

Artefact Analysis

Interpreting exhibitions from an organizational logic perspective

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Introduction

Already for over 20 years, the sociologists Ulrike Froschauer and Manfred Lueger have been investigating the development and application of artefact analysis as a method of organizational research (Froschauer 2009, Froschauer and Lueger 2020, Lueger 2000, Lueger and Froschauer 2018). Due to the omnipresence of artefacts in our everyday lives (from door signs to smartphones) and the concomitant greater need for interpretation (in the hermeneutic tradition), artefact analysis has so far led a rather marginal existence (Froschauer 2009: 327–329, Froschauer and Lueger 2020: 20–26). However, the understanding of artefacts as man-made things that, via the materialization of communication and the representation of decision processes, provide information about the context of their origin as well as organize future activities of use, reveals the potential of artefact analysis. On the one hand, artefacts are not created through social activities alone but are also symbolic for them. On the other hand, artefacts are not only determined via their context of creation, but also by their context of use, in that they induce particular forms of follow-up communication (Lueger 2000: 141, Froschauer 2009: 329). We also find this multidimensional approach to artefacts in the exhibition, when artefacts are the result of communication and decision-making processes of the exhibition makers and at the same time pre-structure the potential uses by exhibition visitors (Reitstätter 2015: 122).

My approach of transferring artefact analysis from organizational research to exhibition studies thus aims, through the reconstructive interpretation of a significant artefact, to reveal the logics of the exhibition's production and perception. Assuming a fundamental epistemic problem, this means that artefacts do not merely reflect reality, but are accessed and interpreted both in everyday life and in research based on prior knowledge (Froschauer and Lueger 2020: 36–44). In terms of methodology, artefact analyses can be grouped into visual and material cultural analyses, so that we can consider the following approaches as precursors and references: cul-

tural-sociological image analysis (e.g. Breckner 2015), text-oriented content analysis (e.g. Froschauer and Lueger 2020a), historical source analysis (e.g. Wolff 2019) or also qualitative video analysis (e.g. Reichertz and Englert 2021). Artefact analysis in the exhibition context shows, via the source-based point of departure, similarities to *Art-Historiographical Exhibition Analysis* as well as *Exhibition Photograph Analysis*. Since artefacts also function as essential material arguments for assessing the characteristics of an exhibition, artefact analysis also evinces a proximity to *Knowledge Analysis* and *Affect-Reflexive Exhibition Analysis*.

Aim of the method

The aim of the method is to place the specific appearance of the artefact into a plausible context of meaning and in this way develop an understanding of the logic of an organization (Froschauer 2009: 327). With regard to the exhibition, the artefact can be a single object, an ensemble of objects or a spatial constellation, as artefact analysis has already explained with observations on special cases ranging from two-dimensional artefacts to spatial design and technical devices (Lueger and Froschauer 2018: 93–127). In our case, organization refers to the exhibition, even though some research questions are aimed more at an organizational-logic assessment of the institution in which the exhibition takes place, or also a broader cultural and historical context, as we will see in our case study below. In any event, artefact analyses focus on “objects made by humans and attempt, on the basis of their social embedment, to reveal information about their meaning, production and operation, and, ultimately, about the social world.” (Froschauer and Lueger 2020: 22) While an artefact is subjected to a focused analysis, the method attempts to gain an understanding of the associated system. Consequently, artefact analysis is particularly well suited for in-depth detailed analyses that in exhibitions with contemporary themes enable a precise focus, and in historical exhibitions, a comprehensive evaluation of the still extant source material.

Fundamentally and independent of the particular research interest, artefact analysis is guided by four key questions that help to explore the wide range of possible frameworks of meaning (Froschauer and Lueger 2020: 27–31, Lueger and Froschauer 2018: 52–58): 1. Why does the artefact exist at all? 2. How do people make the artefact? 3. What do people do with the artefact? And: 4. What does the artefact do to people and society?¹ These four questions lend themselves as a warm-up exercise to sensitize oneself to the method and create a first analytical framework. Specifically, this enables an initial reflection on the logic that occasions the artefact,

1 This question, which is perhaps the most difficult one to answer, can also be put in reverse: What would change for human beings and society, if we didn't have the artefact?

its production, use and social and societal practice, before embarking on the process of concrete artefact analysis.

Step-by-step guideline

Artefact analysis is a “very general procedure that needs to be adjusted to the specific materials in question” (Froschauer 2009: 329). The step-by-step guideline below already includes an adjustment to the exhibition context by tailoring questions guiding the research process to this field of application. The basic principle in artefact analysis is to approach the organization under scrutiny via three key moments: first, deconstruction of the artefact; second, integration into a framework of meaning as a social recontextualization; and, thirdly, a process of translation into an argumentative context (Froschauer 2009: 331–332). In the preparatory stage, artefact analysis is structured via general quality assurance measures and the selection of the artefact, and in the implementation phase, via seven levels of interpretation (Froschauer and Lueger 2020b: 51–70, Lueger and Froschauer 2018: 59–92).

Preparing an artefact analysis

In artefact analysis, quality assurance measures are recommended in the sense of interpretative social research, which, on the one hand, theoretically sensitize researchers to the procedure, and on the other, should be practically incorporated into the research process. Team interpretation sessions are essential for quality assurance, as they promote an opening of perspectives as well as critical reflection. In addition, one should pay attention to carrying out an extensive interpretation of meaning and subjecting it to a careful examination within a generously allotted time frame. This is because, unlike in everyday life, scientific interpretation is not about arriving at the most plausible interpretation as rapidly as possible. Rather, “permanent doubt” enables us to fathom potential meanings inherent in the artefact and examine them for their viability (Lueger and Froschauer 2018: 48). In the circular research process, one needs to include reflection loops so that argumentations can also be corrected. In case the chosen artefact is not transportable or no longer exists, it is necessary to create the most detailed documentation possible in form of photographs, video recordings, sketches and descriptions, and perhaps also to collect explanatory material such as texts, manuals or instructions concerning the artefact.

The selection and necessary documentation of the artefact represent the usually not so laborious act of data collection. The great advantage of artefacts is that they are, as a rule, easily accessible, even though their potential disadvantage is the omnipresence of possible artefacts to choose from. The selection of an adequate artefact is thus critical for the research process. How I want to limit the options depends

on my research interest, that is, the focus on how I want to 'read' the exhibition. In principle, it always makes sense to select an artefact that plays a significant role in the exhibition.² When selecting the artefact, one can take recourse to the actors involved (from exhibition makers to visitors) so that their focus can be incorporated into the artefact analysis. Archival materials from past exhibitions also reveal this kind of structured selection, as their documentary value already predestines them for an artefact analysis. On the other hand, it can make sense to select the artefact as a researcher yourself, in order to preclude any blind spots of the actors involved or critical aspects that can lead to a potential exclusion of artefacts.³

Carrying out the artefact analysis

In the following, seven levels lead through the interpretation of the data, still leaving enough leeway to make prioritizations and adjustments in the sense of artefact analysis as a heuristic art form.

1. Research contexts of artefact analysis

This level is about formulating the epistemic interest in the exhibition and integrating artefact analysis into the research process. For this, we determine both the role as the main or supplementary method, as well as possible adjustments to the artefact.

Exemplary questions:

- How do the artefacts of the examined exhibition differ?
- Which specific artefacts are suitable for developing the research interest?
- Which criteria are decisive for the final selection of the artefact?
- Does the artefact have any specifics that require an adjustment of the procedure?
- To what extent does a complementary application of other methods make sense?

2 In an exhibition, this can be the main introductory text as well as the artwork presented in the central room or the innovative guide that was specially developed for the exhibition.

3 This can be the case with a flyer, for example, which is self-evident for the exhibition makers, while for the visitors, it provides an initial access to the exhibition. Another example would be an artwork-label combination that, in a critical reading, lacks gender-theoretical framings, for example, and thus highlights a topic that was apparently not a priority for the exhibition makers.

2. The artefact's conditions of existence

Since artefacts are not brought into the world by chance nor exist without preconditions, this level concerns the questions of what conditions must be met for the artefact to exist and in what specific environment or situation we encounter the artefact.

Exemplary questions:

- What materials, techniques etc. are required to produce the artefact?
- What are the interests and intentions behind the production of the artefact?
- In which context of an exhibition can the artefact usually be found?
- Which context does the artefact need in the exhibition for a meaningful use?

3. Descriptive analysis

The descriptive analysis aims to locate the object under investigation in the social world. Here, the artefact is described by its characteristics such as materiality, its internal structure and context characteristics as a basis for the subsequent analysis. As an alternative to this open approach, it is also possible to resort to established forms of object or work description.

Exemplary questions:

- What does the artefact consist of and which sensory characteristics does it have?
- What are the artefact's components and how are they related?
- Which material properties can fulfill which functions in the exhibition?
- What is the significance of the spatial, temporal and social context of the artefact?

4. Everyday contextual embedding of meaning

Based on the descriptive analysis, the everyday contextual embedding of meaning locates the selected artefact in settings of everyday life. Positioning oneself in the role of an observer with everyday competence, the aim is to examine the artefact for possible social meanings (attributions), involved actors (at the interface to the artefact) and a situated context analysis (concrete environment).

Exemplary questions:

- What concepts and meanings is the artefact associated with?
- What stimuli and signals can the artefact send to different addressees?

- Which groups of actors are involved with the artefact in the exhibition, when and how?
- To what extent is the artefact part of the everyday or the extraordinary of an exhibition?
- In what other contexts beyond the exhibition could the artefact appear?
- What role do sensory/emotional qualities of the artefact play in the respective context?

5. Detached-structural analysis

The detached-structural analysis broadens the analytical focus by going beyond formal characteristics and concrete meanings, in the attempt to locate the artefact within social practices and macro-structural relationships. This includes production, usage, effects and functions, as well as staged and social integration of the artefact.

Exemplary questions:

- How can we characterize the production context?
- What interests are associated with the production of the artefact and by whom?
- What are the artefact's contexts of use within the exhibition?
- In how far does the interaction with the artefact change or does it itself bear traces of it?
- What effects does the artefact have on the actors confronted with it?
- What happens if the artefact's functions fail?
- What is the overall impression created by the specific arrangement of the artefact?
- In how far does the artefact structure social situations?

6. Comparative analyses

At the comparative analysis level, the selected artefact is compared with other artefacts. While a comparison with similar artefacts serves to review the validity of the findings, a comparison with different artefacts is suitable for examining its scope. This approach can be carried out both inside and outside of the concrete exhibition context. Theoretical saturation is reached “when it is highly unlikely that the inclusion of new materials can contribute to a further development of the findings gained.” (Lueger and Froschauer 2018: 63)

Fig. 1: Seven levels of artefact analysis, © Representation according to Lueger and Froschauer (2018: 65).

Levels of artefact analysis		
1	Research contexts of artefact analysis	Epistemic interest Integration into the research process Specification of artefact analysis
2	The artefact's conditions of existence	Reasons for existence Conditions for existence
3	Descriptive analysis	Materiality Internal structure Context characteristics
4	Everyday contextual embedding of meaning	Social meanings Involved actors Situated context analysis
5	Detached-structural analysis	Production Artefact usage Effects and functions Staged and social integration
6	Comparative analysis	Comparable artefacts Typical artefact contexts Linking with other analysis methods
7	Summary of the artefact analysis	(Re-)Konstruktion of the artefact context regarding the research interest

Core area of interpretation

Exemplary questions:

- Which artefacts are similar or fulfill comparable functions?
- Which differences to other artefacts can we identify?
- What are typical exhibition contexts for the artefact and where else does it appear?
- What meanings are associated with the different contexts?

7. Summary of the artefact analysis

The aim of this level is the conclusive summary of all findings, even though this synthesis has been pursued from the very beginning in the circular research process. This is achieved by a constant structuring of results that records, for instance, recurring aspects, contradictions or also additional information in research memos. Finally, the aim is to evaluate the artefact analysis with regard to the epistemic interest in the exhibition. In order to ensure a replication of the results, it is important to communicate the specific approach of the artefact analysis as well as the applied modes of quality assurance in a transparent manner.

Case Study

I came across my case study on Instagram in the run-up to the workshop *Methodology of Researching Historical Exhibitions*.⁴ There, the Wien Museum published an exhibition view of the Austrian Pavilion at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris. My interest was piqued by the attractive black-and-white illustration of the exhibition in the chicque 1930s style as well as by the caption to the huge photomontage that focused on “the new Grossglockner high alpine road, a prestige project of Austrofascism”. In addition to my professional interest, there was also a biographical aspect, the fact that I grew up in Fusch, a village by the Grossglockner high alpine road. The photomontage by Robert Haas was described as “the leitmotif of the Austrian Pavilion”, so that with this textual reference the selection of the artefact was straightforward. The organizational context is defined by the exhibition of the Austrian Pavilion at the so-called

4 The workshop was organized as part of the exhibition project *Matter. Non Matter. Anti Matter*, in which two historical exhibitions (*Les Immatériaux*, Centre Georges Pompidou 1985, and *Iconoclash*, ZKM 2002) were digitally modeled, organized by the ZKM | Zentrum für Kunst und Medien Karlsruhe (Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe) and the Leuphana University of Lüneburg, Department of Philosophy and Art Studies, from March 16–17, 2023. I decided to use my invitation as an incentive for the long-planned transfer of artefact analysis to the exhibition context. My thanks go to the workshop participants for their feedback on this methodological premiere.

Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne (1937). Today, essential sources concerning this artefact (documentary photographs, model, correspondence) can be found in the Wien Museum, which took over the estate of Robert Haas from his family in 2015. For further information, I consulted literature on international world exhibitions, the Austrian contributions and the actors involved in the 1937 exhibition.

Fig. 2: Instagram Post, Wien Museum, 31 January 2023, © Screenshot: Luise Reitstätter.



We will now, in a brief outline, play through all seven levels of the artefact analysis, with this preparation as a point of departure. The research context of this artefact analysis (1) is, as already explained, a professional-biographical interest in the Austrian Pavilion at the 1937 Paris World's Fair, with its central exhibit, the photomontage. The conditions of existence of the artefact (2) result from Austria's contribution, funded and organized by the Federal Ministry of Trade and Transport, in a pavilion designed by Oswaldt Haerdtl. He in turn commissioned Robert Haas to create a photomontage. The descriptive analysis (3) reveals, with 8,66 x 30,35 m, the gigantic dimensions of the photomontage, presented elevated on the curved rear wall inside the pavilion. The 147 square image panels of the photomontage, already clearly visible from the outside, correspond with the gridded façade of the Haerdtl building. With the curved ends of the wall, the photomontage marks a vertical tripartite division that corresponds with the three roads depicted: Pack road, Grossglockner high alpine road and Gesäuse road. The otherwise monochrome photomontage is divided horizontally by a blue, textile stretch of sky, with white-sprayed clouds, while at the bottom of the picture we see greatly enlarged flower meadows with crocuses and edelweiss. Precisely in the center, in pride of place, the Grossglockner with its

glacier, the Pasterze. Summing up the composition, Haas writes: “Many things are completely wrong, parts shifted from left to right, copied in reverse etc., but a good overall impression.”⁵

Fig. 3: Model of the photo wallpaper, produced for the MAK exhibition in 1983, © Photo: Birgit and Peter Kainz, Wien Museum.



The everyday contextual embedding of meaning (4) refers to the Grossglockner as the highest mountain and national symbol of Austria, ‘the land of mountains’, as the first line of the national anthem declares. The Alpine roads symbolize technological progress, which is staged in a visually stunning way in the combination of impressive nature with innovative engineering. Besides Haerdtl and Haas, the actors involved include numerous collaborators – from employees of the Foto Leutner company to bookbinders and colleagues from the Hagenbund artists’ association. However, the detached-structured analysis (5) already reveals the very manifest anti-Semitic work environment, with Haas, as a Jew, being obliged to hire an Aryan assistant.⁶ At the same time, the elaborate production of the photo wallpaper (as the largest produced hitherto) with its nature-technology topos (preservation and conquest of the high Alpine landscape) was instrumentalized for propaganda purposes by the Austrofascist government as well as by the national tourism agency. Press coverage documents for the most part positive reactions. In March 1938, Haas is also awarded the Grand Prix of the International World Exhibition. However, due to the Nazi takeover of power and the large number of Jewish prizewinners, Haas never

5 Letter from Robert Haas to his brother in the midst of preparations on April 19, 1937.

6 In an interview years later, Haas recalls a phone call from Haerdtl, who said to him: “*Herr Ingenieur*, I don’t know how to tell you this, but they found out that you are Jewish. But I don’t want that to become public knowledge. Would you be prepared to take on an Aryan assistant?” Under pressure, Haas complied, with the result that he was excluded from setting up the photomontage, never saw his work completed in Paris and his assistant Günther Baszel was prominently mentioned in the catalogue.

got to receive his prize. Worse still, the takeover made it impossible for Haas to continue his work and his emigration, which only succeeded at the last minute, led to a cultural loss for Austria.⁷

Fig. 4-6: Entrance area, Austrian pavilion with sculpture and cable car support, and side view with Viennese coffee house, © Photos: Julius Scherb/Wien Museum.



Possible comparative analyses (6) of the photomontage can be found within the exhibition in revisiting the nature-technology theme with the sculpture and cable car support erected in the outdoor area. And a further comparison suggests itself between the urban-rural contrast of Alpine Austria and its capital Vienna with the Viennese coffee house, adjacent to the outside wall. Looking at the national presentations at the 1937 World's Fair, we can see that these already reflected the looming confrontation (Kretschmer 1999: 197–204). This conflict was especially conspicuous in the pavilions of the German Reich and the Soviet Union that faced each other.⁸ Comparisons with other Austrian presentations at other world exhibitions or Biennales illustrate the continuity of Alpine mountainscapes (from touristically branded to artistically reflected) and large-scale visual presentations (from painted dioramas to photo wallpapers and video installations). In the summative analysis (7), various research foci thus unfold, ranging from a media-theoretical exhibition history of the panorama image to the examination of national stereotypes in the stimulation of the touristic gaze and to an inquiry into cultural politics and exhibition practices before the Second World War. Via these extensions one could not only explore the exhibition in the Austrian Pavilion as a closely-framed organization, but also the 1937 World's Fair in Paris or, in even broader terms, contemporary cultural policies, in accordance

7 Robert Haas emigrated to New York via London in September 1938 and, over the course of his life from 1898–1938 in Vienna and from 1939–1997 in New York, looked at *Two Worlds*, as the title of the 2016 exhibition at the Wien Museum aptly sums up. Efforts to make amends can be found in the title of professor awarded to Robert Haas by the Austrian Ministry of Education in 1972, and in the two exhibitions at the MAK (1983) and the Wien Museum (2016).

8 While the pavilion of the German Reich was designed by Albert Speer and crowned by an imperial eagle with a swastika, the pavilion designed by Boris Iofan for the Soviet Union displayed the monumental sculpture *Worker and Kolkhoz Peasant* by Vera Mukhina.

with the theoretical concept of artefact analysis as social analysis (Froschauer and Lueger 2020b: 183–187).

Method reflection

In summary, the benefits of artefact analysis include that artefacts represent an omnipresent and easily accessible ‘natural’ source of data that exists independently of research activities. Originating from the field of research, artefacts are authentic testimonies of organizational decisions. Artefacts can be described as a form of social memory, sometimes also with a reference to conflictual aspects of the organization that hardly ever come to light in interviews, for instance. Another advantage, one that is particularly relevant for the analysis of past exhibitions, is that artefacts are relatively stable and often endure the test of time. The challenges of artefact analysis, by contrast, include that in principle all materialized products of an organization lend themselves to analysis. However, artefact analysis not only presupposes a selection, but also a translation, when artefacts do not speak out of themselves, but only reveal their significance for the organization in an interpretation process. Also, scientific interpretation not only requires experience, but also elaborate quality assurance strategies such as analysis in a team, which can result in an increased work load in comparison with other methods (Froschauer 2009: 344–345).

My experience from the case study presented above has shown me that, due to its development since 2009 and the clear explanations in subsequent publications, artefact analysis is easy to replicate and apply. Particularly helpful for understanding artefact analysis were, in my view, the newly added four key questions and the seven levels of interpretation with exemplary questions as a guideline. On the other hand, I was surprised to see how many levels of meaning can be accessed in an artefact and the organization behind it through a broad interpretation of meaning, in-depth analysis and a collaborative approach. In my opinion, the charm of artefact analysis can be found precisely in this interpretative approach. In this way, exhibitions can be seen – in contrast to the dominant interpretative sovereignty of exhibition makers – as cultural and social constructs that need to be deciphered in the everyday of the exhibition as well as in analytical observation. In artefact analysis and its understanding of polysemy, plural personal and situational possibilities for interpretation are present in both contexts of production and use.

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