

Ministère de la culture et de la communication

*Concours externe pour l'accès au grade de professeur des écoles nationales supérieures
d'art*

SESSION 2016

Les 18, 25 et 26 mai 2016

**Épreuve orale d'admission de langue
Langue anglaise**

Cette épreuve orale consiste en une conversation à partir d'un texte en anglais.
(préparation sans dictionnaire : 20 minutes ; durée : 20 minutes ; coefficient 1)

Avertissements :

- l'usage de la calculatrice, d'un dictionnaire ou de tout autre document est interdit ;
- avant de commencer, vérifiez que le sujet qui vous a été remis comporte toutes les questions ; signalez aux surveillants tout de suite les anomalies éventuelles (page manquante, page illisible...).

Ce document comporte 3 pages au total :

- Page de garde (1 page)
- Sujet (2 pages)

How do we keep museums vital in today's world?

I love museums. I go to them a lot. But from time to time, like anyone, I succumb to impatience and frustration. The German philosopher Theodor Adorno described the feeling exactly: One arrives at the museum, he wrote, and before long, “one does not know why one has come — in search of culture or enjoyment, in fulfillment of an obligation, in obedience to a convention. Fatigue and barbarism converge.”

Actual works of art, in such states of mind, have little chance. You see an etching by Rembrandt and respond with all the slow-blinking spiritual energy of an overfed lizard in a terrarium hopping with crickets. Even more ostensibly spectacular fare — a sculpture of a giant spider by Louise Bourgeois or a dead cow by Damien Hirst — has little impact: Check. Seen it. Meh.

In despair, you head for the cafe. But there, too, the smell is not quite real. You long for the bustle of the street, the traffic congestion, the bad lighting of life.

What is the problem exactly? Is it you? Or is it the museum?

Museums, of course, are terrified that they are the problem. It's their deepest fear. They will do anything to stop it being so. So they introduce iPads. They build transparent new wings designed by celebrity architects. They get active on social media. [...] How, then, do we keep museums vital? How do we do justice to the power of the works they house?

This is the question that every museum must grapple with. And it is the question Adorno addresses in his 1953 essay “Valery Proust Museum,” where he compares two very different attitudes to museums: one expressed by Marcel Proust, the other by Paul Valery.

Proust was very comfortable in museums. He understood that artworks, even if they have been cut off from their original context, take on a second life there. They become part of the life of the observer. [...] We are all, today, Proustians when we go to museums.

But Adorno plays Proust's approach off against Valery's. Where, in Adorno's essay, Proust is the amateur enthusiast, [...] Valery is the unhappy elitist. Where Proust celebrates subjectivity, Valery cherishes the aloof and objective quality of great art.

A poet himself, Valery believed that paintings and sculptures, like poems, had their own mysterious autonomy, which could only ever be corrupted by the chaos of the museum. “The more beautiful a picture is,” wrote Adorno, paraphrasing Valery, “the more it is distinct from all the others. This picture, one sometimes says, kills the ones around it.”

So for Valery, the museum is not just a mausoleum; it is a kind of killing field, an abattoir. It sounds like, and is, an extreme position. But consider it from the artist's point of view.

Ask successful artists about art fairs, for instance, and they describe them as meat markets. They see their works hanging there with price tags attached, resembling dismembered carcasses on hooks. The vulgarity of it all appalls them. But do these commercial fairs treat works of art so very differently from museums?

Artists might tell you that the difference is only one of degree. Museums entrust artworks to curators, who usually hang them in the company of works that happen to have been made in the same era, or in the

same medium, but which in many cases violently collide with the spirit of their own work. Conservators, meanwhile, routinely over-clean them, put clumsy frames on them, and light them inappropriately. [...] I exaggerate, but only slightly. Museums can be very unfriendly to art. That is part of why Valery opposes them so strenuously. But his stance is also a radical version of the much-discredited 19th-century idea of “art for art’s sake.”

Art for art’s sake and in particular, to the control exercised by churches, governments, and political movements, which in the 19th century permeated the creation and reception of art at every level. [...]

What he [Paul Valery] feared was the increasing superficiality of the museum. He lamented the museum’s tendency to transform art into “a matter of education and information,” whereby “Venus becomes a document” and “education defeats art.”

[...] Great art is powerful. You can say it is empowering, and indeed it can be. But it can also be destabilizing, alarming, confronting, confusing — just like life. It should be offered for contemplation as an end in itself.

SEBASTIAN SMEE, *The Boston Globe*, October 16, 2015