

## 7 Conclusion

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### 7.1 Claiming interdisciplinarity as a method for museum practice: Is an interdisciplinary approach to exhibition-making also a matter of confidence?

This book contributes to a methodologically grounded discussion on interdisciplinary exhibition-making by applying a rich theoretical vocabulary from both museum and interdisciplinary studies to analyse three recent cases of thematic temporary exhibitions from my curatorial practice at the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn, Germany. These case studies of specifically interdisciplinary exhibitions have been presented through the eyes of a researcher-participant with a transparent behind-the-scenes investigation of our practical production processes. By introducing, testing, and applying a more precise taxonomy of interdisciplinarity to exhibition theory and practice, based on the groundbreaking work of Julie Thompson Klein, this study has enabled a deeper understanding of this cultural practice, and acts as an advocate for institutional environments and standards which facilitate such interdisciplinary practice. It can perhaps also act as a helpful example for other museum and exhibition curators who are working on interdisciplinary exhibitions.

I have argued throughout that museums are in fact places where interdisciplinary research can happen in all its shades and grades. They are not just institutions that 'support humanities' (Klein 2005, p. 8) and other fields of academia, as Klein contestably writes in her book *Humanities, Culture, and Interdisciplinarity*, but places of research in their own right. This still prevailing notion of museums as front (or back) yards of academic knowledge production can perhaps help explain the continuing hesitancy in the museum context to use the general term interdisciplinarity when describing applicable collaborative work and research processes to begin with – let alone to use a precise terminology around interdisciplinarity, as it allegedly seems to ap-

ply and belong to academia rather than to cultural institutions. Instead, the production of knowledge in museums, when achieved through a collaboration including multiple perspectives, is often attributed the apparently more neutral (but closely related) term *participation*, which seems to be far more easily and readily used and researched in the field of museum studies than interdisciplinarity.<sup>1</sup> In *The Participatory Museum*, Nina Simon, for example, describes 'co-development collaboration' (Simon 2010, p. 237) as a model of participation, which in some cases could also well be framed as an *inter-* or *transdisciplinary* research strategy. Tellingly, she delineates the collaborative co-development of exhibitions and programs as 'often personally focused' 'creative projects', in which participants rather focus on sharing 'personal knowledge and experience', as opposed to 'institutionally focused' 'research collaborations [...] with participants [...] adding to institutional knowledge' (Simon 2010, p. 253), which seems to imply that exhibition-making is not a research activity. I oppose this distinction in the first place, but if the former were at least characterized as participatory and transdisciplinary projects<sup>2</sup>, inviting different kinds of disciplinary and non-disciplinary knowledge (including the embodied and the everyday), and the latter as participatory and *interdisciplinary* projects, involving other disciplinary perspectives, these contributions to the knowledge production of a cultural institution could be empowered and enhanced in their value and appreciation.

Therefore, I have argued for a more *confident* usage and implementation of the theoretical discourse around interdisciplinarity and its terminology in museum studies as well as museum practice. Likewise, interdisciplinary studies (and academia at large) can learn more about and should acknowledge the potential of museums as sites of research, and specifically exhibition-making as a meaningful and available research method (see, for example, Thomas 2010) with the capacity to spark and create new knowledge.

Throughout this book I have been advocating for an interdisciplinary approach to exhibition-making in all its forms, especially when the topics of such exhibitions are of significant societal relevance, asking for multiple perspectives and voices to be included into their development process, as was in fact the case with the themes of the three discussed exhibitions in this study: learning disabilities (chapter 4), climate change (chapter 5) and capitalism (chap-

1 Interestingly, the literature in interdisciplinarity studies seems, in turn, to shun the term 'participation' as I elaborated on in section 2.2 of chapter 2.

2 As I deliberately chose to frame the exhibition *TOUCHDOWN* (see chapter 4).

ter 6). But this research journey – starting out from exploring its scope in the fields of museum studies and interdisciplinary studies in the literature review (chapter 2), on to establishing its theoretical framework in chapter 3, followed by applying the consulted and discussed literature as well as the theoretical tools and practical methods to the analysis of three interdisciplinary exhibition cases – also revealed the real-life complexities and possibilities for conflict in this cultural practice. Interdisciplinarity is basically about complicating things in a fruitful way. One might ask whether an interdisciplinary approach to exhibition-making is worth all these complexities? Moran has a convincing answer with regard to research and beyond it, stating that:

interdisciplinary approaches [...] can challenge ossified, outmoded systems of thought and produce new, innovative theories and methodologies which open up the existing disciplines to new perspectives; and they can help people to think more creatively about the relationship between their own subject and other ways of doing things both within and outside universities (Moran 2010, p. 165).

It is this disruptive, creative, and experimental potential that makes interdisciplinarity a valuable tool or method for universities and museums alike, especially in times in which museums are starting to embrace the idea of activism as a way ‘to shape a more sustainable, equitable and fair world’ (Janes and Sandell 2019, p. xxvii).

## 7.2 Interdisciplinary exhibition-making: What does it take and what do you get?

In chapters 2 and 3 I have attempted to characterize multi-, *inter*- and transdisciplinary exhibitions in the sense of a typology, based on Klein’s taxonomy of interdisciplinarity. And it has become clear, especially by testing these typologies during the analysis of the three case studies in chapters 4–6, that *interdisciplinary* and transdisciplinary exhibitions can be regarded as of a certain higher quality than multidisciplinary exhibitions. But what constitutes this specific higher quality? While multidisciplinary does not include a fundamental discourse between the participating disciplines, *inter*- and transdisciplinarity require a growing intensity of cooperation and negotiation between disciplinary and non-disciplinary partners. Such projects have an experimental and discursive

sive quality that allows for an open outcome. And they enable innovation and novelty, categories I have discussed in the literature review (chapter 2) as desired merits of exhibition-making. But *inter-* and transdisciplinarity facilitate a different kind of innovation and novelty, different from the concepts of these terms that are first and foremost associated with economic growth. Instead of an encyclopaedic accumulation of innovative and new knowledge, these methods create and enable a greater depth and density of knowledge by contributing to its interwovenness. This increased integrative quality can spark new ideas, for example, by recognizing new connections and contexts. It is not only the ‘accumulation of more and more knowledge’ (Frodeman et al. 2010, p. xxx, as cited in the introduction to this book) that leads to a deeper understanding of the world, but the integration of the bits and pieces that we already know about the world, which leads us on to develop larger narratives, new insights, and better solutions for the big questions we are facing as a society.

But what does it take to use these methods in exhibition-making? Both in academia and culture, institutions that are promoting interdisciplinarity are not necessarily themselves providing an enabling environment for this research approach to thrive. All too often funding realities and economic goals clash with political ideals and even basic institutional needs. But what should such an environment that facilitates *inter-* and transdisciplinarity look like? An institutional consequence of applying the methods suggested here would be a degrowth in work speed, because interdisciplinary projects, like participatory projects, need a longer time frame – and thus also larger financial resources – for negotiations and joint decision-making processes. This means that institutions need to invest both time and money into these collaborative methods, in order to allow for slower curating that enables a more thoughtful and independent way of conceptualizing and realizing exhibitions. Apart from resources, interdisciplinary exhibitions need equality amongst the curatorial team members regarding their salaries, decision-making procedures, and a shared access to institutional work tools (as already stated in the conclusion of chapter 5). As the case studies have shown, it is not easy to adjust the curatorial and institutional roles to the needs of such projects, because their integrative quality can go along with not only the breakdown of disciplinary barriers but also of hierarchical levels. *Interdisciplinarity* and transdisciplinarity are also about overcoming hierarchies in joint decision-making processes that ideally lead to a synthesis of methods and content resulting in a collaboratively developed research project, such as an exhibition.

The research for this study, taking place over a period of eight years (2015–2023), has made my own curatorial practice both more purposeful and more realistic, as the chronology of the exhibition cases discussed in this book has shown. After one very ambitious transdisciplinary exhibition, namely *TOUCHDOWN. An exhibition with and about people with Down's syndrome* (see chapter 4), the institutional realities regarding time, finances, and workload did not allow for another exhibition project of that intensity of integration. Over the course of these years, I have become more aware of both the potentials but also the obstacles when using the method of interdisciplinary exhibition-making, and I have been trying to translate this awareness and deepened theoretical understanding into further exhibition projects.

After the exhibition *We Capitalists* in 2020 (see chapter 6), I worked on another large *interdisciplinary* exhibition in which positions from art, cultural history and the natural sciences were incorporated into the thematic enquiry, exhibition narrative and diverse object choice. This exhibition was titled *The Brain. In Art & Science*<sup>3</sup> (28 January until 26 June 2022 at the Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn) and involved an *interdisciplinary* curatorial team spanning the disciplines of medical history, brain research, philosophy, psychology, art history, and contemporary art to encircle the complex topic of the human brain. While finishing this study, I have been working on a new exhibition project on the ecological topic of land restoration that, again, plans to combine art and science, and I hope I will be able to conduct the method of *inter-* and *transdisciplinary* exhibition-making in the conceptual and procedural depth this both environmentally and socially important topic deserves. Originally entering this research as a practitioner, I have now transitioned back from researching and theorizing my curatorial work towards a more informed practice.

### 7.3 Limitations of this study and a plea for museum activism

As much as I have tried to advocate for the use of interdisciplinarity in museum practice and to incorporate some of the theories around this research method into the theory formation in museum studies, I am also aware of the

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3 A comprehensive book accompanied the exhibition: [https://www.hirmerverlag.de/de/titel-1-1/das\\_gehirn-2307/](https://www.hirmerverlag.de/de/titel-1-1/das_gehirn-2307/). A second slightly modified venue has been presented at the Berlin Museum of Medical History: <https://bmm-charite.de/en/exhibitions/das-gehirn> (both links last accessed 2 April 2024).

limitations of my research. I have been arguing for a wider and more pluralistic thematic horizon in exhibition-making, but the scope of my own research has been quite limited, as I have mainly focused on the content-creation in exhibition-making (including narratives and objects as well as their display and interpretation) and the knowledge production that the involved creative and at the same time rigorous development processes entail. With this focus, the perspective of my research has been that of a curator, not least because this is what I do in my professional practice. But apart from this fact, the reason for this narrow choice of research scope was also the notion that in museum practice the institutional processes that are taking place before the grand openings are not revealed, discussed, and analysed often enough, especially not in public. But I am keenly aware that such a discussion and analysis must also involve all the other museum professionals and related experts involved in exhibition-making to truly implement *interdisciplinarity* and transdisciplinarity as methods in museums and other cultural institutions. The works by Nina Simon (2010) and Susanne Gesser et al. (2012) have delivered more comprehensive studies about how to implement participation in museum work (see also Bjerregaard 2020, p. 10), and this is certainly something we should strive for in future research projects regarding interdisciplinarity in museum practice and theory.

Apart from a more differentiated and multivocal institutional viewpoint, another very important perspective is missing in this study, and that is an analysis of the visitors' reception. Do these different processes of collaborative research and knowledge production in a multi-, *inter*-, or transdisciplinary form that happen before an exhibition is finally opened, matter for the audience of an exhibition? As Peter Bjerregaard stated in what I used as the opening quote to this book, '[...] museums would be more attractive to both researchers and audiences if we consider exhibitions as *knowledge-in-the-making* rather than platforms for disseminating already-established insights' (Bjerregaard 2020, *Exhibitions as Research*, synopsis). My notion is that the audiences we work for and with, do appreciate a less apodictical approach to exhibition-making not only by presenting a creatively and deeply thought through 'thickened plot' (Rugoff 2015, p. 44), but also by

bringing researchers and non-researchers together, by asking people to think through objects and space, and by asking research to transgress its internal jargon and formulate questions that can be shared by a general audience', inserting 'a layer of playful imagination to the research process

that has the potential to guide research in new directions (Bjerregaard 2020, p. 11).

As much as we should not underestimate our own curatorial activities in the context of research, our audiences are also curious about and engaged with our research activities. And they can contribute to the research process themselves if we facilitate it, for example, by questioning the importance of the exhibition opening as a signal of an allegedly finished product. Therefore, in a spirit of allowing for change, open outcomes, and creative solutions, I would like to see *interdisciplinarity* and transdisciplinarity as additional tools for nurturing and enabling, what Robert Janes and Richard Sandell call ‘museum activism’, which should ‘stimulate and inform new ways of thinking’ (Janes and Sandell 2019, p. xxviii).

