



# Critical Thinking: A Call for Articles



by Jay Rounds

It's not easy getting museum exhibits people to write for publication! In my brief tenure as editor of *Exhibitionist*, I've found that the use of special theme sections (such as this issue's section on "meaning making") are very helpful in recruiting and motivating authors, besides allowing us to address some central issues in the field. However, it's not my intention to limit any issue to articles relating to the special theme. I'm always open to receiving submissions on any appropriate topic concerning museum exhibits, and encourage you to call me and chat about your idea for an article, or to send an outline or draft to me for review. I'm also very willing to work with first-time authors, who have a good idea but need some extra help getting it into shape for publication.

With that said, I do want to recruit submissions for a special theme section for the spring 2000 issue: Exhibit Criticism. *Exhibitionist* is all about helping us to create better exhibits. It does this by providing a mechanism for cumulating knowledge—i.e., by helping us learn from the experience of others, especially by spotlighting significant patterns emerging in the diverse experiences of thousands of museums and exhibit creators.

One important vehicle for cumulating knowledge is exhibit criticism. Kathy McLean, who has probably done more than anyone else to advance the state of this particular art, has said that the purpose of exhibit criticism is "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" (1994:6). Her ten-year run organizing the criticism sessions at the annual meeting of AAM clearly established the importance of informed, analytical thinking about exhibits.

My predecessor as editor of *Exhibitionist*, Diana Cohen-Altman, has been another leader in the field. Her special issue on exhibit criticism (spring 1994) established *Exhibitionist* as a leading venue not just for superior exhibit reviews, but also for thoughtful essays on the practice of exhibit criticism itself. Diana is continuing her leadership, having just taken over the reins of the AAM criticism sessions from Kathy McLean.

Now that nearly six years have passed since Diana's special issue on the topic, I think it's time for another theme issue on exhibit criticism. Just as we need to cumulate knowledge about exhibit design and development, we need to cumulate knowledge about how to do good, useful exhibit criticism. Diana and Kathy led an outstanding session at the 1999 AAM meetings that reflected on the past decade of developing the art of criticism. The next issue of *Exhibitionist* will seek to build on that platform, combining essays on critical thinking about criticism with exemplary reviews of interesting exhibits. I hope that you will consider contributing!

What kind of contributions am I looking for? The most important thing is to remember the point made above: the justification for criticism is to cumulate knowledge that will help us to create better exhibits in the future. Thus, I'll place low priority on straightforward descriptions of unexceptional exhibits, with no probing analysis, and on "scorecard" reviews that only criticize an exhibit's performance on obvious, standard



## from the editor



criteria. For instance, we all know already that label copy should be readable. It's a useful lesson in human frailty to learn that the new exhibit at Museum X blew that well-known criterion, but it will be given a lower priority for publication than more probing or original analyses. Just like exhibits, articles need a significant take-home message.

Below I list some ideas about topics that would be appropriate for this special issue. This list is meant only to stimulate your thinking, and certainly is NOT intended to define limits for submissions. Any other ideas or approaches to the topic will be eagerly welcomed. But I'll certainly be interested in articles that address any of the following:

1. Essays on the art (or science?) of exhibit criticism, including essays that explore ways criticism is done in other fields that might suggest useful approaches in our own field. For instance, an essay might respond to Marlene Chambers' (1997) concept of "the intentional fallacy" in exhibit criticism—the question of whether or not the intentions of the exhibit creator are relevant in critiquing the actual, completed exhibit.
2. Essays that review and reflect on the existing literature of museum criticism—for instance, that identify persistent themes in past exhibit critiques and show how this persistence illuminates unstated (and perhaps problematic) assumptions we make about the nature and practice of exhibit design and/or exhibit criticism.
3. Reflexive critiques: articles that review an exhibit, but use the review process to explore and make explicit the reviewer's beliefs about how to design exhibits and/or do exhibit criticism.
4. Research reports and essays on the role played by criticism in the field—for instance, a study of how exhibit professionals make use of published (or presented) critiques of the work of others in refining their own practice.
5. Critiques of specific exhibits that use new technologies or innovative design techniques, that are exceptionally creative, or that otherwise offer important lessons for the field.
6. Critiques that tie the specifics of the individual exhibit to broader issues in the field—for instance, that analyze the exhibit in terms of its support for visitor meaning-making, cultural diversity, or constructivist learning.
7. Comparative critiques that analyze two or more exhibits on the same or related topics, using the comparison to draw out lessons about the implications of strategic choices in design approaches.

Manuscripts for this special section (as well as other articles for the spring 2000 issue) must be submitted by February 7th. Earlier submissions are devoutly desired. Feel free to give me a call to discuss an idea you're considering, or to send me an outline for review. My addresses, and instructions for submitting manuscripts, will be found on the back cover of this issue.

### Exhibits Newslines,

Phyllis Rabineau's ever popular column, will return in the next issue!

Send her information on your latest finds at: [rabineau@chicagohs.org](mailto:rabineau@chicagohs.org)

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#### REFERENCES CITED:

##### Chambers, Marlene

1997 "What Manner of Beast Is This? Exhibition Criticism and the 'Intentional Fallacy.'" *Exhibitionist* 16(1): 13-15.

##### McLean, Kathleen

1994 "We Need Criticism." *Exhibitionist* 13(1): 6-8.