

# Exhibition Photograph Analysis

## Taking a look at past exhibitions from a critical media studies perspective

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### Introduction

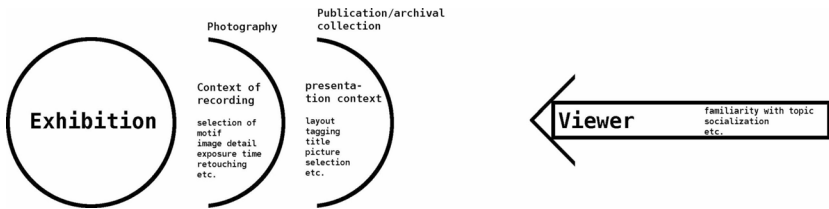
When we look at exhibitions by means of photographs, we take the photograph to be a sign or trace of the exhibition and assume the two are linked in some way. The method presented here is thus based on a semiotic notion of the image (Wiesing 2005). However, photographs are not only signs, but also symbols. The indexical character of the medium is a direct reference to the reality depicted, while its iconic quality draws attention to the fact that it is artificially produced (Walton 2012). The iconic moment allows research to access the medium via cultural codes and thus to interpret it (Paul 2009).

Such an approach is grounded in the context of the photograph (Ruchatz 2012). This comprises the way in which the medium of photography influences what is depicted and can be divided into three levels: the decision as to what is to be depicted, the moment the photograph is taken, and the processing of the photograph. The next thing to consider is the context of the photograph's presentation, i.e. the setting in which it is exhibited and which impacts its meaning. Here again, decisions are made through selection, choice of detail and placement. For photographs where the indexical moment predominates, Lars Blunck has coined the term of documentary photograph. It shows, reports and reproduces (Blunck 2010: 14). The documentation of architectural monuments can serve as an example here. He describes photographs that are more iconic in nature as staged photography; they convey statements (Blunck 2010: 19). Examples where the iconic character is manifestly evident are found above all in advertising photography.

The method presented here is an image and context analysis rooted in visual studies (Belting 2007, Ruchatz 2012: 12, 21) and includes reflection on the medial properties of a photograph. It makes use of both the indexical and the iconic moment. The sign aspect provides information about the image's frame of reference. However, the iconic moment modifies the photographic view of the exhibition, i.e.

the influences of the representation are not random, but are subject to conscious actions, production processes, their structures and the power relations embedded therein. For the viewers of an exhibition photograph, this means that they never look at the exhibition directly, but always see it through the filter of the contexts in which the photograph was shot and presented (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Schematic representation of the layers of perception when viewing an exhibition photograph, © Ute Famulla.



## Aim of the method

Exhibition photograph analysis first emerged as a reaction to the widespread practice of treating exhibition photographs as candid representations of their subject matter. It calls for a critical approach to the photographic material that does justice to the medial character of photography and sees it as an intended information item. It also aims to contextualize it historically.

The theoretical realization that the photograph does not provide an unmediated image of the subject it depicts at first appears as a detachment from the events portrayed. However, a critical media studies approach to the photographs enables us, by analyzing the context, to gain an understanding of the actors involved and an awareness of the possibilities of visualization that existed in that particular period. Besides addressing, in this manner, specific questions about individual exhibition projects, we can also gain insights about how art, museums, fairs, visitors, curators etc. were prevalently perceived at the time the photos were taken or published. The photographic material here always forms the starting point and indicates which questions can be asked.

## Step-by-step guideline

The method focuses on the contextualization of the photographs utilized. The following analytical steps can serve as an example:

A detailed description of the object should be the *first step* in the research project. Here, we identify the elements of the image and note their placement in the composition.

In a *second step*, it is necessary to establish whether the object provides any further information based on a label or its location. Do we, for example, get to know the name of the exhibition, the location of the shot, are the objects or persons shown identified in any way? Do we know the name of the photographer or the photo agency? Are there other pictures that were taken in the same context? Is there a numbering that determines a particular sequence? Do we know where this additional information comes from? Are there any notes that accompanied the picture-taking process? What were the technical circumstances the photographer worked in and which principles did the publication of the pictures follow? When comparing a photo series, we ought to pay attention to whether there are any differences between the various shots or whether things were photographed in a consistent way. It is not uncommon for the works even in an exhibition hall to be re-arranged for the photo; for instance, objects are moved, additional utensils are added, visitors are shown – or not – and the lighting is changed.

In a *third step*, one should start searching for meta data. These can be found, for instance, in the context of the photographers (self-image, working method, technical equipment, networks), the publication (collaborators, guidelines regarding the content, layout, archiving practice, collaboration with picture agencies) or the exhibition (catalogue, press reports, statements, opening speech, accompanying programme). This step differs from the previous one in that before, the object and its current location were considered, i.e. data was collected that is directly relevant to the object of investigation and allows conclusions to be drawn about the context of the image and its presentation. In this third, subsequent step, building on the previous one, information is collected to better understand the photographs and their context.

The *fourth step* is about making a connection between the aspects of the exhibition and the meta data. What is conspicuous here, is that the reproductions of a series usually offer a wide range of aspects that cannot be reduced to a common denominator. There are photographs that expand on the arguments presented in the exhibition catalogue, but there are also others that are difficult to classify. Experience shows that cases that reveal discontinuities between different pictures or between pictures and the materials consulted are particularly interesting. The layers of meaning emerge from the material as a whole. If, for example, your enquiry wants to look into the intentions pursued by the exhibition makers, it is often intriguing to look at the photographs they have authorized for publication. The selection, placement and

editing of the photographs can provide insights into how they wanted the exhibition to be seen or which aspects were given particular emphasis.

What is needed besides the photographic source material is, in particular, additional archive material. Depending on the context, one can here draw on secondary literature or sources. A further resource are the objects shown in the photograph; it makes sense to collect meta data about these as well. Due to the extensive research involved, the method is time-consuming, but its scope corresponds to most art-historical analyses based on the principle of viewing and comparing images. The personnel and time required depend heavily on the source material. If you are processing a photographic estate that includes, besides photographs, also documents concerning the commission as well as examples of publication, the analysis can begin almost immediately. In other instances, the various documents first have to be collected or may not have survived. In the majority of cases, the information on the production processes of a particular period has been well researched, yet nevertheless requires an examination that extends beyond one's own professional discipline.<sup>1</sup>

## Case study

The application steps presented below refer to the case study of the *First International Dada Fair*, which was held in 1920 in Berlin (Fig. 2). In a first inspection of the photograph, we recorded some of its motivic elements:

- artworks,
- the room,
- furniture,
- people.

These were linked to initial associations: artworks: critical of the military, Petersburg hanging, paintings, sculpture, text etc.; room: stucco, high-class, unclear layout etc.; furniture: chairs placed back-to-back/ similar to museum furniture etc.; people: H. Höch, G. Grosz, unusual, rigid postures, appears staged etc.

With the help of the information from the context of the Berlinische Galerie collection, where the photograph is kept, it was possible to identify the photo agency (Bildagentur Internationaler Illustrations-Verlag, Robert Sennecke), the exhibition title (Erste Internationale Dada-Messe, Berlin 1920), the venue (Kunsthandlung Bur-

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1 The magazine *Fotogeschichte. Beiträge zur Geschichte und Ästhetik der Fotografie* often offers a good introduction to various specialized areas.



photographed and leads to the conclusion that they consciously posed for the camera. The fact that the exhibiting artists are at the same time also the organizers of the exhibition, the depicted subjects of the photographs and the people that commissioned them reinforces the iconic moment of the photographs.

In a further inspection of the photograph, the findings gained were applied to questions that arose while looking at the picture. We asked, for instance: Which function do the depicted persons have and what image content is evoked in the context of the examined field of meaning? What conclusions does this allow us to draw on the exhibition and the group of artists?

In summary, we can say that the people in the photograph portray a visitor type preformed in representations of museums and collections: silent visitors engrossed in the contemplation of an artwork. If we broaden our view to include the representation of art viewers, we can distinguish various types. Hubert Locher (2006: 314–315) distinguishes between admiration, visual and haptic appreciation and discussion. These archetypes were also vividly staged in the 17<sup>th</sup> century gallery works. If you look at, for instance, the painting *The Gallery of Cornelis van der Geest*, completed by Willem van Haecht in 1628, the artworks are contemplated reverently, but also touched, moved into the right light, measured, and discussed in groups. Schmalhausen (Dr. Oz), Grosz and Heartfield, who gaze in wonder at the artworks, as well as Hausmann, Burchard and Baader, who discuss them, are thus engaging in the usual forms of traditional art appreciation.

The couple refers to bourgeois rules of etiquette that allowed unmarried couples to meet only in the public space. Höch's musing, pensive pose differs from that of Schmalhausen, Grosz and Heartfield and approaches the limits of the standardized visitor habitus, as her look here not only resonates with admiration, but also with a sense of enquiry. Höch occupies a special position here as her gaze does not rest explicitly on an artwork or on an interlocutor, but leads out of the frame into the unknown. If one compares the photograph with the layout of the house, then also Schmalhausen, Grosz and Heartfield are not looking at artworks, but out of the window. To put it bluntly, you could say that, in the Dadaists' reading, the conventional exhibition or museum visitor does not look at anything at all, but merely adopts the habitus of the beholder.

In contrast to the visitors staged by the artists, the artworks differ from those of the comparative examples. Even though the placement quotes the Petersburg hanging and, like the room and its furnishings, is aligned with the conventions of the bourgeois art world, the explicitly anti-military character is clearly directed against the conventions prevailing in the bourgeois milieu and is supported in this positioning by the accompanying text messages. "Dilettantes rise up against art", "DADA is political" and "ANYONE can do DADA" are just a few of the statements made here. In this way, a dissonance is created in the photograph between the works, which, in the definition of their producers, do not want to be seen as art but as "products" (Ad-

kins 1988: 164–165), and the form of visitor perception adopted by the artists, which, together with the framing room and furnishing, makes a clear reference to the bourgeois art world.

A conspicuous feature in the examples used by way of comparison, in addition to what has already been said, is the uniformity of the depicted visitors. What becomes visible here is that participation in the perception of art was linked to social status and reflected in the clothing. There is probably no one today who finds anything directly remarkable in the way the Dadaists dressed.<sup>2</sup> However, clothing was an important part of the artistic self-staging and was featured by the Dadaists in self-portraits, paintings, photographs and newspaper articles (Burmeister 2022, and Söll 2022). It was neither tailored to the fashion ideal of the “proper gentleman” still common in bourgeois circles, nor did it take its cue from the working class, with which the artists sympathized, or from the habitus of the Bohemians, still common prior to the Second World War, who seemingly tended to neglect their outer appearance. With the flexible gentleman and the dandy, two fashion ideals emerged with which men presented themselves as suave and modern (Söll 2022).

Höch associated this style with Dada in her collage *Da-Dandy* (1919). Without further dwelling on this work, suffice it to say that Höch places the term next to the silhouette of Salomo Friedlaender. Friedlaender’s observations on “creative indifference” had a significant influence on Berlin Dadaism and sought to “emancipate by absorbing polarities ... One has to understand, says Friedlaender, that ‘heaven and hell, good and evil, light and darkness, beauty and ugliness, indeed, all the differences of the world of experiences’ can only be judged properly, if ‘they are seen together’. This idea of the explicit demonstration of opposites and, at the same time, a creative dissolution of antagonisms was taken up by the Dadaists and implemented creatively in many different ways.” (Burmeister 2022: 99). Consequently, Burmeister interprets the clothing style as a Dadaist positioning, in which the bourgeoisie was confronted with a lint-free suit. In the photograph, too, two opposites confront each other.

These are the bourgeois art business and the products of the Dadaists. Dadaist art was intended to enable something new by bringing things together through collage or assemblage that could otherwise not be viewed together (Burmeister 2022: 102). Like the collage, the *First International Dada Fair* in the photograph discussed is a medium that makes the impossible possible and connects the poles. This connection extended also beyond the photograph in that the exhibition was noticed by the bourgeois public via criticism in the press, even if it was poorly attended.<sup>3</sup> With

2 It should be noted here that Ralf Burmeister has already pointed out the significance of Hannah Höch’s walking stick in her hands for the gender question (Burmeister 2022: 100).

3 The analysis focuses only on one of the eleven surviving photographs and does not address the different places of publication. In these extensions, further possibilities of the method

their self-staging in Sennecke's photograph, the Dadaists created an image of their exhibition idea. The First international Dada Fair was intended to bring together the opposing poles of the bourgeois art world and Dadaism and in this way create a space for encounters that would produce something novel. Here, the exhibition is conceived performatively as a place of encounter (Bismarck 2021: 53).

## Method reflection

Very generally, the method trains media competence by requiring a media-critical stance and creates an awareness for the power exercised by the media. Photographs, in particular, are omnipresent in our everyday lives and shape our actions. The benefits of consciously engaging with them therefore go far beyond scientific interest alone. For researchers in the field, the method provides access to past exhibitions and thus offers insights into curatorial practices (Bismarck 2021: 21–23). By incorporating not only individual archive materials, but a broad selection of sources, it allows for a view on various elements of the research field and the exhibition context. By considering the context, the perception, the working method and the organization around the photograph and the photographed exhibition also come into view alongside the content. This makes it possible to gain insights into the system behind the objects and to draw conclusions about power relations, allowing us to observe socially conditioned normalizations and categories of the field of the exhibition, the visitor, the institution and more.

The method has its limits set by the accessibility of the material. As researchers, we never experience the exhibition directly, but always mediated and only as a detail of the overall event. But it is precisely this narrowing of the perspective that offers the opportunity to reveal categories or to gain insight into how creators positioned themselves individually. In broader studies on the various categories of the research field of exhibitions, detailed archival work that inquires into the background of the production processes can be abandoned for a comparative examination of larger image corpora. In the framework of an analysis of current exhibition websites, one could, for instance, examine the image of the visitor visualized here and in this way draw conclusions about the self-understanding of exhibitions.

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can be found (depending on the case study). It is important to note that if the method is extended to include publications, their media properties should also be considered. There are a number of further questions that could be discussed on the basis of this photograph. For example, this paper makes only passing reference to the exhibition catalogue. The role of the Dadaists could also be further explained and a connection established with the other photographs that have survived.

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