

attempt to observe it closely. Usually, weak art-writing does not fail because the writer boldly attempted to express their art experience, and fell short. No-fledgling art-writers are so overcome by the task—writing thoughtfully about their experience of art—that they abandon this endeavor before even trying. They take all sides, or seek refuge in ‘conceptual’ padding (*‘the demands of Greenbergian dogma’*) and stock concerns (*‘the complexities of life in the digital age’*). **Be brave, look at the art, and train yourself to write simply, only about what you know.** Just by trusting yourself—and becoming informed—your texts will improve dramatically.

> *The first time you write about art*

Like writing about sex, verbalizing an art experience always verges on the overwritten embarrassment. **No one excels at art-writing from their earliest attempt.** Have a read of the comments scrawled on blogs or in gallery visitors’ books to know what untutored art-writing sounds like:

‘Thank you! Wonderful 😊’

‘A waste of taxpayers’ money’

‘What a magnificent way to work with chicken wire’⁵⁴

Everyone’s first attempt at substantial art-writing is a tortuous endeavor. To cope, one might resort to echoing whatever’s on the press release or website: *‘Cindy Sherman’s photographs deconstruct notions of the male gaze’*, that sort of thing. This **parroted art-talk is as unsatisfying for you to write as it is for anyone to read.**

Virgin art-writing usually begins with a phrase like, *‘When I first entered the gallery, I was struck by...’* Venturing further—though omitting to describe the exhibition—the novice instantly forgets the art, and lets memory take him...somewhere else. The discussion becomes all about the writer, not the art, and swamped beneath a rush of ill-formed notions, anecdotes, half-baked interpretative angles, and inexplicable associations, all plagued by the writer’s uncertainties:

- + where to start?
- + how many, and which, artworks to discuss?

- + where to end?
- + how to balance description and factual information about the artist/exhibition?
- + where to inject my own musings?

In an attempt to ‘cover everything’ the newcomer tosses in a slew of worn, abstract notions such as:

- ‘subversion’
- ‘disruption’
- ‘formal concerns’
- ‘displacement’
- ‘alienation’
- ‘today’s digital world’.

Concepts pile up like colliding automobiles in a wreck, flying off in every direction, leaving a trail of unresolved ideas in their wake. As the last paragraph approaches, the flagging writer—aware he has little left in the tank—will tack on a panic-stricken finale involving a complete or partial reversal. Initial impressions are dramatically deepened or dimmed with the revelation that the artwork/exhibition/experience was not as initially imagined. It was deep rather than superficial, traditional rather than unfamiliar. It was flat yet round, open yet closed, painting yet photography, personal yet academic, *ad infinitum*, as the writer attempts a budding stab at an original idea. This incipient thought, alas, leads nowhere. The writer will omit the actual title of a single artwork, misspell the artist’s name (twice), and forget to sign his own.

Most of us have written a lame art-text like this; there is no shame in taking your first baby steps. This is probably a necessary rite-of-passage in every art-writer’s life-cycle, but reflects **a tadpole phase you want rapidly to outgrow**, because this type of early text

- + does not reflect or deepen the experience of art, but only solves the *problem of writing about it*;
- + has nothing to do with the art, but *only with the writer*;
- + cannot trace for the reader *how conclusions were reached*;
- + ignores the reality that *most art experiences change in*

meaning the more you think about them. (Even bad art changes over time, proving more shallow and detestable when you are forced to spend time with it.)

You want to start where the beginner's text ends. Drop the first three paragraphs and keep only the last—albeit preserving, and probably expanding, the descriptive prologue. Once your prolonged art-looking begins to mature, winnow down most of the preamble, and think through your own viable idea. *Start there.*

In truth, that business about the text having **'nothing to do with the art but only with the writer' is, actually, what art-writing is always, inevitably, about: its writer.** Wicked reviews mostly reflect the reviewer's own foul mood (although bad art can exacerbate an incipient migraine). As you continue art-writing, you will learn to obscure—or exploit—this fact. But be warned: indulging in your idiosyncratic mood swings can turn ugly. Ignoring your gut reaction, however, is to blame for much of the tiresome art-writing out there. Where your own opinion is *not* requested, such as wall labels or institution websites, push your ego gently aside and research hard information, specific facts. In every case, *really know what you are writing about.*

> *'The baker's family who have just won the big lottery prize'*

One memorable example of first-rate art-writing was composed over 100 years ago. This gem is fewer than a dozen words in length, and attributed to 19th-century writer Lucien Solvay (among others) commenting on Francisco Goya's *The Family of Carlos IV* (c. 1800; fig. 4), who are described as:

The baker's family who have just won the big lottery prize.⁵⁵

This tiny snippet **synthesizes what the artwork looks like, why it's meaningful, and the bigger implications of the painting**, too. For Solvay, this royal group looked like 'the grocer's family...on a lucky day', a phrase later polished to its well-known form.

Keep it simple. 'Omit needless words.'⁵⁶

Why might this razor-sharp mid 19th-century comment prove exemplary for the budding art-writer today? Because:

- + **this phrase employs few, ordinary words.** It does *not* say: *'Collectively, we, politically savvy onlookers, are free to imagine another, perhaps more deprived, class of family—possibly engaged in some non-regal profession or pedestrian trade such as the vending of baked goods—enjoying the luxuries and splendor that good fortune might gift en masse to its unsuspecting, lucky-ticket-holding recipients.'*
- + **it pulls together what the picture looks like** (an overbred, overdressed family) **with what it may mean** (these people aren't 'regal', just lucky). Looking at the painting, we are not mystified as to how Solvay landed upon this idea, but instantly comprehend his words. *We enjoy the art more* thanks to this keen-witted observation.
- + **it has been worded with care, and features concrete nouns.** Solvay's 'grocer' was good, but the later 'baker' is bang on target, resonating in the King's doughy face, the Queen's baguette-like arm. **The wealth of visual details that Goya piled into the picture—which we can plainly see—substantiate the writer's ideas about this art.**



fig. 4 FRANCISCO GOYA, *The Family of Carlos IV*, c. 1800

+ it situates the art within a bigger world picture. ‘Lottery’ hits the bulls-eye. Goya’s political point might be: ‘This is no divine family! These are ordinary folk who randomly won “the lottery of life”, rulling our country generation after generation. Let’s revolt!’⁵⁷ After-effects of the surprise windfall might explain the wide-eyed, startled look on the Queen’s multi-chinned face, and all those round, vacant eyes, as if caught by surprise. *The closer we look at this painting, the more these imaginative words add to our enjoyment of the work.*

+ it does not exclude other responses to the art. Like the artist, this writer was fearless and original, taking a risk. These words are so inventive, so unexpected, they encourage others to think about this painting creatively for themselves. Solvay’s interpretation may be a cracker, but it is not the final word, and it invites other onlookers to match his imaginative wit.

Certainly, **the power behind this comment owes everything to the quality of Goya’s superb painting.** Art-writers are perpetually at the mercy of what critic Peter Plagens has called the timeless art ratio, ‘10% good art: 90% crap’.⁵⁸ It is no easy task to write a smart, supportive text about barren, uninspired work. Such writing will sound like hokum, because it is. **Write first about artists whom you genuinely revere,** the art you most believe in, **so you don’t have to fake it.** And if a work fails, say so with gusto. Faked feelings rarely produce good writing.

As a rule, dial down any bloated and grandiose statements:

‘This art overturns all definitions of visual experience’

‘This video questions all assumptions of gender identity’

‘Viewing this art, we question our very being, and ask ourselves what is real, and what is not.’

Get a grip. Very rarely, great art and poetry can aspire to feats of this magnitude; an overexposed Polaroid of the artist’s bull-terrier probably does not, and should not be burdened with such weighty expectations. **You can support art without prostrating yourself before it.**

Your first question when approaching any piece of art-writing might be: how much of my opinion is required here? Secondly, *do I know enough*

The three jobs of communicative art-writing

All art-writers can concoct a written response to art (the easy part). **Good writers show where that response came from, and convince of its validity** (the hard part; discussed in more detail in ‘How to substantiate your ideas’, page 53). Communicative writing about artworks breaks down into three tasks, each answering a question:

Q1 What is it?

(What does it look like? How is it made? What happened?)

Job 1: **Keep your description of the art brief and be specific.** Look closely for meaningful details or key artist decisions that created this artwork, perhaps regarding materials; size; selection of participants; placement. Be selective; avoid overindulging in minutiae, or producing list-like descriptions that are cumbersome to read and largely inconsequential to job 2.

Q2 What might this mean?

(How does the form or event carry meaning?)

Job 2: **Join the dots; explain where this meaningful idea is observed in the artwork itself.** Weak art-writers will claim great meanings for artworks without tracing for the reader where these might originate materially in the work (job 1) or how they might connect to the viewer’s interests (job 3).

Q3 Why does this matter to the world at large? (What, finally,

does this artwork or experience contribute—if anything—to the world? Or, to put it bluntly, so what?)

Job 3: **Keep it reasonable and traceable to jobs 1 and 2.**

Answering this final question—‘so what?’—entails some original thought. And remember that the achievements of even good art can be relatively modest; that’s OK.

to make my contribution worth reading? In all cases—whether evidence-led (explaining), opinion-led (evaluating), or mixed—your texts will only stand up if you can **substantiate your claims** (see page 53).

> *The three jobs of communicative art-writing*

Here is a short extract from a catalogue text by critic and curator Okwui Enwezor.

In the late 1970s, [Craigie] Horsfield commenced one of the most sustained and unique artistic investigations around the governing relationship between photography and temporality. Working with a large-format camera, he traveled to pre-Solidarity Poland, specifically to the industrial city of Krakow, then in the throes of industrial decline and labor agitation [2]. There he began shooting a series of ponderous and, in some cases, theatrically anti-heroic black-and-white photographs comprising portraits, deserted street scenes and machinery [1]. Printed in large-scale format [1], with tonal shifts between sharp but cool whites and velvety blacks, these images underline the stark fact of the subject, whether its of a lugubriously lit street corner or a solemn, empty factory floor, or portraits of young men and women, workers and lovers [1]. The artist worked as if he were bearing witness to the slow declension of an era [3], along with a whole category of people soon to be swept away by the forces of change [...]. With their stern, stubborn mien, they stand before us as the condemned [3].

Source Text 2 OKWUI ENWEZOR. 'Documents into Monuments: Archives as Meditations on Time', in *Archive Fever: Photography between History and the Monument*, 2008

How exactly does Enwezor's text fulfil the basic expectations of communicative art-writing? He answers three questions (see page 49):

Q1 What is it? What does the artwork look like?

A Enwezor describes what appears in the images, as well as the photographs' size and technique [1].

Q2 What might the work mean?

A The writer explains in brief the artist's project [2].

Q3 Why does this matter to the world at large?

A Enwezor's original interpretation is that Horsfield's 'unique artistic investigations' did not just document the decline of an era, but immortalized those doomed to go down with it: Horsfield's subjects appear as if resigned to death row [3].

If you favor a clipped journalistic style, you might balk at 'relationship between photography and temporality' or 'theatrically anti-heroic', but Enwezor always returns to the actual artwork in order to move his thinking forward and prevent lapsing into meaninglessness. You may not agree with Enwezor's conclusion, and can freely re-interpret Horsfield's portraits (fig. 5) in your own terms; but the writer has taken the reader step-by-step through his knowledge and his thinking to *substantiate* his interpretation.

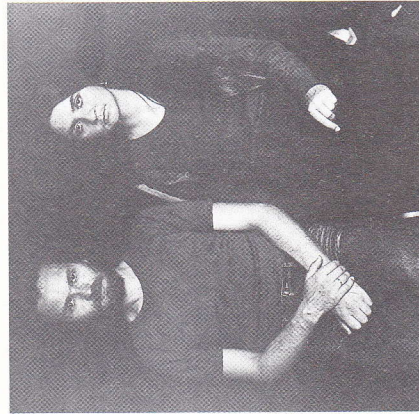


Fig. 5 CRAIGIE HORSFIELD, *Leszek Mierwa & Magda Mierwa - ul. Nawojki, Krakow*, July 1984, printed 1990