Exhibition Catalogues: A Guide

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There are no set rules for the production or writing of exhibition catalogues. Unlike many other categories of arts writing, catalogues perhaps offer the greatest artistic freedom. The writing of a catalogue essay simply requires an accord between the writer/curator and the artist(s). The type of catalogue produced will usually depend on the amount of funding the artist and gallery have, or the significance of the exhibition.

Why do we produce catalogues?

1. For the artist/writer – a permanent record of their exhibition
2. For the gallery – for the archives
3. For the funding body – a form of acquittal and a record for the archives
4. Publicity – to inform the audience, the media or other galleries of the artist’s activities or progress
5. Educational – to provide the audience with information about the exhibition, and for students, project information.
6. To provide a context for group shows which outlines the curatorial thesis

Who produces catalogues?

1. Most galleries will produce some form of catalogue for most shows
2. Artists without funding may produce catalogues for themselves
3. Businesses produce catalogues for trade exhibitions and advertising purposes

What is required of the writer?

Again there are no set rules here and the way in which a catalogue essay is written is a matter for negotiation between artist, writer and gallery.

However, it is desirable that the writer:

1. Is skilled in the art of writing
2. Knows the work of the artist – the work for an exhibition is often not completed at the time of writing the essay
3. Is able to see the artists work within an art/historical context
4. Has flexibility and a broad general knowledge. Artists draw upon an enormous range of ideas, so the writer may be required to write about anything from sex to science, from psychology to politics. The writer is providing a service to the artist and the gallery and therefore should make some attempt to accommodate their specific needs.
5. Is able to meet deadlines – there are no extensions in the real world. If the essay isn’t completed on time, the catalogue will not be produced in time for the exhibition. This is frustrating and disappointing for everyone involved.

Writer’s Fees

As recommended by the Australia Council, $200 per thousand words.

Designer’s Fees

Approximately $50 per hour.

Types of catalogue

1. The Blue Ribbon Catalogue $20,000 – 50,000 – produced by galleries for Biennales or international touring shows. These catalogues may have up to five essays describing different elements of the exhibition. They will be funded and required by arts funding bodies such as Arts Queensland, the Australia Council, private enterprise or other government departments such as the Department of Foreign Affairs and trade. They will be designed by a professional designer, have very high quality colour reproductions and authoritative essays of 2 – 3,000 words. These catalogues will cost $25 to $50 to buy and generally will sell as souvenirs, coffee table books or research tools.

The print run – 5,000 – 10,000

1. The Glamour Catalogue $5,000 – 20,000 – produced for national and state touring shows and/or exhibitions of some significance. These are also funded by the type of funding organisations mentioned above and will also often be obligatory. There will be one to three authoritative essays of 1 – 2,000 words, good quality colour and black and white.
reproductions, and will be designed by a professional designer. They will cost the punter $10 – $20 and also be used as a souvenir or for research purposes. These catalogues generally do not sell well.

The print run – 1, 000 – 2, 000

1. The Brochure $800 – $2, 000 – produced by artists and galleries for the reasons listed above, but generally not obligatory. These serve as a modest record of an exhibition and are used largely for publicity and archival purposes. They are one colour, have satisfactory reproductions and an essay which "does the job". Designed in-house or by people with a limited knowledge of desktop publishing software. These catalogues will often be given away or sold for a nominal price of $2 – $5 because they also do tend not to sell well.

The print run – 200 – 500

1. The Home-Made Catalogue or Artists Book $0 – $500 – produced by the artist without or with minimal funding. These catalogues may be photocopied or hand-made. These catalogues provide the ultimate artistic freedom because they are privately produced and the artist and gallery are not required to please anyone in particular. Again they are given away or sold for a nominal fee although the artist’s book may be sold for considerably more, as a work of art.

The print run – 1 – 200

Trouble-shooting/common problems

1. Proofing/typos
2. Misspelling of artists’ names, especially relevant in the case of Indigenous artists or artists from other cultures. This looks very bad and reflects poorly upon the writer and the gallery.
3. Obscure or inaccessible writing
4. Inability to meet deadlines
5. Sponsors logos – being left off the catalogue
6. Incorrect titles
7. Poor or incorrect reproductions. Good quality 35 mm transparencies are best.
8. Forgetting to thank everyone involved in the production of the exhibition
9. Bad design
10. Over pricing