

### **Visiting the Museum: Some things to think about in general and in writing your critiques**

1. **Prior to entry:** what does the museum say about who belongs inside? What messages does it give the visitor who stands on the sidewalk outside thinking about coming in?
2. **Entry:** What kind of space are you entering? How is the visitor made to feel? Will all visitors feel equally welcome? Will all visitors be able to use the museum in the same way? Is the expectation that the visitor will know what to do in this space? Is there an admission fee? How much? To what extent is your next step inside the museum obvious? What is the presence of security? What seems to be going on in the entryway?
3. **Passages through the museum:** What is the overall narrative structure to the museum? Is this structure quite evident to you or does it come only with time? What is the basic form of organization of the museum's collections (e.g. how is its permanent collection organized)? Will the casual visitor notice it, or only the museum critic? Is your path through the museum relatively predetermined or do you make your own way? In larger museums, is there any message given (or received) about which galleries are more important, which less?
4. **Basic museum design:** Give some thought to basic design decisions about the museum's interior architecture and how collections work with that architecture. Lighting. Spaces for seating, conversation, etc., inside galleries.
5. **Museum collections:** What percentage of the museum space is destined to the museum's permanent collection? Are the visiting/changing exhibits located in a way to encourage a visit to the entire museum or just to that exhibit? Does the casual visitor have any idea that what is being shown is only a portion of the total collection? Would that change one's perspective on the museum visit? If so, how?
6. **The overall museum space:** What is the museum space used for besides the display of its collection? Shops? Food? Entertainment? Public spaces? Restrooms? Where are shops located? Where are restaurants and other food sources located? Are artifacts\* limited to formal gallery space or are they found other places (passageways, halls, bathrooms, etc.)? Does this change how you view the artifact? What provisions are made for different types of groups (schools groups, elderly, disabled)? Can you easily find your way to these spaces? Will the visitors feel comfortable asking for information?
7. **Museum aids:** What kind of help does the museum provide to understand its collection: narratives on the entry to the museum or galleries? Listening guides

- (audio sticks, tape, CDs, etc.)? Docents? Guide books (free/pay/how much)? Other devices (e.g. heavy plastic sheets of information, maps, etc.). If you use one of the guides (oral or written), what do you learn about who put the guide together? How is the authority of the museum transferred via the guide to the visitor? Take some time to look around and observe the people who are using various aids. Are there any forms of aid that you find particularly useful?
8. **The gallery and exhibition morphology:** What is the narrative structure of the gallery itself? Is there an obvious way to move through the gallery? If so, what is its basic organizing principle? Can you approach the gallery from a different perspective, i.e., take a different path? What does the flow of the museum visitors do to someone who wants to move in a different direction? Are the visitors in that gallery basically observing the sense of direction in the gallery? Does the gallery provide its own entryway information (text/visual)? To what extent does that information pre-determine how you will “read” that gallery? Think about what Pearce calls depth, rings, and entropy vis-à-vis exhibition morphology.
  9. **Galleries and the public:** How is the gallery visitor expected to interact with the exhibits? Visually? Hands-on? Via sound? Via the written word? In some other way? Which exhibits are more likely to encourage hands-on participation? Which least likely?
  10. **The exhibit space:** Think about some individual exhibit cases and how they are set up. What are the organizing principles? What are the *assumptions* the exhibit organizer is making about the people who will be viewing the exhibit? Labels: placement; content; information provided. What do the labels assume about the museum visitor? Too much, too little text? Can a case be understood in isolation or do you need to see its surrounding cases? What choices do the curators make by placing items in context/juxtaposition/proximity? Can you find any particular narrative within the case itself? Is the case crowded or spare? If crowded, does it appear that way because of poor museum technique or because the curators are saying something about the artifacts exhibited? To what extent does the number of items in a case lead you to value or ignore the items inside? To what extent does the exhibit tell you that it is about the “canon”?
  11. **The artifact:** Individual label or case label? Information provided? Is the artifact unique? authentic? real? reproducible? a copy? Why is the artifact there? Aesthetic reasons? Educational reasons? Memory reasons? Emotive reasons? To what extent does its placement in the case answer these questions for you? How is the artifact sited, lighted, hung?
  12. **Education and the museum:** Is the educational purpose of the gallery, case, or museum evident to you? What does it say about how people learn? What are the basic educational techniques that it uses to insure that learning will occur?
  13. **The visitors:** What are the museum visitors doing? Get a sense of the demographics of the visiting population – who is there? Are people most often alone or in groups? Age, gender, race; can you tell anything about class? Are most

visitors approaching the exhibits and/or the museum in the same way? Are they talking (about what)? Do they adopt the “proper” museum-gaze in front of an artifact? Are there people there who seem to be using the museum in a different way? What are they doing? What are young children doing? Can you tell anything at all from observing the visitors about their purposes in coming to the museum? Do the visitors speak to the guards? The docents? Does the museum make any effort to segregate the visitors by age? What are the security guards doing? Who are they looking at?

**14. Feedback:** What, if any, are the opportunities by which visitors can provide feedback to the museum: comment cards, computers, postcards, etc. Are these located: at the exit to the museum? In every gallery? In some galleries? By exhibits? Do you have any feeling that the museum directors/curators actually care what you think about the exhibits? Is there any indication at all by which you can see that visitor input has had an impact on the museum?

**15. Outside again:** What is your *immediate* feeling on leaving the museum?

**16. Response & reflection:**

If you could sit down with the museum director or the curator of a specific exhibit, (a) what would you ask her/him? (b) what would you recommend should be changed? (c) what do you think worked the best (explain)?

What did *you* use this museum for? Did you try to get a sense of the overall museum? Did you only visit a few exhibitions or artifacts? What was your purpose in coming? How do you feel the museum is using its space? Who do you think is the intended audience of this museum? Do you think the museum should be attracting different audiences?

What is being *performed* in this museum (in Bennett’s sense of the term)? What are the basic narrative lines that the museum is adopting? How is time spatialized in this museum? How is space temporalized? How are cultural differences made visible? To what extent are gender differences suggested by the museum display?

**17. Final thoughts:** What was the overall *purpose* of the *museum* you just visited? What does the museum director want you to come away with? Who (*really*) is this museum for? Will you return? Who would you bring with you? Do you have any sense of the outreach activities of this museum? Do you know of any other way to get information about this museum?

**\*Please note that “artifact” in this sheet does not intend to distinguish between “art” and “non-art.” I am using it simply to denote the object on display.**