

# Critical commentary - how critics measure the success of museum exhibitions

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The subtext of this is to explore aspects the critic's perspective on museum programmes - 'looking at them from the outside in'.

This presentation falls into three parts.

Part 1 reflects on what it is that critics do;

Part 2 considers what's involved in assessing the success of an exhibition, and how different professions might go about it; and

Part 3 speculates about the effect they might have on museums.

I'm principally referring to the kinds of criticism that appear in British newspapers. Like most people, I tend to read reviews that appear in the papers. It's also the case that the subject of criticism is quite openly debated in the press. In researching this keynote, I found far more column inches devoted to debates about criticism than I'd ever envisaged.

I'm focusing on the criticism of museum exhibitions, but there doesn't appear to be a body of literature on museum criticism per se - or at least, not that I've found. In the UK, debates tend to focus on theatre criticism, visual arts criticism and literary criticism. Given that Arts Council of England now supports museums, a lot of effort is going into aligning these different sectors. It's reasonable to assume that many of the same issues pertain to their criticism.

I'm also going to apologize ahead for some of the language I'll be using. For some reason, criticism remains a largely a male preserve, and the site of much macho-posturing.

## 1 What do critics do?

"What critics do" is far from straight forward - they do different things. Without wanting to wade through the massive, historic literature on criticism in general, I'm approaching the subject by looking to some recent examples from the British press. Even within this particular niche, there's a vast different of opinion as to the function of criticism.

It seems to me that the title of this keynote - "*how critics measure the success of museum exhibitions*" - makes certain assumptions. It suggests that *measuring the success of exhibitions is something that critics are expected to do*; that in doing so, they are likely to defend institutions' programming, and to predict (if not prescribe) the majority opinion of the target audience<sup>1</sup>. The same is often thought to apply to people writing about film, theatre and books. It supposes that critic is a cog in the marketing machine.

It's certainly *one way* to think about critics. Here are a couple of examples that suggest how that model works in practice:

- The British theatre and events production company, Strut & Fret, recently offered to pay critics \$100 for reviews that they could quote in their publicity during the last week of a particular production. By definition, this identified the financial value that positive criticism represented. As someone in the know observed, at least they were offering a "competitive" fee, given what mainstream press outlets usually pay for freelance reviews<sup>2</sup>. In the US, critics who comply with this are known as "blurb whores".
- The flipside of this approach shows that organizations may withdraw any encouragement to critics whose views don't suit their purposes. It's recently been reported that Lynn Slotkin, the Canadian critic, had her media pass to the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Ontario revoked after one too many negative reviews.

So, in some quarters, it looks as though critics are neither welcome, nor encouraged, to publish critiques that go against promoter's interests.

But, where I'm coming from - expecting critics to reflect on the success of a museum exhibition, let alone measure it, is a high-risk strategy. For many writers, who regard themselves as principled and independent thinkers

*"...a review is simply a way of starting a debate...In any sphere of activity – be it politics, sport or fashion – there is a crying need for someone who brings to the subject a lifelong professional commitment - more than ever, I'd argue - in an age of spin and hype"<sup>iii</sup>.*

Take a review of this year's Royal Academy summer exhibition. This event is now in its 242nd year, and is still associated with what Debrett's, the historic guide for the upper classes, refers to as the "traditional social season". For reasons that will become clear, the review I'm about to quote is by a longstanding and well-respected, *theatre* critic. Let's call him Critic No 1.

*A few months ago I was talking to our art critic... who said the job he dreaded most each year was covering the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition. "It can't be as bad as reviewing plays by Edward Bond or Howard Barker," I said, in an attempt to cheer him up, but [his] ... glum face suggested that he thought it was undoubtedly a good deal worse.*

*Well, now I know he was right. As I sauntered along Piccadilly towards Burlington House on a brisk and breezy summer's day, I found I was looking forward to a morning looking at pictures, even if some of them were almost certain to be terrible. I even thought I might buy one of the more modestly priced items as a birthday present for my wife.*

*I emerged, four hours later, feeling 20 years older than I had when I entered and engulfed in a black cloud of depression. The only silver lining was that I hadn't felt the slightest urge to reach for my chequebook. The show's overall theme this year is "Raw", a term so vague as to be meaningless. Half-Baked would be much nearer the mark.*

*How can so many people produce so much bad art? Why do so many of the works on display feel derivative, shop-soiled, gimcrack and above all dull?<sup>iv</sup>*

The fact that the newspaper allowed its theatre critic to review the summer show, suggests that the Royal Academy's show is regarded as a bit of a joke. Even worse, *the Daily Telegraph's* readership - the Conservative middle class - is likely to overlap very precisely with the Royal Academy's audience.

The review also makes it clear that critics - whether or not they're fans of a particular institution - can't always be relied on to be positive. They're not paid to do marketing. Their job is to make judgments about their subject; explain what they think, and why; and engage their readership.

## **2. What's involved in assessing the success of exhibitions?**

It depends where you're coming from....

2.1 Assessing success of exhibitions is conventionally regarded as the work of **evaluators**, whose job is, by definition, to "... assess the worth or merit of things".<sup>v</sup> While the same might be said of criticism, the professional practice of evaluating the success of exhibitions stems from business and political expediencies. The fact that its commissioning by individual institutions, may reflect their funders' demands for accountability and control.

The early 1980s marked the beginnings of an explosion in auditing activity in both the UK and North America. Audits, focused on organizations and projects' finances, value for money, quality, environmental effects; learning - you name it.

Exhibition evaluation has tended to be associated with visitor studies, and concerned with customer satisfaction - from the perspectives of museums' commercial potential and public value requirements. In the UK, much pioneering work referred to "educational exhibits" <sup>vi</sup>, and their emphasis was on what, and how much, visitors learned from museum visits.

Over the past 30 years, the growth of a culture of formal scrutiny has resulted in the increased formalization of individual and organizational performance. But the manner in which assurances and accountability are generated is under question. The imposition of audits' values is now seen to have sometimes had unintended and dysfunctional consequences for audited organizations <sup>vii</sup>.

In Britain, the imperative to "measure culture" was mainstreamed by the first New Labour government of 1997. In Britain cultural policy was driven by strategic development rather than the quality of cultural output. In that sense, "measuring culture" emphasized organizational efficiency rather than cultural content. Indeed, critics regarded audits of cultural practices as oxymoronic - implicitly contradictory. Government ministers' first publicly acknowledged their uncertainties about measuring culture (as distinct from making judgments about it) in 2003 <sup>viii</sup>. By 2008 the Department set about officially revising its position. It sought to move the justifications of its funding away from the achievement of apparently "simplistic targets" (not all of which had actually been met), and towards

*"...an appreciation of the profound value of art and culture. Just as the new society we live in has immense potential for the creation of art, so art has never before been so needed to understand the deep complexities of Britain today".*

The Department proposed that rather than employing auditors and evaluators, artists would be the greatest critics of their own work, and that their judgment of its success or otherwise should be trusted" <sup>ix</sup>. It intended setting up a system of critical assessment known as "peer review".<sup>x</sup>

In the event, progress on developing critical engagement around the cultural sector has been really slow. While there is some dispute as to whether the Arts Council England's reform of its system actually involved people who would qualify as "peers", an enduring legacy of this period is that the government acknowledged "critical" as good. One of the Department's other ambitions was to ensure "an informed, critical, demanding audience in the future"<sup>xi</sup>.

According to the Arts Council's 2004 guidelines for evaluating arts education projects, evaluation had two main purposes: one was to improve practice in those projects being assessed, and in the future; the other, was to show what impacts a project had had.

While such evaluations could be undertaken internally, the Arts Council recognized that external evaluation was likely to be highly focused; objective and credible - although it might raise some uncomfortable questions <sup>xii</sup>.

Seven years on (2011) the Arts Council published a somewhat broader evaluation framework, which it conceives as a "key tool" for the development of its funded organizations <sup>xiii</sup>. This focuses on self-evaluation, and is intended to help its clients to evaluate various aspects of their work including their artistic aspirations, and the quality of what they promote. It recommends that they ask themselves such questions as: "Are we honest with ourselves about the quality of the

art we produce/present/support?" and "To what extent do our achievements enable us to meet our artistic aspirations?"

This emphasis is on *self-evaluation* is currently fairly widespread. It's generally cheaper than employing an external consultant; organizations themselves own the process, and it avoids unwanted criticisms.

The UK Evaluation Society's guidelines cover self-evaluation, commissioning, participation in evaluation and professional evaluation. It insists on certain standards: bespoke commissioning; accountability, transparency, and openness about stakeholder's expectations and requirements. It expects all evaluators to be explicit about the purposes, methods, intended outputs and outcomes of their work <sup>xiv</sup>.

Given the interests of this conference, it's worth referring to what is probably *the* guide for self-evaluating museum exhibitions. This is Beverley Serrell's, *Judging Exhibitions: A framework of assessing excellence* (2006). It's based on a framework of shared standards for making and assessing the quality of museum exhibitions. It was designed by a group of museums practitioners who wanted to be able to assess their exhibitions from a visitor-centered perspective - effectively looking at them "from the outside in".

2.2 Moving on to look at the success of exhibitions from the perspective of **criticism...** I'm taking a second extract from British newspaper criticism. In this, Critic No 2, defends a previous review of an exhibition at Tate Britain on the basis of wholly subjective criteria - which is not what you'd expect from an evaluator.

In an article called, *Art criticism is not a democracy*, he writes:

*You might think it's arrogance or snobbery that leads me to criticise a work of art, and maybe it is – but I'm still right*

*My last comment [on the Tate show] appears to read in a highly polarized way. "All the early stuff in the show is basically rubbish", I find myself saying, "but the later stuff... is fantastic". It's a brutal expression of opinion that some may find arbitrary. But, this is the right way to review new art.*

*The reason so much average or absolutely awful art gets promoted is that no one seems to understand what criticism is: if nothing is properly criticized, mediocrity triumphs. A critic is basically an arrogant bastard who says, "this is good, this is bad" without necessarily being able to explain why. At least, not instantly. The truth is, we feel this stuff in our bones. And we're innately convinced we're right.*

*Critics are born, not made. I don't know why I became convinced that I had more to say about art than other people, and an opinion that mattered more than most. But I did decide that – and persuaded others to listen.*

*... Of course, by being so blunt, I run the risk of vilification. I will be seen as a vapid snob, elitist, etc. But I am no more guilty of these traits than anyone else who sets themselves up as a professional critic; I'm just trying to be honest. What do you think all the other critics believe – that their opinion is worth nothing? Unless you think you're right, you shouldn't pass verdict on art that is someone's dream, someone's life.*

*So, I'm sorry, but this is the deal.*

Another article, *How rude should theatre critics be?*, reflects on the dreadful truism that the most damaging reviews are invariably the funniest. (They're also the easiest to write). But its author, who describes himself as an "ageing hack", insists

*I still reserve the right occasionally to be rude: not out of malice or spite, but out of the need to ensure that the second-rate is put firmly in its place. Which, after all, is what the job is partly about.*<sup>xv</sup>

It's been observed that bloggers are often even more confrontational than professional critics. Posting reviews on line is said to allow people to feel "liberated, lively and perhaps even anarchic". "Emotions are exaggerated. Informality reigns"<sup>xvi</sup>. Their feistiness may be about asserting their independence from the "mainstream media"; they may have to shout more loudly to be heard above the fray. Or, as one veteran critic put it, maybe they're just angrier because they're younger.

Anger in criticism has traditionally been regarded as representing moral virtue. In her classic essay, *The Duty of Harsh Criticism*,<sup>xvii</sup> published nearly 100 years ago, Rebecca West argued that the English arts press had become so reverential that "a new and abusive school of criticism" was necessary. She completely dismissed the supposed virtue of amiable, advocacy. Such criticism, she said, "excuses itself by protesting that it is a pity to waste fierceness on things that do not matter. But they do matter."<sup>xviii</sup>

The notion that "honesty" is fundamental to criticism still applies - perhaps more so than ever. In a world in which "Publishers are placing more pressure on authors to do self-promotions", several high profile authors have been exposed for posting fraudulent reviews. They have used fake identities (sock puppets) on blogs, Twitter or Amazon to promote their own work and give bad reviews to others. The Crime Writers Association, in particular, regards this practice as "unfair to authors and also to the readers". It's reportedly looking to set up a membership code of ethics<sup>xix</sup>.

So, one could infer that while critics might contribute to an exhibition's success; they might also be capable of undermining it.

Whether or not they're successful in achieving their ambitions, they're certainly conscious of their potential to shape opinion. Some regard themselves as singularly ineffective. Robert Hughes, arguably, "the greatest art critic of our time", who died in August, self-deprecatingly complained of getting " ... tired of the role that critics are supposed to have in this culture. It's like being the piano player in a whorehouse".

It's been argued that if critics are to exert any influence at all on the making (or consumption) of culture, they should possess various qualities. These include "something like a philosophy, an attitude towards life" and the ability "to explain to his readership why [what he's reviewing] has touched him so, why it should continue to do so, and why it has the ability to touch his readers as well".<sup>xx</sup>

Many of Hughes' obituaries reflected on what drove him to write criticism, and why. Tributes describe him as having made criticism "...look morally worthwhile. He lent a nobility to what can often seem a petty way to spend your life". His condemnation of modern art, for example, involved

*"...political and ethical judgment, as well as artistic. Art had become the plaything of the market, he believed. It was getting too expensive as it turned into the sport of 1980s investors. Artists like Jeff Koons and – he later added – Damien Hirst were barely real artists at all, but grotesque market manipulators.*

*If he was right, God help us all, for the conquest of art by money and the proliferation of celebrity artists that he condemned continues to multiply.”<sup>xxi</sup>*

1. Part 3 speculates about the effect they might have on museums.

### **3 What kind of effect might critics have on museums?**

It inevitably depends, to some extent, on who is assessing what, and for whom. In crude terms, evaluation is considered to be for internal consumption, whereas criticism is for an external readership.

There’s a growing body of literature on the evaluation of evaluation<sup>xxii</sup> across various subject areas. This includes museums, where evaluation has become a standard part of museum projects. A current British project called *Evaluating Evaluation*<sup>xxiii</sup> has been prompted by the fact that it appears to be relatively rare for museums to scrutinize and discuss summative evaluations, or to use the findings to inform subsequent projects. A few museums publish some of their evaluations online, but in general evaluation reports tend to be seen by very few people.

The project’s researchers have observed that objectivity, or rather, the lack of it, is often an issue. In practice, evaluations are normally sent to project funders and are often used for advocacy purposes. Many summative evaluations deliberately set out to demonstrate success, rather than take an honest critical stance. “People have told us that the versions of evaluations that do get circulated are often edited to play down problems”.

**In terms of criticism:** It’s a time-honored adage that there’s no such thing as bad publicity. Yet, studies have consistently shown that negative news damages sales and attendances. A few months ago the *Harvard Business Review* published some research on the effects of book criticism. It shows that under certain circumstances “Bad Reviews Can Boost Sales”<sup>xxiv</sup>. The authors focused on the sales patterns of nearly 250 hardcover works of fiction reviewed in the *New York Times* from 2001 to 2003. But, their findings are more than likely to apply to museum exhibitions. Indeed, they’ve gone on to publish extrapolations of their findings in relation to a number of other businesses<sup>xxv</sup>. Their analysis suggests that the positive effect of bad reviews appears to largely depend on whether or not consumers were already aware of the book’s author.

As you’d expect, good reviews, increased sales (with gains of between 32% and 52%). But, as you’d also expect, negative reviews of books by established authors caused a drop (of about 15%, on average). But, for books by relatively unknown authors, bad reviews caused sales to rise (by an average of 45%). This held even when the criticism was extreme. By making consumers aware of a book that they would otherwise have not known about, even the harshest review can be a boon.

Time was also a factor. In follow-up interviews participants were asked how likely they were to buy various books. It turned out that negative reviews damaged well-known authors, regardless of any delay between the review and the purchase decision. Although negative reviews initially also hurt unknown books, the detrimental effect quickly diminished. The researcher suggested that product awareness often lingers after the memory of the bad write up fades. Bad reviews could raise the profile of less known books and authors. This may be good news for relatively unknown museums and obscure exhibitions...

So, the fact that companies try to quash negative publicity, may not always be the best tactic. Adverse criticism may be of even greater benefit to them.

### **Closing remarks**

I was invited to consider how critics measure the success of museum exhibitions. In the event, I've compared the roles of critics and evaluators, and found certain differences in how they assess exhibitions:

- Whereas the evaluator is likely to work to a prescribed and agreed framework, the critic's approach is less formally directed, and conventionally pursues a personal agenda.
- The evaluator might measure the effectiveness of an exhibition; but the critic's approach is based on perceptions of its 'value';
- More specifically....the evaluator will be employed to consider whether an exhibition is delivering on its stated aims and to its target audience, but the critic may well ask if it was intellectually justified in the first place.
- Whereas the evaluator might be looking to measure an exhibition's excellence; the critic might simply reflect on its mediocrity.

So, what difference might those approaches make and to whom? This is the point where I hand over to you!

**My workshop tomorrow is billed as " Looking from the outside in: understanding the critic's perspective".**

It's based on participants' responses to a local exhibition. I'm planning to divide everyone into two groups. One group will assess the exhibition, using a framework devised for museum professionals to judge exhibitions' excellence; the other will take their own approach to critiquing the exhibition. The groups will then meet discuss their findings and consider their possible effects. I very much look forward to continuing this debate with you tomorrow

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<sup>i</sup> [http://hubreview.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/is-there-room-for-critics-in-market\\_16.html](http://hubreview.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/is-there-room-for-critics-in-market_16.html)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.superflutiesredux.com/2012/06/15/make-big-money-now-be-a-theatre-critic/>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/sep/09/michael-billington-arts-criticism>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/7830939/Summer-Exhibition-at-the-Royal-Academy-review.html>

<sup>v</sup> Roger Miles "Grasping the greased pig" *Museum Visitor studies in the 90s*. Science Museum, 1993: 24

<sup>vi</sup> Miles, Roger S. et al. (1982). *The design of educational exhibition*.

<sup>vii</sup> <http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780198289470.do#.UDYwG9BWomQ>

<sup>viii</sup> [http://www.demos.co.uk/press\\_releases/valuingculture](http://www.demos.co.uk/press_releases/valuingculture)

<sup>ix</sup> <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/supportingexcellenceinthearts.pdf>

<sup>x</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2009/sep/10/peer-review-arts-council-theatre-assessors>.

<sup>xi</sup> <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/supportingexcellenceinthearts.pdf>

<sup>xii</sup> published 1999 & 2004

<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/documents/publications/phpLYO0Ma.pdf>

<sup>xiii</sup> [http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/Arts\\_Council\\_Plan\\_2011-15.pdf](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/Arts_Council_Plan_2011-15.pdf)

<sup>xiv</sup> <http://www.proveandimprove.org/documents/GuidelinesforGoodPractice.pdf>

<sup>xv</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2011/jul/29/theatre-critics-review-giving-offence>

<sup>xvi</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2011/sep/30/calm-down-review-theatre-bloggers>

<sup>xvii</sup> <http://www.tnr.com/book/review/the-duty-harsh-criticism>

<sup>xviii</sup> <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/08/25/theater-talkback-the-good-that-comes-from-bad-reviews/>

<sup>xix</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/sep/03/rj-ellory-secret-amazon-reviews>. Authors include RJ Ellory, "only the tip of the iceberg" - Orlando Figes and Stephen Leather

<sup>xx</sup> <http://www.superflutiesredux.com/2012/06/18/the-complete-critics-qualifications/>

<sup>xxi</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2012/aug/07/robert-hughes-greatest-art-critic?intcmp=239>

<sup>xxii</sup> HE <http://www0.bcu.ac.uk/crq/publications/inqaah99.pdf>; in press [http://cima.ned.org/docs/CIMA-Evaluating\\_the\\_Evaluators\\_Report.pdf](http://cima.ned.org/docs/CIMA-Evaluating_the_Evaluators_Report.pdf)

<sup>xxiii</sup> <http://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/comment/01062012-why-evaluation-doesnt-measure-up>

<sup>xxiv</sup> Berger, 2012, <http://hbr.org/2012/03/bad-reviews-can-boost-sales-heres-why/ar/1>.

See also Positive Effects of Negative Publicity: When Negative Reviews Increase Sales", by Jonah Berger, Alan T. Sorensen and Scott J. Rasmussen

<sup>xxv</sup> <http://www.economist.com/node/18231516> . based on the analysis of the sales patterns of nearly 250 hardcover works of fiction reviewed in the *New York Times* from 2001 to 2003.