated by displaying them in a certain way.
- A few paragraphs on the strengths, if any (for instance, the exhibition presents unfamiliar work, or work that although it is familiar is nevertheless of such high quality that one can see it again and again). If the exhibition includes work by several artists, the reviewer singles out those who are especially interesting.
- A few paragraphs on the weaknesses, if any (perhaps too much space is devoted to a certain period, or to certain artists, or to certain forms of art). If you include such comments make sure that you do not sound self-satisfied.

- A concluding paragraph in which the reviewer in effect summarizes (but in fresh language) the point—the thesis—that has been emerging throughout the review. A relevant quotation by an artist can often help you write a paragraph that does much more than lamely say, “As I have already pointed out. . . .”

Tone, as another page in this book indicates (174), is largely a product of the writer’s attitude toward the subject and toward the readers. The tone of a review therefore depends partly on the publication in which it will appear: A review in a scholarly journal will have a different tone from a review in a popular magazine. Unless your instructor has told you to write a review aimed at the readers of a specific journal, imagine that your classmates are your readers, forgetting of course that they may be reviewing the same exhibition you are. Remember, too, it’s always productive to treat both your readers and your subject with respect.

Some final tips:

- Read any texts that are on the walls.
- If a brochure is available at the exhibition, take it, read it after you have walked through the exhibition once, and then walk through the exhibition at least once more. On this second trip, you may want to record (in the form of marginal jottings) your responses to comments made in the brochure. Save the brochure, or buy a catalog if one is available; such material will provide sources for the illustrations in your paper.
- If an audio program is available, listen to it as you go through the exhibition. Take notes on the comments you think are noteworthy—and be sure to acknowledge the program if you use any of the material in your review.
- Take notes while you are at the exhibition; don’t assume you will remember titles and dates, or the ways in which works are juxtaposed, or even all of your responses to individual works.
- In your first draft, don’t worry about limitations of space. Put down whatever you think is worth saying, and later revise the review to bring it within the established length.
- Express your opinions—subjectivity is inherent—but go easy on such terms as “I think,” “I feel,” “In my opinion.” Express opinions chiefly by calling attention to details that will in effect compel the reader to share your responses.
- If possible, revisit the exhibition after you have revised your draft, so that you can improve the review (probably by adding concrete details) before handing it in.

- Give your review an interesting title: not “A Review of an Exhibition of van Gogh’s Self-Portraits” but perhaps “Van Gogh Looks at Vincent.” The final version of the title will probably be almost the last thing you write, but make certain that the final draft of the review fulfills expectations that the title arouses.
- For help in thinking about standards of evaluation, consult Chapter 9, especially pages 224–235.

✓ Checklist for Revising a Review

- Is the title informative and engaging? (A comment on the appropriateness of the exhibition’s title often provides a good beginning.)
- Do the opening paragraphs give your readers the appropriate amount of background? And do they give the reader an idea of your thesis?
- Does the review provide the appropriate factual information (e.g., approximate size of the exhibition, concept behind the exhibition, method of display, freshness of the material)?
- Are the value judgments expressed in the review (both of individual works and of the exhibition as a whole) supported by evidence?
- If you include an illustration, does this illustration help the readers to see an important point?
- Is the tone appropriate? (Sarcasm is rarely appropriate.)
- Is the review the assigned length?

THREE SAMPLE REVIEWS

Here are three reviews, all of exhibitions by Mark Rothko (1903–1970), an abstract expressionist painter born in a part of Russia that today is Latvia. Rothko came to the United States as a child, and became a naturalized citizen in 1938.

The first review is about 1,000 words long, the approximate equivalent of four double-spaced typed pages. This exhibition, showing works from the artist’s entire career, opened at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., and then went to the Whitney Museum in New York. The reviewer saw the exhibition in both venues, and thus is able to make some interesting comparisons about the installation. Because the review appeared in *Art Journal* (Spring 1999), a publication concerned with contemporary art, read by artists and art historians, the reviewer can allude to other artists without even briefly identifying them; she knows that her readers know who these people are.

The next two reviews are shorter; one about three hundred words, and the other about one hundred words. In some ways, a short review is harder to write than a long one—the writers have to be very clear in their minds about what are the major points that must be made, what is the single best example to give, and so forth. (Professors of journalism tell a story about a shrewd newspaper editor who told a columnist, “Write a long review, you don’t have time to write a short one.”)

Before reading these reviews, try to see some good color reproductions of Rothko’s work. You can find them by typing his name into a search engine such as Google or Yahoo. The National Gallery of Art has a particularly good site that was prepared for the exhibition; just type “NGA Rothko” and go on from there. Strictly speaking, the site is <<http://www.nga.gov/feature/rothko/rothkosplash.html>>

Although it is unlikely that you saw the exhibition, try to evaluate the reviews. Does the author of the longest review make some point that the authors of the shorter reviews should have made, even in their extremely limited space? Or does the author of the longer review omit some especially interesting point that an author of a shorter review makes? If so, do you think the first author should have made this point?

MARK ROTHKO
Phyllis Tuchman

Jeffrey Weiss, Exh. cat, Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. Texts by John Gage, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Barbara Novak, Brian O’Doherty, Mark Rosenthal, and Jessica Stewart, 374 pp., 120 color ill., 50 b/w. \$65.

Exhibition schedule: National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., May 3–August 16, 1998; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, September 10–November 29, 1998; Musée de l’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, January 8–April 18, 1999.

The Mark Rothko retrospective, which opened at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and was next on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, was astonishingly beautiful. And people responded accordingly. Answering to a call comparable to “Build a ball field and they will come,” the crowds

descended on this spectacular display. Whenever I visited the exhibition, which featured about 110 paintings and works on paper the artist made between 1936 and 1969, a year before he died at the age of sixty-six, the galleries were filled. Abstract art is once again ascendant; artists, as well as others, appear to care passionately about how it is made, what it can address, and its ability to communicate the highest values of life in a nonrepresentational, visual language.

Exhibiting his work regularly from the forties onward, Rothko never lacked critical attention during his lifetime or after his death. Besides the retrospective mounted at The Museum of Modern Art in 1961 when he was fifty-seven, Rothko represented the United States in 1958 at the Venice Biennale and in 1959 at Documenta II in Kassel. Moreover, during the fifties and early sixties, when the work of Americans was rarely seen abroad, his art traveled to places as far-flung as Berlin, Paris, Caracas, Calcutta, and Madrid.

While there have been other in-depth survey exhibitions and several books and catalogues devoted to Rothko’s art during the more than three decades since his suicide, the magnificence of this latest retrospective came as a surprise to many. Thanks to Jeffrey Weiss, associate curator of twentieth-century art at the National Gallery, this body of work will never again look the same. The author of *The Popular Culture of Modern Art* and co-curator of the National Gallery and the Boston Museum of Fine Art’s exhibition “Picasso: The Early Years, 1892–1906,” this talented art historian turns out to have quite an eye, as well as a searching intellect. Weiss’s discriminating selection from Rothko’s oeuvre, more than anything else, set this group of canvases and drawings apart from those seen previously.

At the Whitney, Rothko’s representational pictures from the thirties and forties benefited from their proximity to the new fifth-floor galleries displaying the permanent collection. Having a context within which to view these awkward, not quite resolved canvases shed further light on the period in which they were executed. Following the artist’s own example, a number of critics averred that these tentative works never should have been exhibited (years after their making, Rothko tried to distance himself from these canvases and never referred to or exhibited them). However, Weiss brought a fresh eye to bear on them, choosing

paintings with strong blocks of color serving as backgrounds. They do indeed suggest possibilities the artist later went on to develop.

Another group of works, the late acrylics on paper mounted on canvas from 1969, were also broadly criticized for being unresolved and possibly unfinished. It was suggested that they, too, should never have been shown. But consider this scenario. Rothko's art of the thirties was influenced by what the then-young artist saw being done around him. Eventually, as a mature painter, he hit his stride, and one work generated another. But there came a moment when he realized he was an older "contemporary" amid a new emergent generation. So, he again glanced at what was being created by others.

Where decades earlier, his eyes, which he depicted in a self-portrait from 1936 as nuggets of blue, had turned toward older artists, they now rested on what artists fifteen or twenty years younger, some of whom were Minimalists, were doing. Surrounding Rothko's greatest paintings of the late fifties and early sixties with both earlier and later work reveals the ways in which he was affected by the periods in which he flourished. It also adds a touch of poignancy to this retrospective.

Still, it is Rothko's gift for color that we treasure most. He used a range of blues and tangerines, as well as shades of chartreuse and saffron, the way Mozart arranged a musical score with the instruments of a symphony orchestra. With consummate grace, this Russian-born, Yale-educated artist used his palette as if it were a keyboard. And his paintings react to different viewing circumstances the way a concerto is altered by the interpretation of its conductor, the company, and the hall in which it is performed. At the National Gallery, where the rectangular galleries seemed narrower, the walls darker, and the lights lower than they were at the Whitney, sensations of color rather than individual paintings swept over viewers. For instance, in a room where canvases with orange predominating hung along one wall and others with blue were across from these, peripheral vision took hold. It was as if your left eye saw one hue and your right eye perceived the other set of tones.

At the Whitney it was easier to focus on each individual picture. The works seemed a bit less mysterious, and you could easily concentrate on how Rothko had actually executed them. You could readily parse how the artist put one color on top of

another and perhaps one or two others on top of those. The complexities of his art were never more evident.

Because of how the exhibition was installed, the way one group of works led into another possessed a clarity that revealed Rothko's appeal to the Minimalists who followed his lead. "The verticals," Donald Judd wrote about one of his predecessor's paintings in the September 1963 issue of *Arts Magazine*, "are simultaneously areas, color, light, and volume—which is intrinsic to Rothko's successful work." The multiforms from the late forties, with their patches of color scattered across the canvases, have an unexpected liveliness (and make evident that the artist was as much influenced by Ad Reinhardt as he was by Clyfford Still at this point). As stacks of various hues grow larger and more expansive, the emotional range of these abstractions amazes. You become aware as well of how the artist applied pigments to his flat surfaces with broad arm movements, delicate flicks of the wrist, rubbing motions, and a swoosh from time to time. As you look, uniformity gives way to the discovery of scores of irregularities. Eventually blocks of chocolate and maroon become as dense and smooth as ice. During the early sixties, a void rather than a luminous glow entered Rothko's paintings. Curtains of black took over; and in the darkened room at the National Gallery in which the canvases from the mid-sixties hung, you felt the artist's pain and were brought to tears as if this were the tragic end of a long, arduous adventure.

Soon after the retrospective opened in New York, its excellent publication was joined by David Anfam's exemplary catalogue *raisonne* of the artist's works on canvas. A British scholar who has organized several Rothko exhibitions and written books on Abstract Expressionism as well as on Franz Kline, Anfam has spent years pulling everything together. The plates, which reproduce more than eight hundred works spanning a truncated lifetime, are almost all illustrated in color on heavy stock. Wonder how Weiss's selections stack up against the rest of the artist's oeuvre? Consult this book. But be assured, the answer is quite well. While Weiss's text situates Rothko's oeuvre within an absorbing cultural context, Anfam has introduced all sorts of new art historical sources. Suggesting the Russian-born artist was more city-oriented than previous authors have, Weiss creates a new way to dis-

tinguish Rothko's urban achievements from those of, say, Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning during their "landscape" years in the Springs, just outside of East Hampton on Long Island. Moreover, John Gage's essay on Rothko's painting practices in the retrospective's catalogue also can be applied to the stunning canvases of Still because the two had so much in common. Solely focused on his subject's output, Anfam is more limited in his orientation. Since he is very good with what he does, Anfam should be read in tandem with Weiss. Rothko, who would complain bitterly to almost total strangers such as myself that he had begun to feel "old-fashioned," would be delighted that unlike his colleagues he is now the subject of all sorts of books devoted to his art and the big picture.

MARK ROTHKO
'A PAINTER'S PROGRESS: THE YEAR 1949'
Ken Johnson

Pace Wildenstein
 32 East 57th Street, Manhattan
 Through Feb. 23

If you have time to see just one New York gallery exhibition this month, this knee-buckling selection of paintings by Mark Rothko from the year 1949 should be it.

By 1949 Rothko had left behind the more traditional representational painting of the 30's and the Surrealist work of the 40's; he was into pure abstraction—a flattened, glowing, soft-focused kind of Cubism.

This is the year that he finally broke free of the obligation to make interestingly varied compositions and discovered the power of large, simple, symmetrically ordered blocks of color. He began to make the paintings that we now view as classic Rothkos.

So part of the excitement is seeing the moment when an artist dares to become fully himself. The other part is sheer beauty. Rothko came to be thought of as a tragic visionary, but with this set of pictures he seems an ecstatic hedonist drunk on color, tropical light and the erotic touch of brush on canvas. You may feel intimations of cosmic poetry, but the thrill is mainly sensory.

Here in diaphanous washy fields, there in throbbing opaque blocks, color appears shamelessly savory; blackberry, plum, watermelon, mango, blueberry and buttery yellow. Rothko varies and balances darks and lights and warmth and coolness like a master chef. It's hard to believe that such unabashedly voluptuous work was made on the eve of the decade of gray flannel repression, cold war and nuclear fear.

New York Times, February 6, 2004, B39

Now for the shortest, unsigned review—really just an extended note in a list in a magazine of what is going on at art galleries.

MARK ROTHKO

These Rothkos put the reproductions in art-history books to shame. They all come from 1949, the year the Ab Ex master made his breakthrough. First he gives himself permission to banish representation. Next he covers his surfaces with patches of bold, shimmering color. Then in "Untitled 1949," on loan from the National Gallery, he breaks into five-part harmony with registers of yellow, purple, green, black, and orange. The paintings are reunited for the first time in half a century and arranged chronologically (taking into account some customary date-fudging by the artist) so that you can witness inspiration and discovery unfolding. Through Feb. 23. (Pace Wildenstein, 32 W. 57th St., 212-421-3292.)

New Yorker, February 9, 2004, 12