

Writing Effective Art Exhibit Labels: A Nuts and Bolts Primer

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**“Interpretive labels tell stories—
they are narratives, not lists of facts.”**

-Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*

“Containing the length of labels is like packing for a trip... we are advised to stack our belongings in three separate piles —

(1) the things we would like to take; (2) the things we think we need; and (3) the things we absolutely cannot get along without — and then take only the third group.”



-George Weiner, “Why Johnny Can’t Read Labels”

What's The Big Idea?

The big idea clearly states the exhibition's scope and purpose.

All interpretive texts in a given exhibition should link back to and support one over-arching concept, or big idea.



Different Types of Interpretive Texts

Painting & Sculpture I

The works displayed on this floor roughly span the years 1880 to 1940. Within an overall chronological flow, galleries highlight individual stylistic movements, artists, and themes, including Post-Impressionism, Cubism, the work of Henri Matisse, Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*, and Surrealism, among other subjects. An ongoing program of periodic reinstallations allows the curators to present a wide range of artworks in various configurations, reflecting the view that there are countless ways to explore the history of modern art and the Museum's rich collection. The Painting and Sculpture Galleries on the fourth floor display art made between 1940 and 1980; the Contemporary Galleries, on the second floor, present the most recent works in the collection.

CONCEPTUAL ART

Revolution was a pervasive term in the late 1960s in the United States and Europe, as students demonstrated against the Vietnam War, race riots broke out, and protesters challenged accepted systems and authorities. In this spirit, many artists began to question traditional notions of art, in some cases rejecting the art object altogether in favor of a radical, dematerialized practice based in ideas and actions.

This gallery presents a selection of works from the formative years of what came to be known as Conceptual art in the United States. During this time, artists such as Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner moved away from the art object, experimenting instead with the possibilities of language, time, radio waves, and mapping as primary materials. Many of these examples come from the collection of Seth Siegelaub, a publisher, dealer, and exhibition organizer whose groundbreaking books and shows were critical to the development of Conceptual art.

Pablo Picasso

Spanish, 1881–1973

Les Femmes d'Alger 1907
Oil on canvas

Acquired through the Lille P. Bliss Bequest, 1939

The result of months of preparation and revision, this painting revolutionized the art world when first seen in Picasso's studio. Its monumental size underscored the shocking incoherence resulting from the outright sabotage of conventional representation. Picasso drew on sources as diverse as Iberian sculpture, African tribal masks, and El Greco's painting to make this startling composition. In the preparatory studies, the figure at left was a medical student entering a brothel. Picasso, wanting no anecdotal detail to interfere with the sheer impact of the work, decided to eliminate it in the final painting. The only remaining allusion to the brothel lies in the title: *Alger* was a street in Barcelona famed for its brothel.

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**Extended
Labels
(100 words)**

**Gallery Overview
or Section texts
(200 words)**

Introductory texts (250 words)

Topics Most Helpful to Viewers

- Formal elements/Content (imagery, iconography, symbolism)
- Cultural and historical context
- Artist's commentary on work, own philosophy
- Technique and process, or how a work is produced
- Why the object is considered art and why it is in the museum

Topics Least Helpful to Viewers

- Unsubstantiated assertions of aesthetic quality, comparative judgments, or connoisseurship
- Theoretical or specialized art historical information
- Lengthy biographical information about the artist
- Exhibition history or provenance



DO...

- Include concrete visual information; draw the eye back to the work of art
- Work from specific (ideally a visual or sensory detail) to general information
- Ground your explanation in what the reader is likely to already know
- Write for the broadest possible audience, using familiar vocabulary
- Explain technical or specialist terms
- Clarify references made by titles or things that may not be evident just from looking
- Include sophisticated concepts, as long as they are explained using non-exclusionary vocabulary
- Include quotes by the artist
- Write labels so that they stand alone

DON'T...



- Write about what the reader cannot see
- Make reference to works of art that are not directly in view
- Mention other artists or works of art without addressing a clear connection to the work at hand
- Think of using clear, straightforward language as “dumbing it down”
- Cram too many ideas into one paragraph
- Tell visitors what to think, or make unsubstantiated assertions of quality
- Refer to visitors in third person

Interpretive Label Critique

(10 minutes)

**Re-write the first sentence of
your assigned label
(5 minutes)**



DRAFT LABEL

Christo (Christo Javacheff)
Package on Wheelbarrow, 1963
Cloth, metal, wool, rope and twine

Christo has excessively wrapped an object in a random manner distorting and concealing the original form and evoking all the mystery and curiosity associated with a gift-wrapped package. Similarly Christo's wheelbarrow suggests industry and business, but the package, without identifiable shapes or marks, appears contradictory to the smartly designed packaging of a practical commercial industry. This work resonates with "Nouveau Realism", a 1960s group of artists working in France, with whom Christo was briefly associated, who sought inspiration from "modern nature." By employing found objects and industrial materials these artists confounded the industrial and commercial processes with its aesthetic potential.



DRAFT LABEL

Edvard Munch, *The Storm*, 1893, Oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 51 1/2" (91.8 x 130.8 cm)

Munch depicts not a physical storm but one of inner, psychic turbulence and anxiety. The worried brushstroke and fraught purple and blue tonalities saturating the picture purposefully preclude catharsis, rendering the landscape pregnant with tension. Munch frequently summered in the Norwegian seaside resort of Aasgaardstrand in the company of fellow artists and writers of the anti-bourgeois Kristiana (Oslo) Bohème. The central woman, virginally white, clasps her hands to her head, a gesture mimicked by the nearby circle of women—their quasi-ritual disposition evokes a pagan rite. The windows of the house—bright, yellow, arresting—partially anthropomorphize the building while suggesting a vibrant world from which the women are excluded.



**LABEL
CURRENTLY ON
DISPLAY**

**Christo (Christo Javacheff)
Package on Wheelbarrow, 1963
Cloth, metal, wool, rope and twine**

In his early twenties Christo escaped the oppressive Communist regime in his native country and wandered in exile throughout Europe, supporting himself primarily by painting commissioned portraits. He has related his early wrapped-package works to the isolation and sadness of his coming of age in Bulgaria; the wheelbarrow, in particular, suggests a stateless, nomadic life. In 1964, shortly after making *Package on Wheelbarrow*, Christo relocated to New York City. There, in partnership with his wife, Jeanne-Claude, he has created large-scale temporary installations, wrapping trees, islands, buildings, and bridges in fabric.

90 words



LABEL
CURRENTLY ON
DISPLAY

Edvard Munch, *The Storm*, 1893, Oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 51 1/2" (91.8 x 130.8 cm)

Munch painted *The Storm* in Aasgaardstrand, a small Norwegian seaside resort he and other artists frequented. The painting may have been inspired by a violent storm that occurred there that summer, but it also conjures a sense of psychic distress. Standing near the water on an eerie blue Scandinavian summer night, a young woman clad in white clasps her hands to her head. Other women, standing apart from her, echo the anguished gesture. The windows of the house—bright, yellow, arresting—imbue the building with an almost human presence while suggesting a vibrant world from which the women are excluded.

100 words

Legibility & Accessibility Matters

A photograph of an art gallery. On the left, a woman in a wheelchair is looking at a large painting on the wall. To her right, another woman stands looking at the same painting. In the background, other visitors are visible in a well-lit gallery space with wooden floors.

“Legibility
is legibility”

A photograph showing a group of people in an art gallery. They are gathered around a painting on the wall. The scene is brightly lit, and the people appear to be engaged in conversation or viewing the artwork.

Design with
empathy



Visitor Research



Qualitative research is “a form of inquiry that helps us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena.”

-Merriam, 1998



Why do visitors read wall text?

Added information

- “Gives me knowledge of what I’m seeing”

Context and understanding

- “For the historical context – I like to know what was happening in the year something was made, something about the artist”

Gives meaning and deepens appreciation

- “I have my own impressions of art, but when I read this I go in a new direction – look at something in a new light”

Orientation

- “Helps me place myself in the space”

Enjoyment

- “If there's something I’m really interested in (whether I know a lot about it or nothing) I like to read the info available since it typically adds to my enjoyment”

A green speech bubble with a white outline and a tail pointing towards the bottom right. Inside the bubble, the word "QUESTIONS?" is written in a white, serif, all-caps font. The background of the entire image shows several hands of different skin tones raised in the air, suggesting a classroom or a public meeting.

QUESTIONS?