



## **Group think in art – is this a fundamental problem for the critique?**

### **Summary**

Creative arts are, by their very nature, subjectively received and evaluated. Reviewers and critics, on the basis of education and experience, are

arguably the ones who draw lines for the rest of us between the populist and the critically acclaimed. But use of language is itself an art; influencing others and persuading them of value and merit.

I will argue here for raised awareness of the power of language to influence the setting of subjective criteria, introducing researched techniques that place opinion under scrutiny and avoid leading dialogues that result in an unverifiable bubble of opinion.

### **Linguistic clarity and open questions**

Of material I have read to date, which is not yet a vast amount, much seems to fall into two broad camps of over-blown turgidity and fanboy. In the first group, clarity in academic expression and the use of plain English seems not to be prioritised, while in the second, generally interviews, there are no searching questions, or evidence of challenge, and every indication of providing a soft play area for the artist/writer/work to bounce around in safely. Quite often the interviewer is entirely absent from the video format. Clearly, clarity is possible as there is available good writing and good presentation. I have listed some of these at the end of the essay.

But here are the problems. With dense and impenetrable language, challenges are difficult to construct and frame because it is less easy to get a foothold on complex, often very long, sentences and to find the central idea. This is even more difficult when that idea has the quality of mist and to ask what it means may seem to an observer to be a failure in the questioner. The ‘fanboy’ material, on the other hand, while also showing no evidence of challenge, seems either to follow every word the artist/writer utters, or to lead the discussion by suggesting how or why they did or thought a particular way.

In fairness, scientific writing has historically been turgid and barely accessible – some would have said deliberately so to exclude ‘pretenders’ – but it is at least founded on evidence that is verifiable. Latterly, Chairs in several universities have been established particularly to address public engagement although this scheme is currently closed (Royal Society professorship for public engagement in science).

I am not implying that clarity precludes the use of specialist language; specific terminology can and should be learned; but I suspect that lack of clarity, spiralling verbiage, and unchallengeable statements are more likely where the quality of the material in question is essentially subjective. How can 'taste' be evidenced, and how do you say to a critic of substantial authority that you think the piece they're lauding is, well, underdressed?

Some of the pressures have been identified, studied, and written about by psychologists for many years. Norms and conformity (e.g. Cialdini and Goldstein 2004), group membership (see OpenText ref), group think (Fisher, 2021), and latterly all the evidence about leading questions coming via forensic concerns about manipulation of witness testimony, and clinical ones relating to vulnerable adults, (e.g. Loftus, 1996; Milne and Bull, 1999; Conboy-Hill 2000).

But to keep it simple; wherever there is a power imbalance, people on the weaker side of the watershed will tend to fall in line with the stronger one. Wherever there is a majority in a group, those who do not agree will tend to stay silent or just go along with it. If there is some uncertainty about an answer or a situation, people tend go with whatever the most influential person says. And if questions are leading - the answer being implied by the question – there is a good chance the person answering will fall in with it. The risk, then, for a discipline almost wholly subjective in its appraisals, is that people will agree with the opinion of the most noteworthy voice (social influence), go along with it so as not to seem ignorant (compliance with group membership), or disengage completely (leave the group). In this way, opinion is shaped and trickles down into the public domain. I would argue too that it finds its way into education so that students risk being moulded to fit a model set by an elite from a previous generation.

So power, numbers, uncertainty, and leading information that sets up the 'right' answer can influence the way people talk about something they are not completely certain about. The

effect is so powerful, police officers are trained to avoid doing it when interviewing witnesses (e.g. Alpert et al 2012), and many journalists do it all the time to get the answers they want.

The arts are, undeniably, a different kettle of fish from scientific enterprise. Artists seem able to make extraordinary claims, such as these from Richard Tuttle (2014), *'Most artists have terrible childhoods'*, or *'Artists they're from nature, they come out of nature, they're like the clouds that just happen'*, without challenge about what they mean by that, or how they know; (and in this video he was not), but the answers to insightful probes may have been much more interesting and grounded in relatable experience. For instance, remarking that a particular comment is interesting and asking to hear more about it may have shed light on Tuttle's thinking about 'clouds' or his assertion about the childhood experiences of 'most' artists.<sup>1</sup> Where scientists will have a stand-up row in public over the way a subsidiary statistical significance was calculated, artists and writers will be unlikely to meet anything remotely similar in response to anything they do - unless they are Anish Kapoor buying the rights to 'the blackest black' and not letting anyone else have any (see Semple 2016).

I see no fault here, but I do see a problem in that it drives consensus through a convoluted network of influence which may have no validity at all. 'Blurred Lines', a documentary about how art becomes collectible, is instructive. Not surprisingly, it has a lot to do with money and whose wallet matters most. If artists were actively less subjective when they reviewed art, or presented their views about what is good, what is not, and why, making clear that this is opinion and not fact, perhaps the cycle of patronage would have less of a grip.

So how does this happen? Fisher (2021) describes group think and if ever there existed a group on a massive scale, it is the world of creative arts. Recognising the flaws inherent in subjectivity and the power of conformity when there are no agreed standards would be a start, and his article lists a number of measures that are relevant to group discussions. But I think the single most important measure would be to **question whatever is said or printed in a manner that is open and enquiring but never biased.**

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<sup>1</sup> In fact Tuttle goes on to talk about his own childhood, which seems to have been less than ideal, so either he was asked about this by the interviewer or expanded on his comment of his own volition.

This can be achieved by asking open questions in the context of a structured interview. Doing the homework and having follow-up information to hand to inform subsidiary probes but inquiring always without leading the interviewee towards an answer. <sup>2</sup>

Open questions always begin with the following words which may be preceded by a statement drawn from what the person has already said:

**What ...** You said you found the sea a powerful influence; **what** is it, do you think, about the sea that draws you so much? [**What** do you mean when you say ‘artists are like clouds, they just happen’? Tuttle, op cit]

**When ...** I see from your bio that you’ve been painting in this style for a while; **when** did you first notice that this style was beginning to dominate your work?

**How ...** You work a lot at very large scale, **how** did your preference for large scale emerge?

**Why ...** [‘You don’t have art unless you would die without it’ is quite an extraordinary statement, **why** do you believe that is the case? Tuttle, op cit]

**Who ... Who** would you say is the most influential performance artist working today? [supplementary probe: **what** is it about X that, for you, gives them this prominence?]<sup>3</sup>

A second key strategy would be **the use of plain language to improve accessibility** which, in this case, means ease of reading and understanding, so that challenges are feasible (see the 2015 quote from Connerton which exemplifies this, and the 1999 quote beneath it for an example of the exact opposite). Educating readers/viewers to spot inherent bias and unsubstantiated claims, language at the expense of clarity, and how ‘fanboy’ a piece seems to be, would be a handbrake on the rush down the funnel of conformity.

### **Why is this important?**

I believe there is a ‘relevance’ issue for art. Governments find it an easy target when funds are tight and I am not sure it helps itself by speaking in ways that exclude anyone not willing to

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<sup>2</sup> I am planning to interview a practicing artist using this technique and to post the video to my blog.

<sup>3</sup> All ‘interview’ conversations are fictitious, barring quotes from Tuttle’s 2014 interview which are cited.

simply accept its self-accounting at face value or who believe they must be a bit dim if they do not 'get it'.

Obfuscation often masks fear of exposure, imposter syndrome (Weir, 2013), being 'found out' as a charlatan; and anything that relies on subjectivity is going to suffer from the vagaries of fashion. But in my view, there is nothing to be afraid of in plain speaking or having your thoughts probed by more incisive questioning. At the very least it can help all of us clarify our own thinking and so move us forward in a way that passive acceptance will not. And at its best it may engage a currently disenfranchised audience who never really got the connection between the art they see on walls in a gallery - or more likely do *not* see because they do not visit - with the art work that underpins the films they watch, the video games they play, or the designs they value for their favourite products. I remember reading about the battle for supremacy between Microsoft and Apple back in the early days of computing. To paraphrase an article now lost in the mists of time, Microsoft came out and said "Look at this machine, this software; it'll make you more productive; we do diaries and spreadsheets and databases and *business* stuff," while Apple just put up a picture of theirs and said, "Isn't this beautiful?"

Artists make things beautiful and useable and comfortable; but they also make things that are uncomfortable, disturbing, and challenging. Rendering these important streams of work accessible and inclusive by the way we write about and speak about it and inquire of its makers about their process would, I think, open up artistic enterprise to a wider more activist consciousness. The first steps would be to write for clarity, to interview like a detective, and to learn how to spot fanboy material and opinion dressed as fact.

## **Conclusions.**

The creative arts risk enveloping themselves in bubbles of opinion created by leading questions, lack of challenge, and self-fulfilling linguistic processes due to the subjective nature of the disciplines. I have argued that this is counterproductive to artistic process and to public support whereas clarity of writing and interviewing informed by established techniques known to reduce leading questions, would allow for better interrogation of process to the benefit of artists and viewers, readers, students, and audiences.

**Word count 1872/2000 excl title, footnotes, and references**

## References

**Fisher, C. 2021** Group think: what it is and how to avoid it. The Conversation. [online]  
Available at [Group-think: what it is and how to avoid it \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/group-think-what-it-is-and-how-to-avoid-it).

**Loftus, E. 1996.** Eye Witness Testimony. Harvard University Press. This is the earliest collection of Loftus's research and formed the impetus for the development of the Cognitive Interview, developed by Geisman and Fischer et al in the 1970s and now used in enhanced form by UK police. This brief account by Professor Becky Milne is a good introduction  
[Becky Milne explains the cognitive interview - OpenLearn - Open University](#)

**Semple, S. 2016.** Why Anish Kapoor is banned from the world's pinkest pink. [online]  
YouTube. Available at [Why Anish Kapoor is banned from world's pinkest paint - YouTube](#).

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**Hockney, D. 2006.** Secret Knowledge. Thames and Hudson. Video at [BBC David Hockneys Secret Knowledge 1of2 DivX MP3 MVGForum - YouTube](#)

**Tamar Avishai,** The Lonely Palette Podcast. [The Lonely Palette Podcast](#).

**Gompertz, W. 2016.** What are you looking at? 150 years of modern art in the blink of an eye. Penguin.

**Richard Tuttle:** *'Most artists have terrible childhoods', then 'Artists they're from nature, they come out of nature, they're like the clouds that just happen.'* Unchallenged statements in The Richard Tuttle Interview, 2014. 'Artists are like clouds'. The interviewer may be prompting at times but is not heard. There is no evidence via Tuttle's flow of speech that he was challenged

or probed on any of his statements. The interview is a classic example of opinion presented as fact. Available from YouTube [Richard Tuttle Interview: Artists Are Like Clouds - YouTube](#)

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**Conboy-Hill, 2000.** The Cognitive Interview – a multi purpose approach to interviewing people with learning disabilities. Presented at 6th World Congress on Innovations in Psychiatry – Westminster Central Hall, London.

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**Understanding Social Groups. [undated]** [Understanding Social Groups – Principles of Social Psychology – 1st International Edition \(opentextbc.ca\)](#)

**Alpert, G.P., Rojek, J., and Noble, J.** 2012. The Cognitive Interview in Policing: negotiating control. Briefing paper, ARC Centre of Excellence in Policing and Security. Australia.

### **Supplementary material**

For an overview of interviewing in a clinical context without leading the interviewee, see [How interviews are contaminated – Good Question \(good-question.org\)](#). In the interests of transparency, this is my site. I've used this interview protocol in very many contexts, not all of them clinical, and I can see how a version of it would improve the quality of interviews with artists.

Note: it's important to recognise that clarity does not preclude potentially unfamiliar language. Some things must be learned because they have their own meaning within the context of the discipline.

**Royal Society** professorship for public engagement in science [Professorship for Public Engagement in Science | Royal Society](#)

## Extracts.

**Connerton, K.** 2015. Exposure: Self-Portraiture, Performativity, Self-Inquiry. Doctoral dissertation for Sydney College of Arts, university of Sydney. P3. [\(PDF\) Exposure: Self-Portraiture, Performativity, Self-Inquiry | Kimberly Connerton, PhD - Academia.edu](#)

This extract demonstrates the core components of clarity. Using the first person (I/we) and avoiding the passive tense, she describes the motivation for her work:

*“My own guiding question is why I have a strong urge to find and resolve a state of interiority through my photography and video production and examine what interiority means in a postmodern paradigm where subjectivity is often one of exteriority and construction. My inquiry into self-portraiture has taken two directions. Firstly, immersion in the act of constructing identity, evident in my series on Andy Warhol and Yoko Ono where I use wigs and props to become their image. Secondly, expressing a sense of my own interior subjectivity through portraits that aim to show myself as I feel I am, as contingent a proposition as that is.”* Connerton (2015) P 3.

**Anon 1999.** While it is customary to credit the author of anything written, I feel omission in this instance may be appropriate:

~~the book~~ book represents a particularly powerful enunciation of the reconception of the subjectivity of the artist and the historian calling into question both the production and interpretation of art as moments of active negotiation of ‘body/self’ boundaries and limits. ~~the book~~

Retrieved and clipped from a 1999 piece under the auspices of the Association of Art Historians. It's possibly what's meant by the kindly derogation that goes, 'If you can't get ahead, get a big hat'. No doubt, it's a sentence amenable to dissection, grammatically and syntactically, but no reader should have to do this to make sense of a piece of writing.



**Good, plain language communicators.**

**Tim Marlow's** *Great Artists* series 2001-. Some of this is still on YouTube.

**David Hockney.** His analysis of the historical use of devices such as the *camera obscura* is very readable and can also be found on YouTube.

**Tamar Avishai** of the podcast, The Lonely Palette. Its strapline is '*the podcast that returns art history to the masses, one object at a time*'. Totally relatable language, no fancy footwork, and a good deal of humour.

**Will Gompertz**, he of the film critiques, also has a couple of books on art history. My favourite is 'What are you looking at?' which is a fun-packed gallop through 150 years of modern art. This is also available from Audible. I must have 'read' it about six times.

Suzanne Conboy-Hill 521602

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