THE SHORT GUIDE SERIES

■ ■ ■

Under the Editorship of
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MARCIA STUBBS

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A Short Guide to Writing about Art

TENTH EDITION

SYLVAN BARNET
Tufts University

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and a full head of hair that is shaped like a natural crown (the cranial protuberance symbolizes his supreme wisdom) stands unaided and makes a confrontational gesture. Although the image is far from realistic, it does catch the supple, undefined body of a child (except for the delightful indication of the spine), and it interestingly contrasts the smooth bodily surfaces with the finely detailed elaborate garment. This paradoxical image—a smiling infant who commands—itself is an embodiment of the challenging idea that there is a world different from our visible world of helpless infants who are born, grow old and sick, and then die.

The Buddha at Birth was produced by the lost-wax method: The image was made in wax, encased in a clay mold with a drain hole, and the mold was then heated. When the melted wax ran out, bronze was poured into the mold through an inlet, filling the space where the wax model had been. After the bronze cooled, the mold was broken to free the bronze image. Details were perhaps refined, and the image was gilded—i.e., it was painted with powdered gold dissolved in mercury, and heated until the mercury vaporized, leaving gilt fixed to the surface.

Although Buddhism was introduced to Japan from Korea in the sixth century, the oldest surviving Japanese Buddhist sculptures are, like this one, from the early seventh century. (In later images the face is rounder, less rectangular, and the skirt is longer.) The present sculpture may be the earliest Japanese gilt bronze in the United States, and perhaps the earliest outside of Japan.

✔ Checklist for Writing a Catalog Entry

Have I asked myself the following questions?

- ❑ Details of artist, title, dimensions, material, owner correct?
- ❑ Length of entry appropriate to the assignment?
- ❑ Necessary technical words unobtrusively defined?
- ❑ Nature and significance of the work communicated?

7

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. It also deepens the *writer's* understanding because (as this book repeatedly suggests) writing is a way of getting ideas. This fact is at the heart of an anecdote: When an art critic was asked what she thought of an exhibition, she said, "I don't know; I haven't written my review yet."

Writing a review requires analytic skill, but a review is not identical to 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, again from 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, how they interact, how they exert an influence ("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 relatively 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, such as "Is Norman Rockwell Under-Rated?" rather than "Norman Rockwell: A Review."
- 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). A reviewer may comment on the slightly obscure title of an exhibition, explaining, for instance, that "Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker" is an exhibition of Walker's depictions of slavery. In any case, 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. . . ."
- A paragraph (or two or three) on the installation, including the explanatory wall plaques (if any) and the lighting. Some exhibitions treat the objects as self-sufficient works of art, "form as content," perhaps giving them a sort of jewel-case setting with spot ("boutique") lighting, whereas other exhibitions treat the objects as artifacts that encode the values of a culture and display them with abundant contextual material such as long labels, wall texts, and brochures. Exhibitions of this second sort commonly avoid spotlights, using instead an overall wash of light. An exhibition that seeks to reproduce or at least to suggest an historical context—for instance, Egyptian objects in a tomb-like setting or standing on sand; or Greek sculpture in a setting of classical columns—is said to be an *environmental installation*. Remember, the curator has shaped the exhibition by choosing certain works, and the designer has collaborated by displaying them in a certain way. But curators and designers are not entirely free: They must work within a given architecture. Thus, you may also want to comment on the architectural problems that the curator faced. 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.
- 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, or perhaps too many objects are crowded into the space). 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—the writer's personality as the reader perceives it, for example courteous or stuffy or bullying—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. Be serious but don't be stuffy. (For more on tone, with examples of writings that unintentionally convey off-putting personalities, see pages 190–94.)

Some final tips:

- Read any texts that are on the walls. (You may learn from them—or you may find them intrusive.)
- 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 10, especially pages 223–36.

For a valuable discussion of the ways in which objects have been exhibited, see Victoria Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement* (2005).

A Note on Reviewing an Exhibition of Non-Western Art

Reviewing (like exhibiting) non-Western art, especially sub-Sahara African, Oceanic, and Pre-Columbian material—works from a culture that is regarded as "the Other"—can be especially challenging. It is perhaps easier to see this challenge in exhibitions than in reviews: If the exhibited material is accompanied by abundant contextual material, for instance music and photomurals showing how the people who produced the works used them in rituals, viewers may complain that the exhibitors are apologizing for it, are condescending to it, or are implying that it lacks universal aesthetic value. If, however, the exhibited material is offered "as art," with little contextualizing material, viewers may complain that it is baffling.

The West, furthermore, has pretty much invented the idea of what is and what is not the West: The West includes Europe, the ancient Near East, ancient Egypt, and the Americas (but not the Indian traditions in the Americas). Thus, the concept of "the West" is as much cultural as it is geographic. And non-Western art is defined in terms of Western art: Painting and sculpture rank higher than basketry and textiles, which until recently were regarded as works of craft rather than of art.

You may find it appropriate to indicate *why* the material is considered to be "art":

- Beauty of form?
- Excellence of craftsmanship?
- Preciousness of materials?
- Importance within its own culture?
- Influence on Western art (e.g., African sculpture on Picasso, Navajo sand paintings on Jackson Pollock)?

What advice can be given? Only this: Be aware that

- if you give a fair amount of context, of background, readers may mistakenly infer that you are implying that the work is aesthetically weak, but
- if you give relatively little context readers may mistakenly infer that you subscribe to mystical universal values.

When you reread your draft (just as when you read any of your other drafts), imagine yourself in your reader's shoes and consider whether the review is open to these possible objections. Think hard about your assumptions and make whatever revisions seem necessary. The challenge is great, but if you face it you will produce a thoughtful review.

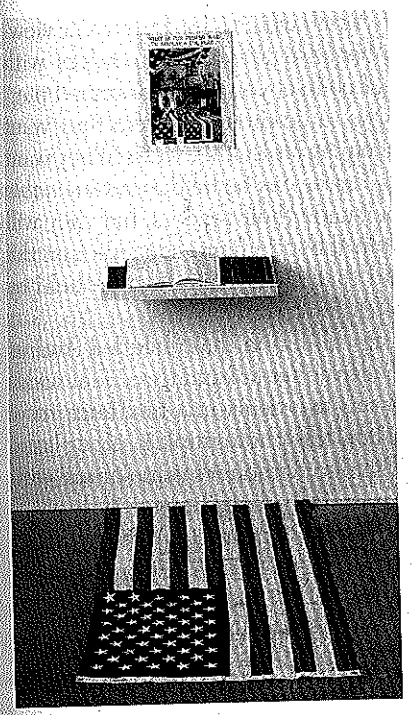
A Note on Reviewing a Highly Controversial Exhibition

Viewed one way, every exhibition is controversial—why *this* material, shown in *this* way?—but with most exhibitions (for instance, van Gogh's self-portraits, or Mary Cassatt's prints, or Chinese ceramics of the Song Dynasty) such questions are asked by very few viewers. Some exhibitions, however, raise questions that may inflame a general public. Exhibitions of this sort are likely to include

- images that have been looted (antiquities illegally excavated and then smuggled out of the country of origin, or paintings stolen from Jews by Nazis and now in the hands of recent purchasers), or
- images showing nudity or sexual acts (especially implying sado-masochism or pederasty), or
- images that seem to some viewers sacrilegious (for instance, Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987), a photograph of a plastic crucifix submerged in urine, or Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), a collage executed in part with elephant dung and including images of female genitalia clipped out of pornographic magazines, or
- objects that stir strong patriotic responses (in Scott Tyler's exhibition, viewers were invited to step on an American flag).

Reviews of such exhibitions are likely to become chiefly attacks or defenses, rather than thoughtful analyses. If you are writing about a highly controversial exhibition, be sure to go beyond merely reasserting your preconceptions: Make a diligent effort to understand what the artist is doing.

Let's look briefly at Scott Tyler's work, an installation (i.e., a site-specific work, usually consisting of an ensemble of several units designed for a particular place) created in 1989 by an African-American student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. (Tyler is also known as Dread Scott Tyler.) The work, in an exhibition of work by minority artists, was titled *What Is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?* On the wall was the title; beneath the title were photographs showing coffin-draped flags and South Koreans burning an American flag; beneath the photographs, attached to the wall, was a shelf on which rested a blank notebook in which viewers could write their comments; beneath the shelf, on the floor, an American flag extended outward from the wall. Veterans groups were outraged, security at the exhibition had to be heightened, a teacher who walked on the flag was arrested, the matter was taken to court, and Judge Kenneth Gillis dismissed the suit, declaring that no state or federal law had been violated. In the course of his ruling the judge said, "This exhibit is as much an invitation to think about the flag as it is an invitation to step on it."



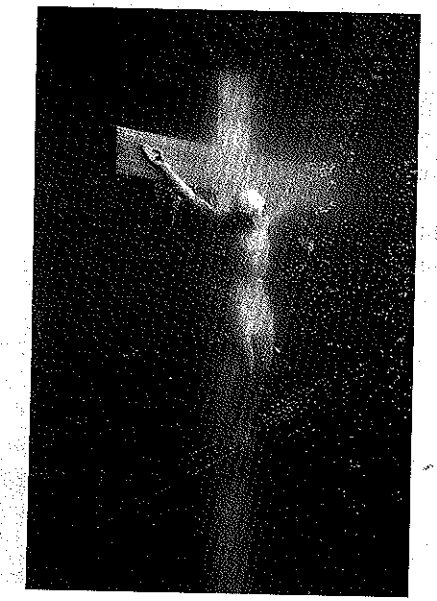
Scott Tyler, *What Is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?* Installed at the Art Institute of Chicago, 1989. Scott Tyler (Aka Dread Scott).

The judge's words are wise; an exhibition of this sort is an invitation to think, *not* to shout the first thing that comes to one's mind. True, most reviews of such exhibitions probably proceed from strong feelings and are likely to be worded strongly, but if reviewers want to do more than get something off their chests, if they really want to convince their readers that this or that exhibition is outrageous (or, on the contrary, is to be regarded seriously), they will have to do more than express their outrage.

For one thing, reviewers might well begin by examining their own assumptions. Reviewers who write for a right-wing journal (say, *The National Review*) or for a left-wing journal (say, *The Nation*) need not worry about examining their own ideas or about convincing their readers—they are preaching to the choir—but other reviewers are rightly concerned about learning from the exhibition and about communicating their views to

persons who may not share them. Such writers want to set forth their viewpoints as effectively as possible, not because they think readers with markedly different views will say, "Yes, of course, you have converted me," but because these writers want their views to be thoughtful and they want them to be given a hearing by readers who may have other views. They want to show that the views they advance in the essay can be held by a *reasonable* person. Of course, they would like to persuade their readers, but they will settle if the readers, finding some merit in the argument, concede that the writer has offered a reasonable case and that the position can be held by someone who is neither stupid nor hopelessly corrupt.

Consider a reviewer writing about an exhibition that included Andres Serrano's large colored photograph (about five feet tall and three feet wide) called *Piss Christ* (1987), an image showing a crucifix in a luminous rosy-golden glow. (In fact, as mentioned earlier, the photograph is of a plastic crucifix immersed in a Plexiglas tank of the photographer's urine mixed with cow's blood.) Serious reviewers, whatever their final positions, will do more than either rant about blasphemy or enthuse about artistic freedom; they will try to understand the responses of those spectators who were outraged and also of those who found the image impressive, meaningful, and aesthetically successful. In short, they will try to understand the counter-arguments to their own position.



Piss Christ (1987). Andres Serrano © the artist. Photo © Pavla Cooper Gallery, N.Y.

For instance, a reviewer who found the image offensive and ultimately valueless might nevertheless recognize that

- Serrano was brought up in a devout Roman Catholic family;
- Serrano may have wanted to assert that, for believers, Jesus was fully human as well as divine; *Piss Christ* by its title jolts viewers out of unthinking conventional responses to religious images, forcing them to think freshly about the significance of the Incarnation and the Crucifixion;
- blood is commonly shown in images of the Crucifixion, so another bodily fluid also might be used to help describe Jesus' humanity;

- the image is visually attractive, at least until one reads the title or learns what exactly is depicted;
- in our democratic society, artists—like all other people—are entitled to express their ideas freely;
- "artistic freedom" is not just a matter of indulging in the nonsense of artists; our society benefits when art is not censored.

Recognizing that such views have something to recommend them, the reviewer might nevertheless go on to argue, on moral and aesthetic grounds, that the work is trivial and crude (Serrano might at least have said "urine" instead of "piss"), that we need not believe Serrano's comments about his aims and his religion, and that—without disputing Serrano's right to express himself—work that deeply offends many Americans should not be supported by taxpayers' dollars (Serrano had received a grant of $15,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts). A reviewer might well argue that protecting an artist's freedom of expression is one thing, but subsidizing the artist with taxpayers' money is a very different thing.

On the other hand, a reviewer who valued the work ought to show awareness of such thoughts as these:

- the title is deeply offensive to many people;
- in the eyes of many people, immersing a crucifix in urine is comparable to the blasphemous act of urinating on a crucifix;
- most viewers cannot be expected to know that the artist may be expressing some thoughts about the human nature of Jesus;
- taxpayers may reasonably argue that although an artist (like everyone else) has the right to express ideas that offend some people, government funds should not be used to support work that either advances or derides religious beliefs.

Having shown some understanding of the counter-arguments, the reasons why viewers might be deeply disturbed by Serrano's image—and having *achieved* this understanding by the process of drafting and writing—the reviewer might then go on to offer arguments to the effect that the image nevertheless has value. Probably the essay will not win many converts, but even readers who remain unconvinced may recognize the good faith of the writer and the complexity of the issue.

A question: If a work of art offends us, and we later hear that the artist's intention was praiseworthy, need we modify our response? (For a brief discussion of *intention*, see pages 223–25.)

Perhaps we can go a bit further and be a bit more specific: The reviewer probably will also examine as fairly as possible

- the work's material and formal properties (what is it made of, how the elements are combined), and the aesthetic impact;
- the context (for instance, social, political, or religious) that the artist or the organizer of the exhibition is working in or drawing on;
- the meaning(s) of the work(s) in their context.

A RULE FOR WRITERS:

Because by writing you hope to educate yourself and then to interest and perhaps even to persuade skeptical readers, especially when you write about a highly controversial topic, you need to show that you understand that intelligent people can hold views other than yours. In short, make certain that your writing reveals that you are informed and that you are a person of good will.

✔ Checklist for Revising a Review

Have I asked myself the following questions?

- ❑ Is my title informative and engaging? (A comment on the appropriateness of the exhibition's title often provides a good beginning.)
- ❑ Do the opening paragraphs give my readers the appropriate amount of background? And do they give the reader an idea of my thesis?
- ❑ Does the review provide the appropriate factual information (e.g., approximate size of the exhibition, concept behind the exhibition, lighting and labeling and other methods of display, freshness of the material). You may even want to consider supplementary material: If the museum shop has in effect mounted a show of relevant stuff (reproductions, books, T-shirts), does this display enhance or degrade the exhibition?
- ❑ Are the value judgments expressed in the review (both of individual works and of the exhibition as a whole) supported by evidence?
- ❑ If the review includes an illustration, does this illustration help the readers to see an important point?
- ❑ If the topic is highly controversial, have I stated at least one other view in a way that would satisfy its proponents and, thus, demonstrated my familiarity with the issue and your fairness?
- ❑ 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—writers of short reviews 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, look at 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 ills., 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; Musee 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

*Phyllis Tuchman, "Mark Rothko," *Art Journal*, Spring, 1999.

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 possesed 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 distinguish 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.

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*Ken Johnson, "Mark Rothko," *New York Times*, Feb. 6, 2004.

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

*Anonymous. "Mark Rothko." *The New Yorker*, Feb. 9, 2004, page 12. Copyright 2005 Conde Nast Publications. Originally Published in *The New Yorker*. Reprinted by permission.

8

HOW TO WRITE AN EFFECTIVE ESSAY

I love being a writer. What I can't stand is the paperwork.
—Peter de Vries

Writing is a craft. You have to take your apprenticeship in it like anything else.
—Katherine Anne Porter

What is written without effort, in general is read without pleasure.
—Samuel Johnson

A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.
—Thomas Mann

Earlier pages have touched on aspects of the writing process, but now is the time for a fuller discussion.

THE BASIC STRATEGY

- Choose a topic and a tentative thesis.
- Generate ideas, for instance, by asking yourself questions.
- Make a tentative outline of points you plan to make.
- Rough out a first draft, working from your outline (don't worry about spelling, punctuation, etc.) but don't hesitate to depart from the outline when new ideas come to you in the process of writing.
- Make large-scale revisions in your draft by reorganizing, or by adding details to clarify and support assertions, or by deleting or combining paragraphs.
- Make small-scale revisions by revising and editing sentences.
- Revise your opening and concluding paragraphs. Make certain that these paragraphs are *interesting*, not mere throat-clearing.
- Have someone read your revised draft and comment on it.
- Revise again, taking into account the reader's suggestions.
- Read this latest version and make further revisions as needed.
- Proofread your final version.