

Affect-Reflexive Exhibition Analysis

Using one's own perception as an analytical tool

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Introduction

The way we perceive exhibitions, what we see in them and how we understand them, changes from one *turn* to the next in the social sciences and humanities and differs depending on the academic discipline. The interpretive turn, for instance, focused its analysis on the semiotic nature of things (Scholze 2004), while the spatial turn generated an interest in the exhibition space (Hillier and Tzortzi 2011, Reitstätter 2015). The long-neglected enquiry into the ways exhibitions are perceived in relation to curatorial practices and education garnered much attention from the affective turn as well as the educational turn (Jaschke and Sternfeld 2012, O'Neill et al. 2010). The reflexive turn, hitherto the most consequential one, led, together with the post-colonial turn, to a fundamental (power-)critical re-evaluation of the way exhibitions are designed and organized (Bennett 2018, Lidchi 2013). Looking at an exhibition through the lens of these and other cultural turns is to follow certain premises: the exhibition becomes, for instance, a semiotic system, a relational space, a meshwork, a place of representation or a possibility of self-assurance and requires specific detailed analyses such as those included in this volume under the titles of *Space Syntax*, *Knowledge Analysis* or *Context Analysis* among others.

The method of affect-reflexive exhibition analysis¹ is based on a synthesis of these premises and various perspectives of the *cultural turns* on exhibitions and follows three principles: Firstly, as a subject of enquiry, the exhibition is considered with a holistic mindset. That means we view the exhibition as a coherent whole. The term 'exhibition' here comprises more than merely the exhibits and is not to be understood exclusively in a tangible, material sense. All the elements of the exhibition are therefore examined holistically in their interplay. This is grounded in

1 The method is the result of my dissertation project at the Chair of Museum Studies at the University of Würzburg. For a detailed explanation of the background, aims and application of this method see Schorr 2025 as well as Fackler and Schorr 2024.

the assumption “that the things that are parts of the whole have the features characteristic of them only in their aggregate” (Elsfeld 2003: 3). Secondly, the analysis is conducted in an integrative manner by including all relevant exhibition elements in the analysis rather than focusing on them separately. An essential component of integrative analysis is the analyzers themselves, because before, during and after the visit to the exhibition connections or associations (through seeing, walking etc.) arise between all human and non-human participants in the exhibition situation (Bismarck 2021, Ingold 2015, Latour 2019, Pekarik and Schreiber 2012, Rana et al. 2017, Siepmann 2001). The third principle is based on the realization that the analyzer merges with the exhibition and is, in one way or another, affected by it: one’s own, subjective perception of the exhibition serves as a point of departure for the analysis. In the implementation, the body itself, as it reacts to the exhibition, becomes an analysis tool.

In terms of content, these three principles build upon not only the various perspectives of the cultural turns, but also to a significant degree on Tim Ingold’s theory of lines and Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, in conjunction with positions from curatorial studies. In keeping with Tim Ingold, the interplay of the exhibition elements can be described as an interweavement of individual threads that together form a meshwork – the exhibition. Meanwhile, the actor-network theory assumes that all exhibition elements are connected to each other as potential actors in an exhibition, in a network-like manner (Bismarck 2021, Ingold 2015, Latour 2019). The exhibition elements affect each other during their interaction and in this sense one can understand the exhibition as an interactional web. All the exhibition elements participating in this web, meshwork or network are integrated into the analysis accordingly. While it is self-evident to describe the objects on display in an exhibition as exhibition elements, as well as lighting, colour choices, room temperature, surfaces, etc., there are also other, less obvious or tangible exhibition elements that can have an indirect impact on the exhibition as a whole, such as the history of the institution, the physical itinerary to the exhibition, the zeitgeist, local, societal and thematic references or current events etc. The personal background of the analyzers is also taken into account, since, according to this theoretical approach, the analyzers themselves are part of the interaction of the exhibition elements. In other words, everything that impacts the analyzers is incorporated in the analysis.

It is crucial that the reflection of the exhibition’s affect is, on the one hand, always linked back to the exhibition in a reflective process to ensure observations are made about the exhibition and not about the analyzers themselves. On the other hand, it is part of the method to reason the situational affect in an intersubjectively comprehensible way. Here, straightforward language, and a reflection on one’s own situatedness can be helpful, but also recourse to possible methods of interpreting the significance of the exhibition elements for the exhibition, as suggested by the cultural turns. The method of affect-reflexive exhibition analysis supports this epony-

mous process of reflecting on affects by means of so-called loop-back and follow-on-questions, thus facilitating the successful transition from the initially important perception of the exhibition to scientific analysis.

Aim of the method

The aim of affect-reflexive analysis is to understand how the exhibition being analyzed – considered from one's personal, situated perspective (Haraway 1988) – functions in its contingent way of being. For this, it is necessary to establish how the elements of this exhibition interact, with what means it operates and what, also implicit, messages are conveyed. For this purpose, individual, subjective impressions are collected. But these can only ever be situational impressions, and on no account can they be used to make a general observation that reaches beyond the moment and one's own analysis. The answers to this open research interest are formulated after conducting the analysis as propositions about the exhibition that must be substantiated with arguments (How do I arrive at this statement?) and backed up with concrete examples from the exhibition (exhibition elements). The aim of the analysis can be specified beforehand, for example, if you want to examine the tenets an exhibition follows or how certain topics or groups of people are presented. For this particular focus, the analysis questions need to be modified ("focused analysis", Schorr 2025).

Step-by-step guideline

The analysis is usually conducted by one person. If several people analyze the same exhibition, results can be contrasted and compared, which would yield a more comprehensive picture of how the exhibition works.² Notes can be taken manually or digitally. In addition, a mobile phone camera or a traditional camera can be helpful, providing taking photographs is allowed. Depending on how well the method has been assimilated, it may be helpful to note down the analysis questions as well. The time required for the analysis depends on the size of the exhibition and the precision of the analysis. When planning, it is important to keep in mind that the exhibition should be visited several times. At least two days should be allocated to data collection and evaluation. The time needed for drafting the analysis report depends on the

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- 2 By combining the results of a method test with non-museum professionals and from the application of the method by students, it became clear that despite the fundamentally subjective results, similar findings were formulated again and again, so that individual results may also be more intersubjective than one would initially assume (Schorr 2025).

chosen format and your own level of experience. You should plan at least two working days for a detailed analysis report in written form with a length of around seven pages. All in all, a time investment of four to five working days should be included in the initial planning.

The analysis is always conducted retrospectively, after visiting the exhibition, and it is an iterative process, i.e. you work in constantly repeating loops. The individual steps can be grouped into the typical phases of a qualitative study as follows: Step 1 defines the research question as the point of departure. Steps 2 and 3 correspond to the first data collection. Step 4 corresponds to the first data evaluation, steps 5 and 6 to the second collection and evaluation phase, which can be repeated several times, and step 7 to drafting an analysis report that should provide an answer to the research question.

Step 1: Clarifying the requirements

First of all, the research interest has to be formulated and put down in writing as a leading question. Next, an exhibition is selected as the object of investigation that matches this leading question.

Step 2: Visiting the exhibition

The next step is an initial visit to the exhibition. This visit differs from a recreational visit in that the exhibition has to be perceived with greater awareness, in order to be able, in the next step, to note down the impressions gained in the exhibition.

Step 3: Noting down your impressions and assigning them to the analysis questions

After allowing some time to elapse after your visit to the exhibition (e.g. after a break or the next day), you first of all note down all the impressions that you remember.³ These memories are first written down in no particular order. This avoids leaving out impressions that do not correspond to the analysis questions. These notes are then assigned to the analysis questions. There are seven analysis questions that are explained below in some detail for better comprehension.

3 Of course, it is possible to take notes digitally (e.g. using a smartphone or tablet). However, the method tests have shown that working with analogue tools makes it easier to process sensory impressions and leaves a more lasting impression. The advantage of digital notes (e.g. miro board or similar) is that it is easier to move and assign impressions to the analysis questions. Using large sticky notes is an elegant compromise, but it can also lead to a chaotic mess of notes.

a) What did I perceive (sensuously)?

This question explores primarily visual impressions, due to the visual impact of exhibitions, but may also refer to other sensory impressions. The point is to record, after visiting the exhibition, which sensory impressions are particularly present. If you want to first work descriptively for an easier start, it may be a good idea to begin with this analysis question. Once you have noted down your impressions, you ask yourself, looping back why it is that you remember precisely these impressions (e.g. spatial position, style of presentation, your own interest, physical / narrative path, curiosities etc.). As a follow-on question, you ask yourself: What is the consequence of what you have perceived or how you have perceived something?

b) What did I learn?

This question serves to analyze the main statements of the exhibition and its narratives (Bal 2006), so the answer may be quite expansive. This question addresses the tenets of the exhibition, not about what one has understood in terms of content or learned cognitively. The answers are often connected to the title of the exhibition, but the narratives can also be more subtle and usually become more visible toward the final part of the exhibition. Here, neither what was announced nor what was literally mentioned in the accompanying texts, nor what might have been meant is important. So our work here is not evaluation-based. The subsequent loop-back question is then: On what do I base my impression? Here, or in a follow-on question, you can start searching for details for broader contexts, in order to collect evidence for the impressions that led to the answer of the analysis question. In addition to the overall narrative, the analysis can be expanded to include sub-narratives to enable an even more detailed argumentation. It is advisable to begin with this analysis question if you want to find initial answers to the overall research interest (How does this exhibition work?) as directly as possible, as it frequently yields rather analytical answers.

c) How did I react?

Reactions to exhibitions can vary in many ways: physically (How did I feel where?), but also in terms of time (immediately, after some time), silently (in my thoughts) or in a conversation with others etc. The first task in this analysis step is recording, following your visit to the exhibition, your reactions at different points of your visit. You could use a floor plan of the exhibition room to note these down. Next, you examine these reactions with loop-back questions and search for the underlying causes. At the same time, you draw conclusions with follow-on questions, because reactions can provide an indication of disruptions, controversies and contradictions, but also flows, points of contact and affirmation. You can also examine passages in the exhibition that you didn't react to in order to find out why a reaction apparently failed to materialize. Reactions are highly dependent on the person and situation involved, and this needs to be very consciously factored when research-

ing the causes and drawing conclusions, and their relevance and validity have to be reflected accordingly.

d) What did I recognize?

This analysis question is concerned, on the one hand, with identifying what you recognize and, on the other, identifying *with* what you recognize. This can relate to anything in an exhibition context, from exhibits to mindsets or forms of presentation. Ultimately, the underlying question here is whether the exhibition has anything to do with yourself and your own life, and if so, what, and if not, why not and with whom possibly otherwise. The answers to the subsequent loop-back and follow-on questions can provide clues as to the exhibition's target groups, relevance and multiperspectivity.

e) What / whom did I miss?

This analysis question is about searching for who or what is missing, i.e. is not represented, but is missed. There is thus a close link between this question about representation and the previous one about identification. Detecting gaps is no easy task, particularly if you are not an expert on the subject of the exhibition or feel sufficiently represented yourself. Nevertheless, your own unfulfilled expectations or aspects of the exhibition that raise questions can provide clues. This can be the case at content level as well as at design or didactic level and also regarding the context (loop-back questions). This analysis question deliberately emphasizes the aspect of missing, not that of non-existence. This is because missing something or someone inherently implies that it or that person should, by rights, be present, because it is justifiably relevant to something or someone (these justifying reasons have to be elaborated in a second step). This aims to guard against the temptation to add random items. From a theoretical viewpoint, the focus here is therefore more on ethics than on comprehensiveness, in recognition of the fact that an exhibition, which is always a result of a selective process, can never be complete, but it can be ethically reflected (McClusky 2011).

f) How was I addressed in my role as visitor?

The focus of this analysis question is on how visitors feel about being involved in the exhibition. You can, for instance, consider whether you feel addressed as an equal, or under-challenged or lectured to. You need to bear in mind that, as an analyzing visitor, you are in a somewhat different role than, say, during a recreational or group visit. The sources for the impressions gained can be found in very different exhibition elements and elaborated accordingly with the help of loop-back questions in a second analytical step (formulations in the texts, proposals for interaction/ participation, placement and visibility of the exhibits and additional information, accessibility etc.) In a follow-on question you ask yourself what are the implications of

the way one was addressed as a visitor. The results of the analysis can reveal something about the self-image of the exhibition makers, about the importance of visitor friendliness, about target groups or political agendas.

g) Leaving room for the unexpected and contradictory

Room must be kept free in your mind and on paper. Every exhibition and every analyzer is different, so there are always aspects that do not cover the analysis questions presented above, but should and must be considered without fail. However, just as with all other questions, it is crucial to always ask 'why?' when examining the causes, in order to arrive at well-substantiated analysis results.

Step 4: Making preliminary observations

Looking at the overall picture of the answers to our analysis questions and to the loop-back and follow-on questions enables us to draw certain conclusions. Often, in this step, apparently already forgotten impressions suddenly come to mind and can now be added. In this way, preliminary observations regarding the exhibition can be made from the synthesis. Here it is important not to lose sight of the research interest. The concrete examples from the exhibition evidence your own interpretation and support your argumentation.

Step 5: Revisiting the exhibition

Next, you should plan a second visit to the exhibition. This serves to verify impressions and conclusions. You can now specifically re-examine memories and collect further evidence, such as photographs, but also revise conclusions made in step 4 and draw up new ones. If you notice something that you hadn't remembered before, you can ask yourself why it was forgotten or why you are noticing it now and draw conclusions from it.

Step 6: Specifying observations

You now need to refine the line of reasoning of your analysis. If necessary, steps five and six can be repeated several times until your research interest is saturated.

Step 7: Drawing up an analysis report

Finally, you draw up the analysis report. The analysis can, but does not need to be, a written text. Other formats are also possible, such as a collage, mind maps, podcast etc. Like the exhibition you are analyzing, your analysis report is also a product of numerous decisions about what is and what is not expressed in which form. It

is an “act of exposure” (Bal 1996: 5–6), which is accompanied by the same questions of authority and authorship as an exhibition. It is therefore important to be transparent about how you arrived at the observations in your analysis report. Here it is helpful to proceed according to the pattern ‘assertion, substantiation, example’, or to orientate yourself on what factual descriptions, your own productions of meaning and structures that convey observations actually are. The aim is to make your own impressions and conclusions intersubjectively comprehensible, that is, to process them in such a way that they can become the basis for a broader discussion about the exhibition and the exhibited objects.

Case study

The special exhibition *Wanderland. Eine Reise durch die Geschichte des Wanderns* (Wanderland. A Journey Through the History of Hiking) in the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* in Nuremberg will serve as a case study to illustrate the individual points of the step-by-step guideline.⁴ I visited the exhibition for the first time on 9 February 2019 and took pictures (Fig. 1–3) of details but also of views of the rooms:

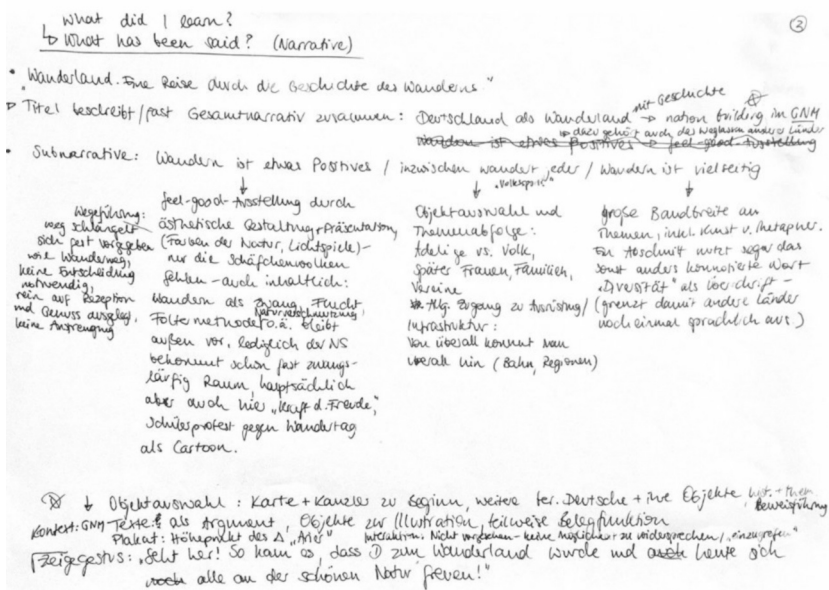
Fig. 1: Impression of the exhibition Wanderland, © Photo: Carla-Marinka Schorr.



4 For an overview of the topics of the exhibition held from 29 November 2018 to 28 April 2019, see the homepage of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nuremberg: <https://www.gnm.de/ausstellungen/sonderausstellungen-rueckblick/wanderland/> (05.08.2024).

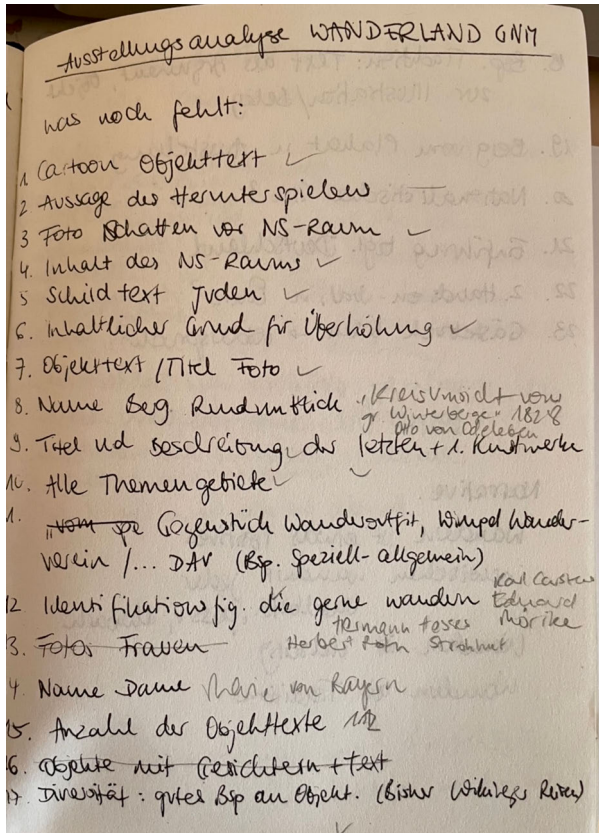
I then arranged the notes according to the analysis questions and began to develop initial propositions as an answer to my general research interest: How does the exhibition work? Here (Fig. 5), for instance, are the notes for analysis question “What did I learn?”

Fig. 5: Notes for the analysis question “What did I learn?” Propositions regarding the overall narrative and sub-narratives were listed as handwritten notes and linked with arrows to impressions of the exhibition and backed up with examples (spatial design, exhibition contents, selection of exhibits). Crossed-out passages, additions and brackets illustrate the process-oriented nature of the analytical work, © Carla-Marinka Schorr.



As I gathered more and more concrete evidence to support my propositions, I noticed gaps in the data I collected and I took appropriate notes (Fig. 6), so that I could fill them in during a second visit to the exhibition:

Fig. 6: Notebook. Points 1 to 17 represent a list of details that should be looked at more closely during the second visit to the exhibition because gaps in the data already collected became apparent here. During the second visit, the points were ticked off in pencil or new data was added by hand, © Carla-Marinka Schorr.



After my second visit I added the new data to the already existing ones, refined the evaluation and developed a 'common thread' for the analysis report. The following passage was created from the notes shown above (Schorr 2019):

"A further narrative [...] is the observation that meanwhile everyone is hiking. This is conveyed primarily through the sequence of topics: The exhibition begins by looking at hiking as a leisure activity and how it allowed the bourgeoisie to set themselves apart from the common people, who went on foot for lack of alternatives and certainly not for their own sake. In the course of the tour, the bourgeoisie's hiking is supplemented by the topics of 'Vereine' (associations), 'Frauen' (women), and 'Wanderbewegung' (the hiking

movement), thus conveying that hiking enjoyed ever-greater popularity and that walking in the great outdoors not only became socially acceptable, but also a popular sport.

In addition, the selection of exhibits, which seems to follow the principle of ‘from the particular to the general’, supports this narrative: *There is a lot to see – from Hermann Hesse’s private hat to a hiking outfit by Vaude, from the self-carved walking stick to the commercially available designer hiking staff, from pennants of hiking associations that are only open to particular groups to advertising posters from travel companies.”*

To illustrate for the sake of practice what was meant above with orientating yourself on *descriptions of what is there (factual)*, **your own productions of meaning (interpretative)**, and ***structures that convey observations (exhibition elements)***, these are highlighted correspondingly (italic, bold, italic and bold).

Method reflection

The affect-reflexive method of exhibition analysis operates by taking the analyzer’s impressions as a starting point. Accordingly, this promotes the tendency to formulate personal feelings in the analysis report instead of scientific analytical results. It is decidedly not about whether you ‘like’ an exhibition. Instead, you need to reflect on the implications of being attracted by the aesthetics of an exhibition. Does it, for instance, make it easier for you to find your way around and focus on the content, since it helps you concentrate? Or does it detract your attention to superficialities and makes you forget that, in actual fact, you are confronted with controversial issues? Proceeding from personal impressions and transposing these into intersubjectively comprehensible arguments is not (yet) standard practice and not accepted in all professional disciplines. Instead, things are often phrased in general or absolute terms, suggesting a universality that does not allow for other perspectives. For better transparency, here one can use the first-person form, not widely used in German-speaking countries, but frequently employed internationally (‘In the last room I see...’ instead of ‘in the last room one sees ...’).

While other methods are better suited than affect-reflexive exhibition analysis for evaluating and critiquing exhibitions, for audience research or generating swift results, the strength of this method lies in the analysis questions that structure individual impressions. It initiates a reflection on exhibitions and exhibits in a way that integrates all relevant exhibition elements into the analysis and thus does justice to the complexity of the exhibition medium. In this way it arrives at analysis results that are based on transparent intersubjectively comprehensible arguments and enable an understanding of how a particular exhibition works from a particular perspective. This is important to initiate a discourse not only – but primarily – on a professional level about the effect and the affect of exhibitions.

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