

On the relevance of exhibition analysis

Six questions for *museumdenken*

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The *museumdenken* network was established in 2021 as a loose association of individuals and institutions with the aim to reflect on the future of the museum as an institution against the backdrop of the crisis of its public evaluation. The website www.museumdenken.eu/ and dialogue-based event formats, also on exhibition analysis, serve as a platform for providing and sharing information. As editors of this methods book, we queried four members of this network by email regarding their viewpoint on, their experience with and their recommendations for exhibition analyses. We have compiled their responses into a fictional conversation.

Why do you think it is important to analyze exhibitions at all?

Roswitha Muttenthaler: I'll start off with a counter-question: Why should a well-founded analysis of the medium's inherent resources and positionings not be relevant with regard to exhibitions? For other cultural manifestations – literature, music, film, art, theater – it is common practice to research and teach the techniques and forms of expression of the respective medium and their applications in the framework of the corresponding academically institutionalized disciplines, to examine works analytically and critically, to debate them discursively.

Regina Wonisch: The only difference is that these fields are recognized and their representatives never need to justify their activities. Only when the question of the purpose of exhibition analysis has finally become obsolete, will museology have found its place in the academic and cultural establishment. Particularly in a world in which visual content is ubiquitous, but where there is a lack of visual literacy and critical competence, analytical skills could be helpful in the perception of exhibitions.

Anika Reichwald: Even if the thought that others could analyze your own exhibition might meet with some reluctance, I consider it an important, if not essential tool to apply specific methods in order to understand exhibitions.

Gottfried Fliedl: Also considering that hegemonial, disciplinary and emancipatory potentials come together in a museum. As a publicly funded and operated cultural institution, the museum participates in the goal of all government measures aimed at promoting the wellbeing of society. This goal must stand up to scrutiny and be subjected to permanent critical revision and transformation.

What specific fields of application do you see for exhibition analysis?

Gottfried Fliedl: Unlimited ones. Exhibition analysis has to continuously evolve with the medium of the exhibition in order to do justice to established forms as well as pioneering new practices of exhibiting.

Anika Reichwald: I believe that exhibition analyses can be a wonderful moment of bonding, be it in a team, among like-minded or just interested parties. The shared experience of observing, exchanging and discussing in an often “different space” offers the opportunity to open up to other perspectives and opinions more readily. This is of inconceivable value for the communication between different departments but also between different institutions. What do the others look at? What is important to them? And what isn't? By experiencing other perspectives, I also learn something about the way my partners or colleagues work. Ideally, this could lead to a new way of working together in the exhibition process.

In your experience, what principal challenges do you face when analyzing exhibitions?

Regina Wonisch: For me, the biggest challenge are the methodological approaches that are often borrowed from other disciplines and have to be applied to exhibitions. But without institutionalized museology combined with professional training, it is impossible for a vibrant discourse on methods and praxis of specific exhibition analysis to develop and also find its way into the museum environment.

Roswitha Muttenthaler: An analysis is based on the challenge of a systematic, planned and methodical approach that attempts to incorporate all building blocks of an exhibition and their interconnection to form a holistic whole. So we need suitable methods, which I see as an aid, as a comprehensible set of tools, in order to train the eye through a planned course of action, to elaborate as many interpretative assumptions as possible and put them up for discussion. The challenges inherent to the format of the exhibition are the freedom to reflect on the sequence of reception – films, books and music have a predetermined course, while in exhibitions, everyone decides for

themselves – and the possible complexity of the resources that are employed. The location, a multiplicity of material and immaterial exhibits, texts, media and countless options ranging from the design of rooms to displays each offer their own interpretations which, in their interaction, can reinforce or compete with each other. A further challenge is the range of exhibitions in terms of locations, contents, forms and approaches. For instance, exhibition conventions in art museums differ considerably from those in cultural or natural history museums.

Gottfried Fliedl: I agree that the semantic openness of the medium of the exhibition makes it difficult to arrive at unambiguous judgements regarding the attribution of meaning and narrative forms. I therefore can't see that there is such a thing as a theoretical basis for analyzing exhibitions.

How can independent, critical thinking be encouraged in exhibition analyses?

Regina Wonisch: Independent thinking is a prerequisite for any kind of analysis. The more often you embark on such an enterprise, without knowing in advance where it will lead you, the more flexible your thinking may remain. A well-founded analysis forms the basis for a differentiated critique of an exhibition that thrives on a comprehensible argumentation and does not preclude a dissenting opinion.

Anika Reichwald: Thinking critically also means, above all, being open to trying to see beyond the obvious, not being led by preconceptions, but instead engaging with the exhibition.

Can you tell us about specific 'aha' moments in your own exhibition analyses?

Anika Reichwald: Long before I became interested in the topic, I visited the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome. There they had decided to remove the factor of time as a constant structure in the permanent display of their collection – *time is out of joint*: artworks were thus no longer exhibited in chronological order, instead, other factors, such as colour combinations, themes or formal analogies were found for grouping artworks together. I think it was there that I realized for the first time how much we as observers are led by structure and how much more imagination, freedom, joy, even adventurousness can at times emerge without standardized structures. But also confusion, the feeling of being lost, of things not quite matching and so on. The exhibition therefore demanded that I analyze it, without formulating this

explicitly. But by closely observing the space, display, staging and object, it was possible to understand (or sometimes simply not) what it was all about. A wonderful exhibition experience and I wonder how much fun the curators must have had.¹

Gottfried Fliedl: My ‘aha’ moment was that, for me, the basis of criticism is the precise and thick description, and the best tool for this is not a written description or photograph, but rather to capture and record the subject by drawing it – as completely as possible. So, pencil and sketchbook instead of mobile phone or camera.

To what extent can exhibition analyses also have consequences?

Regina Wonisch: In any case, exhibition analyses have consequences for the person who conducts them. The deeper insights that unfold in the process also affect the way other exhibitions or visualizations are perceived. But it’s like the exhibition itself, the stories are produced in the minds of the recipients. The consequences of an exhibition analysis that has yet to find its audience are equally unpredictable.

Anika Reichwald: In future, exhibition analysis should be regarded as a benefit rather than a punishment for exhibition creators. Only then can the creators and the analyzers work together. But that means that prejudices against analysis and critique need to be dismantled, but above all, that the way errors and mistakes are dealt with in museum operations would have to be reconsidered.

Gottfried Fliedl: Yes, exhibition analysis and critique would convey a sensitivity for the different working methods, objectives and qualities of museums and soften the predominantly affirmative stance towards the museum as an institution. Ultimately, this would enable us to address the political role of the museum and facilitate a debate on which societal demands should be placed on museums. This would give civil society, which is at the moment almost completely detached from the museum, an active and intervening role that would go far beyond the current small-scale participation and towards a genuine democratization. For exhibition analyses should not attempt to control or disambiguate the open and associative nature of the medium. It is the best thing about exhibiting.

1 Website of the Galleria Nazionale: <https://lagallerianazionale.com/mostra/time-is-out-of-joint> (05.08.2024).