



# We Need Criticism

by Kathleen McLean

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“It forces us to listen to critics who have no stake in our happiness, but have a take on our effectiveness. And it compels us to be more thoughtful about the exhibitions we create.”

It’s about time for some hard-hitting criticism of museum exhibitions. For too long, we’ve practiced in a self-congratulatory atmosphere, heaping indiscriminate praise on each other, sometimes without really meaning it. Perhaps this is because we appreciate the tremendous effort it takes to create an exhibition. Or perhaps we can’t bring ourselves to tell colleagues when we think their efforts missed the mark. Exhibition criticism forces us to look hard at our exhibitions.

## We Need a Forum

It’s been hard to find good criticism in the museum exhibition arena. Mostly, we see reportage-style reviews lacking critical analysis. The few analytical reviews usually focus on curatorial content with little or no analysis of form and experience; or on design and form with no consideration for content and experience.

Since 1990, I have been chairing sessions on exhibition criticism at the American Association of Museums annual meetings. Every year, a standing-room-only audience suggests that we’re ready to open our exhibitions up to the critics and engage in a more substantial dialogue about the quality of museum exhibitions.

Traditionally, there have been few venues for exhibition criticism. *Museum News* has always played it pretty safe and will probably continue to do so. But other publications are a bit more daring. *The Journal of Museum Education* has printed several exhibition critiques over the years; plans for *Curator* include serious exhibition reviews; and the *Exhibitionist* has ventured into this uncharted territory with its last issue. Let’s hope that these publications will increasingly provide an essential forum for thoughtful analysis of individual exhibitions.

## We Need Models

There seems to be persistent confusion about the true nature and function of criticism as it applies to museum exhibitions. Many people confuse evaluation and criticism. Some people insist that reviews must be objective and “fair” (whatever that means)—they feel they have a right to insist on a positive review to balance a negative one.

Unlike evaluation, which is grounded in some form of **objective** assessment, criticism is **subjective**. It is a personal judgment, no matter how sincere and informed. And unlike promotional reviews full of praise that are meant to draw audiences, critical reviews are meant to help develop a clearer sense of the parts of an exhibition and to illuminate how those parts relate to the whole exhibition experience. Critical reviews come from looking deeply at exhibitions.

Good criticism is always based on the reviewer’s own experience **of** and **in** the exhibition. And good criticism can only come from people who have a deep and holistic understanding of exhibitions. Personal intimacy with the medium is essential if the reviewer is to provide the depth of analysis necessary to inform the way we think about exhibitions, improve the processes we employ to develop them, and ultimately, improve the experiences people have in them.

I developed the following model to help focus on the types of questions reviewers might want to consider as they assess an exhibition. It’s an attempt to define criticism as a chronicle of the reviewer’s personal experience in the exhibition.

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### **One Approach to Criticism**

#### ***Before the Exhibition—Your State of Mind***

All of us bring preconceptions and pre-judgments to an exhibition. You may have heard a glowing review from someone you respect and therefore will be very receptive to anything the exhibition contains. You may be interested in the subject. You may know people who worked on the exhibition. Or, conversely, you may approach the exhibition as if you are going into battle, having heard negative things about it from a colleague you admire.

Your attitudes towards the exhibition, the circumstances of your life the day of your visit, and the people around you all affect your experience of the exhibition, and an awareness of these factors will help to remind you of their influences on your experience.

#### ***Exhibition Entry***

Before entering the exhibition, stop and note your initial reactions. Does anything attract your attention: the title, the structure, colors, sounds, objects, or lighting? Do the title graphics create an image for the exhibition? Are you drawn into the space or would you rather go elsewhere?

#### ***Organizational Clarity***

From where you stand, can you determine the exhibition theme? Are there advance organizers of interpretive graphics to assist you in understanding the scope of sequencing of the exhibition? Do the graphics describe what you are about to experience, provide a menu for selecting portions of the exhibition, or introduce the exhibit creators and explain their goals?

Where do you go from the entry and why?

As you move through the exhibition, is there a defined path indicated by placement of signs, graphics, exhibit structures or furniture?

Does the path seem arbitrary or is it related to some sequence, such as historical chronology?

Do you feel constrained by the path, or can you move about freely and at your own pace?

Are individual exhibits grouped or clustered, and if so, can you determine why? Do you notice any organizing elements, such as banners, pylons, graphics, highlighted objects or exhibits, or area title signs that identify themes or sub-themes? Are there clear relationships among these elements?

#### **Exhibition Environment**

Note the use of the overall space. How does the environment contribute to your experience of the exhibition? Can you focus on the exhibition, or are there other museum activities or exhibits competing for your attention? Does the design of the exhibits encourage you to interact with other visitors, or do you feel constrained or restricted from interacting?

How do you feel in the exhibition? Are you aware of temperature or air quality in the space? What kind of sounds can you hear? Does the environment echo with footsteps? Can you hear other visitors interacting? Do audio components draw you into the environment, or do the sounds compete for attention? Does the noise soothe or irritate? Is there adequate seating?

Are there any areas in the exhibition that make you uncomfortable? Why? Do you feel crowded and confined; or conversely, do you feel as if

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you're in an empty and cavernous space? Can you get close enough to exhibits to see and use them? Is there adequate viewing space for all objects and elements?

Look for elements that pull you through the space. Stand in one place and look around you. Are there focal points, "hot spots," of landmarks within your line of sight to pull you into specific areas, and are they related to an organizing principle? Do lighting effects, colors, or sounds attract you to an area? Why? Once attracted to an area or exhibit, does the element that attracts you contribute to the exhibit context, or does it feel gratuitous?

Note the use of additional props, such as period furniture, plants, models, and stage sets. Do they intensify the environmental setting of the exhibition? Do they relate to concepts of themes? Do any of these props distract you from the exhibits?

How effective is the lighting, and is it sufficient? Is the room generally lit with ambient or unfocused light, or are objects, signs, and labels dramatically spotlighted? Are there any shadows or glare that impair your viewing of the exhibition?

Are museum staff people present, and are they helpful and accommodating? Is a guard stationed in the vicinity? Are special security devices such as electronic eyes, cameras, or alarms used, and are they obtrusive in any way?

How well is the exhibition being maintained? Can you see smears and smudges on the Plexiglas or glass? Are there fingerprints or dust on case and wall surfaces? Are paint and other surfaces worn or chipped? Have graphics been worn away, making them difficult to read?

Is the exhibition directed toward a specific audience? How do you know? Is the exhibition accessible to the disabled? Have provisions been made for hearing- and sight-impaired visitors?

### **Appropriateness of Exhibition Media**

Consider the use of exhibit elements, objects, artifacts and multimedia. Are there a variety of things to do and experience in the exhibition? If the exhibition is based on objects, are the objects the subject and focus of the exhibition? Are they used as examples to communicate ideas? Are they individually displayed or grouped for some reason? Do they complement or overpower one another? Is there an interesting format in which the objects are presented? Are there too many or too few objects to support exhibit ideas? Are there provisions for relief of monotony by size, shape, or placement variations?

Are there any interactive exhibits that allow you to experiment on your own or deal with a topic in different ways? Do they encourage you to think more carefully about a topic or discuss the exhibit with others? Are the exhibits working properly? Do you find yourself saying "so what" afterwards?

Where is the text placed in the exhibition? Is it legible and easy to read? Has it been broken into small palatable amounts, or is it too much to read at one time? Is your vision of labels, signs, and interpretive graphics obstructed by anything? Could this have been avoided? What eye level was chosen for the labels? Is it clear which label accompanies each exhibit? Do the signs and labels convey a specific style that is in keeping with the subject of the exhibition? What is the tone of the text and labels (conversational, didactic, preachy, dull)?

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If the exhibition contains multimedia or audiovisual presentations, are they relevant to the exhibition? Do they support the exhibition concepts, or do they seem like an afterthought? Are they easy to use? Are you aware of cables, electric cords, plugs, and other equipment, and does this distract from your experience of the exhibition?

#### **Overall Effectiveness of Communication between Planners and Visitors**

After having thoroughly reviewed the exhibition, do you have a clear notion of its focus and themes? Do you have a notion of the exhibition creators and their reasons for creating the exhibition? Can you determine a pattern of conceptual relationships? Does

the exhibition succeed in communicating its messages? Are they implicit or explicit? Are there conflicting or confusing messages?

How important a role does the exhibition design play in communication? What aspects of the design were particularly effective and what could have been improved? Is the design overbearing or coercive? Has the exhibition inspired or excited you in any way? Will you remember it tomorrow, next week, next year? Or, would you rather have gone to the movies?

*Parts of this article were excerpted from Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions, published by the Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC), 1993.* 

# Still We Need Criticism

by Kathleen McLean

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I used to imagine that if exhibition professionals would only embrace exhibit criticism in all of its manifestations, museum visitors ultimately would be offered more high-quality exhibitions. In my 1994 article in the *Exhibitionist*, I said, “We need a forum.” We now have several, including the regular exhibition reviews of which I am the editor in *Curator: The Museum Journal*. I also said, “We need models,” and I think the field has evolved over the years to embrace a wide variety of models, styles, and approaches to professional assessment and peer review of exhibitions—in publications, in sessions at conferences, and in projects like Beverly Serrell’s *Framework for Assessing Excellence in Exhibitions*.

In my 1994 article, I offered a model for critiquing exhibitions that provided potential reviewers with questions aimed at describing their **personal experiences** within an exhibition. I hoped this experience-based approach would help foster a sharpened awareness field-wide of the sensory nature of three-dimensional exhibitions, at a time when most exhibition reviews focused on curatorial content or exhibit and graphic design. Today, peer reviews of exhibitions usually are much more comprehensive, critiquing the overall experience as well as content and design.

So now, after twelve years of developing forums for and models of exhibition criticism, do museums offer more high-quality exhibitions? I don’t think so. Some practitioners are certainly more comfortable thinking and speaking critically about their work today than in the past. But criticism based on personal experience alone is not enough; it is just the first step in creating a more reflective group of practitioners, and ultimately, better exhibitions.

## We Need Context

Criticism uninformed by past practice is simply opinion. And while opinion can be interesting, it is not usually helpful from one situation to the next. We need to become more familiar with what has been done in the past, from exhibition design and popular media techniques to the results of prior visitor research and evaluation studies. We need to place our experiences within a larger context of exhibition development practice.

Several examples of this contextual approach appear in a recent issue of *Curator: The Museum Journal*.<sup>1</sup> In “Lincolns in Latex” (one of the best exhibition reviews I have read, by the way), Daniel Spock reviews the new Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois. Spock not only describes his experiences as a visitor to the museum, he also compares the exhibit elements he experienced to other museum exhibitions and popular culture presentations, from Disney theme park attractions like the *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride, to old dioramas and German expressionist films. The review reflects Spock’s familiarity with the history of exhibition practice and situates his experience within that context, provoking readers to consider the exhibitions (and museum) as examples within a larger field of practice.


In the same issue, Beverly Serrell reviews “The Civil War in Four Minutes” and discusses why she found the exhibit compelling and memorable. She also includes a postscript that identifies two other presentations that used the same technique: Charles and Ray Eames’ short 1952 film *Atlas: The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and the 2000 film *World Population* produced by Zero Population Growth. These references allow readers to step back from

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the specificity of “The Civil War in Four Minutes”—to set aside all of the personalities and politics—and better understand why this type of presentation was so good at depicting complex large scale events over long periods of time. It helps transcend the notions of brilliant designers or expensive budgets and focus on the powerful effects of a well thought out technique applied and presented appropriately.

### Going Forward

We need to cultivate an evolutionary consciousness that encompasses past and current practice, and seeks to innovate and expand upon the knowledge base of a long line of museum exhibition creators, from curators and designers

to educators and evaluators. When we consider which elements of exhibits are “successful” or “compelling” or “powerful,” we should be able to step back from the particularity of the exhibit and identify some sets of similar examples or more generalizable principles. This would help us consciously select specific techniques, media, and designs for specific purposes. We could be much more intentional. And perhaps we would see more innovation in the field, as we build upon the past and evolve over time. 

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<sup>1</sup> Spock, Daniel. “Lincolns in Latex: Exploring Lincoln’s Legacy at the Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum.” *Curator* 49 (1), 2006, pp. 95-104. Serrell, Beverly. “The Civil War in Four Minutes,” *Curator* 49 (1), 2006, pp.105-108.

## ExFiles: An Online Science Exhibit Community

*In the spirit of this statement by Lee Shulman, work is underway on the ExFiles project, which over the next three years will result in a community-based collaborative web site for the exhibit field. ExFiles is made possible by a grant from the National Science Foundation, awarded in January 2006 to the Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC). Kathleen McLean is part of the core planning team, along with Wendy Pollock of ASTC, Jim Spadaccini of Ideum, and seventeen exhibit practitioners and advisors, including representatives of NAME, who will help to build and test the site.*

*Records of exhibitions—from titles and opening dates to outcomes and lessons learned—will form the core of the site, which will also take advantage of recent developments in web design to provide ways for registered site users to not only quickly retrieve information about exhibitions, but also to contribute, comment, and critique. One starting place for site design is the case study format developed for **Are We There Yet? Conversations about Best Practices in Science Exhibition Development**, edited by Kathleen McLean and Catherine McEver. Among the possibilities are multiple users adding elements of an exhibition case study over time, in “wiki” style. Other sources of inspiration are the **Cheapbooks of Exhibit Ideas**, compiled by Paul Orselli, part of the ExFiles team.*

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\*From Taking Learning Seriously, by Lee S. Shulman, originally published in *Change*, July/August 1999. Volume 31, Number 4. Pages 10-17. Available at <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/publications/sub.asp?key=452&subkey=618>

“Learning is least useful when it is private and hidden; it is most powerful when it becomes public and communal. Learning flourishes when we take what we think we know and offer it as community property among fellow learners so that it can be tested, examined, challenged, and improved...”

— Lee S. Shulman\*