

6 A multidisciplinary exhibition and the political dimension of *interdisciplinarity* – *We Capitalists. From Zero to Turbo*

6.1 Introduction

The first two case studies on the temporary exhibitions *TOUCHDOWN. An exhibition with and about people with Down's syndrome* (2016–2018) and *Weather Report. About Weather Culture and Climate Science* (2017/18) explored the theoretical and practical implications of conceptualizing and organizing a, in the first case, largely transdisciplinary and, in the second case, largely *interdisciplinary*¹ exhibition. But especially the latter case study also showed that the established procedural categories or qualities of interdisciplinarity can all occur in one and the same exhibition project, when examining the various phases and constellations of its production process in greater detail. This third case study on the temporary exhibition *We Capitalists. From Zero to Turbo* (2020) will now introduce and analyse a predominantly multidisciplinary exhibition.

Based on the premise that all three exhibitions were institutionally labelled as 'interdisciplinary' and were thus apparently aiming at an *interdisciplinary* production process, this chapter will focus on describing and discussing the specific actions that were taken to '*create interdisciplinarity*' (Lattuca 2001, book title, emphasis added), at least to a certain extent, by allowing for interaction and integration during the process of curation. In this chapter I argue that *interdisciplinarity* has to be created and enabled and is thus a predominantly practical and process-oriented tool.

1 I am differentiating between a more general understanding of interdisciplinarity and a more narrowly defined kind of *interdisciplinarity* (in italics) following Klein's taxonomy (Klein 2010, p. 16) as established earlier in the introduction to this book.

All three exhibitions introduced in this book had a significantly political dimension – by making the socially relevant topics of (1) disabilities, (2) climate change and (3) capitalism subjects of discussion. This also had a bearing on the fact that an interdisciplinary approach was chosen for their production processes. Interdisciplinarity here not only represents a research strategy of ‘simply bring[ing] [...] different disciplines together’ (Moran 2010, p. 15) when it comes to addressing academic, societal, or cultural questions that no discipline (or societal/cultural stakeholder) can solve alone, but a practical tool to support and enhance the political claim of these three exhibitions. In Moran’s analysis of the role interdisciplinarity played in the emergence of cultural studies (and critical humanities) this correlation is evident (Moran 2010, pp. 45–73; see also Klein and Parncutt 2012, pp. 139–141) as the increased advocacy for interdisciplinarity in academia since the 1970s has often been directly linked to critical or political research and activism. Although Klein points out that interdisciplinarity as such ‘does not imply an inherent or a particular kind of social consciousness or ideological agenda’ (Klein 2005, p. 62), Moran plausibly concludes that ‘interdisciplinary approaches often draw attention, either implicitly or explicitly, to the fact that what is studied and taught within universities is always a political question’ (Moran 2010, p. 15). This equally applies to knowledge that is researched for and conveyed in museums (and exhibitions), being both ‘expert institutions’ and ‘community platforms’ (Sandahl 2020, p. 234). Interdisciplinarity in all its shades and grades is perhaps not useful for all exhibitions, because some topics require or profit from an in-depth monographic and monodisciplinary perspective, but the above observations support the assumption that interdisciplinarity – similar to participation – can be an especially productive and desirable research and work practice for exhibitions that are aiming to be politically relevant or participate in a democratic public debate. As Hans Joas observes, interdisciplinarity needs ‘substantial research questions’, or topics, as interdisciplinary dialogues that ‘cannot happen in a vacuum’ (Joas 2005, p. 89). The topic of capitalism, which is at the centre of this third case study, certainly met this requirement.

Throughout this book, I have been discerning between multi-, *inter*-, and transdisciplinary exhibition-making (Klein 2010, p. 16). The term multidisciplinary, and the descriptive vocabulary associated with it, will play an especially important role in this third case study. ‘Multidisciplinarity refers to the placing side by side of insights from two or more disciplines [...] in a serial fashion but makes no attempt to integrate the insights produced by these perspectives into an interdisciplinary understanding’ (Repko 2008, p. 13). Multi-

disciplinarity is thus 'failing to engage in the hard work of integration' (p. 13) amongst the participating disciplines. On the surface, the final result may perhaps seem to be integrated, but it is missing a collaborative research or work process that would have allowed the involved disciplines to interact with each other.

Multidisciplinary research projects – in this case an exhibition project² – can thus present an overtly interdisciplinary understanding of their subjects, but their production process is a separated and lonely one. Whilst a multidisciplinary exhibition might, as a whole, represent something new and – for example educationally – highly valuable, and whilst each disciplinary insight or contribution might have been intentionally chosen, the involved disciplines remain unchanged in both theory and practice, because they were not involved or integrated in the production process. Multidisciplinarity certainly still has its own merits because it often constitutes a first step towards *interdisciplinarity* by taking on a broader, multi-perspective view on a relevant topic, but the involved disciplines are still speaking 'with separate voices on a problem of mutual interest' (Repko 2008, p. 17), because they are not invited to partake in dialogue, debate, or even constructive dissent amongst each other during the research process. At best, the resulting (academic or cultural) product, such as a publication or an exhibition, sparks a subsequent discussion, but in most cases, this does not affect the finished product by retrospectively adding to its substance or depth.

The exhibition *We Capitalists* earned considerable public recognition and positive feedback for its new and unusual narrative and approach to the purportedly rather abstract topic of capitalism. However, the aim of this chapter is not to critique the resulting exhibition, but to investigate the mechanisms and reasons behind the fact that this overtly multi-perspective exhibition lacked integrative depth. Therefore, I argue that it has to be categorized as a largely multidisciplinary product based on an analysis of its developmental process. However, apart from this more general, initial 'judgement' about the exhibition, the analysis will show that this exhibition case also had its *interdisciplinary*

2 The question, whether curating is a *research* activity, has been addressed at length in the literature review of this study (sections 2.3.2 'The innovative and experimental potential of temporary exhibitions', and 2.5 'The exhibition curator's role') and in the second case study about the exhibition *Weather Report*. It was also discussed in an interview with Wolferger Stumpfe (WS), my co-curator for the exhibition *We Capitalists*. This discussion will be reflected on in section 6.4.2.

moments, which served significant purposes, such as the meaningful *politicization* and *emotionalization* of the exhibition. But rather than just being coincidental ‘moments’, they were the consequences of deliberate curatorial actions on the institution’s part to improve the integrative depth and dialogical quality of this exhibition.

Similar to the structure of the previous two exhibition case studies, this chapter will follow the practical sequence of curatorial steps along the chronology of the exhibition-making process. The analysis of the exhibition *We Capitalists* will trace the curatorial process, from forming a curatorial team (section 6.3) and developing conceptual ideas and methods (6.4.1), to object choices (6.4.2), conceptualizing an accompanying publication (6.5.1), education tools such as a digital game (6.5.2), and finally the exhibition design (6.5.3).

This practice-based investigation again includes autoethnographical notes and observations and will rely on a number of other sources: Apart from my own reflections as an institutional ‘insider’ as well as existing project files,³ I draw on a long qualitative, semi-structured interview with Wolfgfer Stumpfe (WS), my co-curator for the exhibition *We Capitalists*, conducted on 24 April 2020 in Bonn.⁴ On 24 September 2020, in Bonn, I had another important (but unrecorded) feedback conversation with Lisa Philippen from the Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung / bpb), who will be introduced as an external partner in sections 6.3 and 6.5.2. On 8 October 2020, I conducted a recorded online conversation about the digital game, which was developed for this exhibition, with Thomas Lilge and Christian Stein from Playersjourney UG, who will likewise be introduced as external partners in sections 6.3 and 6.5.2.

3 This concerns general notes and files that do not reveal any critical personal or institutional data.

4 This interview with WS was recorded, transcribed, and translated from German into English by the author.

6.2 The exhibition *We Capitalists*

Fig. 6.1: Entrance of the exhibition *We Capitalists* showing Julian Röder, Available for Sale, 2007, © Julian Röder, courtesy Galerie Russi Klenner. Photo: Laurin Schmid, 2020, © Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland GmbH, Bonn.



This exhibition about the system of capitalism clearly deserved a multi-perspective approach, as this topic equates to nothing less than our daily lives. Basically, everybody would be able to say something about it because we are all part of the system. That is also the reason why we called the exhibition *We Capitalists*. This was not an exhibition theme for specialists – like Picasso's blue or pink periods – but a question concerning all of us (WS).⁵

The temporary exhibition *We Capitalists. From Zero to Turbo*,⁶ developed and presented at the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn, Germany, was opened on 12 March

5 This passage is quoted from the interview with WS on 24 April 2020 in Bonn mentioned above.

6 A filmed guided tour through the exhibition by the exhibition curators, WS and me, can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/403953993> (with English subtitles, last accessed 2 April 2024).

2020 and locked down again two days later, on 14 March 2020, due to the coronavirus pandemic. The exhibition, curated by Wolfger Stumpfe (WS) and me, stayed shut for almost two months before reopening on 12 May 2020 under a strict routine of safety measures to protect visitors and employees from a COVID-19 infection. The show was on display until 30 August 2020 and reached a total number of 17,830 visitors.⁷

We Capitalists encircled the seemingly abstract topic of capitalism from a mainly cultural historical perspective, but deliberately resisted presenting a supposed chronology in the historical development of capitalism. It was instead narrated along 14 chapters introducing the fundamental characteristics of the system. Debora J. Meijers calls such exhibitions ‘ahistorical’ (Meijers 1996, p. 18), observing in the context of art history that there ‘are more general indications today that traditional notions of chronological development [...] are no longer acceptable. There are doubts regarding history as an evolutionary process’ (p. 18). Whilst opting for a thematic structure, the exhibition nevertheless drew on history-based framings to identify historical preconditions which supported the emergence of capitalism. The exhibition concept was narrated along the following chapters:

Fig. 6.2: The exhibition chapters introducing the basic characteristics of capitalism and their theoretical references within the exhibition.

Exhibition chapters	Theoretical references (‘talking heads’) introduced in the wall texts
Introduction: <i>We Capitalists. From Zero to Turbo</i>	

7 I have reflected on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for this exhibition in a short article that was published online on 29 July 2020 in the *Cultural Practice Magazine* of the Institute for Cultural Practices of the University of Manchester: ‘#ClosedButActive? An exhibition trying to find its voice during lockdown’ (<https://www.culturalpractice.org/article/closedbutactive-an-exhibition-trying-to-find-its-voice-during-lockdown>). It was also published online in German on 13 August 2020 under the title ‘#ClosedButActive? Kann eine Ausstellung auch geschlossen „aktiv“ sein?’ (<https://magazin.bundeskunsthalle.de/2020/08/closedbutactive/> (both links last accessed 19 July 2023)).

(1) Rationalism: More Structure, More Order	Max Weber (sociologist, economist)
(2) Efficiency and Productivity: More Goods, More Consumption	Lillian Gilbreth (psychologist, industrial engineer)
(3) Individualism: More Ego	Emile Durkheim (sociologist)
(4) Accumulation: The Goal is Profit	Karl Marx (philosopher, economist, historian, sociologist, political theorist)
(5) Resources: My, Your, Our Property	Elinor Ostrom (political economist)
(6) Money	Georg Simmel (sociologist, philosopher)
(7) Economy and Religion: Matters of Faith	Christina von Braun (cultural scientist, gender studies)
(8) Art Costs Money: The Art Market Emerges	Adam Smith (economist, philosopher)
(9) Growth: Always More	Ulrike Herrmann (economic journalist)
(10) Luxury and Innovation: Always Different	Eva Illouz (sociologist)
(11) Acceleration: Faster and Faster	Karl Polanyi (economic historian, anthropologist, sociologist, philosopher)
(12) The Uncertainty Factor: Humankind	Reinhard Selten (economist)
(13) Creative Crises	Joseph Schumpeter (political economist)
(14) Wastefulness and Abundance	Christine Frederick (home economist)
Epilogue: The World – Where Is It Going? ⁸	

Each of the chapters (see Fig. 6.2) displayed a wall text introducing the term in question alongside an eminent academic or entrepreneur as a ‘testimonial’ to the respective aspect of capitalism. These 14 ‘talking heads’, as we unofficially called them, were not only from diverse academic disciplines, but comprised

8 The title of the final exhibition chapter was named after Aldous Huxley’s novel *Brave New World*, and more precisely after its first German language edition from 1932. In this edition the title was translated with *Welt – Wohin?*, before the more literal German translation *Schöne neue Welt* was used.

almost as many women (6), as men (8), which was positively noticed and commented on by several visitors.⁹

During the conceptualizing process we – that is the curatorial team and its external partners – came to compare this investigation of capitalism by its characteristic components to a DNA analysis in order to reveal the internal structure of the system. Figuratively speaking, this ‘DNA of capitalism’ has long since entered our own DNA, our own identities, with capitalism being far more than just an economic system. Capitalism as a social order has shaped our thinking, perception, and existence for centuries. The exhibition itself and the *Capitalism Game* – a digital game¹⁰ integrated in the exhibition – invited visitors to explore and experience their own position within the system of capitalism, a structural phenomenon that has entered every corner of our daily lives. With this educational tool we deliberately tried to personalize and emotionalize the exhibition topic (see section 6.5.2).

The exhibition comprised a wide array of about 250 objects taken from the realms of art, history, archaeology, ethnography, science, and everyday popular culture. The artworks and objects were of great diversity in historical age, materiality, as well as cultural, local, and disciplinary origin (see section 6.4.2). Over 70 museums, galleries, collectors, and artists from all over Europe and from New York supported the exhibition with loans.

Several objects originated from art forms that seem particularly close to life, such as photography, film, and video art. There were no geographic limits: Ethnographical objects such as a piece of stone currency from Micronesia that contributed to the history of money were exhibited, as well as, for example, archaeological finds from Mexico questioning luxury and wastefulness as a human condition. Since, however, the system of capitalism developed in the Western European culture over the past centuries, the primary focus was on this region of the world.¹¹ It is, in fact, difficult to describe the abundance and diversity of the displayed material that was freely associated with the structural characteristics of capitalism. The exhibition showed rare archival documents

9 We drew upon these thinkers separately as multidisciplinary ‘witnesses’, but how interesting would a – necessarily fictitious – *interdisciplinary* discussion amongst them have been, not only bridging generational and historical gaps, but also political and gender differences.

10 The game was developed in cooperation with the German Federal Agency for Civic Education and Playersjourney UG of gamelab.berlin.

11 The first half of this paragraph is partly drawn from the exhibition concept written by WS.

such as one of the oldest accounting books from Genova, classical oil paintings depicting motifs ranging from an idyllic communal village pond (as shared property) to the legendary treasures of King Croesus, wooden models of Amsterdam harbour from colonial times or an early German windmill, technical devices from everyday life such as a small mobile phone that once belonged to Angela Merkel (famous for networking by means of countless text messages), as well as poignant art installations such as the *Two Workers* by Duane Hanson.

Fig. 6.3: Wolfger Stumpf and Henriette Pleiger with one of Duane Hanson's Two Workers. Photo: © Claudia Friedrich, 2020.



The exhibition architecture (see section 6.5.3) and design consisted of a monotone modular industrial shelf system, which was supposed to evoke images of storage halls, server facilities or DIY stores. In this architecture the artworks and objects, in a subtly unsettling way, assumed the character of commodities.

After this short introduction of the final exhibition, the following sections of this chapter will look back at its development to understand and investigate this practical process regarding its shades and grades of interdisciplinarity. This analysis will start with the chronological question of how the curatorial team for this exhibition was built, and by exploring its interdisciplinary potential, in hindsight.

Fig. 6.4: In the foreground: Matthias Böhler and Christian Orendt, Give Us, Dear, 2013. A cooperation of the Neues Museum Nürnberg with Elke Antonia Schloter and Volker Koch. Photo: Laurin Schmid, 2020, © Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland GmbH, Bonn.



6.3 Aspiring to *interdisciplinarity*: Appearance over substance?

6.3.1 Initial concept ideas and forming the curatorial team

The Bundeskunsthalle was starting to think about an exhibition about capitalism as early as 2013. That year, Rein Wolfs had become the artistic director (2013–2019) of the institution, and in one of his first curatorial meetings, in which we discussed ideas for new exhibitions, WS suggested we develop an exhibition for the bicentenary of the birth of Karl Marx (1818–1883) in 2018. Rein Wolfs immediately welcomed the idea and shortly afterwards met with the president of the Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb),¹² Thomas Krüger, who had been an important figure in the late 1980s GDR opposition and during the German unification. Already at that first meeting, they both agreed to collaborate on this exhibition project, in which the bpb eventually became a strong institutional – and *interdisciplinary* – partner. However, in 2014, at a meeting of the Bundeskunsthalle's board of trustees, consisting of representatives from all sixteen German states, Rhineland-Palatinate expressed the wish that the Bundeskunsthalle abandon the plan for an exhibition focusing on Karl Marx,

12 This institution is online accessible at www.bpb.de or in English at <https://www.bpb.de/e/die-bpb/ueber-uns/federal-agency-for-civic-education/> (last accessed 17 July 2023).

because the state itself planned a series of large exhibitions involving several local museums in Karl Marx's birth town Trier for 2018. Since important loans were reserved for this event, the Bundeskunsthalle postponed its own plan and changed its thematic focal point. Instead of concentrating on Karl Marx, the institution's conceptual ideas now adopted a widened thematic approach by presenting capitalism as an economic and political system, its history, present form and possible alternative systems.¹³ However, WS seemed to be less interested in this economic and political focus and, from early on, especially when he was finally assigned to develop a detailed exhibition concept in 2015, he argued for a more explicitly cultural historical and social perspective on the topic of capitalism.

With regard to the building of a curatorial team for the planned exhibition, an important shift seemed to take place after 2013, when the project was first introduced to the Bundeskunsthalle's programme board, an advisory board consisting of eminent national and international museum directors. According to the first very brief project outline for this occasion, WS had been assigned as internal exhibition manager¹⁴ (at that time working at the Bundeskunsthalle), and an external 'academic curatorial team of historians, art historians and sociologists' was envisioned by WS with the initial approval of the institution. The choice of these three disciplines is revealing in two ways: Firstly, and more generally speaking, it shows that initially there existed a plan to establish an *interdisciplinary* team of academics for developing the exhibition concept and content. Secondly, the choice of disciplines demonstrates a rather hesitant attitude towards a more political approach to the topic as evidenced in WS's first ideas about the exhibition, which could be felt – and was later openly discussed – throughout the exhibition-making process. This palpable divergence regarding the politicization of the exhibition between WS and the Bundeskunsthalle made an additional cooperation with a decidedly political

13 Apart from the several exhibitions about Karl Marx planned for 2018 in Trier, other planned exhibitions later served as thematic references, for example, *Das Kapital* (The Capital) at the Museum für Arbeit, Hamburg (2017/18, <https://www.hsozkult.de/exhibitionreview/id/rezausstellungen-303>, last accessed 19 July 2023) and *Revolution! Für Anfänger*innen* (Revolution! For Beginners) at the Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe (2018).

14 In the institution's internal understanding the title 'exhibition manager' at that time comprised the organization and realization of the exhibition as well as content-developing curatorial tasks.

partner, such as the Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb), even more important from the institution's perspective.

Despite this content-related question, the organizational shift regarding the project team that must have taken place after 2013¹⁵ was of fundamental importance for my research question: The idea of an *interdisciplinary* curatorial team was abandoned and WS became the sole curator of this exhibition until I was assigned co-curator and exhibition manager in 2018 (WS had meanwhile left the institution). The institution had thus established a rather *monodisciplinary* curatorial duo for the last two years of the exhibition-making process until the opening in 2020. At a curatorial level, the opportunity for an *interdisciplinary* project – by definition requiring a certain level of interaction with and integration of other disciplines – was missed, but according to a later project outline for the Bundeskunsthalle's programme board from May 2018 the exhibition was still categorized and labelled as 'interdisciplinary', at a point in time when it was already clear that this project was going to be multidisciplinary at most. This reveals the rather vague sense in which the term was applied. Seen in the light of the established definitions regarding *interdisciplinarity*, this attribution seemed to be more about appearance than substance in hindsight. The notion that 'interdisciplinarity' is regarded as a desirable hallmark of high quality in both academic and cultural contexts was already discussed in chapter 2 of this study. But here, the institution's 'quality control' – of what practical measures and resources an *interdisciplinarity* development process would have actually required –, and perhaps also its strength of purpose seemed to have been lacking. However, it is to the Bundeskunsthalle's credit, as the analysis of the development process of this exhibition will show, that the additional cooperation with the bpb functioned as a – if not equivalent, but highly significant – replacement for the abandoned idea of establishing an *interdisciplinary* curatorial team, as this external partner's *interdisciplinary* interventions added considerable depth to the resulting exhibition and its by-products.

15 This information was acquired from the archived evolving versions of project outlines and was confirmed in the interview with WS.

at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. In 2016, WS was contracted by the Bundeskunsthalle as external curator for the exhibition *We Capitalists*. In March 2018, the actual work on the exhibition finally began, when I was assigned to join the project. By then the show was scheduled to start in March 2020, giving us two years to realize the project. In the five years prior to this, WS had had ample time to develop his ideas and conceptual thoughts, which gave him a considerable lead over me regarding his knowledge on the topic. But what clearly united us from the start was our love for thematic exhibitions in general and our ambition to encircle the topic from multiple perspectives using diverse material object categories and educational tools.

Also in March 2018, I had just completed the exhibition *Weather Report* (see chapter 5) and had another exhibition titled *California Dreams. San Francisco – a Portrait* coming up from 12 September 2019 to 12 January 2020.¹⁷ While I had served mainly as an organizing and managing curator in *Weather Report*, I was not only managing the latter exhibition but was also heavily involved as a co-curator in its content development and text production. This short description of my workload might partly account for my being a comparatively weak sparing partner – at least content-wise – for my co-curator WS in the exhibition *We Capitalists*. However, I had volunteered to take over this exhibition project, first and foremost, because the topic promised the chance to engage in a socially highly relevant political debate. Additionally, I cherished the opportunity this thematic exhibition seemed to provide regarding an *interdisciplinary* exhibition-making process. Perhaps, I remembered too vividly my political engagement as a student teenager during the 1980s, envisioning us in long and animated political discussions reflecting on capitalism. But, although this latter hope soon faded as it was quite unrealistic, I nevertheless very much enjoyed the multidisciplinary quality of the exhibition content and object choices suggested by WS and was looking forward to the collaboration with him and the additional external partners.

I am not an art historian like most of my curatorial colleagues at the Bundeskunsthalle but graduated in Chinese studies and have become more of a thematic generalist in two decades of temporary exhibition-making. Since 2016, I have been deeply engaged in theoretical research in museum studies,

17 The exhibition *California Dreams* had to be postponed for almost one year and had then moved dangerously close to the next exhibition I had to manage and co-curate, namely *We Capitalists*, which was scheduled to open in March 2020. This led to a double burden in my workload from 2018 until early 2020.

and all these facts in combination perhaps explain some of the differences between WS's and my approach to the topic, and to curating in general, but these will be addressed in more detail in sections 6.4.1 and 6.4.2.

After WS and I had spent most of 2018 working on the exhibition concept, the list of loans, and loan requests (see the following sections 6.4.1 and 6.4.2), towards the end of 2018 we entered a close collaboration with the Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb). This cooperation was twofold:

- (1) With the bpb's Print Department we conceptualized a publication that promised to become an *interdisciplinary* add-on to the exhibition *We Capitalists* as it tried to interweave our specific exhibition narrative and diverse choice of objects from art, history, archaeology, ethnography, science, and everyday life with several essays by eminent authors on the political, economic, and social implications of capitalism. In this collaboration, which will be described in more detail in section 6.5.1, the bpb's two editors, Miriam Shabafrouz and Benjamin Weiss, became important *interdisciplinary* sparring partners.
- (2) Until early 2020, the bpb had a Project Group for Political Education and Culture (now dissolved within the bpb's Funding Department), led by Sabine Dengel. In addition to her, Lisa Philippen, research officer in this former project group, became another crucial external partner in the exhibition project *We Capitalists*, with whom I worked closely to initiate, conceptualize, and organize the development of a digital game for the exhibition. This project group was an exceptionally interesting experiment in the history of the bpb as it promoted a stronger outreach to cultural institutions like museums, for example, to find and create new methods and narratives for *political education* by exploring the potential of *cultural education*.¹⁸ The resulting game for the exhibition also became a milestone regarding the Bundeskunsthalle's ambitions to develop new digital educational tools.¹⁹

18 See <https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/bildung/kulturelle-bildung/59956/neue-wege-fuer-politische-bildung> (last accessed 19 July 2023). The specific distinction between these two terms in the German context will be addressed in section 6.5.1.

19 The *Capitalism Game* was nominated for the DigAMus Award 2020 which honours the best digital projects by German museums. Amongst 129 projects, the *Capitalism Game*

The latter collaboration involved another external partner, namely Players-journey UG, a spin-off company of the research cluster gamelab.berlin/ Interdisziplinäres Labor Bild Wissen Gestaltung of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, consisting of Thomas Lilge and Christian Stein, and also involving gamelab.berlin's research assistant Julia Trinkle. Defining itself as an 'interdisciplinary laboratory' on its website,²⁰ gamelab.berlin aims to reach out beyond the academy in its 'interdisciplinary, multiperspectival research into the phenomenon of play. [...] By linking university research and practical design, we [the website owners] hope to help open up entirely new dimensions in the interaction between theory and practice'. The inspiring cooperation with this research cluster for the development of a digital game for the exhibition *We Capitalists* will be discussed in section 6.5.2.

In autumn 2019, the last external partner to join this exhibition project came in with a surprisingly strong voice – given their late arrival in the process and considering the exhibition was to open in March 2020 – and was at least partially able to constructively disrupt the mostly monodisciplinary curatorial dialogue between WS and myself. These were the exhibition designers Markus Miessen and Lena Mahr. Their *interdisciplinary* contribution to this exhibition project will be a focus in section 6.5.3.

6.4 Multidisciplinary exhibition-making: Lonely decisions

The following sections of this case study will analyse the exhibition-making processes with respect to my research question, which aims to identify critical moments in our collaboration which created *interdisciplinarity* by enabling debate, or even dissent, and subsequent integration. Sections 6.4.1 and 6.4.2 will concentrate on the development of the exhibition concept and the research and loan acquisition of the exhibited artworks and objects. These two steps in the curatorial process did not yet involve the additional external partners but were conducted amongst the curatorial duo, consisting of WS and myself.

As postulated earlier, multidisciplinary exhibitions are typically curated by a single curator or a monodisciplined curatorial team controlling their production process, and this is what happened in this case. The exhibition concept and

was chosen in the category 'Apps & Games' for the shortlist of 24 projects: <https://digamus-award.de/auswahlverfahren/digamus-shortlist/> (last accessed 19 July 2023).

20 See http://www.gamelab.berlin/en/home_en/ (last accessed 19 July 2023).

choice of objects were almost completed when the additional external partners entered the project. These two already completed components of the overall project must have seemed like a hermetical ‘monolith’ to which the partners, nevertheless, still tried to contribute. And, to a certain extent, they did succeed in pushing the exhibition concept’s boundaries after all, instead of confining themselves to only engaging with the exhibition’s two by-products (the accompanying book and the digital game) and the exhibition architecture (listed here as the last part of the production process according to the actual course of events). But the initial content development for the exhibition involved even lonelier decision-making processes, because even between the two curators a continuous collaboration was not possible during the production process, as the following diagram²¹ exemplifies.

Fig. 6.6: Diagram showing the distribution of workloads and the different collaborating groups amongst the team members (including the external partners) charted along the tasks of the exhibition-making processes.

PROCESSES & PARTICIPANTS <i>We Capitalists</i>	Institution (various colleagues)	WS Curator (external)	HP Curator (internal)	bpb External partner	Playersjourney External partner	Miessen External partner
Idea and Team Building	Dark grey	Dark grey	Light grey			
Exhibition Concept			Light grey	Light grey		Light grey
Object Choice			Light grey			
Book		Light grey		Dark grey		
Exhibition Texts			Light grey	Light grey	Light grey	
Game and Education		Light grey			Dark grey	Light grey
Architecture	Dark grey	Light grey		Light grey	Light grey	Dark grey

Dark grey: high input
Light grey: low input

21 I owe the idea for this diagram (Fig. 6.6) to Weber 2012, p. 250. Katja Weber presents a diagram describing the intensity of participation regarding exhibition content development and decision-making processes along project phases, discerning between institutional (museum) and external participants.

The diagram attempts to visualize the imbalance (and division of responsibilities) during our collaboration, especially within the curatorial duo. None of the tasks that constituted the development of this exhibition were, in fact, jointly executed regarding a balanced size of input or desired intensity of collaboration. While WS was – for good practical reasons – predominantly in charge of the development of the exhibition concept, the initial research, and choice of objects as well as the production of the exhibition texts, the administrative loan acquisition, and the collaboration with the three additional external partners were mainly falling into my responsibility. My tasks also included negotiating the exhibition architecture and graphic design and organizing the actual realization of the exhibition and its by-products together with the internal team of the Bundeskunsthalle. As internal curator representing the institution, I was also authorized to take or convey the institution's 'final decisions' regarding the realization of the exhibition and its accompanying products. In crucial moments of the production process, this added an additional *hierarchical* imbalance to the working climate within our curatorial duo. Only in rare moments did my institutional obligations allow for a 'hierarchy-free room' (Lerchster and Lesjak 2014, p. 80) for negotiations within our curatorial team – ideally a moderated space without immediate institutional pressure (p. 80).

Nora Steinfeld, who advocates for a democratization of institutional processes in museums, warns of 'made-impossible conflicts, which have turned curators and educators into resources themselves' (Steinfeld 2018, p. 122), meaning a working environment that hinders democratic, creative, and productive debate and dissent. She writes of unspoken, 'sedimented and petrified conflicts' (pp. 121, 122) that are inherent in museums, both in objects and the people who work with them. Steinfeld asks how these conflicts 'could be kissed awake by us, and how they are kissing us awake' (p. 122). In the feedback conversation and interview between WS and me, it became clear that we both would have loved to have more time (and less additional workload) to risk 'acting out' existing conflicts instead of suppressing them, and that more dissent and active integration of our at times conflicting views would have probably further improved the resulting exhibition.

6.4.1 Concept development: Neutrality and open-minded resistance

The following section tries to trace the evolution of the exhibition concept especially regarding the dynamics and divergent viewpoints in our curatorial duo. Concerning the creative process of developing the exhibition concept, WS and

I regretfully agreed in hindsight (during the interview with him on 24 April 2020) that it was a lonely one. The concept, in fact, mainly resembles WS's reflections on the topic, as my organizational workload and curatorial engagement in the preceding exhibition did not allow an earlier and stronger involvement in the content development. By 2018, WS had already created an exhibition concept and preliminary list of objects on his own, which greatly impressed the involved representatives of the institution, including myself. The broad scale, on which WS's knowledgeable and imaginative concept addressed the complex topic of capitalism, and its explanatory clarity, were highly appreciated as well. But there were still aspects of his concept that prompted discussion.

It must be borne in mind that capitalism cannot, any more than any other form of organisation, be judged by economic results alone. Account must also be taken of the social and cultural achievements for which the capitalist process provides both the means and the psychological prerequisites (J. A. Schumpeter 1946²²).

This quote by the political economist Joseph Alois Schumpeter, which was plotted in large letters on a wall in the introductory room to the exhibition, already held the seeds for an at least multidisciplinary approach to the topic. But it also supported two important programmatic aims of WS's approach, (1) his *cultural historical* perspective on the topic, and (2) a *neutral* view on capitalism which also allowed for mentioning its historical achievements, such as its innovative power, alongside the legitimate criticism of the capitalist system's more extreme consequences for society and the environment, such as severe inequality. This second notion of neutrality was strongly disputed amongst the whole exhibition team including the artistic director of the Bundeskunsthalle and the additional external partners. Whilst we all agreed to discuss both pros and cons of the system of capitalism in our exhibition, we felt that WS avoided stronger critical statements, while hiding behind his aim of a 'neutral' presentation of the topic. Mieke Bal points out that 'neutrality is an actual rhetorical strategy rather than just a theoretical possibility' (Bal 2002, p. 31). In an attempt to add a more critical voice to the above quote by Schumpeter, I suggested Mark Fisher's

22 Schumpeter, J. A. (1946). 'Capitalism', in: Schumpeter, J. A., edited by Clemence, R. (1989). *Essays: On Entrepreneurs, Innovations, Business Cycles, and the Evolution of Capitalism*. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, p. 197.

famous ironic quote (after Fredric Jameson): ‘It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism’ (Fisher 2009, p. 2), which implies that it might still be useful to imagine alternative systems to capitalism after all. This quote was then plotted on the same wall in the introductory room to add some food for thought and discussion at the beginning of the show.

Fig. 6.7: This image shows the introductory room to the exhibition We Capitalists. The entrance to the exhibition space is located in a side wall to the right (not in the picture), which also held the overall introductory text to the exhibition. Quotations by Joseph Schumpeter and Mark Fisher followed on the right side of the wall depicted in this image. Next came the opening sequence of the film Teorema by Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italy, 1968, c. 1:30 minutes, © Mondo TV s.p.a. Rome (centre), an initial text for The Capitalism Game (left on wall) and another part of Julian Röder’s work, Available for Sale, 2007, © Julian Röder, courtesy Galerie Russi Klenner (left on floor). Photo: Laurin Schmid, 2020, © Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland GmbH, Bonn.



Apart from WS, we all doubted the feasibility and reasonableness of a ‘neutral’ approach and would rather have agreed with Janes and Sandell who call neutrality a ‘myth’ (Janes and Sandell 2019, p. 8) as far as museum practice is concerned. Still, WS advocated an objective view on the topic, with multiple

voices and perspectives – *of his choice* – constituting a possible way towards objectivity (see Dubin 1999, p. 14). But by ‘objective’ he actually meant ‘non-political’. As stated in the interview, WS believed it to be his educational duty as a curator to convey an analysis of capitalism as ‘neutral’ and ‘non-political’ as possible, for example, by not repeating the well-known comparisons between the systems of capitalism and socialism or communism. Instead, he wanted to fully concentrate on an in-depth, multi-perspective analysis of capitalism itself. We welcomed this latter approach, but at the same time doubted that it could (and should) ever be ‘neutral’ or ‘non-political’.

This discussion is important with respect to this research because it constituted one of our very few interventions in WS’s concept, which had already been largely viewed as set and ready for realization when I joined the project. The further *politicization* of the exhibition, or at least the open acknowledgement that the exhibition had been political all along (see Gesser et al. 2020, p. 26), could be described as an *interdisciplinary* moment within our collaboration, as it involved at least some degree of negotiation and integration. And this integration of multiple disciplinary voices and perspectives²³ – *chosen by other participants of the exhibition team* – did, after all, not lead to a non-political kind of objectivity but to an enhanced politicization of the exhibition and its by-products. Interestingly, visitor reactions proved WS right to a certain extent, as some, according to their own oral statements more conservative, visitors expressed their surprise and approval of the seemingly more balanced description of capitalism, because they had expected ‘the usual’ critical stance. In this environment they felt more open to also take in the more critical aspects of the exhibition narrative.

When WS and I explained the exhibition concept (as outlined in section 6.2) to the external partners, the colleagues from the bpb contributed a very important ‘conceptual metaphor’ (Bal 2002, p. 110) that changed our take on the topic. During a discussion about the structure of the planned publication they played with the idea of comparing the investigation of capitalism by its characteristic components to a DNA analysis, in order to reveal the internal structure of the system. This and subsequent creative discussions with colleagues from the bpb (which, for example, revolved around the psychological consequences of ‘lifestyle capitalism’) led not only to a necessary politicization but also to a

23 These other disciplinary perspectives especially included more critical views on capitalism from the fields of sociology, political science, and economics, but also, for example, questions concerning the psychological impact of capitalism on our lives.

palpable *emotionalization* of the topic, as we (the exhibition team) now asked ourselves to what extent this ‘DNA of capitalism’ has entered our own DNA, metaphorically speaking. WS welcomed this idea, which also changed the way in which we talked about the exhibition concept.

In the interview, WS said that he had hoped for more dialogue and integration, especially between the two of us, and that more time and energy for collaboration, mostly prevented by my workload, would have improved the concept. But during the exhibition-making process I often felt that he defended his ideas quite strongly and resisted a more substantial interference. I would therefore like to describe his attitude as an ‘open-minded resistance’, with all its ambivalent implications. On the one hand (and under different circumstances), WS would have welcomed my input and was clearly supporting *interdisciplinarity* in general:

Interdisciplinary exhibition-making is useful in principle. I believe that the result is good, *but the process is difficult* [emphasis added]. For the resulting exhibition, I feel that this is the right way and that it is important to struggle and cope with other people’s perspectives. I think this should be done with all exhibitions, actually. What sometimes makes exhibitions feel monotone or even boring, is perhaps that they are mostly done only by museum people who decide on whose voice is heard and whose perspective is included. Cultural scholars or curators often have a certain perspective that is not as diverse as it might seem (WS).

On the other hand, he seemed quite content – under the given circumstances, perhaps rightly so – with the multidisciplinary concept he had created by himself.

The concept was created in a multi-perspective way within my own head. While I was taking in several perspectives from different disciplines, digesting them and spilling out this input in the form of the exhibition concept, I tried to minimize my own tunnel vision (WS).

This perfectly describes a multidisciplinary research process, in which knowledge from multiple disciplines is filtered through and controlled by one mind. Haas and Helmer suggest that this one mind can be understood as monodisciplinary in its methodological setting, although seemingly drawing from diverse disciplines, but not entering in any kind of negotiation. Under this definition ‘the achieved synthesis remains [...] mono-disciplinary’ (Haas

and Helmer 2014, p. 55). Both of our positions within the curatorial team were ‘monodisciplinary’ in yet another way: Regarding our tasks, WS was the ‘scholar’ in this project, whereas I was the practical ‘exhibition-maker’. Since each of us had been working in both (in my opinion both *curatorial*) roles in the past, we were rather reluctant to confine ourselves to these separated realms in this specific project, but the real – instead of ideal – circumstances still required this ‘division of labour’.

Not surprisingly, WS described in the interview that he felt a certain ‘open-minded resistance’ on my part as well, because I, too, did repeatedly reject contributions from his side, but also for understandable practical reasons rooted in institutional requirements and deadlines. The pressure to realize the exhibition led to an almost complete stop in mutual negotiations between the two of us towards the end of the production process, as especially I was simply lacking the strength for them. This was especially the case in the last six months before the opening and predominantly concerned the exhibition design and installation, which I mostly saw through alone. However, that both of us stayed ‘open-minded’ until the opening despite all obstacles speaks to the quality of our curatorial partnership.

6.4.2 Object choices: A ‘fascinating chaos’

It is an ambitious undertaking to make an exhibition on such a complex topic. The experiment can be called successful, although only a few of the 250 objects are as captivating as the installation of the ransacked monkey’s body [Mathias Böhler and Christian Orendt, *Give Us, Dear*, 2013, see Fig. 6.4]. What makes the exhibition appealing is that – compiled under general terms such as ‘individualism’, ‘accumulation’ or ‘rationalization’ – artworks, historical artefacts, and documents as well as objects from everyday life are presented together (Christoph Driessen about the exhibition *We Capitalists*, dpa [German Press Agency], 12/13 March 2020, transl. HP).

The diverse artworks and objects in the exhibition were contextualized in often surprising settings, sometimes seemingly communicating with each other for the first time. For example, a marble sculpture from around 1600 of the Roman philosopher Seneca, who had promoted that ‘time is money’ long before Benjamin Franklin, was presented in close proximity to an A net car phone from 1966 representing the acceleration in communication technology. Presumably, Seneca would have loved having this early mobile phone at hand while pursuing

his shady business deals. Nicholas Thomas describes the potential and often surprising relationships between objects as similar to ‘a relationship between myself and a cousin of whose existence and identity I am ignorant’ (Thomas 2016, p. 81). To put it in another way, Chris Dorsett frames this idea through Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (Hooper-Greenhill 2000) and her understanding of curatorial practice as ‘inter-artefactual’, referring to Julia Kristeva’s concept of ‘intertextuality’ (Dorsett 2010, p. 249). In the case of our wide range of objects, this idea of the inter-artefactual was both exciting and frightening at the same time, because I doubted that we were fully aware of all the possible semiotic layers and relations that could have unfolded between each grouping of objects (pp. 249, 250). Amongst the exhibits there was a considerable amount of what Dorsett calls ‘storage stuff’ (p. 244) that had seemingly just been waiting for a new context and a ‘re-meaning’ (p. 248, after Hooper-Greenhill 2000, p. 122). Dorsett’s ‘storage stuff’, also described as ‘a mass of “found objects”’ (p. 245) interestingly relates to the term ‘assemblage’ that Klein uses to characterize multidisciplinary research (Klein 2010, p. 17). In art history an assemblage is defined as a three-dimensional collage, typically using found or bought objects.²⁴ Klein also mentions the term ‘bricolage’ regarding its usage in the humanities and identifies it as

a trendy term for taking bits and pieces from various disciplines and fields. The positive connotation is the free play of creativity. Interdisciplinarity, however, requires more than an eclectic mix of concepts, methods, and terminology. It entails conscious triangulation of depth, breadth, and synthesis (Klein 2005, p. 66).

This quite accurately mirrors the research process for this exhibition, as many of the objects were admittedly found along the way of associatively encircling the exhibition’s key themes, rather than chosen in a more targeted – and negotiated – research strategy. Both WS and I enjoyed this free style of research, and also took pleasure from the feeling that quite often objects seemed to find us rather than the other way round, and I regretted having only limited time for taking part in this adventurous quest, as compared to my co-curator.

What did these free associations produce? ‘Chaotic, but entertaining’, was how the culture columnist Thomas Kliemann described the ‘fascinating exhibition’ *We Capitalists* one day after the opening (*General-Anzeiger Bonner Stad-*

24 <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/assemblage> (last accessed 18 July 2023).

tanzeiger, 13 March 2020, transl. HP). Although I am not methodologically using examples of how the exhibition was perceived by media and critics, nevertheless some phrases in these sources are interesting and reaffirming regarding the taxonomy of interdisciplinarity. This press response is reminiscent of what Moti Nassani called a multidisciplinary ‘fruit salad’ as opposed to an *interdisciplinary* ‘smoothie’ (Repko 2008, p. 13, after Nissani 1995, p. 125) as an analogy for differing research processes and their results in an academic context. Another journalist used the word ‘brainstorming’ to describe our obviously diverse take on the cultural history of capitalism (*Kölner Illustrierte*, March 2020, transl. HP). The diverse pieces of disciplinary knowledge gathered in this exhibition were at least juxtaposed and assembled in an intentional and ‘coordinated mode’ rather than just in a ‘sequencing mode’ (Klein 2010, p. 17), but, although certainly forming new ‘inter-artefactual’ (Dorsett 2010, p. 249) relations, they largely remained ‘non-integrative’ bits and pieces reminiscent of a – nevertheless delicious – fruit salad.

The stories the diverse artworks and objects had to tell within the context of this exhibition, proved my co-curator wrong – in a very positive sense – in two respects: (1) They were not neutral and (2) many of them were potentially highly political regarding their usage and context. Sarah Pierce said in an interview with the bold title ‘It’s the thing that’s going to mess everything up’: ‘[...] for me it’s quite a political proposition to bring things together for a moment of exhibition’ (Pierce 2019, p. 275). And I would agree with her that curation itself is a political act in the first place (see also Sandell 2020, p. 52). WS certainly knew of the political potential of each and every object in this exhibition, because he himself conducted the research for most of them, and chose them exactly for their narrative potential, but for some reason, he was reluctant to acknowledge their political aspects. There was a certain kind of modesty and hesitation to raise his voice in his approach to curating when I would perhaps have preferred to be more outspoken about these aspects. For WS, his own achievement of conceptualizing the exhibition and researching possible exhibits, surprisingly, had not been a scholarly or academic research activity but had mainly served an educational purpose.

In my opinion, curating is not an academic task, but an educational or perhaps translating kind of work. This is why I, as an art historian, can work on the topic of capitalism. I am translating the work of other academics – specialists – into the medium of an exhibition and prepare its content appro-

priately. This means working with academic content, but it is not itself an academic activity (WS).

I would not see my work as a curator as modest and quiet as that and would instead view certain aspects of curatorial work as academic. In *The Return of Curiosity* Nicholas Thomas points out that the role of the curator needs to comprise 'enquiry' and 'exploration' as well as 'experimentation', and that 'research, exhibition and public engagement ought to be in dialogue' (Thomas 2016, p. 141) as parts of curatorial work. I understand exhibition-making as capable of producing *new knowledge*, for example, by re-discovering, re-thinking, re-interpreting or re-contextualising objects in a new and inspiring way. If I were not convinced of this, the application of the theories of interdisciplinarity studies (evolving from an academic context) to the field of exhibition-making would not work in the first place.

6.5 Creating *interdisciplinarity*: Allowing for interaction

The following observations will try to unpack further whether this exhibition project also allowed for integrative *interdisciplinary* moments and contributions that were more than just 'overtly interdisciplinary components' (Klein 1990, p. 56) in a multidisciplinary project. This section of the case study describes and analyses those parts and tasks of the exhibition-making processes in which I was able to take on a more active curatorial role as indicated in Fig. 6.6 (chapter 6.4), namely with respect to the by-products of the exhibition, a publication (6.5.1) and a digital game (6.5.2), as well as the exhibition architecture (6.5.3). In all three areas of the project, I deliberately understood myself as an enabler of *interdisciplinarity*, trying to purposefully open up our so far quite hermetical curatorial duo. With the support of the institution, this meant increasing the complexity of the overall project by enlarging the team and inviting disparate voices and potential dissent. This was done with the corresponding aim to enlarge the depth and horizon of the exhibition's content and ways of presentation.

6.5.1 The book: An *interdisciplinary* experiment between cultural and political education

As introduced in section 6.3 of this case study, the Bundeskunsthalle entered a close collaboration with the Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb) in late 2018, first and foremost, to develop a joint and multi-perspective publication on the subject of capitalism. Thomas Krüger, president of the bpb, had been enthusiastic about the idea to produce not only a ‘reading book’ – the usual format of the bpb’s publications –, but also a ‘picture book’ on this seemingly ‘dry’ topic.²⁵ We were not just attempting an illustrated reader, but the images in the book (representing a meaningful selection of artworks and objects from the exhibition) were supposed to tell their own story, following their own narrative amidst an array of political essays in the sense of an ‘art meets science’-concept. With this Thomas Krüger and Rein Wolfs planted the seeds for a collaboration that would involve very different disciplinary research methods and working cultures. However, we all shared their enthusiasm and light-heartedly entered the cooperation, which rather surprisingly turned out to be more difficult – and more *interdisciplinary* – than expected.²⁶

In addition to differing views about the book’s content and aesthetics, especially our disparate understandings of its educational purpose led to persistent misunderstandings. Christian Stein (see section 6.5.2) has investigated how disciplinary language codes can provide considerable obstacles to interdisciplinary collaborations (Stein 2016, p. 20, see also Bal 2002, p. 34). As different as, for example, the term ‘system’ is understood within disciplines such as biology, computer sciences, and sociology (Stein 2016, p. 20), in our case different notions of the term ‘education’ led to persisting misunderstandings and conflicts, and were, unfortunately, revealed and fully understood only in hindsight.

As a matter of fact, both the resulting book as well as the digital *Capitalism Game* (see section 6.5.2) that were developed in collaboration with the bpb,

25 These quotes are from my notes taken during a meeting at the bpb in Berlin on 30 November 2018.

26 The Bundeskunsthalle’s first cooperation with the bpb’s Print Department for the exhibition *TOUCHDOWN* starting from 2015 (see chapter 4), had been less controversial during its production process, probably also because the Bundeskunsthalle in that case provided the complete content for the joint publication, whereas in the case of *We Capitalists* the content development was a joint effort.

had to bridge a deep disciplinary gap between *political* and *cultural education*, which has its roots in German history. The political indoctrination of the Nazi era had led to an attempted clear cut between these two fields of education, which found one of its most prominent expressions in the Beutelsbacher Consensus²⁷ from 1976. This declaration advocated a mainly cognitive strategy of political education in order to prevent ‘overpowering’ effects (German: ‘Überwältigungsverbot’), and to enable and empower pupils and students to conduct analytical controversy and debate. In this historical context, cultural education was met with a certain amount of scepticism, mainly because of the emotionalising and aestheticising aspects of its contents and methods. This scepticism was caused by the fear of political instrumentalization, and only in recent years a dialogue has started between the realms of political and cultural education, which had been separated for decades. This led to institutional and strategic barriers as well as divided professional networks which had also prevented a closer collaboration between the bpb (the political educationist) and the Bundeskunsthalle (the cultural educationist) before 2013. The fact that our joint project contributed to this significant discourse about a legitimate ‘politicization of culture’ and ‘culturalization of politics’, has been an *interdisciplinary* challenge – and success – in its own right.²⁸

As much as this publication achieved an inspiringly integrative quality judged from its contents, the development process, at several times, seemed disparate beyond the hope of integration and often felt like a prejudiced ‘culture clash’ between the (perhaps sometimes merely imagined) differing demands and claims of political versus cultural education, or even science versus art. As representatives of the Bundeskunsthalle, we (allegedly only representing the arts and culture side of the collaboration) encountered, for example, substantial doubts regarding our exhibition practice that was perceived as ephemeral, as if this endangered or even ruled out a serious dedication to producing a lasting publication meeting academic standards.

However, these discussions and constructive conflicts amongst the team constituted the decidedly *interdisciplinary* moments and achievements of this book’s production. Apart from his considerable textual contribution to the

27 See <https://www.bpb.de/die-bpb/51310/beutelsbacher-konsens> (last accessed 18 July 2023).

28 I owe the discussion of these correlations to a substantial feedback conversation with Lisa Philippen (bpb) on 24 September 2020 in Bonn. She has kindly given her consent to use information from our conversation in this chapter.

publication, WS participated in the structural and content discussions only at the beginning and then left the details to Miriam Shabafrouz (MS) and Benjamin Weiss (BW, both editors of the bpb), as well as Jutta Frings (the Bundeskunsthalle's head of media and publication) and me. Perhaps rooted in their differing disciplinary backgrounds, MS (focused on economic and political questions) had more difficulty accepting our cultural and art historical approach to the topic than BW (with his background in media and communication studies). MS suggested new artworks for the exhibition with a stronger focus on economics and, in some cases, criticized WS's choice of objects as being too historical and not up to date. WS and I defended our side of the book's content, and by defending it had to sharpen our arguments. The discussions about the book content and structure felt tiresome at the time but were in fact also strengthening the exhibition's content.

Fig. 6.8: *The accompanying book of the exhibition We Capitalists, Stumpfe et al. 2020, pp. 74/75. Photo: © Henriette Pleiger, 2023.*



The *interdisciplinary* quality of the resulting book lies in the combination of alternating image series and essays. The image series of chosen objects from the exhibition are not merely illustrating the essays but are following a separate and independent narrative throughout the book. The book is organized along the same structural keywords characterizing the system of capitalism

that could be found in the exhibition. Each chapter starts with an introduction to the term in question (for example, ‘rationalism’) and an image series (five to eight images with captions) from the exhibition, followed by one to three essays related to the keyword. The graphic designer supported this structure with an alternating colour scheme to highlight the artistic and cultural contributions to the book and to create a layout that was different to the bpb’s usual publications in political education.

To exemplify the repeating structure of each chapter, I will describe one of them here. The chapter on ‘Resources: Private and Common Property’ (Stumpfe et al. 2020, pp. 74–93), for example, starts with a short text introducing the term ‘property’ (p. 74, see Fig. 6.8). These short texts introducing each chapter, written by WS, were also applied as wall texts in the exhibition, but in that context, they used a slightly less complex and thus more accessible language. A series of five images depicting artworks and objects from the exhibition follows, including captions which encircle and deepen the chapter’s idea (pp. 74–81).

1. The artwork *Sands and Fans* (1971) by Alice Aycock (see Fig. 6.8). The included caption did not explain the artwork which consists of four fans blowing towards a large heap of sand in the middle of them. Instead, the caption introduced the global question of whether sand should be a common property instead of being subject to an enormous and unfair trade business. The sand trade between Singapore and Indonesia is given as an example, with extreme environmental consequences for the latter, weaker trade partner.
2. The *Salbuch* (Engl. urbarium or register of ownership) of the Saxonian Naumburg Monastery (1514) exemplified the emergence of private property in medieval times.
3. Still photograph from the film *Landraub* (Engl. land grab) by Kurt Langbein (2015). The film narrated the loss of land of small farmers in Cambodia to so-called development and investment projects by international financial groups.
4. Two maps of the De Beemster region (1607 and 1658) in the Netherlands and a model of a polder windmill (c. 1790) exemplified the creation of (exploitable) new land.
5. The artwork *Give Us, Dear* (2013) by Matthias Böhler and Christian Orendt (see Fig. 6.4). Hundreds of tiny figures are working on an almost eight meters long lying creature resembling a large monkey. The little figures harvest the animal’s resources – its hair, flesh, teeth, nails and body fluids – and are carting them away through a hole in the wall. The animal – which

was perhaps the most impressive object in the whole exhibition – seems to be sleeping, but there is a feeling that it might wake up at any time.

Three essays follow this series of images: Vandana Shiva's 'Land and Ground as Common Property', Dirk Böttcher's 'The Curse of Raw Materials', and Susanne Heeg's 'Living in Capitalism: Who Must Stay Outside?' (Stumpfe et al. 2020, pp. 82–93, titles transl. HP). All three address very different recent aspects of the overall chapter theme. Although this mixture of times, places and questions might seem random and chaotic, it created an associative space around this specific aspect of capitalism reaching far down in history and beyond the Global North.

The multidisciplinary compilation of political essays adds to the quality of the book. The disciplines listed in the 24 biographies of the authors have an astoundingly wide range from economics, sociology, political sciences, mathematics, philosophy, anthropology, history, gender and feminist studies, and psychology to perhaps less expected fields such as physics, geography, theology, art history, archaeology, and drama. Typically for a multidisciplinary academic publication, the contributing authors were not invited to enter into a mutual dialogue, but their contributions were collected in an 'encyclopaedic' fashion (see Klein 2010, p. 17 or Potthast 2010, p. 180). But whilst the encounter of essays, artworks and objects in one publication was not that unusual from our side of the collaboration, it was rather new for the bpb, also causing fears of weakening the publications academic rigour. Their courage has to be applauded as the book received positive feedback, especially because of its unusual and integrative approach. For both institutions the experiment of this publication, which required complex negotiations and curatorial mediation on my part, proved to result in a valuable *interdisciplinary* product supporting the exhibition with respect to the depth of its content.

6.5.2 The *Capitalism Game*: Breaking disciplinary barriers

In cooperation with the bpb and the company Playersjourney UG of game-lab.berlin at the Humboldt-University, a digital game was developed, which was integrated into the exhibition *We Capitalists* as an educational tool. While the exhibition ended on 30 August 2020, the game remains available as an online offer on the websites of the Bundeskunsthalle (within the exhibition archive) and the Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb). This permanent online version of the *Capitalism Game* was also realized within the context of

the significant increase of virtual educational formats during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020.

With the *Capitalism Game*, which was closely interwoven with the exhibition content, we tried together to find and create new methods and narratives for both political and cultural education. The game raises the question of identity construction in capitalism. During the game, the players collect 'egos', the in-game currency, by performing and 'selling' their emotions and are drawn into a 'shopping experience'. In advertised 'chats' with twelve individual exhibits offered for sale, the aim is to emotionally recognize one's own capitalist identity in the age of 'lifestyle capitalism'. Each player's consumerist behaviour is anonymously tracked throughout the game and results in an ostensibly individualized film, serving as both 'receipt' and 'prize'. The game is experienced as both fun and unsettling at the same time.

While the wall and label texts in the exhibition could be described as rather conventional, with regard to interpretation, the *Capitalism Game* proved to be an experimental and inventive educational tool that was welcomed by many visitors of all ages: 58.2 per cent (10,383 out of the total number of visitors of 17,830) played the game. Especially because of its chat dialogues that were both knowledgeable and entertaining, the game disrupted and at the same time supported the curatorial narrative. It also enabled visitors to – at least digitally – invade some showcases within an overall 'don't-touch place' (Dudley 2010, p. 11, see also Saunderson 2012) in much more intimate encounters than would be usually allowed in a museum, with the objects featuring in the game. The 'gamification' of the exhibition also helped with synthesizing the diverse material categories and contents of the exhibition.

On 8 October 2020, I conducted a feedback conversation about the joint development process of the game with Thomas Lilge (TL) and Christian Stein (CS) from Playersjourney UG.²⁹ This conversation was especially fruitful and instructive, as both my dialogue partners identify themselves as interdisciplinary researchers and are very familiar with the theoretical frameworks of interdisciplinary studies. In the literature review I discussed the similarities between interdisciplinary researchers and interdisciplinary curators, and many

29 Apart from this internal feedback conversation, the Bundeskunsthalle also published an online conversation about the game between Lisa Philippen (bpb), Christian Stein (Playersjourney UG), Benjamin Doum (Bundeskunsthalle's social media expert) and me on 20 August 2020: <https://magazin.bundeskunsthalle.de/2020/08/das-kapitalis-mus-game/> (last accessed 19 July 2023).

of these observations regarding the potential and obstacles of our respective work practices were palpable during our conversation. As for our collaboration in this particular project, both TL and CS clearly described it as an *interdisciplinary* experience. The fact that both contracting institutions (the bpb and the Bundeskunsthalle) had managed to create time and space for a joint ‘process of negotiation’ and had expressed a ‘sincere interest’ in a joint production, including long ‘swirling spirals of discussion’ in which our respective ‘source disciplines’ did play a significant role regarding our differing perspectives, was named by CS as one of the reasons for this perception. Speaking from experience, CS emphasized that *interdisciplinarity* too often fails because the participants cannot agree on joint aims, values, and methods (see also Lerchster and Lesjak 2014).

From the academic perspective of TL and CS, this project also had a transdisciplinary component. As much as the development of the game’s content resembled an *interdisciplinary* research process, they both understood its practical implementation as transdisciplinary, resembling an academic outreach activity. I provocatively asked them, whether the museum was merely sort of a ‘front yard’ or ‘playground’ of the university, in which they had left academic (and thus disciplinary) territory behind them. They answered with a theoretical definition which is circulated in online teaching material of the Humboldt-University: ‘While interdisciplinary work aims at *more* knowledge, transdisciplinary work aims at *different* knowledge’ (emphases added).³⁰

In this sense, TL characterized the game narrative as a different way to *frame* and *convey* knowledge, at least different from an academic way of narration. Klein goes further in advocating ‘*rethinking*’ knowledge instead of only replicating it³¹ in an (academic or cultural) educational setting, and the game to a certain extent did that: It re-thought and extended the twelve chosen objects’ stories (as presented in their exhibition labels) and enabled the game users to address and engage with these objects in a different way by entering into a fictitious conversation with them. In the first case study about the exhibition *TOUCHDOWN*, I discussed (and to a certain extent acknowledged) the definition of ‘different knowledge’ constituting transdisciplinarity, but I seriously doubt the above notion of viewing museums and exhibitions as

30 See <https://www.rewi.hu-berlin.de/de/lf/lis/bae/wissen/intertransdisziplinaritaet> (last accessed 19 July 2023).

31 Oral quote by Klein from the online conference of AIS (Association of Interdisciplinary Studies) on 6 December 2020.

non-academic places, and thus would refrain from categorising the game as transdisciplinary in the sense of it being an outreach activity. However, the game should be viewed as an *interdisciplinary* intervention and extension of the original exhibition concept, and thus it considerably added to the exhibition's interpretive and dialogical quality.

6.5.3 The exhibition architecture: An *interdisciplinary* intervention as enhanced politicization

The architecture and graphic design for this exhibition, which was developed comparatively late during the production process (less than half a year before the opening) entered the project with its strong individual voice that required negotiation and integration, moderated by me in my function as the exhibition manager, and can thus be understood as an *interdisciplinary* intervention. Exploring 'collaborative co-curation', Tricia Austin advocates to acknowledge and deploy exhibition designers 'as creative strategists, social mediators, user-centred enablers [and] inventive storytellers' to support museums as 'agents of change' (Austin 2018, p. 45). She attributes a stronger than usual role to designers, also in terms of enhancing and creating content, thus allowing them to contribute to originally curatorial tasks. This approach proved to be worthwhile in this particular exhibition case.

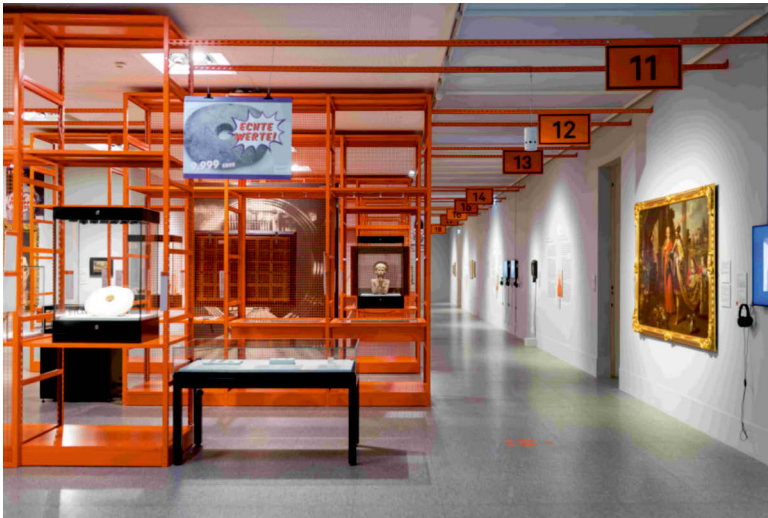
In their submission to the competition amongst four exhibition architects in November 2019, Markus Miessen Studio suggested an exhibition architecture consisting of a modular metal shelf system (meeting museum standards) in the colour RAL 2004 (pure orange). This bright – but also deliberately monotone – shelf system was supposed to 'rob the curated exhibits of their hierarchical references' (here and in the following quotes from Miessen's concept for the exhibition architecture: transl. HP). The overall aesthetics were 'oriented towards multinational logistic companies and data centres', evoking images of storage halls, server facilities or the like. Shelf numbers corresponding to the exhibition chapters supported the visual appearance which a radio report by the Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR, West German Broadcasting) aptly described as 'DIY store optic'³² (see Fig. 6.9).

32 In German: 'Baumarktoptik', <http://www1.wdr.de/kultur/wir-kapitalisten-bundkunst-halle-bonn-102.html>, published 12 March 2020. The cited content from this website is not available anymore.

These aesthetics of rationalism and optimization reveal the processes of geopolitical reality in the microcosm of a specific architecture: as a physical spatialization of our virtual reality, in which every object is de-hierarchized, indexed and made distributable. Here capitalism shows itself in its purest form: in a spatialized and accelerated technocracy (Markus Miessen, transl. HP).

During the 1980s, the Swiss exhibition curator Harald Szeemann had been postulating that art needs protection in safe places such as museums to present 'an alternative to everything in our society that is geared to consumption and reproduction' (Meijers 1996, p. 7). Miessen's provocative architecture invaded this 'safe place' and came as a direct assault on the artworks and objects on display, overtly ignoring their diverse needs regarding materiality and style.

Fig. 6.9: Exhibition view We Capitalists: rooms 6–12 / shelves 11–18. Photo: Laurin Schmid, 2020, © Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland GmbH, Bonn.



While the objects within the exhibition assumed the character of commodities – or seemingly even hardware market goods –, the architecture of standardized industrial metal shelves had a second connotation as it was also

deliberately reminiscent of an archive system, suiting the rather encyclopaedic character of the exhibition.³³ This radical or even brutal concept-architecture, which assigned the same value to all objects, also helped unify the diverse materials on display. But to see oil paintings or fine art sculptures displayed in glaring orange metal shelves was at first very much against our usual ideas and aesthetic views.

At the beginning, WS and I were reluctant to accept this design – which was favoured by the institution's artistic director Rein Wolfs – as we had previously dreamt of the exhibition resembling, for example, the floor of a classic department store, in which the exhibition chapters would have been separated in a colourful and visually diverse array of differently designed rooms resembling fair booths. The monotony of the shelf system and its suggested bright orange colour frightened us. It also frightened us because of its curatorial strength. But, to our surprise, we soon began to embrace the idea as well as the fact that the shelf system became a strong exhibit – and political statement – in its own right. The whole exhibition had suddenly turned into a coherent art installation. And even though some encounters between objects and architecture really hurt the eye they felt somehow refreshing – and at the same time these moments of seemingly mere aesthetic pain strongly resembled the pain felt when encountering the capitalist commodification (commercialization) of things of emotional value. The exhibition thus also became a bodily experience in a subtly unsettling way, because the architecture itself had an 'interpretive function' as a 'spatial setting' (Hale and Back 2018, p. 343) that had 'transformed the act of curating into one of "staging"' (p. 341). In fact, this vivid setting even breathed new life into some of the more scholarly and allegedly old-fashioned objects, such as traditional wooden models. This was more than a merely supportive exhibition design. It was another strong curatorial voice entering – and *politicizing* – the exhibition, and can thus likewise be described as an *interdisciplinary* intervention. It embodied what Cristina Lleras et al. call 'activism through architecture' (Lleras et al. 2019, p. 147).

33 'Encyclopaedic' is amongst the descriptive vocabulary Klein uses for multidisciplinary (Klein 2010, p. 17).

6.6 Conclusion

The exhibition-making process of *We Capitalists* was largely multidisciplinary regarding its content development and object choice, mainly because of the low intensity of integration within the curatorial duo, but the exhibition unfolded a significant *interdisciplinary* quality in the cooperation with its three additional external partners. The partners especially added political strength and courage to this project, which was already an inherent part of many object biographies (see Hill 2012) in this exhibition, but needed to be given a stronger voice, and that was reached through negotiation and collaboration. This integrative task formed a considerable part of my curatorial role and ambition in this particular exhibition project. Apart from the enhanced politicization of the exhibition's content and aesthetics, it was the digital game that added an emotional, individual experience and quality to the exhibition.

But this case study also showed that a multidisciplinary exhibition can still be a good exhibition. Notwithstanding the critique of this exhibition's internal development process, its wide encyclopaedic horizon, diversity of object categories and yet explanatory clarity have earned considerable public recognition and were by no means a failure. However, especially because its topic was of such social and political relevance, it profited from *interdisciplinary* interventions and extensions, and would have profited even more if its *interdisciplinary* potential had been used more purposefully. That this was not the case is also due to the fact that we viewed the production process of an exhibition as ending with the opening although the process of knowledge production definitely does not end on that date.

Exhibitions have to get 'ready' in order to be opened. [...] 'Voices from outside' will be let inside at a point in time, when the topics are set, when the basic ideas are defined, and when the remaining time until the opening runs short (Bose 2020, p. 273, transl. HP).

The exhibition *We Capitalists* coincided with a severe economic and social crisis after the global coronavirus outbreak in spring 2020. Capitalism, in many of its aspects that are affecting our daily lives, seemingly came to a halt, also causing a huge amount of anxiety and existential fear. The exhibition *We Capitalists* – even in its two months of lockdown – suddenly became a relevant commentary on the daily news, more relevant perhaps than it would have become without the COVID-19 crisis. In this situation, the cultural sector quickly became 'non-

essential' and deprived of substantial income due to closure and lockdown. However, mostly through social media, culture became an essential tool to help people cope with a very difficult situation. The exhibition showed that cultural education (and this was surprising only at first glance) can contribute to the analysis of an economic system at large or an economic state at a particular point in time, and thus may also play an important role in political education without the (well-founded) fear of indoctrination.

A press quote from the opening day summed the exhibition up as: 'A glance into the abyss of what we are. And how we became it.'³⁴ This quote shows that the exhibition was indeed understood as a political statement, despite our internal discussions. Museums and exhibition centres such as the Bundeskunsthalle need to join what Janes and Sandell (2019) call 'museum activism' and should contribute to tell and explain the stories of our political, social, economic, and environmental realities from multiple perspectives. Even more so with news like these, published shortly after the exhibition closed: An educational guidance of the conservative UK government from September 2020 equated anti-capitalism to an 'extreme political stance', which should not be taught in schools.³⁵ This showed once more how important it is to aim for and deliver a diverse cultural and political education in order to create an active and responsible society. I argue that interdisciplinarity as a method can support activism in museums, and I will further discuss this in the overall conclusion of this book.

34 Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR, West German Broadcasting), <http://www1.wdr.de/kultur/wir-kapitalisten-bundskunsthalle-bonn-102.html>, published 12 March 2020, transl. HP. The cited content from this website is not available anymore.

35 *The Guardian*, 27 September 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/sep/27/uk-schools-told-not-to-use-anti-capitalist-material-in-teaching> (last accessed 19 July 2023).