

# How to Write an Opening Speech to an Art Exhibition

Daniel Palmer



Cate Blanchett opens Ricky Swallow's Venice Biennale exhibition in June 2005.  
Image courtesy of The Australia Council for the Arts.

Of all the genres of commentary about art, the opening speech is perhaps the most difficult to pull off. These notes consider some of the pitfalls of the opening speech, motivated by the author's recent experiences (both as an opening speaker and audience member). It is inspired by Umberto Eco's essay 'How to Write an Introduction to an Art Exhibition' (1980), collected in *How to Travel with a Salmon and Other Essays* (1994). Like Eco's satirical essay, mine is essentially instructional, offering counsel for both artists and potential opening speakers (POS).

Let's start with the obvious. As everyone knows, good public speakers don't unfold pieces of paper out of their pocket. So the following advice about *writing* a speech is really about *giving* a speech. Not that I am an expert. Far from it. I am, however, resigned to my fate, as an art school lecturer, of being called on by students to open their shows (at least when my celebrity colleagues are unavailable).

My objective here is to help myself, as much as you, to avoid dull speeches. In this sense I have to disagree with a website advising on giving a speech, which states: 'Don't try to be unique or interesting. Be as fully and completely yourself, unrestrained by your fears and desire to please others ...' Nothing could be more dangerous. You need to overcome who you are. I'm not suggesting there isn't good advice available online to help you overcome *glossophobia*.<sup>1</sup> For instance, many sites wisely advise against the idea of picturing the audience naked, since these images might inspire more terror than comfort.

But general advice such as 'know your audience' may not be sufficient for art openings, which as we know are composed of a diverse mix of poseurs and wannabe artists and their hangers-on, not to mention the artist's family and friends, and all those attracted to free wine. Surely nobody has come specifically to hear your speech, which is why the following lessons, learned the hard way, might help:

1. Keep it short.
2. Never sound like, or quote from, the catalogue essay, especially the puff-piece you may actually have written for the show. If you must talk about how the work is made, make it brief.
3. Try to see the work first. As with writing catalogue essays, not knowing the work can prove embarrassing.
4. Personal connections are *de rigueur*, but remember: other people don't care about the details of your wonderful friendship with the artist.
5. Maintain an authoritative air, and never admit to your ignorance. A prominent art critic recently admitted to me that he doesn't understand contemporary art. If you have nothing to say about the work, talk about something else. I was once lucky enough to open an exhibition on the day Jacques Derrida died.
6. Never open your own exhibition (if you are the artist or, increasingly likely, the curator). There are plenty of POS around.
7. If you agree to open a show for the wrong reasons (such as for a favour, professional obligation, to see your name on the invitation, etc.), use special tact. The opening speech, like the catalogue, is not the place to express doubts about an exhibition, contemporary art, or yourself.
8. Curated shows pose a special risk: you may discover that despite the title, there is no actual theme that unites the works on display. This calls for some spontaneous para-curating. *SEE POINTS 2 AND 3.*
9. Humour is obviously desirable in a POS, but if you must resort to singing in public make sure the acoustics are kind. Galleries are usually OK, old church halls even better.<sup>2</sup>
10. Always dress better than your audience (thanks Steve Martin).
11. Theatrics are good; if you're not much of a performer, at least wave your hands around a lot.
12. Despite all the above, opening speeches are all about authenticity—yours, and that of the art. It's a sobering business, so if you're worried that your words might feel hollow, strained, or false, try to avoid this by drinking at least two glasses of wine before you open your mouth.

<sup>1</sup> *www.speech-writers.com* even devote a special topic to the tricky problem of opening art exhibitions, which they claim is 'Suitable for use by someone who has had the honor of being asked to open the art exhibition.' They advertise: 'How to Solve YOUR Opening of an Art Exhibition ... Problem in 60 Seconds.' The speeches are described as addressing 'the part art plays in our lives', and importantly, 'Each Speech is Complete in Itself, Easy To Deliver, Risk Free, & Guaranteed To Work!' Importantly, they underline, their pre-prepared speeches 'say what etiquette says OUGHT to be said on a particular occasion.' All for just US\$23.15.

Daniel Palmer is a lecturer in the Theory Department of the Faculty of Art & Design at Monash University

<sup>2</sup> *My apologies to everyone in Devonport during my visit in 2005.*