

# Narratives – Structures – Contradictions

## Subjecting exhibitions to a critical reading

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*schnittpunkt. ausstellungstheorie & praxis*<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The method narratives – structures – contradictions aims at a critical investigation of power relations and assumes that exhibitions have an agency within these power relations. This involves three essential theoretical points of departure:

Firstly, it is an analysis that first and foremost seeks to address and understand social power relations by means of a critical assessment of exhibitions. A critique of the representation of exhibitions, as formulated particularly in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in activism and in critical, artistic, museological, cultural studies and curatorial discourses, for instance, by Donna Haraway (2004) and Henrietta Lidchi (1997), aims to do more than just analyze and understand exhibitions. It is more about a critique of the forms of representation in the museum understood as a critique of power relations and forms of government, drawing on the theories of Michel Foucault and Stuart Hall.<sup>2</sup> Against this background, exhibitions appear as forms of action that are situated in power relations and are pervaded by them. The method we present here aims to understand both these sides: the power relations that turn exhibitions into specific spaces for meaning-making, as well as the specific actions that exhibitions generate and that are themselves based on contradictions, negotiations and compromises.

Informed by linguistic, post-structural and cultural-semiotic theories, we thus understand museum and exhibition work as a specific form of discursive behaviour

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1 *schnittpunkt ausstellungstheorie & praxis* is an open, transnational network for actors and interested parties in the field of exhibitions and museums based in Vienna. *schnittpunkt* are: Martina Griesser-Stermscheg, Christine Haupt-Stummer, Renate Höllwart, Beatrice Jaschke, Monika Sommer, Nora Sternfeld and Luisa Ziaja, [www.schnitt.org](http://www.schnitt.org) (05.08.2024).

2 Nora Sternfeld describes this vividly in her lecture "Museums As Spectral Infrastructures", given at the conference The Politics and Poetics of Exhibiting: Proposing New Institutional Models Through Exhibitions, February 23–24, 2023, Louisiana Museum Copenhagen, <https://vimeo.com/showcase/10251788> (05.08.2024).

and exhibitions as visual-verbal sign systems, in whose narrative structures consciously constructed and culturally coded meanings take effect. In the processes of (re)coding of objects – charging them with meaning that transcends their materiality, physical presence, history and provenance – institutional effects of an apparent neutrality and objectivity, attributions of value and relevance and their embedment in specific knowledge apparatuses and canonizations play just as important a role as the fundamental entanglement of the power / knowledge nexus. In order to trace such discursive structures of macro- and micro- narratives in the sense of a decoding, a critical exhibition analysis of this kind employs a combination of semiotic, ideology-critical and deconstructivist reading strategies.

Secondly, we understand exhibitions as sites of potential (self) criticism. Here, we refer to the institutional critique that emerged in artistic and curatorial contexts in the 1960s: an artistic and theoretical practice that began to question its own social and field-specific framework against the background of feminist, postcolonial, representation- and hegemony-critical approaches (Ziaja 2013a, 2013b). Museums and exhibitions were subjected to thorough structural analyses. These comprise institutional parameters, formats and role attributions as well as overarching questions of identity politics and social differences and exclusion mechanisms. This is not just about visualizing and criticizing the specific contexts of production, presentation and perception of visual art, but also about actually intervening in them. While the artistic approaches and many of its paradigmatic actors have since found their way into the art-historical canon – the very system of values they had set out to challenge – the analytical tool of institutional critique has been increasingly applied in the sense of an institutional self-critique and re-definition. However, an analysis dedicated to structures and (self-)criticism always has to consider the risk of being co-opted.

Thirdly, it is about understanding exhibitions as the result of contradictions, conflicts and institutional forms of negotiation and reading them on the basis of their contradictoriness. The critical reflexivity of New Museology and the artistic institutional critique have meanwhile also had an effect on museum praxis: many institutions have embarked on a process of re-definition. Current forms of presentation show ruptures with approaches of the traditional museum narratives: They transcend national narratives, expand Western perspectives, address neoliberal logics of exploitation, call into question the apparent objectivity and neutrality of the White Cube and involve visitors in the exhibition. Against this background, an analysis cannot merely limit itself to examining continuities and traditions, but must equally consider the breaks with established logics. This involves looking at the potential of exhibitions to be a source of resistance, but also that of hegemonial discourses to assimilate critique. In order to get a grasp on these questions, the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci coined the term transformism (Marchart 2008,

Sternfeld 2009) to describe the strategy of maintaining power by co-opting critique.<sup>3</sup> The analytical method that investigates ruptures and this transformism assumes that discourses are never homogenous and that exhibitions are a contested terrain in which different, contradictory positions and forces leave their mark.

## Aim of the method

The aim of the method narratives – structures – contradictions is to examine exhibitions as forms of discourse and actions within power relations. It seeks to make exhibitions comprehensible in their interpretative authority, in their narrative forms and against the background of their structural conditions as a contested terrain in which different discourses and interests clash. The core questions are geared towards the “poetics, politics and effects of exhibitions” (Lidchi 1997, Sternfeld 2009): The poetics refer to the grammars and narrative forms of the exhibition. This raises the question: Which narrative(s) does the exhibition present and which discourses are thereby represented? The politics address the structures, conditions and infrastructures of exhibitions. This raises the question: To what extent is the institutional framework of production, presentation and perception addressed and reflected in the exhibition? The effects relate to the results of critical questioning and possible achievements, compromises, rejections or contradictions that arise from them. This raises the following questions: In which way is the critique of national, Western forms of presentation integrated or ignored? Is the ‘objectivity’ and ‘neutrality’ of the museums and exhibitions critically addressed, are their political and economic entanglements revealed?

## Step-by-step guideline

The analysis is based on a catalogue of questions that is subdivided into three sets: narratives and deconstructions, structures and resistances and ruptures and contradictions. Each of the guiding questions is deliberately formulated in such a way as to encourage participants to consider various aspects of the exhibition on their own, in small groups, or in conversation with others. The method works very well when these aspects are discussed together in small working groups. With the help of the questions, specific areas can be selected that are examined and discussed in detail (as in a close reading). In the discussion, the questions can point to a more

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3 Sternfeld and Marchart apply the concept of transformism from political theory from, among others, Antonio Gramsci to the field of exhibitions, thus enabling a more differentiated analysis of tendencies and strategies in the exhibition context.

general examination of interpretative sovereignty in society. If the analysis is carried out in a seminar or workshop context, the discussion in the working groups can be expanded by sharing the findings in a plenary session. The discussion on this more collective level opens up many follow-up questions that pertain to social power relations but also present possible alternative curatorial strategies. Since these three sets of questions are closely interrelated, it is not necessary to work on them in the presented order. It can just as well be done in parallel.

## 1. Narratives and deconstructions. Exhibitions as systems of representation

Possible questions:

- Which narrative(s) does the exhibition present and which discourses are thereby represented?
- How are they structured and which narrative strategies does the exhibition follow?
- Are there a core message and thematic points of focus and how can these be identified?
- Does the exhibition showcase particular exhibits as key objects and does it stage highlights?
- What is the ratio of original to secondary material?
- How are texts and media employed?
- Is the collection the objects were selected from discussed?
- What do we learn about the provenance of the exhibits and the genesis and the size of the collection?
- Are gaps and desiderata addressed?
- Does the exhibition present itself as a homogenous narrative and does it adopt an objectifying perspective?
- Or is there room for ruptures, alternative perspectives and counter-narratives?
- Does it follow the Western (art-historical) canon and is the latter addressed as a frame of reference?
- Is the origin of the narrative disclosed and contextualized in relation to the institution?

## 2. Structures and resistances. Exhibitions as sites of (self-)critique

Possible questions:

- Is the exhibition trying to ask questions or is the focus on providing answers?
- To what extent is the institutional framework of production, presentation and perception addressed and reflected in the exhibition?

- Does it reproduce existing structures, systems of representation and value, or does it question them?
- Does the exhibition attempt to appropriate and reinterpret hegemonic structures and develop new approaches and strategies?
- Does the exhibition make it clear for whom and why it exists in the context of this institution? And does its spatial and content-related setting enable discussions and critical discourses? Are such things actively organized?
- Is the role of private, private-sector and corporate actors disclosed in the exhibition and in the institution, and if so, how?

### 3. Ruptures and contradictions. Exhibitions as a contested terrain

Possible questions:

- In which way is the critique of national, Western forms of presentation integrated or ignored?
- Are the ‘objectivity’ and ‘neutrality’ of museums and exhibitions critically addressed, and their political and economic entanglements revealed?
- What linguistic, architectural, interactive means and forms of staging does the exhibition use? Who is addressed? Who is excluded?
- Which world views manifest themselves in the texts and in the selection and staging of the objects? What is missing?
- Which alternative narrative would be conceivable (in a different place, in a different time)?
- What is represented in the exhibition? To what extent is it about breaking with traditional narrative forms?
- Are there post-representative elements? Can something happen?
- What are the consequences of the critique of the museum in the museum for the museum?

In recent years, critical discussions have changed markedly. Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, critical theories have spread like wildfire in the practice of institutional texts and contexts: feminism, anti-racism, environmental politics, institutional critique, inclusion debates, decolonial and queer theories are omnipresent – while structurally, not much has changed for the better and a hard-earned critical vocabulary often becomes a label (Griesser-Stermscheg et al. 2023). This year,

we have therefore expanded the question catalogue in collaboration with students<sup>4</sup> of the /ecm Master's Programme in Exhibition Theory and Practice<sup>5</sup> 2022–2024 to include the following questions:

- How can past injustice and stories of violence be addressed without reproducing them?
- How can the silenced voices of history, which can only be guessed at in the gaps of exhibitions and collections, be made audible?
- How can we imagine a relationship between exhibitions and institutional infrastructures that does justice to the ghostly dimension of history, which is at the same time repressed and present?
- How can different temporalities and situated archives – not only hegemonic forms of knowledge – be read together?
- What room does the exhibition leave for imaginings of possible other futures?
- And what would a different institution look like?

## Case study

On 3 and 4 November 2022, we were invited to organize a think tank at the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden (DHMD). This was entitled *How can critique of the museum have consequences in the museum?* The aim was to collectively analyze the permanent exhibition *Abenteuer Mensch* (Adventure Man) and subsequently critically reflect on the self-image of the DHMD. After input presentations by exhibition theorists and practitioners, we addressed similar questions in three workshops to the ones posed above. In the documentation of the *schnittpunkt* think tank, Simon Nagy (2022) summarized some pertinent reactions:

“One participant says that only the invitation to search for gaps has led her to see gaps at all, because in her daily work she usually succumbs to the interpretative power of the permanent exhibition. The call for collective critique, however, does not only produce enthusiasm but also resistance. After all, the permanent exhibition is a visitor magnet, the collection supports the exhibition in an already well-established

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4 See the profiles of the participants in the /ecm course 2022–2024 and the homepage of the /ecm Master's Program in Exhibition Theory and Practice: <https://ecm.ac.at/teilnehmerinnen2022/> (05.08.2024).

5 The /ecm Master's Program in Exhibition Theory and Practice at the University of Applied Arts Vienna is a two-year postgraduate program that provides comprehensive knowledge and skills in the expanded museum and exhibition field and has been led by us, the initiators of *schnittpunkt. ausstellungstheorie & praxis*, since 2006. See the homepage of the /ecm Master's Program in Exhibition Theory and Practice: <https://www.ecm.ac.at/> (05.08.2024).

dynamic, and the ongoing evaluation enables very specific optimizations and corrections. Why does everything have to be questioned now? The dynamics of enthusiasm and conflict is connected to the dynamics of ‘in the museum’ and ‘of the museum’. Being critical of the museum is not particularly problematic, on the contrary: A certain mode of critique and deconstruction is part and parcel of ‘good form’ in the cultural sector. So searching for fractures together can even be something very enjoyable. By contrast, resistance is always palpable if the criticism is aimed at the very structures of the museum, in order to delve deeper from there and convey it to the museum. That’s when it gets down to the nitty-gritty: namely, the day-to-day work practice in the institution, for the institution and possibly against the institution [...].

The conflictual discussions produce numerous diverse proposals and visions for the future of the museum. The participants’ questions, observations and ideas are collected on index cards that form the aesthetic backbone of this documentation [...]. The fundamental critique of the permanent exhibition which is the focus of the final plenary session is: the spirit of [the ethno-nationalist (‘völkisch’) ideology rampant at] the time the museum was opened in 1930 is still present in today’s exhibition. What does that mean? The ethno-nationalist division into ‘healthy’ and ‘sick’ has shaped in the most violent way imaginable the idea of which bodies are considered to be functioning, desirable and capable of participating in the community, and which ones are excluded. Even if today we no longer work with these terms, they still appear in the mechanical and binary representations of bodily functions. The exhibition *Abenteuer Mensch* presents the human being primarily on the basis of the physical functions of the body. Whether it is a ‘see-though human being’ or as organs and structures dismantled down to the smallest detail, human beings seem to consist of individual parts that sometimes function better or sometimes worse and at some point add up to a whole [...]. A fundamental critique that does not simply seek to improve what is observed, but rather calls its very foundations into question appears in plenary as an opportunity for intensive self-reflection by the DHMD. And as an opportunity to translate this reflection into a new concept for a permanent exhibition.”<sup>6</sup>

## Method reflection

This glimpse from an intensive workshop shows that a method that considers, in a holistic way, narratives, structures and the contradictory results of critical examina-

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6 Documentation of the *schnittpunkt* think tank on November 3–4, 2022 at the Deutsches Hygiene Museum Dresden (DHMD), formulated and designed by Simon Nagy, Vienna 2022: 8–14.

tions of exhibitions is able to produce insights that can certainly be described as eye-opening: often, hierarchies, exclusions and assumptions come to light that have become entrenched in the history of an institution or groups of objects and that have an impact without intending to do so. Understanding these better can not only reveal, but also challenge and shift the ways in which our own knowledge is itself embedded in power relations. In this sense, it is also less about a critique of the exhibition and more about an examination of the canon in order to understand its mechanisms and make it alterable. The result at the DHMD was very concrete: the workshop was followed by the institution seriously considering a new concept for the permanent exhibition.

We have applied this method in numerous other places over the past twenty years and have time and again found that openness and the development of perspectives of exhibitions as contested terrain are capable of promoting a profound critical engagement. The method is thus particularly interesting when it comes to understanding exhibitions as visual-spatial discourses with powers of agency. This is because exhibitions are actually always polyphonic and always show what they show always within power relations. They are the result of divergent demands, aspirations, and compromises. They always produce inclusions and exclusions. And they could always also be different. All this can be made clear and reflectable with this method.

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