

Analyzing exhibitions

An introductory overview

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Exhibitions are constructed cultural dispositions. They organize the world or at least the world view of a specific group. At the same time, they discover and find structures for transmitting and appropriating narratives about this world and thus create structures of inclusion and exclusion. Presenting world views, creating and exhibiting arrangements are potent gestures that usually take place with good intentions, but often still remain too unreflected or at least uncommented from a critical cultural studies perspective. Exhibitions are part of the social discourse, they deal with topics that are assumed to be of importance to the public. They are made by people who are part of society and act publicly. Exhibiting is therefore not an end in itself. The 'gestures of showing' (Muttenthaler and Wonisch 2015) are aimed at visitors as users of the exhibition. In the interpretation of the 'constative speech act' (Bal 2006: 77), exhibitions are dependent on visitors. Well-known museums, regular large-scale exhibitions and new immersive environments attract flocks of visitors, while other cultural institutions maintain close contact with people in the neighbourhood, are local meeting places and talk of the town. Exhibitions therefore reach people directly and indirectly and often do so, at least in part, with public funding. This comes with certain responsibilities.

Being able to analyze exhibitions as constructed cultural dispositions as well as places of public exchange is a necessary competence in cultural studies. There is thus no lack of theoretical approaches and implicit applications. Frequently referenced publications provide helpful suggestions and interesting examples of how exhibitions can be critically examined as cultural phenomena (Haraway 2004), as a statement of the 'expository actor' (Bal 2006: 77), powerful stagings (Stanizewski 1998) or art-historical positings (Klonk 2009). In his book *Museumsanalyse* (2010), Joachim Baur has presented more explicit methodological approaches that analyze exhibitions using cultural semiotics (Scholze 2010), narrative theory (Buschmann 2010) or visitor research (Kirchberg 2010). Angeli Jannelli and Thomas Hammacher have in turn compiled a special issue on questions, hypotheses, approaches, examples of application, and field reports on exhibition analysis (Vokus 2008). There are also individual practical guides that encourage the analysis of exhibitions with a focus

on evaluation and criticism (Kavanagh 1994, Moser and Wyss 2016), gender (Ebeling 2016) or accessibility (Nolte and Kinzler 2012). It is in particular at the interface between theory and practice that DASA Working World Exhibition Dortmund and the Chair of Museum Studies at the University of Würzburg have made an outstanding contribution to methods of exhibition analysis via workshops, the blog *ausstellungskritik.de* and the recent publication *Besser ausstellen* (2024). It cannot therefore be argued that exhibitions are not already being analyzed. However, such efforts in practical application often tend to be experimental in nature, as they are based on intuitive approaches or individual case studies. To some extent, there is also a lack of visibility of methodological approaches when guidelines are published informally in a wide variety of sources or sophisticated methods of exhibition analysis are hidden away in the corresponding sub-chapters of monographs and dissertations.

What is lacking is therefore not the analysis of exhibitions but rather a collection of “ready-to-use” methods (Thiemeyer 2010: 32). To date, no single dedicated methods book for exhibition analysis exists, at least in the German-speaking countries. By compiling different perspectives on exhibitions and developing existing approaches into replicable methods, our book aims to deliberately promote the further development of this field and render these methods productive for various contexts of use. Our understanding of methods of exhibition analysis is based on the premise that these need to be categorized theoretically, specified via concrete procedures and transferable to different settings in order to be characterized as dedicated methods. In doing so, we assume a desire for scientific systematization as well as a necessary diversity of methods, bearing in mind that exhibitions are examined from different perspectives and with different motivations. Analyzers study exhibitions for reasons of research, as well as for reasons of professional training and development, of coverage, of evaluation of their own curatorial work or that of their colleagues. In this sense, the methods book addresses users from the realms of research (in the expanding field of museum and exhibition studies), of teaching (e.g. in exercises, excursions or qualifying papers) as well as museum praxis (as a tool of self-evaluation and ongoing exhibition development).

In its aim to close the methodological gap in exhibition analysis with a methods compendium, this book already has a fairly lengthy history. Its origins go back to the closed conference *Ausstellungen analysieren* (Analyzing Exhibitions) in September 2019, organized by the DASA Working World Exhibition Dortmund and the Chair of Museum Studies at the University of Würzburg, where we, the editors of this volume, first met and forged plans for such a methods book. From the very outset this project was based on the model of a *Book in Progress*, which was to develop organically in the process of a systematic inventory of current approaches, the collaborative contribution and elaboration of specific methods in an early exchange with users. With this strategy, we wanted to create an example of how *slow science* can function as a decelerated, methodically developing, cooperative and open form of knowledge pro-

duction. This processual approach was supported by a grant from the University of Vienna in the *Aktiv Studieren* programme, which we received for the year 2022 to collect the first basic body of methodological texts and subject them to a feasibility test in an interconnected seminar and workshop. Travelling expenses for the 2022 workshop in Vienna as well as for the follow-up workshop in Nuremberg in 2023 were funded by Erasmus+. Publication funding from the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) as part of the *The Museum Gaze* project enabled the final production of the book and its open access publication in German and English. Additional funds for the translation were kindly provided by the Faculty of Historical and Cultural Studies at the University of Vienna. Our special thanks go to Matthias Müller for his careful editing and consistent translation. For the cover design and typesetting, we would like to thank Stefanie Muther and Emanuel Mauthe from Extraplan.

In processual terms, our *Book in Progress* did not imply embarking into the realization of the book with a predetermined table of contents and a definitive number of contributions, but rather gradually inviting authors for particular methodological foci, in order to explore and develop the field and also the need for different approaches on a step-by-step basis. Based on our knowledge of existing studies and structured research, we invited experts involved with methods of exhibition analysis in the most diverse (trans-)disciplinary contexts and fields of application to submit contributions. With the structured communication of methodological knowledge in mind that we were aiming for, we asked all authors in a comprehensive briefing to systematize their respective approaches and present their methods with regard to the theoretical background, the key questions and focus, a step-by-step guideline, a brief case study and a final method reflection. In the ensuing intensive feedback process involving us editors and early users, the text versions were able to evolve from an initial version to the final contributions in this book.

In concrete terms, the *Book in Progress* meant that all methodological texts underwent multiple revisions from the text's initial version to the final one. To this end, as already mentioned above, a five-day workshop was held in the framework of a seminar with students of art history, critical friends and the authors of the method texts at the University of Vienna in the summer semester 2022. Prior to the event, the authors' texts, as yet in a draft stage, were read by the participants who subsequently provided feedback regarding comprehensibility with the help of a feedback form. During the workshop, the methods were put to the test in selected Vienna exhibitions, with the text as a guideline and with additional input from the authors. Afterwards, the participants again gave feedback on the method text. We forwarded both feedback forms to the authors with the request to incorporate this response and their own experiences from the workshop into the revision of their texts. In the winter semester 2022/2023, in a seminar at the Chair of Museum Studies at the University of Würzburg, we repeated the method tests in a three-day workshop in Nuremberg museums, but this time with different texts. Further methods and their

respective texts were tested in a similar setting at Merseburg University of Applied Sciences in the summer semester of 2023.

The method tests proved to be a valuable tool for the circular text development intended for the *Book in Progress*. Our thanks go to Elena Blum for her collaboration in realizing the workshop at the University of Vienna, to Guido Fackler from the University of Würzburg for supporting our work and for his collaboration at the Nuremberg seminar, to Daniela Döring for adopting our concept in her teaching at the Merseburg University of Applied Sciences – as well as to all workshop participants for their comprehensive feedback. We would also like to specifically thank all the authors for unreservedly embracing this process of sharing their texts at an early stage and subjecting the methods to practical testing together with the users' feedback. Just to illustrate the additional work load this principle involves: the texts underwent at least three rounds of revision, some even more. In this way, the final texts gradually took shape, partly over a period of two years, happily without losing their individuality in the process, despite the rigid specifications. The numerous feedback loops allowed the texts to mature and gave the authors the chance to take a step back and revisit their work several times. We as editors also benefitted from the *Book in Progress* format: it enabled us to engage in-depth with the diversity of exhibition analysis and gave us time to establish and develop international and cross-disciplinary contacts with the overall thirty-four authors.

In its final design, the book approaches exhibition analysis from a cultural analysis, perception studies and practice-oriented perspective and precedes these three parts with a short introductory section: this contribution dealing with the genesis, contents and aim of this book is next followed by a fictional conversation between Gottfried Fliedl, Roswitha Muttenthaler, Anika Reichwald and Regina Wonisch. They are all involved in the *museumdenken* network and have, partly already since decades, been working with various forms of exhibition analysis in theory and practice. We asked them six questions and their answers indicate what we might consider as the purpose as well as the application contexts and ranges of impact of exhibition analyses. The contributions in *Part I Cultural Analysis Methods* address open questions in the critical-reflexive examination of the relationship between exhibition, institution and society. *Part II Perception Analysis Methods* unifies approaches concerned with the broad range of visitor perception based on the understanding of exhibitions as public places and social appropriation. *Part III Practice-Oriented Methods* focusses on the practicalities of the exhibition by examining how exhibitions can be configured in a concrete context, but also critically questioned and changed regarding their various uses and impact potential. Our breakdown of these three areas of exhibition analysis is further differentiated by the individual methodological contributions.

The seven contributions subsumed in the part *Cultural Analysis Methods* are concerned with the exhibition as a cultural phenomenon in different spatial, institutional and medial contexts. Kali Tzortzi employs the method of *Space Syntax* to map

exhibitions via their spatial organization and analyzes architectural predispositions of physical and social experience through the interplay of units. Daniela Döring uses *Knowledge Analysis* to examine exhibitions from the perspective of critique of representation and power and pursues the question what kind of knowledge is generated here under what sort of conditions. In *Context Analysis*, Angeli Sachs focusses on logics of collection, presentation, institutional embedding and public perception, in order to interpret exhibitions also as phenomena of time. The method of *Artefact Analysis* that Luise Reitstätter has borrowed from organizational research enables an understanding of the exhibition as a superordinate system through the reconstructive interpretation of production and reception contexts of a central artefact. With *Exhibition Photograph Analysis*, Ute Famulla offers an approach to the exhibition via its primary medium of documentation, photography, by examining the context of the photograph and the presentation from the perspective of media criticism. Maria Bremer raises the question of how exhibitions contribute to art historiography and links in her *Art-Historiographical Exhibition Analysis* the history of the exhibition and the history of exhibited art with curatorial studies. In *Affect-Reflexive Exhibition Analysis*, Carla-Marinka Schorr presents a method for capturing the holistic overall picture of the complex structure of an exhibition by using one's own perception as an instrument of investigation.

The part *Perception Analysis Methods* comprises six contributions that determine the public medium of the exhibition through the exhibition's appropriation by visitors. Eva Specker and Helmut Leder have reviewed the classic method of the *Questionnaire* for exhibition analysis and show how to formulate good questions in order to obtain concise information from visitors about their perceptions. With *Observation*, Carola Korhummel presents another classic of exhibition research and advocates observation as a qualitative method for understanding the exhibition as an experiential space by identifying patterns of behaviour. Dimitra Christidou gives an introduction into the interview method of *Social Meaning Mapping*, supported by illustrated exhibition plans, which lends itself particularly to the multimodal reconstruction of the exhibition experience of groups. In *Video-Based Ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis*, Dirk vom Lehn presents a sophisticated and also perceptive method to map the interaction with exhibits and between exhibition visitors. With *Go-Alongs*, Luise Reitstätter and Karolin Galter suggest exploring exhibitions via a joint walk and engaging in situative conversation in the mode of attentive listening. Luise Reitstätter, Seda Pesen, Enkelejda Kasneci and Raphael Rosenberg employ the method of *Mobile Eye Tracking* to explain how the exhibition can be grasped as a visual medium via detailed analyses of visitors' eye movements.

The book's third section presents six *Practice-Oriented Methods* which draw on practical work with exhibitions as well as attempt to shape exhibition praxis. Tabea Schmid has transferred the *AttrakDiff* method, originally developed for design processes, from user experience design to the exhibition, in order to assess its

pragmatic and hedonic qualities. In *Judging Exhibitions*, Jana Hawig and Ria Glaue offer for the first time a German translation of the method developed by Beverly Serrell, in which a group of experts substantiates the qualities of an exhibition from a visitor-centered perspective via individual evaluations as well as a comparative sharing of assessments. Simon Schütz shows in *Talkback Boards* how visitors can provide written feedback about their experience and suggestions for subsequent modifications via feedback stations integrated in the exhibition. In *ExhibitionScorecard*, Sabine Fauland presents a catalogue of indicators (from behind-the-scenes collection work to inclusion to climate awareness) that allows the success of an exhibition to be comprehensively evaluated beyond visitor numbers. Felix Koberstein and Livia Nolasco-Rózsás use the method of *Digital Models* to emphasize the analytical and informative value of reconstructing past exhibitions with the tools of collecting, mapping and contextualizing archive materials. With its contribution *Narratives – Structures – Contradictions* the *schnittpunkt* collective presents a question-based tool for a power-critical exhibition analysis which was further developed together with participants of the / ecm Master's program for exhibition theory and practice with regard to current critical debates in the exhibition field and the desire for institutional changes.

Content-wise, the contributions on cultural analysis, perception analysis and practice-oriented methods interlink with each other and connect the book's application contexts in exhibition-related research, teaching and praxis that we are aiming for. Since epistemological interests often relate to a variety of perspectives, we explicitly encourage combining methods. In addition, it will sometimes be necessary to adjust a method to your own application context. Such adaptations are expressly encouraged, even though this is not proposed explicitly in all method texts. After all, analyzing exhibitions also means positioning yourself personally and putting yourself into a critical and reflective relationship to the exhibition and its analysis. In the spirit of an empathetic culture of criticism and ethical work approach, it is also necessary to treat exhibitions – as results of personal endeavors of exhibition creators in their specific working contexts – with care and circumspection and to find a way to examine them in a factually sound, methodically reflected way, and with transparent conclusions.

For, just like exhibitions, methods of analysis and methods books are also subject to mechanisms of potent, structural disposition. They include some approaches and leave others unconsidered. The remarks here and in the respective method texts reflect the immediate context of the genesis of our *Book in Progress* and show the viewpoints of both us editors and the authors. We open up the field of exhibition analysis and at the same time confine it with a limited number of texts and perspectives. We are, in this respect, also aware of the lacunae of our book, for example, by not explicitly addressing the exhibition's educational or design aspects with specific methods or by limiting ourselves methodically to analogue exhibition formats. In this sense,

the principle of the *Book in Progress* also means that this book does not see itself as a definitive compendium. It has to be continuously updated – and we see this as an opportunity – in a process of adopting methods and suggestions for expansion. We are banking here on collective thinking and action by all those who are enthusiastic about analyzing exhibitions as an epistemological tool. The development of the *Book in Progress* does therefore not end with its publication, but rather begins a new chapter in the extended community of its users.

Fig. 1–3: Workshop on Methods of Exhibition Analysis, 17–22 May 2022, Video-Based Ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis in the exhibition Avantgarde and the Present at Belvedere 21, © Photos: Karl Pani, Department of Art History, University of Vienna.



Fig. 4–7: *Workshop on Methods of Exhibition Analysis, 17–22 May 2022, Judging Exhibitions in the exhibition Hot Questions – Cold Storage at the Architekturzentrums Wien, © Photos: Karl Pani, Department of Art History, University of Vienna.*



Fig. 8–9: Workshop on Methods of Exhibition Analysis, 17–22 May 2022, Judging Exhibitions in the exhibition Hot Questions – Cold Storage at the Architekturzentrum Wien, © Photos: Karl Pani, Department of Art History, University of Vienna.



Fig. 10–13: Workshop on Methods of Exhibition Analysis, 17–22 May 2022, Social Meaning Mapping in the exhibition Enjoy. The mumok Collection in Change at mumok, © Photos: Karl Pani, Department of Art History, University of Vienna.



Fig.14–15: Workshop on Methods of Exhibition Analysis, 17–22 May 2022, Social Meaning Mapping in the exhibition Enjoy. The mumok Collection in Change at mumok, © Photos: Karl Pani, Department of Art History, University of Vienna.



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