

# Go-Alongs

## Exploring the exhibition together as we walk

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Luise Reitstätter and Karolin Galter

### Introduction

The method of go-alongs is variously referred to as go-along interviews (Zahner 2021), walk-alongs (Skov, Lykke and Jantzen 2018) or accompanied visits (Haywood 2018). In go-alongs, the two established methods of observation and interview are combined in the setting of a joint visit to an exhibition. Originally, the method was located in spatial ethnographic research. Margarethe Kusenbach (2003, 2008) coined the term go-alongs to register material and social environments in the moment. As go-alongs involve experiencing the exhibition in the act of walking together, the approach also falls into the category of so-called mobile methods (Büscher and Urry 2009) or, more specifically, of “mobile interviews in the field” (Keding and Weith 2014). The focus on the shared experience *in situ* also offers a participatory research approach (Unger 2014) as well as a valorization of everyday and practical knowledge (Hörning 2001). Other methodological references found in go-alongs are thinking aloud (Bilandzic 2005, Boren and Ramey 2000), listening conversations (Leinhardt, Crowley and Knutson 2002, Leinhardt and Knutson 2004), and object elicitation (Banks and Zeitlyn 2015, Iltanen and Topo 2015, Willig 2017), in the sense of utilizing the exhibition to stimulate verbal statements and active listening.

### Aim of the method

Irrespective of the different methodological frameworks, the overarching aim of a go-along is to record the exhibition experience *in situ*. Thus, the benefit of this method is that it captures the exhibition experience exactly at the specific time and place when and where it actually occurs. This focus on the concrete experience of the exhibition is the feature that distinguishes the method from other cultural studies methods such as *Knowledge Analysis* or *Context Analysis*, which derive implicit modes

of viewing from the analysis of exhibition settings, for example, as well as from empirical methods such as *Questionnaires* or *Social Meaning Mapping*, which collect data on the exhibition experience retrospectively through visitors' re-narration. Rather, responding to a methodological research gap, go-alongs foreground the actual perceptual practices of the exhibition visit in the specific socio-material situation by producing the experience of viewing and touring exhibitions together (Hanquinet and Savage 2016: 11–12).

In terms of research paradigms, this corresponds to the focus of the spatial turn and its interest in the perception of the spatial environment (Döring and Thielmann 2015), as well as to a sensory approach, with its focus on physical and sensory experiences (Pink 2015). With their interest in individual construction and production of meaning, go-alongs also reference the “turn to understanding” in exhibition and visitor studies (Hooper-Greenhill 2006: 371–374). In summary, it is precisely the combined analysis of spatially structured scenarios of perception and visitors' biographically guided processes of production of meaning that constitute the unique feature of go-alongs in the exhibition setting.

## Step-by-step guideline

But how can go-alongs be applied in a specific research context? The 6-step guideline described here follows the preparatory phases of selecting the exhibition (1) and the participants (2), conducting the go-alongs (3) including documentation (4) and the follow-up work comprising data preparation (5) and data analysis (6). At the same time, it should be noted that there is room for phases to interlink and overlap, if we understand go-alongs not so much as a strictly linear, but as a potentially circular research process. For instance, participants could be selected in parallel with the go-alongs to see which backgrounds and perspectives have not yet been represented. Processing the data of the go-alongs while they are being conducted would also make sense, so that any necessary adjustments can be made during the documentation, for instance, to improve audio quality, or to accommodate new emerging research interests.

### 1. Selecting the exhibition

When selecting the exhibition, or a section of it, it is necessary to determine the unit of analysis for the go-alongs. While choosing a limited section of an exhibition certainly benefits an in-depth examination, one should bear in mind that exhibitions in particular are about the interplay between the multiplicity of objects and spaces. Furthermore, as Jeffrey K. and Lisa F. Smith (2001: 235) note, “the thing” for visitors is not engaging with individual objects of an exhibition, but rather the museum as

an overarching spatial and institutional unit. With this in mind when conducting go-alongs for an analysis of a particular exhibition, it can make perfect sense to cover all the stations of a typical museum visit – including passing through the entrance area to the ticket counter, the cloakroom, and ending with a visit to the museum café – in this way reflecting the comprehensiveness of an exhibition visit, but also acting as a joint warming-up and rounding-off.

## 2. Selecting the participants

Selecting a balanced sample of participants is crucial, as findings from exhibition go-alongs show that ‘perceptual filters’ shape the specific experience and assessment of the exhibition (Zahner 2021). In museum studies, these influences and also the desire for certain exhibition experiences have already been extensively researched in ‘entrance narratives’ (Pekarik and Schreiber 2012). The exhibition can be visited either with just one person or a natural group, such as a couple or family constellation (Skov, Lykke and Jantzen 2018). Besides recruiting participants in advance according to certain criteria such as age or previous affinity to museums, it is, of course, also possible to approach exhibition visitors on site and invite them spontaneously to participate in a go-along.

## 3. Conducting the go-alongs

The go-alongs take place during the opening hours of the exhibition. First of all, it is necessary to determine the allotted roles and tasks of participants and the accompanying person. While the participant is clearly expected to provide information and to structure the exhibition visit with their individual modes of perception, the contribution of the accompanying researcher is somewhat more flexible. For example, the latter can say a few introductory words at the beginning of an exhibition (“Today we will visit the permanent exhibition of the *House of Austrian History*, which opened in 2018.”), suggest a certain path through the exhibition (“We will take a look at section X and section Y.”), ask specific questions after viewing a part of the exhibition (“How did you perceive the presentation of topic Z?”), or alternatively embark on the tour totally unscripted without providing any framings, routes or questions.

In general, we consider a low-key and cautious contribution by the accompanying researchers to be more productive, because it is precisely the visitors’ own efforts at structuring their experience within the prescribed script that is a defining feature of exhibition visits (Reitstätter 2015). In this way, evaluating the participants’ own structuring – specifically, for example, what they (do not) observe when and for how long, and what they (do not) want to comment on and why – already yields initial insights regarding focuses, omissions or potential difficulties in comprehension. Conversely, if researchers remain primarily silent and contribute little during

the joint visit, this mode of accompaniment can appear equally strange and far removed from a natural shared visiting situation. During the go-alongs, affirmative gestures (such as nodding) and approving comments (such as “I understand.”) by the researchers are useful in showing that they are listening actively and participating in the tour. In case of non-verbal or fragmentary reactions by the participants – such as shaking their heads or giving cursory comments – we advise researchers to solicit further explanations while the tour is still in progress. This is because a shake of the head can signify both a lack of understanding and rejection, the word ‘interesting’ can serve as a stopgap and as an expression of genuine interest in a conversation.

#### 4. Documenting go-alongs

Documenting go-alongs can vary in the level of detail from writing a protocol after concluding the visit to an audio documentation (with a mobile phone, dictaphone or wireless microphone) to a video documentation (with a mobile phone, mini camera in hand, camera(s) in the exhibition space or even *Mobile Eye Tracking*). In all cases, one has to strike a balance between the accuracy of the data documentation and the amount of influence the participants are subjected to as well as the time and effort required for data collection. For an internal exhibition evaluation, it may, for instance, suffice to conduct go-alongs with a small number of carefully selected people and to subsequently document these systematically in a protocol – e.g. according to (un)appealing objects, specific interpretations of objects, chosen routes, usability problems etc. For a scientific analysis, the documentation should be more detailed and include at least an audio recording. Doing an audio-only documentation in a more complex exhibition setting is not advisable, as it is much more difficult to later assign comments to individual objects. Instead of a video documentation, this can be remedied by drawing a route on an exhibition floor plan after concluding the go-along.

#### 5. Preparing the data of the go-alongs

Depending on the documentation, the data from the go-alongs need to be prepared differently in each case. If there is no digital documentation, it is necessary to draw up a detailed observation protocol after concluding the go-alongs. This can be carried out in the manner of an ethnographic observation in a running text or, for specific research interests (e.g. comprehensibility of the museum’s wayfinding system, dealing with hands-on stations, questions about particularly discussion-stimulating objects or areas that receive little attention) this can be also done in a table. In case of an audio documentation, everything that has been said is transcribed. Referenced or also illustrated transcripts, which indicate in brackets the exhibits discussed or show them in the exhibition environment to facilitate attribution, are

helpful (but also more time-consuming). For this purpose, it makes sense to create illustrated plans of the exhibition in advance, with brief descriptions of the objects, so that they can be assigned more efficiently and systematically. Documenting what has been observed on video serves to attribute comments to objects, but if the participants are filmed (and not only the common field of vision), it can also be employed as a multimodal supplement to the discourse situation, showing body postures, gestures, facial expressions etc.

## 6. Analyzing the data of the go-alongs

Depending on the documentation and data preparation, different analytical procedures can be used for analyzing the data of the go-alongs. According to the different ways of interpreting qualitative interviews set out by Ulrike Froschauer and Manfred Lueger (2020), a topic analysis would, for instance, be suitable for observation protocols. It can record and contextualize content and opinions that were touched on during the go-along and relate them to specific stimuli triggered by the exhibition. For transcripts, one could apply a system analysis, where content is paraphrased and interpreted based on the context of statements and affect; or also a fine-structure analysis, where particularly salient statements of the conversation are broken down into semantic units and examined for both manifest and latent meanings. With video files, additional analyses of viewing patterns are possible when using *Mobile Eye Tracking*, and in the *Video-Based Ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis*, additional multimodal data analyses can be employed in combination with the analysis of talk.

One should not underestimate the amount of work involved in data analysis, but it is difficult to generalize because it also requires circular processes of interpretative analysis that are ideally conducted in a group for quality assurance purposes. In our opinion, it is essential to pay attention to diversity both when determining the participants and the analyzing researchers, since different perspectives do more justice to the multidimensionality of the material.

## Case study

This case study is taken from the research project *Right to the Museum?*, in which we examined the changes in museum concepts of the public and their perception in the population using a combination of archival and field research (Reitstätter and Galter 2023). While the archival research collected and analyzed documents of institutional self-description, our field research worked with independent and accompanied go-alongs. The subsequent interview consisted of an online questionnaire and a vignette commentary/interview on excerpts of museums' self-description, in

order to contrast museum missions with the visitor's freshly acquired experience. Before embarking on the field research, key sections of the permanent exhibitions were selected together with representatives of the participating museums. This was done in order to cover the respective museum's range of content when selecting the exhibition area. At the same time, our tour, which started with a meeting point in the museum's foyer and ended with an interview in a lounge area, took us through all the stages of a normal exhibition visit (Fig. 1–3).

*Fig. 1–3: Go-along from the museum entrance to a selected area of the permanent exhibition at the House of Austrian History, © Photos: Karl Pani, Department of Art History, University of Vienna.*



We conducted the go-alongs through the selected sections of the permanent exhibitions together with the twenty members of the so-called citizen board. The aim was not to reproduce the typical museum audience in the course of the study. Rather, we wanted to examine the relevance of museums and the experience of exhibitions not only from the perspective of visitors, but also from the perspective of citizens. We ensured that the group of the citizen board was representative of the population living in Vienna by taking into account the six aspects of diversity – gender, age, education, migration background, disability and previous museum affinity. The go-alongs were audio- and video-documented using an audio recording device that participants carried around their necks as well as a GoPro camera that us researchers held in our hands and used to film the exhibits we were looking at (Fig. 4). In our video documentation, the focus was on our common field of vision and not on the participants and their physical reactions. This affords a more discrete documentation, even though, with the video focus on the field of vision and not on the participants, their nonverbal reactions are lost and this can result in a predominance of language in the further processing of the data. After the tour we also documented its particularities in a protocol.

Fig. 4: Documentation of the go-along in the House of Austrian History with an audio recording device and a GoPro camera. © Photo: Karl Pani, Department of Art History, University of Vienna.



Due to the high number of a hundred go-alongs (twenty people who each visited five partner museums) with an average duration of one hour and twenty-one minutes, we decided on a mixed approach to data preparation. We transcribed thirty of all go-alongs with references to the discussed objects and excerpted another twenty by summarizing the engagement with the exhibition and transcribing key statements verbatim. We summarized the remaining fifty go-alongs in a structured protocol after watching the videos and listening to the audios. A transcription of a one-hour go-along requires about ten hours of work. For an excerpt with a partial transcription, the time investment is reduced to around six hours, and for a protocol to about three hours. After the first rounds of data preparation, we began with group analysis sessions to identify inherent themes, patterns and specifics of the go-alongs and to combine these with our explicit research interest in the characteristics of the local museum audience in their perception of 'their' museums and permanent collections that they had visited. These group analysis sessions led to a preliminary coding template, which we applied in the program Atlas.ti and expanded with further relevant codes in the process.

The crucial point for us when conducting the go-alongs in the *Right to the Museum?* project was engaging in active listening in the exhibition space, in order to understand how vastly different people experience and interpret the same museums and exhibitions for themselves. What was remarkable in this process was that

the repeated visits to the exhibitions led to a changed understanding of the museum as an institution and also to an emergence of individual visiting strategies, particularly among participants that had little previous affinity to museums. Specifically, it was mostly after the third visit that we saw changes in the way the exhibition was appropriated – for instance by setting priorities for particular object categories or recognizing cross-references. Furthermore, the majority of the members of the citizen board stated after participating in the project that in the future they would visit museums more often or that they have greater appreciation of their own cultural heritage. Another result was that visiting exhibitions together was extremely enlightening in the object-based discussion of topics, interests and values, and that it had a strong relationship-building effect in the joint research situation. In this way, go-alongs are not only suited for analyzing exhibitions but also as an interview method for exploring the topics presented in the exhibition (Fineder and Reitstätter 2021). Furthermore, they can be used as an interactive way of getting to know each other, for example, in the case of dating in museums or participatory education of- fers.

## Method reflection

As already mentioned at the outset, empirical studies with go-alongs in the field of exhibition studies are still relatively rare, particularly in comparison to other forms of data collection such as a quantitative *Questionnaire*. This article is an effort to make the method of go-alongs both better known and also more comprehensible in order to explore possible meaningful future applications in exhibition analyses. In this context, we see the benefits and limitations of the method in the following areas:

One of the main advantages of the method is the natural setting for data collection, since exhibitions are interpreted via the go-along exactly in the same way they are typically visited: together and while walking. Firstly, this type of inquiry requires little or easily accessible technical equipment. Secondly, when using this method in exhibition evaluation, it immediately reveals strengths and weaknesses, for instance, when a section is consistently ignored and another object generates intensive interaction. Thirdly, by carefully selecting the participants, different types of visitors can be given a voice through active listening, so that the method encourages varied perspectives on the exhibition and cultural participation. This points to the possibility of using go-alongs not only for exhibition analysis but also as a tool for raising curatorial awareness for a wide range of visitor needs or also as a way of empowering visitors by articulating and appreciating their perceptions.

A drawback of the method of go-along is, first of all, the often considerable amount of time needed to prepare the data for scientific use. Secondly, data analyses requiring background knowledge and practice in interpretative social research

come with more prerequisites – for instance, in comparison to standardized questionnaires that often have automated data analysis integrated in the programme they run on. A third limitation of the method results from the difficulty to do justice to a multisensory exhibition tour in a data analysis when the documentation reduces the exhibition experience primarily back to text. However, this limitation can be mitigated by an initial data analysis that is carried out shortly after collecting the data, as well as by repeated listening to the audios and viewing the videos at a later point in time. It is all the more relevant for the go-along to emphasize sensory and atmospheric aspects beyond the spoken word if one wants to fully capture the charm of the method of analytically recording the physical and social practice of visiting an exhibition.

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