

Observation

Understanding exhibitions as spaces of experience

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Introduction

“His gaze wanders along the queue of people lined up in front of them. She repeatedly runs one hand over his coat-covered back, while the other checks the neat fit of her hair-do. After a while of mutual silence she retrieves a mobile from her black handbag and starts to read out the Wikipedia article on *The Kiss (Klimt)*. He shuffles across the gravel in his shiny loafers, sighs and draws closer to her until they are cheek to cheek, gazing together at the glowing screen. Behind them, the contours of the Upper Belvedere shimmer in muted shades of gold.” This is the beginning of an observation protocol of a pilot study conducted on Valentine’s Day 2023 on the romantic potential of museums. The method of exhibition analysis applied here was observation, which is as straightforward as it is effective.

Observation looks back on a more than hundred-year tradition in exhibition research. Benjamin Gilman is considered a pioneer in the field. In the early 20th century he documented a total of thirty guided situations of a single museum visitor in black-and-white photographs to illustrate the visitor’s exertion under the catchphrase of *Museum Fatigue* (Gilman 1916). Later studies with regular visitors focused on patterns of behaviour such as the attraction of exits or the *right turn bias* (Robinson 1928, Melton 1935, 1936, Porter 1938). Further studies explored orientation and circulation in museum spaces (Falk et al. 1985, Cohen, Winkel and Olsen 1977, Parsons and Loomis 1973, Peart 1984, Rosenfeld and Turkel 1982).

Stephen Bitgood and colleagues in particular (Bitgood 1988, 2003, Bitgood et al. 1985, Bitgood and Richardson 1986) employed observation to analyze economies of movement and developed proposals for an appropriate exhibition design based on their findings. Beverly Serrell (1993, 1995, 1997, 1998) compiled the results of more than hundred exhibitions in zoos, aquariums and museums in a meta study and compared the dwell time per square meter, now a frequently referenced metric known as the ‘sweep rate index’. This approach, established as tracking & timing, is a reduced form of observation that assesses an exhibition in terms of its exhibits’

capacity to attract and detain. Finally, in the light of ongoing digitalization, the tools of observation are changing: new recording technologies and software solutions are replacing traditional pen-and-paper techniques (Yalowitz and Bronnenkant 2009).

In the current application of observation as a method of exhibition analysis, quantitative approaches dominate, providing a competitive indicator for the success or failure of an exhibition, for instance, in comparing intensity of use. Here, a rigorous observation regime often limits the amount of knowledge gained beyond statistics. However, some research projects indicate what observation, as a well-founded method of recording of what is taking place, is methodically capable of: Inequality researcher Nicole Burzan (2022), for instance, examined changing social distinction behaviour in experiential museums as well as situations of interaction between service personnel and visitors, in order to explore their ambivalent function as a hinge between enforcing a set of rules and creating a welcoming atmosphere. In turn, cultural manager Ina Ross (2018) conducted studies on postcolonial appropriations of the museum as a picnic spot and a hang-out place, as a backdrop for photos and selfies for the social media feed or as a meeting place for unmarried couples at the Tribal Museum Bhopal. This potential of observation as an open-ended, qualitative method for analyzing exhibitions will be outlined below. The exhibition should be considered as part of a growing experience economy in the 21st century that replaces useful and material goods with experiences that are as emotionally intense as possible (Illouz 2018). The exhibition as a space of experience is neither a static store of knowledge nor a purely aesthetic act, but rather an affective proposition that visitors can appropriate in multiple ways and continuously redefine through their actions.

Aim of the method

The method of observation aims to gather knowledge about visible actions and behaviours. When applied in exhibitions, observation can produce unpredictable findings, for instance regarding social role structures or modes of use, that cannot be captured with more structured methods. In this way, the special nature of everyday phenomena can reveal itself in minimal clues – such as a glance through a window or a casual touch of a companion: the in-between, the unspectacular, the authentic interstices that make up a visit to an exhibition beyond taking in collection highlights. The method doesn't end with merely recording the observed phenomena, but goes further in attempting to make sense of their potential relationships and meanings.

Step-by-step guideline

Observation as a method of exhibition analysis is just as multi-layered as are exhibitions themselves as spatial constructs, physical experiences or social events (Reitstätter 2015). Aspects of an exhibition that can be examined via observation include, for instance, orientation and circulation in the architectonic space, the reception of specific exhibits, the use of educational tools as well as any form of interpersonal interaction. It is thus in the broadest of terms that the following guideline aims to do justice to this pool of observable possibilities.

1. Setting and self-positioning

The primary research instrument of observation is the researcher themselves, who notices interactions in the exhibition space and puts them into writing by resorting to simple tools. Before embarking on the field research, it is therefore necessary to reflect on the setting: what is the context of the exhibition venue, the exhibition theme, the exhibition visit as a culturally framed practice? This is followed by a self-positioning that takes into account individual influences and expectations: Where do I locate myself within or outside of this system? What do I consider as normal? This overarching last question is best answered antonymously by imagining a situation within the exhibition that would be considered unusual from one's own perspective (Goffman 1963).

Both the setting and the corresponding self-positioning are conducive to gaining an advanced awareness of one's own role in the field. Accordingly, one can choose between various variants of observation: structured or unstructured, participatory or non-participatory, overt or covert (Lamnek 2016, Lüders 2013). Structured observation collects data based on predefined categories, while unstructured observation merely sets out flexible guidelines. In contrast to non-participatory observation, which maintains a distance from events and can also be conducted via video recording, the researcher is directly present in the research field during participatory observation. Depending on the social emphasis of one's role, a further distinction is made between active and passive. Finally, overt observation reveals the researcher as such, while covert observation withholds this knowledge.

For exhibition analysis, the entire range of structured to partially structured to entirely unstructured observation is applicable, depending on the research stage and research interest. Researchers in the role of regular exhibition visitors would, according to this model, perform a passive, participatory observation. Covert observation combined with an anonymized data collection is ethically acceptable in the context of the public exhibition space.

2. Data collection tools

Point of departure for data collection is a preliminary research question that is allowed to further develop organically in the research field and in the follow-up. After clarifying the details of the spatial, temporal and thematic scope of the field research in terms of the preliminary research question, the next step is to prepare the tools of data collection. Field notes play an essential role here and it much benefits the observation to clearly subdivide them in a detailed protocol and a short memo. The protocol is purely descriptive and records the observations in chronological order in a continuous text in the present tense. The memo written directly after the protocol is, in turn, a useful tool for formulating preliminary interpretations or possible hypotheses for the observed behaviour. Sketches of specific scenes or movements can serve as visual aids for recalling spatial circumstances and special moments. In case of recurring observations, it is helpful to mark them with self-defined symbols that should be noted in a legend for effective reconstruction. Depending on whether you decide to go for a structured or an unstructured observation, the field notes should be prepared accordingly with or without fixed categories. Nevertheless, observation is a flexible study design that can and should always be adapted to the actual circumstances on the ground.

3. Descriptive observation

After preparing the tools of data collection, the actual research in the field can begin. In exhibition analysis, as in other fields of observation as a method, it is recommended to follow a chronological, fluid sequence of three levels of observation, progressing from descriptive to focused to selective observation (Lüders 2012). In the first phase of descriptive observation, the researchers explore the circumstances of the exhibition and assess its complexity. Initial questions that can support the descriptive observation in the exhibition space are: What can be perceived? What are the contextual conditions – from the entrance fee to architectural aspects and the specific situation of the visit? On the strength of this initial description, the preliminary research question can already be further specified. The duration of this phase varies, depending on the exhibition and the researcher: as soon as actions are repeated and specific processes emerge, one can continue to the next phase.

4. Focused observation

Following the first comprehensive inventory, the second phase of focused observation concentrates on behaviours that are relevant to the specific research interest. The focus in the exhibition analysis can, for instance, concern how visitors approach an exhibit or how they take breaks. It is now advisable to divide the field research into

smaller, more tailored units of action, which is reflected in the way the field notes are organized. Here, two questions are helpful: Which elements define the behaviours I have observed? When or how does an action begin and what does it end with? For this purpose, the data collected in the protocol can be compared with each other and any observable patterns of behaviour can be noted down in the memo. As soon as a representative accumulation of these patterns emerges, one can continue to the next phase.

5. Selective observation

In the third and last phase of data collection, the researcher collects further evidence and examples for the behavioural patterns found in the course of the focused observation and recorded in the memos. When visitors approach an exhibit, selective observations concerning the amount of space, position and neighbourhood of the exhibit could, for instance, serve as evidence for typical behaviours. The selective observation is completed as soon as a sufficiently diverse set of evidence for the previously identified behavioural patterns is available.

6. Data analysis

The three-layered data collection is followed by the process of data analysis. In effect, this is not a unique sequence of two operations, but rather an iterative research process of data collection and analysis: the constant re-evaluation of collected data in turn impacts every new observation in the research field (Lueger 2000). In the process, memos and protocols are collated and their ideas collected, hypotheses are generated and discarded. The solid basis for such data loops consists in the comprehensiveness and the predefined formats of the field notes as a tool of data collection. Based on the overall impression of these field notes, categories are first derived in the data analysis in order to annotate the data in the next detailed run. Even though the data collection can be carried out by one single person, general quality assurance measures in qualitative research should be observed during data analysis, and the data should be reviewed and analyzed by several independent persons (Bohnsack 2005, Flick 2018).

7. Contextualization

Finally, the observations are confronted and contextualized with existing theories and historical evidence. Depending on the research interest, this contextualized knowledge can be used in two ways. On the one hand, it is possible to derive general rules for exhibition research from the accumulated observations. On the other, it is

conceivable to put forward practical and specific suggestions for adjustments to the examined exhibition space.

The resources required for the observation comprise the researcher as well as a notepad and pen or a suitable digital device for data collection. If the annotation during data analysis is performed using chargeable software, this should be factored into the budget or covered by the research institution's licences. While personnel requirements are minimal, observation tends to be a rather time-consuming method, both in terms of data collection and analysis.

Case study

The pilot study conducted by the Laboratory for Cognitive Research in Art History at the University of Vienna on Valentine's Day 2023 marked the start of the larger research project *Dating in Museums (DiM)*. The aim was to examine selected Vienna art museums as experiential spaces for love relations using an explorative format. The preliminary research question was: To what extent is the art museum used as a space for romantic rendezvous? Ahead of the project, the five-person research team discussed the semantic field of 'dating' in general terms and in relation to museums. First, we defined the setting of the art museum with its specific behavioural conventions of keeping one's distance and viewing exhibits in a contemplative mode. With regard to self-positioning, we verbalized personal attitudes towards dating as a practice both outside and inside the museum. Which forms of dating or romantic love do we consider (not) normal? Which attitudes do we follow or correspond to ourselves in this respect? Subsequently, we decided on a partially structured, passively participating, covert observation in the role of museum visitors. This allowed us to observe situations in the public exhibition space in a non-invasive way as well as relate to specific museum experiences from a closer internal perspective.

When determining the framing details, we timed the study to coincide with Valentine's Day in order to ensure as high a concentration of dating visitors as possible. In terms of location, our radius was limited to Viennese art museums, and in terms of content, we shortlisted events that explicitly dealt with the concept of romantic love. For this purpose, we first reviewed the range of offers in all Viennese museums via desktop research and subsequently contacted selected institutions for the research project. Ultimately, we chose four museums with completely different events: The Kunsthistorische Museum Wien (KHM) with a brief art-historical tour; the Museum für moderne Kunst (mumok) with 1+1 admission and a queer photoshoot in an installation; the Museum für angewandte Kunst (MAK) with nude drawing and a lecture; and the Upper Belvedere with free admission and a professional photoshoot for kissing couples in front of Klimt's most famous painting. Methodically, we opted for a combination of observation and interviews, where we

explicitly revisited and approached people we had previously observed (hide and seek). A briefing preceding the field research was devoted to the practical approach in the field, which determined field notes consisting of a protocol and a memo as well as sketches as tools of data collection.

In a first, descriptive phase of observation, we noted the relatively high number of presumed couples in the museum audience, distinguishing themselves from other visitors through specific, repetitive forms of interaction such as eye contact and physical proximity. The contextual conditions – admission fee, architecture, suggested experiential format for Valentine's Day – differed greatly between the examined museums. We therefore assumed, on the one hand, a specific form of how dating couples experience museums that applies to all four museums, and on the other, significantly varying visitors' interests depending on the suggested experience format. The second, focused phase of observation concentrated on the previously identified couples among the visitors. Here, beginning and end of joint activities and their interruptions within an exhibition space were recorded. The following patterns emerged: silently standing together before art works in close physical proximity; taking time out together on seats with or without conversation; and actively heading for less crowded places of retreat within the exhibition. In a third, selective phase of observation, the researchers collected further supporting evidence and examples of the previously identified behaviours, paying particular attention to the exhibition architecture as well as specific features of the exhibits.

In the course of data analysis, we studied the field notes together and derived suitable categories – intimacy, focus on exhibits, focus on the event, contact with other visitors – before subjecting them to a further reading. For quality assurance purposes, these data loops were carried out independently by several researchers and subsequently contrasted with each other and discussed in group analysis sessions. Two fundamental assumptions were consolidated: firstly, it was possible to identify both general and specific behavioural patterns of dating persons who knew how to deliberately use certain parts of the exhibition as an experiential space for intimate acts. Here, in particular the exhibition architecture seemed to be correlated with the degree of intimacy: while displays of intimacy were relatively rare in the open spatial constellation in mumok, affording little privacy, these were quite frequent in the small, concealed cabinet layout of the KHM. Secondly, the visitor interests varied considerably depending on the suggested experiential format in the four examined museums: in the mumok, for example, the behaviour of the visiting couples showed a pronounced focus on the exhibits, and thus a concentration on the exhibits with a concomitant neglecting of the accompanying person, while in the KHM, the exhibition tended to serve as a kind of resonance chamber for intimate acts. The Belvedere, in turn, was able to attract the largest crowds in terms of numbers – in part owing to the contextual condition of free admission – with the event offered as a unique and shared museum experience being the focus of interest.

Finally, the observations of dating couples in the museum, made in the context of this particular pilot study, were placed in the context of social conventions of visiting and historical concepts of museum use. In the light of an increasingly emotional eventization of cultural practices, the accumulated observations could contribute to acknowledging the practice of dating as a relevant exhibition experience and to actively enabling the observed needs of dating visitors by providing appropriate offers in the exhibition space.

Method reflection

Observation is a timeless and long-standing method. The advantages are obvious: firstly, it is an easily accessible method that can be implemented with just one researcher and with little to none financial means. Secondly, it ensures a minimally invasive approach to the field, which, depending on the implementation, enables an undisturbed visit to the exhibition for the observed persons. Thirdly, it constitutes an open-ended and hypothesis-generating approach that makes it possible to record unpredictable forms of behaviour. It is particularly advisable in combination with other methods because it can reveal the blind spots of other, hypothesis-driven methods. For example, visitor self-assessments and opinions obtained through a survey can be enriched by observing unconscious or concealed behaviour, such as different degrees of intimacy.

One should always bear in mind the limitations of observation as a human-based method: even with careful preparation and execution, selective and subjective processes of perception cannot be completely avoided, but they can be made intersubjectively comprehensible through data-based argumentation. Therefore, methods such as *Video-Based Ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis* or *Mobile Eye Tracking* can be used as a complement or as an alternative. Ultimately, the maxim of observation is unattainable in a twofold sense: neither is it possible to set up an all-encompassing observation, nor can the difference between participants and researchers be completely eliminated. The observation process is after all as fleeting as the material that it aims to capture, and the methodical solidification of ephemeral states is always an artificial process.

When applied to exhibition analysis, observation can draw conclusions about architectural or curatorial advantages or disadvantages, as well as about needs of the visitors that are met or denied. The sum of these observations yields appropriations of the exhibition as an individually designable space of experience, where interactions with exhibits can explicitly serve to bring visitor and companion closer together, or where the ambience of the exhibition feeds the romance of a rendezvous. Understanding exhibitions as spaces of experience could bring hitherto less documented, affective exchanges in the network of visitors, architecture and exhibits

into focus and emphasize the social relevance of exhibitions against the backdrop of a late-capitalist society built on experience economies.

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