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The image shows the front cover of the book 'Exhibiting Photography' by Shirley Read. The cover features a photograph of a person standing in a gallery space, looking at a wall of framed photographs. The title 'Exhibiting Photography' is prominently displayed in large, serif capital letters. Below the title is a subtitle in a smaller, blue serif font: 'A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO CHOOSING A SPACE, DISPLAYING YOUR WORK, AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN'. The author's name, 'SHIRLEY READ', is at the bottom in large, bold, serif capital letters. In the bottom right corner, there is a small red square containing the Focal Press logo and the word 'Focal Press'.

**Exhibiting
Photography**

A PRACTICAL GUIDE
TO CHOOSING A SPACE,
DISPLAYING YOUR WORK,
AND EVERYTHING IN
BETWEEN

SHIRLEY READ

Text, Printed, and Publicity Materials

FIGURE 4.1 "Highgate." "I print everything myself and each print will be slightly different. My images are often printed for the first time some twenty years after they were originally taken, so I have serious problems with the way photographs are described as being 'printed later'!" Gary Woods. Image © Gary Woods



One of the most neglected areas of exhibition preparation is generally the text. This is often because photographers see themselves as visual rather than verbal people and either dislike writing or ignore its importance in showing the work. But exhibitions almost always entail a certain amount of textual material and it is well worth learning to produce good

text or the text can let down the rest of the show. Learning to write well about your work often goes hand in hand with learning to speak well about it and is a very useful skill to develop. The texts for an exhibition can include:

- an introduction to the exhibition and texts that accompany the images or different sections of the exhibition
- artist's statement(s)
- titles
- captions

There are many books on the market about how to write well; it's a big topic. But some basic guidelines about writing text for an exhibition are as follows:

- Keep text short. Too many words will be seen as privileging the text over the images and will distract the audience from the artwork.
- Keep text as straightforward and jargon free as possible.
- Make sure that basic and essential information is covered—places, dates, and names are usually important to the audience (even if they are unnecessary to an understanding of the images).
- Do not try to influence the reading of the work, critique it, interpret it, or describe what is in the images. All these things get between the audience and their experience of the work.
- Avoid emotive words and keep an objective tone. If the work is emotional, it will be undermined by the use of an emotional text.
- Avoid intimate personal statements. It is possible to present very personal work and still keep your privacy if the text is impersonal.

Think for a moment about your reaction to the text in an exhibition. Do you read text first or last? Do you feel unable to look at the exhibition until you have read all the accompanying texts? Do you look at an image and then at the caption, or vice versa? How different would the exhibition experience be if no text were provided?

Even when photographs are not provided with accompanying text (sometimes on the gallery wall or the odd advertisement), the viewer brings experiences and beliefs with them; we fit the images into narrative contexts.

Steve Edwards, From *Photography, A Very Short Introduction*

In the 1980s, photo exhibitions were text-intensive as a reaction against the formalist aesthetics of the previous era where any contextualization or captioning was excoriated. But the pendulum swung again, and today text is usually shunned in the gallery space and banished to the artist's statement available at the gallery desk or as a handout for visitors. Photographers can be creative at supplementing

their images by using sound, narrative forms, or producing their own gallery guide, or brochure. But it's not seen as acceptable at the present time to "force" visitors to read texts if they do not wish to.

Deborah Bright, artist, academic and writer on photography

One way to envisage the difference between "art" and "documentary" in photography turns on this relation to language and narrative. In the main, documentary is a closed form, designed to produce preferred interpretations. As such, images are usually combined with some form of anchoring text that steers the viewer/reader in a particular direction. Photographic art, in contrast, typically abjures words, or employs elliptical text, in order to leave the image open to associations and interpretations. For art, vagueness or ambiguity are often the preferred modes.

Steve Edwards

Seating also disappeared from museum galleries but has reappeared in the nineties. It is arranged so that its focus is not the art. A catalogue and other, varied reading materials are placed beside, on or in front of the usually hard chairs or benches. The pleasure of sitting and looking at art has been replaced by the task of reading about it. The work ethic prevails.

Reesa Greenberg, art historian, from *Thinking about Exhibitions*

In his essay "Rhetoric of the Image," Roland Barthes (1977) asked us to look at the interdependence of text and image and the way that the "linguistic message is indeed present in every image: as title, caption, accompanying press article, film dialogue, comic strip balloon."

In the gallery, the danger is that the text will become more important than the image. There are many possible reasons for this. We live, we are told, in a visual world. Surrounded by images, we have a sophisticated understanding of them. While this may be true of images from television, advertising, and journalism, it is less true in the gallery context. In fact, many of us experience an uneasy shift from our daily experience of being bombarded by photographs that carry a common message ("buy this" or "try this") to the more complex experience of standing in front of a photograph in a gallery where we are being asked to look, to feel, and to contemplate possible meanings or perhaps ask questions of the image. In a gallery, an audience can be tense and wary and very uncertain of their reading of the images. For some people, the gallery experience also makes them nervous that they will be at the receiving end of heavy sales pressure, others that too much will be asked of them and they will demonstrate their ignorance of the finer points of art. As a result, an audience can rely too heavily on the explanation provided by the exhibition text.



FIGURE 4.2 Sea Change: Solway Firth Low Water 5.20pm 27 March 2006. Image © Michael Marten

“‘Sea Change’ compares identical views at high and low tide around the coast of Britain. The whole work is made up of pairs of photographs so, in thinking about how to present them, I considered printing two images on a single piece of paper or keeping them separate. In the end I decided that the best way to present them would be separately, probably without borders, and hung in pairs fairly close together.” Michael Marten

For both curators and photographers, an important objective is to get the viewer to spend time with the image and to look thoroughly. As Simon Norfolk says (in an interview with the author for the Oral History of British Photography, 2003) “I aim to get people to look at my images for more than the usual four seconds.” To achieve this, it helps if the text is short, unobtrusive, and as clear and straightforward as possible. It’s important that the text not compete with the photographs for the attention of the audience.

In the past, many photographers insisted that their work “spoke for itself” and so provided too little explanation. Today we frequently have the opposite problem: the work may have been interpreted for us before we see it. The purpose of any text should be to give information and provide a way into understanding the work.

The use of text is one of the most important and least understood areas of exhibition production. On a practical level, writing text for an exhibition is one of the tasks that is worth doing early in the exhibition process rather than, as often happens, leaving it until the last possible moment and producing it under pressure. Writing about an exhibi-



FIGURE 4.3 Sea Change: Solway Firth High Water 12 noon 28 March 2006. Image © Michael Marten

tion before the exhibition has been designed is a useful exercise, which should clarify issues and ideas about the work for both artist and gallery; and doing this can make it easier to find the best way to present the work. A good text acts to support an exhibition, and a text produced in the early stages of an exhibition helps ensure that everyone involved can talk about the exhibition in a coherent and informed way.

Exhibition texts should always be as short as possible. As critic Lucy R. Lippard famously said, “I’d rather not read standing up!” Most people can comfortably stand and read a panel of text of between 50 and 100 words. Three or four simple paragraphs are usually sufficient for an introduction to an exhibition, an artist’s statement, or a press release.

An exhibition introduction and additional texts may not be necessary. They are there to provide the audience, who could have wandered into the gallery without knowing the exhibition title or theme, with background information. If the exhibition is divided thematically or chronologically, each new section may need an introduction.

ARTIST’S STATEMENT

An artist’s statement is sometimes used as an exhibition introduction, although it is useful in a number of other ways.

It is usually a very good starting point and reference for anyone writing a press release about the work and a way of making sure that he or she represents the work accurately. It is also appropriate text for any short leaflet, handout, or catalog and can be used as an introduction for an artist's talk.

Another, surprising use is as a record for the artist. Making work can be such an intense and all-absorbing process that many artists forget that, in a few years' time, there is a real possibility that they will not remember how the work came about. A statement serves as a way into the work for the artist as well as for the public. For any artist, writing a statement about his or her work can be very difficult but, whether it is used in the exhibition or not, it is a beneficial exercise to write one and a good way of clarifying ideas about the work.

This statement on "Maps from Nowhere" by Roma Tearne gives an idea of how to approach writing something that can be both personal and distanced. It was written before she undertook the work as a way of making clear for a gallery director, and for herself, a starting point for the work:

In 1991, soon after my youngest child was born, I moved from the house where I had lived for many years. Having moved the furniture I left a large rosewood box with my most personal belongings standing in the middle of my studio. The box was one that had travelled with my mother and myself across seven thousand miles from Colombo to London. It had once held all the belongings we brought with us from the tropics. Now I filled it with the photographs, the diaries and the mementos from the intervening years. I intended to collect it in the morning. So, having packed the box up, I placed a large "Do Not Touch" notice on top of it and went away for the night. The following day I was due to vacate the house. But on my return I found to my horror that the rosewood box had vanished along with the other debris. It had been removed by the house clearance men. Everything I owned, all the memories of generations of my family had been dumped somewhere in the North Sea. Discarded.

I have been looking for those stories, those diaries, those maps of my past for sixteen years now. Every photograph album in every junk shop I pass is a source of ardent curiosity. Who knows, I tell myself, they might still appear.

"Maps from Nowhere" is a project about this loss. It is an investigation on what might or might not be found after time. It is about a journey I may or may not undertake back to my home in Colombo, a journey that has been more than forty years overdue. It will not be easy to go back. My family is dead, my relatives untraceable, there is a war on in Sri Lanka, dengue fever is rife, as is malaria. And, even if I do go back, what can I hope to discover? The white house on the hill beside the coconut grove cannot possibly exist any longer. The school I attended—will it have withstood the war? Even the sea might have changed. I have heard that the tsunami has swept some of the rocks away from Mount Lavinia

Bay. I had carved my name on one of those rocks. Roma Chrysostom, age 10, Colombo, Ceylon, The World, The Universe.

“Maps from Nowhere” will take the form of a photographic project. It will be part of a journey into the interior, of a place, constructed by me over a lifetime. Nowhere was the place where my parents longed to return to when life became hard. It was a place that has existed for so long in the collective imagination of my family that finding it will not be easy, but by the writing of this proposal the journey itself has already begun.

This is an artist’s statement that stands as a piece of writing in its own right and works whether or not we see the images. While it is intensely personal, it is both thoughtful and accessible and explains the photographer’s intent clearly.

TITLES

Titles, both of the exhibition and of each work, are crucially important. They can be:

- descriptive
- locating
- allusive
- metaphoric
- contextualizing
- subverting

A title should be short, precise, and, if possible, both resonant and memorable. Titles can also be borrowed from books, poems, film, or music.

Alternatively, they can simply be a date, place, or name. Candida Hofer or Andreas Gursky will locate an apparently entirely anonymous modern institution by giving us its name: “Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library New Haven CT IV” and “Prada 1” are both title and comment. Equally, a title can point out an absence of locating information: “Untitled,” “Set 1,” “First Series,” and “Monochrome” are titles used to prompt the viewer to look at the image rather than seek information from a title.

However, a title can also be personal and inexplicable; it does not need to be explanatory or even very accessible. Rut Blees Luxemburg, for example, called one of her works “Cau-chemar.” This means “nightmare” in French, but the word itself is resonant enough for it not to matter if it is not immediately understood.