

**Excerpts from "We Need  
Criticism" by Kathleen McLean  
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**Before the Exhibition – Your State of  
Mind**

All of us bring preconceptions to an exhibition. You may have heard a glowing review from someone you respect and therefore 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.

**Exhibit 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 or interpretive graphics to assist you in understanding the scope or 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 definite 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 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 kinds 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 you're in an empty or 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," or 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 attracted 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 the concepts or 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 finger prints 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 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 you 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)?

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

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?

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