

# WRITING ART REVIEWS

Reviews are an important way of creating active critical discussion, and also of building tomorrow's art history. Basically, any given art review has two immediate purposes: 1) to tell readers who haven't seen the exhibition a little about it so they can consider going, and 2) to document and critique the activities of a city's art world.

## THE BASICS

To establish a clear context, try starting with the journalist's credo "who, what, when, where, why." For example:

The opening of Wangechi Mutu's *This You Call Civilization* achieved record attendance levels last Friday at the AGO. This exhibition, which includes a large number of drawings, collages, and mixed media installations, is Mutu's first solo exhibition at a major institution.

Notice that in this example we get a lot of information very quickly: the artist's name, the exhibition title, the venue, the media included, and a sense of the scale and relevance of the show. Once you establish basics such as these, you can go in many different directions, but most reviews take the form of description and analysis. (To paraphrase art writer Susan Sontag, the job of art criticism is simply to show what a work is and how it is what it is.)

## DESCRIPTION

A description should allow your reader to form a picture of what you saw. Generally begin with a basic overview and move on to more complex details.

Sixteen small assemblages are arranged on the east wall in something resembling a gravitational arc. Each work is about a square foot in size and constructed from paper, foil, and acrylic paint. Each involves a great variety of colour, texture, and even depth.

The amount of detail you get into will vary depending on how complex the object is and whether you have photos to support your review. The amount of detail may also be affected by what it is you want to discuss later in more analytical terms.

### HERE ARE SOME MAIN ELEMENTS OF DESCRIPTIVE OBSERVATIONS:

**PHYSICAL QUALITIES:** Material, colour, shape, texture, size, etc.

**FORM:** The relationship of the different parts of this thing (use prepositional phrases such as inside, under, on top of, to the left of, etc.)

**CONTENT:** Some works are clear in what they depict, represent, narrate, argue, convey etc. Other works are less straight forward and may have blurred, overlapping, or even conflicting ideas and images. Still others seem to be entirely about form.

**PRESENTATION:** How a work is placed, displayed, framed, labeled, etc. has an effect on it and how we understand it. Think about the exhibition setting, lighting, descriptive texts, other works shown nearby and so on.

**INTERACTION:** Every work is interacted with differently. Some works we simply look at, some we listen to, some we have to think about, some we may be immersed in.

## **ANALYSIS**

If you've already put some effort into observation and description, your analysis has already begun. To analyze means to break into parts or to loosen, so it's a bit like loosening the screws of an object to see how it goes together – and how it falls apart. For a work of art, this means identifying the relationships between the parts, and speculating on the relationship between the work of art and the rest of the world. To begin thinking analytically, here are some questions you might ask:

**MATERIAL / MEDIUM:** What is unique, interesting, or challenging about this material or medium? Where does it come from? What is the cultural or historical context for this material? For example, is presenting a skull encrusted with diamonds (Damien Hirst) different from presenting a skull marked with graphite (Gabriel Orozco)?

**FORM:** How is it built? How is it held together? How does the scale of one part affect the way you see another part? How does the speed of x affect the speed of y?

**PROCESS:** How is the work made? How does it come into being? Is this process visible in the end product, or is it hidden? How is it different, for example, to make something by hand or to have something manufactured? How is burning something different from melting something; how is scratching a copper plate different from painting a wall?

**ACTION:** What is the work doing in the world? What are some verbs associated with it? Does it stand, jump, teeter, fall, float, rest, recede, remove, return, emerge, aggress, or something else? How? What is its opposite? What does it refuse to do?

**SPECTATOR RESPONSE:** What are people doing when they encounter the work? What do they say about it? What effects does it have? What does this work exclude, prevent, or prohibit? Does everyone have equal opportunity to “experience” or “get” this work?

**ART AND WORLD HISTORY:** What art work of the past does this relate to? Does it explicitly refer to previous artists or cultural figures? How does it relate to the artist's past work? Does it offer any new conceptions or practices to what we think of as art? How does it present or consider gender, race, class, power, media, and so on?

## **RESOURCES**

As you ask yourself these kinds of questions, don't forget that there are many different sources of information available to help. For example:

- The work itself
- The exhibiting gallery or institution (artist statement, catalogs, gallery attendants, curators)
- The artist (he or she may be available locally or virtually)
- Previous exhibitions at other venues (check the artist's CV for info)
- Publications (books, exhibition catalogs, websites etc.)