

Context Analysis

Exploring exhibitions in their contexts

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Introduction

What is the original context of an object or work of art¹, and in what contexts do they become part of collections and exhibits in exhibitions, where they are again placed in different contexts? What contexts do exhibitions open up through their thematic focus, structures, exhibits, texts, media and staging? And in what contexts do museums, exhibiting institutions, galleries, off-spaces or the public space find themselves? Context analysis aims to analyze different possibilities of contextualization that are relevant for better understanding the medium of the exhibition as a space of representation, action and negotiation.

But first of all: What do we actually mean by the word context? It comes from the Latin *contextus*, meaning 'connection' or 'link'. In an article on "Function and Context", Tristan Weddigen writes: "The art-historical and cultural-historical term context could be defined, with recourse to literary theory, as the set of references relevant to the explanation of an artwork, painting or object [...]. 'Art in context' is understood to mean a cultural-historical and interdisciplinary examination of also non-artistic conditions of production and perception of visual arts works." (Weddigen 2011: 132) The aim of this paper is to expand the context analysis presented here beyond the objects themselves to include their function and role as exhibits in the context of an exhibition. In a further step, on the level of the exhibition it considers the relevant references in the context of thematic approaches and societal issues, the exhibiting institution and its programme, as well as the general discourse on exhibiting and art education.

Important references are here two older, but still relevant texts by Krzysztof Pomian and Mieke Bal. Pomian writes about "the visible and the invisible" of collections: "groups of natural or artificial objects kept temporarily or permanently out of the circuit of economic activities, afforded special protection in an enclosed place

1 In the interest of readability, we will, in the further course of this paper, use the term object to denote both objects and works of art, except when referring to specific examples.

adapted specifically for that purpose and put on display.” (Pomian 1990:65). For these objects, which from this point on are no longer “*things, useful objects*”, Pomian introduces the concept of “*semiophores, objects which were of absolutely no use*”, which, “being endowed with meaning, represented the invisible.” (Pomian 1990: 30). According to Muttenthaler and Wonisch, he therefore “differentiates between a material and a semiotic side of an object, which he attributes to a connection between the visible and invisible” (Muttenthaler and Wonisch 2006: 53–54). And museums are in Pomian’s view those institutions “whose role is to form a consensus of opinion around the technique of opposing the visible and the invisible [...] and consequently around new social hierarchies, where a place at the top required the enjoyment of a privileged relationship with the invisible in its new definition.” (Pomian 1990: 43).

In her essay *Telling, Showing, Showing Off*, Mieke Bal analyzes the privileged or also hegemonic position of the museum and how it deals with its possibilities to create meaning and contexts of meaning using the American Museum of Natural History in New York as an example (Bal 1996: 18–20). Bal however here also makes a number of basic observations in her speech act theory that are helpful for a context analysis that also includes institutional critique. Bal examines the rhetoric of “where ‘I’ says to ‘you’ what ‘they’ are like.” So the museum speaks to the visitors about the objects and their meaning (in the context of this exhibition). Here she focuses on “the display as a sign system working in the realm between visual and verbal, and between information and persuasion” and argues for a disclosure of the museum’s speaker position: “Putting forward the ‘I,’ the expository agent who is ‘speaking’ this text, means transforming the interaction between visual and verbal representation so as to provide the one with a commentary on the other. The displays can then point at their own discourse as not natural, but as a sign system put forward by a subject” (Bal 1996: 20).

Aim of the method

The method of context analysis proposed in this paper is therefore based on the concept of the object as a sign and carrier of meaning(s). The central question we shall deal with here concerns the shifts, occurring concomitantly with contextual changes, in the meaning of objects with regard to their collection and presentation: the aim is to examine from what contexts exhibits originate and which contextual shifts take place in the way objects are perceived and in the way they exert their effect by collecting and exhibiting these objects, which by this process become exhibits. The goal is a conscious and reflected curatorial approach to objects, the history or histories they come with and the stories they might tell in the present and the future.

Provided they are not stored in a collection depot, these objects become, as exhibits, part of exhibitions in which they are placed into different contexts. If we

imagine an exhibition as a narrative, then this narrative unfolds on various levels: through the basic concept and structure of the exhibition – its thematic areas or chapters, through the exhibits and their presentation in the exhibition on the basis of the concept, the staging and in the interrelation with other exhibits, through the texts that accompany them, and the way in which they are referred to or interact with in the art education.

This also corresponds to the notion of exhibitions as a “hybrid medium” in which “diverse forms of visualization intersect”, as Muttenthaler and Wonisch describe it: “Objects, (moving) images, texts as well as the exhibition architecture are contextualized in a space and woven into a dense texture. Every exhibit interacts with the surrounding exhibits, texts and elements of the exhibition architecture and is perceived in their context. [...] Since perception is structured by the process of establishing relationships, it is necessary to consider the aggregate interaction of all exhibition elements and explore the contexts of meaning produced in the process.” (Muttenthaler and Wonisch 2006: 37–38) Context analysis aims to complement and expand other methods of exhibition analysis by focusing on the possible relationships and connections between the exhibition and its various elements, examining and subjecting them to scrutiny.

Step-by-step guideline

Literary theory constitutes an important basis for context analysis. Transferring methods applied there to the exhibition enables a systematic strategy in context analysis. We replace what would be a textual element in literature by an object that functions as an exhibit in the context of the exhibition. In doing so, we also consider its relation to other exhibits, either via visual connections or the creation of ensembles, as well as its relationship or that of individual ensembles to the exhibition as a whole.

In addition, we examine contexts of classification, production or reception. Classification contexts can be artistic periods such as the Renaissance, movements such as colour field painting or genres such as arts and crafts. Contexts of production or origin point to biographical, cultural, intellectual, philosophical, political, socio-historical or economic contexts. Such issues are currently the focus of the discussion around ethnological museums, the creation of their collections in colonial contexts, the way objects are displayed and talked about, as well as new approaches to working with and restituting objects to communities of origin. Contexts of reception are contexts within which an artwork is “mediated, understood or processed”. This could, for example, refer to the exhibiting institution, the collection and exhibition context or the “current political situation which influences its perception”. (Burdorf, Fasbender and Moenninghoff 2007: 398) A current example would be the

2022 documenta fifteen in Kassel and the related discussion about anti-Semitic contents triggered by the *People's Justice* banner by the Indonesian collective Taring Padi on the Friedrichsplatz.

The context analysis is developed through a structured analysis of the exhibition, with the individual steps of the analysis consistently focusing on content in connection with contexts (Geertz 1987, Muttenthaler and Wonisch 2006: 49–53). A written checklist, which can be adapted to the respective research interest, is helpful as a framework for a systematic approach. Its structure is as follows:

To begin with, we consider the exhibiting institution and its significance and societal context, because it matters whether it is a high-profile state-run art museum, a biennale or an off-space.

Next, the exhibition is analyzed in the context of the institution, its relationship to the programme, its setting etc. This sheds a light on the function and the significance of the exhibition within the exhibiting institution.

Now, the focus is directed to the exhibition itself: its approach to the topic, its structure and criteria of arrangement, e.g. chronological, thematic, by regions etc. This is an essential basis for every content-oriented exhibition analysis.

After this, we turn our attention to the exhibits: What types of exhibits are on display, how are they exhibited, and are they contextualized? This should be examined from the individual example, to ensembles and rooms right up to the entire exhibition.

Texts and captions play an important role here. We analyze their volume, structure and levels, location and content, examine how the institution speaks and whether they are in any way contextualized. For contextualization is not only evident in the way something is shown, but also in the way it is spoken about.

All of this is embedded in a scenography in which the way how the exhibition's message is presented and how possible contexts are shown plays an important role. One should consider the exhibition itinerary, atmosphere, staging, colour, lighting etc.

Now, we turn to the use of audiovisual media, interactive and participative elements: Which ones are there and how are they used, what are their contents and contexts?

A context analysis would not be complete without the educational and accompanying programme of the exhibition: What content and contexts do we find here? Are they directly linked to the exhibition and do they complement it? It frequently hap-

pens that critical content and contexts are relegated to art education, while the exhibition itself remains relatively unaffected.

Here it is also worth taking a look at the exhibition's analogue and digital communication, e.g. handouts, leaflets, homepage, press releases etc. and how content and contexts are presented there. And if there is one or more accompanying publications, content and contexts should also be examined in the light of the exhibition.

It is recommended to do several walkthroughs of the exhibition you want to analyze, each time adopting a different perspective following the question catalogue to be modified in line with your particular analytical purpose. For working out the individual aspects of the analysis and being able to track them in the course of the investigation, the findings are best documented in writing and images. The summarized review of the individual aspects with the help of the previously described context categories yields the following results: Which contents and contexts can be identified? How do they become visible, readable and perceivable? Or is a contextualization missing and which contexts are omitted? From the range of existing or missing contexts, you should now make a meaningful and target-oriented selection according to your specific epistemic interest. This selection is subsequently further analyzed with regard to the exhibition, its education and communication, and complemented by consulting literature, archive material, press reports, conversations with curators etc.

Context analysis can be conducted alone or in a team. The workload depends on the specific research interest and the design of the analysis connected with it, which also takes the time invested into account.

Case study

Following the analysis guideline described above, I will now apply context analysis to an exhibition that has been the subject of heated debate in Switzerland and beyond. In October 2021, the Kunsthau Zürich, one of Switzerland's most renowned art museums, opened an extension building designed by the English architect David Chipperfield that significantly increased the museum's exhibition space. The presentation centred on the collection of the Swiss arms manufacturer of German origin, Emil Georg Bührle (1890–1956)², who had acquired the important works of "Impressionism, early modernism and Old Masters" (Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft and Kunsthau Zürich 2021: 19) with the profits from the arms production of his machine tool factory Oerlikon and the associated, partly also illegal, arms trade. With these purchases he also profited in many cases from the seizure of Jewish property, the disen-

2 This context analysis refers to the first version of the exhibition without any subsequent revisions, which was shown at the Kunsthau Zürich from October 2021.

franchisement, forced expulsion and murder of many Jewish collectors during the Nazi period. Already at this point important ethical questions arise: Should a collection of this provenance be shown at all? And if so, how does one make its historical burden comprehensible and open it up to critical debate? An added challenge in this case was the fact that Emil Bührle had for a long time been one of the most important patrons of the Kunsthau Zürich and had, besides making numerous donations, financed the Bührle Hall, opened in 1958. The Bührle Collection was not handed over to the Kunsthau Zürich as a gift, but as a twenty-year permanent loan – which meant that the museum could not act independently, because the Bührle Foundation was involved in the conception of the exhibition and in the associated sovereignty of interpretation.

The Bührle Collection was given the pride of place in twelve rooms on the second floor of the Chipperfield building. The Kunsthau Zürich's own collection was displayed in just four rooms along the window front facing Heimplatz. Across from the Bührle collection, separated from it by the central stairway, are two rooms for temporary exhibitions. The exhibition was arranged according to the preferences of the collector Bührle in groups of works such as “Old masters of the Netherlands” or “Vincent Van Gogh and the *École de Paris*”. The exhibition texts constantly established this connection, for instance: “Emil Bührle was always looking for early works by the artists that interested him. This highlights the major steps that were necessary to move from traditional beginnings to new and modern forms.”³ Both the architecture of the extension building, with its many shimmering bronze details in its interior design and also the design of the exhibition lent the Bührle Collection an air of prestige and value (Fig. 1). In the aura of these rooms, it was easy to forget that a considerable number of these artworks were purchased under circumstances that meet the criteria applied today to describe them as “looted art” or “cultural property seized as a result of Nazi persecution”.⁴

3 Exhibition text “Vincent van Gogh and the *École de Paris*”, in: The Emil Bührle Collection, first version, Kunsthau Zürich.

4 This is based on the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art (Washington Principles). Published in connection with the Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets, Washington, D.C., 3 December 1998. And the subsequent Terezin Declaration on Holocaust-Era Assets and Related Issues, 30 June 2009.

Fig. 1: *The Emil Bührle Collection, exhibition space in the extension building, Kunsthaus Zürich, 2021, © Photo: Angeli Sachs.*



The problematic contexts surrounding the collector and the collection were relegated to a documentation room under the trivializing title “Emil Georg Bührle – Industrieller, Kunstsammler, Mäzen” (“Emil Georg Bührle – Industrialist, Art Collector, Patron of the Arts”) at the periphery of the collection exhibition, where Emil Bührle’s career was described on ten panels, crammed with text and accompanied by few illustrations, arranged according to periods of his life (Fig. 2). In its invitation to a panel discussion, the IG Transparenz (Transparency interest group) wrote: “The documentation room designed to present the collector and arms manufacturer in line with the most recent historical findings does not offer false information, but it largely glosses over Bührle’s activities and is conspicuous by its omissions.” Overall, the unidirectional, affirmative mediation of the collection exhibition and the documentation room insufficiently reflected the role of the collector, of the Kunsthaus Zürich and of Swiss society, which combined to form a kind of “Kunsthaus-Bührle complex”,⁵ and perspectives beyond this spectrum – for instance, the previous owners of the paintings – as well as critical voices, were largely disregarded.

5 “Der Kunsthaus-Bührle-Komplex: Geschönt und verschwiegen. Für einen lebendigen Dokumentationsort und eine unabhängige Provenienzforschung” (“The Kunsthaus Bührle Complex: Whitewashed and Hushed up. For a vibrant documentation centre and independent provenance research”) was the title of a panel discussion organized by the IG Transparenz for

Fig. 2: The Emil Bührle Collection, documentation room in the extension building, Kunsthaus Zürich, 2021. Both images show the first version of the exhibition prior to the subsequent revisions. © Photo: Angeli Sachs.



After the exhibition opened, fierce criticism ignited in the public, among experts and the press: “How well does artwashing work in the 21st century?” (*Monopol*, November 2021), “Looted art behind a noble façade” (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 15 November 2021) or “Controversy over the Bührle Collection: ‘Those in charge in Zurich have underestimated the historical context’” (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 3 December 2021). The flood of articles has not abated to this day. Panel discussions were held and the activist group KKKK offered “Looted art tours” at the Kunsthaus Zürich.⁶ “The contaminated museum” (Buomberger and Magnaguagno 2015, Keller 2021,) first improved some details and in 2023 produced a revised presentation of the Bührle Collection under the new director Ann Demeester, which will be shown until autumn 2025 (Sachs 2024, 165–199). At the same time, the Bührle Foundation’s provenance research was reviewed by external experts.

the reappraisal of the Kunsthaus Bührle Complex at the Volkshaus Zürich on 09.12.2021. The author was one of the panel participants.

6 Website of KKKK.partners: Komitee Kunstraub Konfiskation Kommunikation (KKKK) (Committee on Art Theft Confiscation Communication), which constantly adapts the Ks to current requirements: <https://kkkk.partners/weristKKKK> (05.08.2024).

The example of a context analysis described above is necessarily compressed, due to the limited scope of this paper. Besides the basic exhibition analysis with a focus on existing or non-represented contexts, classification contexts, contexts of origin and reception play a crucial role here. In this example, we are dealing with a collection exhibition that raises the following questions: In what political, social and economic environment was this collection by Emil Bührle assembled and under what terms can it be presented and viewed today? Without a context analysis, it would have been impossible to form a comprehensive picture of the exhibition of Emil G. Bührle's collection in the Kunsthaus Zürich in which the paintings were separated from their, in this case, necessary collection contexts. Since I was not able to find all the relevant information within the exhibition and its education, I supplemented it by talking to experts and drawing on research reports, publications, recordings and evaluations of panel discussions, press conferences and press articles.

Method reflection

"Contextualization is a necessary precondition for interpretation" (Burdorf, Fasbender and Moenninghoff 2007: 398) could serve as a leitmotif for the purpose and the necessity of a context analysis. Context analysis opens up the possibility to not simply accept exhibitions as the given narratives of an institution and thus as factual statements, but to analyze them in the complexity of their interrelations and to interpret them in terms of their attitude and their contemporaneity. They can be contexts that are visible or retrievable as subtexts, but also omissions, contexts that are not shown or narrated.

Context analysis is a complex enterprise. It requires a careful disposition and structure, moving back and forth between significant details, partial connections and the exhibition's overall context and its education, communication and publication, as well as its context with regard to the institution and broader societal and discursive issues. In this complexity, however, context analysis enables to reveal the agenda of an exhibition and the institution representing it, its intentions and programme. With this broader view, the exhibition can be placed in the context of the state-of-the-art discourses around exhibiting and communication as well as societal issues. In this way, context analysis opens up possibilities for a comparative debate and forward-looking perspectives which are relevant in particular for museologists, curators and educators in the field. It is primarily these professionals that this method is aimed at, as well as at students in these fields.

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