

# Knowledge Analysis

## Examining exhibitions critically in terms of representation and power

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### Introduction

Knowledge is a paradoxical term: the harder one attempts to grasp it in a definitional way, the more it eludes definition (Füssel 2021: 7). Knowledge cannot be defined conclusively, but is constantly renegotiated within cultural and historical contexts. Exhibitions in particular are central venues for these negotiations.<sup>1</sup> They make knowledge both visible and invisible, they represent, popularize, discard, generate new insights and put these up for debate at the same time. Ever since Michel Foucault pointed out the inseparable connection between knowledge and power, an analysis of knowledge can no longer be conceived without the question of power relations: power generates knowledge and knowledge constitutes power (Foucault 1977). Exhibitions operate at this interface and are characterized by relations of power and domination. They are closely linked to historically evolved institutions such as museums, archives, collections and universities, which often retain bodies of knowledge from colonial, patriarchal and hegemonic contexts (Paul 2019: 174).

Contrary to what is often assumed, the knowledge presented in exhibitions is not evident, but provisional and contestable. According to Beatrice von Bismarck (2021: 13, 63), exhibitions can be understood as curatorial situations that can abandon established forms of knowledge and multiply and process other knowledge. Their rationalizing and simultaneously aesthetic arrangements in space enable both affirmative and critical reflections of the respective knowledge culture. It is precisely

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1 The Research Training Group *Wissen | Ausstellen. Eine Wissensgeschichte von Ausstellungen in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Knowledge | Exhibiting. A History of Knowledge of Exhibitions in the Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century) based at the Georg-August University of Göttingen explored this reciprocal relationship (2018–2023). The following reflections benefit greatly from the joint discussions and collective work processes, which is why I would like to sincerely thank all the PhD students and colleagues involved.

here that the dual function of knowledge – as a power-stabilizing and emancipatory instrument (Kroll 2002: 403) – can become productive. A knowledge analysis of exhibitions addresses this ambivalent relationship between the re-production, new production and de-production of knowledge.

## Aim of the method

An analysis of knowledge that is based on a critique of representation and power aims at describing exhibitions as places where purportedly valid knowledge and its production processes are negotiated. It enquires who produces what knowledge and by what means, and incorporates the analyzer's own position and situatedness into the analysis. It takes a subjective, interpretive approach and in doing so, produces new, relational and particular knowledge. On the one hand, it is necessary to follow the curatorial narrative, on the other, to look for disruptions, unrest, resistance or conflicts in the display. By placing various bodies of knowledge in relation to one another, both the knowledge that has become evident through exhibitions and that which is contingent and inconclusive can be addressed.

In order to explore various dimensions of knowledge in an exhibition complex, I propose a combination of various approaches. My method is guided by a cultural analysis that, following Mieke Bal (2002), examines exhibitions as cultural processes with the aid of feminist, post-colonial and representation-oriented critical perspectives. The frequently raised question "Who is speaking in particular?" allows to analyze epistemic inequalities regarding gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality etc. in exhibition and museum practice (e.g. Adair and Levin 2020, Döring and Fitsch 2016, Kazeem-Kamiński and Martinz-Turek 2009, Muttenthaler and Wonisch 2006). This raises the need to inquire not only into which and whose knowledge is represented, but also how and under what structural conditions it is presented. The spatial, architectural and medial parameters (Hoffmann 2014, 38) come into focus, because these conditions of display either enable or restrict specific forms of use, exploration and discovery.

In exhibitions – understood as "a complex of coded sign relations" (Scholze 2010: 137) – particular meanings, interpretations and attributions of knowledge production are constantly negotiated. Cultural and implicit bodies of knowledge are embedded in curatorial practice, the exhibition itself and its perception. This tacit dimension of knowledge (Polanyi 1967) can be elaborated through an ethnographic approach. In examining exhibitions and their diverse practices, we can identify which cultural premises, which subjects, positions and actions are addressed and which are made impossible. The basis of such an investigation is Donna Haraway's (1991) long-standing feminist demand for an embodied and situated knowledge that makes one's own situatedness and privilege the point of departure for a (self-)criti-

cal and reflective production of knowledge and thereby makes alternatives visible. A power-critical analysis of knowledge thus not only aims to critically reflect exhibitions in terms of process, as potent venues of performance and negotiation of knowledge, but at the same time to participate in them and contribute to shaping them with one's own knowledge.

## Step-by-step guideline

Even though the tools of knowledge analysis were initially situated theoretically, the method proposed here was developed from my practice (Döring 2020, 2021, Döring and Strunge 2021). Exhibition analyses can hardly be designed at the drawing board; they are always embedded in overarching questions as well as epistemic interests and can generally be understood as a constant oscillation between a theoretical approach and framing and mapping the subject matter. The following guideline is therefore not conceived as a rigid procedure, but rather as a working mode that isolates separate, often interlocking stages from one another and at the same time invites reflection and, if necessary, divergence.

### 1. Explore, perceive, let yourself be guided

Where does an exhibition begin? The very approach to the exhibition, its accessibility and the history of the museum or the exhibiting institution, its embeddedness in the urban space, its architectural and global forms of representation or the cultural-political framework already point to the structural preconditions of the exhibited knowledge. Determine a point of departure and let your interest and intuition guide you. Look for introductory or explanatory curatorial information in order to get a general idea of what to expect: How is the exhibition designed, is there a suggested tour, what story is it meant to tell, what knowledge to convey? The mode in which you move through the exhibition rooms is twofold: On the one hand, it is about exploring, immersing yourself and discovering, but digressing and getting side-tracked is welcome. On the other hand, it also involves observing your observation, i.e. a detached perception of your own exploration. Because the question why you have, for instance, digressed from a designated path or what exactly has attracted your attention can therefore be a valuable instrument to uncover your own epistemic interest. Reflecting the question "What do you want to know?" is one of the keys to and a precondition for a power-critical knowledge analysis.

## 2. Note, sketch, draw

Record selected exhibition contents during or at the end of your tour by taking notes, photographs or making sketches. I often take a first step towards abstraction when leaving the exhibition – in the last room of the exhibition, a reading or activity corner or in the museum café. Make a note of key words, sentences or outlines of individual exhibition scenes, exhibits or architectures – it's about saving your first immediate impressions in a medium that you are comfortable with. It is also in moments like this that your attention may wander: How do you perceive the exhibition venue? What attracts you? Are other visitors present and how do they conduct themselves? What happens in the spaces in between? Where and how does the exhibiting institution present itself to you? Who participates (and how)? Your notes about the exhibition constitute a first level of reflection, they should be as unfiltered as possible and not yet aim for a particular outcome, giving you the opportunity to gather contingent and implicit bodies of knowledge.

## 3. Search, question, analyze

Before tackling the actual production of text, it is advisable to identify your epistemic interest more accurately and analytically frame various forms of knowledge. The aim of this work step is to create your own catalogue of questions in which you (can) incorporate the parameters listed below. From this, you generate key concepts and a leading question that you want to think about with and in the exhibition. This allows you to structure and focus what you want to know. The approaches address different levels of a power-critical knowledge analysis.<sup>2</sup>

### a) Subject

Subjective experience and observation constitute, in a cultural-anthropological sense, a significant source of knowledge production that needs to be reflected and operationalized. Exhibitions, in particular, are spaces that are read, physically experienced and negotiated by subjects (Reitstätter 2015). What emotions, associations or memories does the exhibition trigger in you? Where do you feel that it appeals to you – or not – and why? Explore your own epistemic processes, interactions and entanglements in the field of the exhibition in order to be able to work out implicit presumptions and inscriptions. Also reflect the conditions of your own knowledge

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- 2 Sophia Prinz and Hilmar Schäfer (2015: 290–302) undertake a similar categorization in their praxeologically oriented dispositive analysis of exhibitions, but without following a power-critical or cultural-analytical approach: They focus on the architecture of the building, the medial arrangement of the artefacts, the intersubjective relationships and finally their embedding in discursive practices.

production, for instance education, professional discipline, origin, gender and your relationship to the institution. This positioning does not necessarily need to find its way into the final text, but serves to make you aware of where you stand yourself.

### ***b) Representation***

The concept of representation serves to enquire about contents, assumptions and collections represented in the exhibition. Which canon, whose knowledge or which objects are shown? Processes of visualization are always ambivalent and at the same time linked to forms of invisibilization (Schaffer 2008). Your analysis should therefore also look for the omissions, the absent and the categorizations: which voices are not represented? Which boundaries, groupings and gaze regimes are being applied? Can gender-specific, classifying or racializing differences or hierarchies be detected? Who talks about whom – what and how?

### ***c) Display***

At this level, the ways in which the exhibition is staged come into view. How can you describe the display? In which forms and formats is knowledge organized in the room? What atmosphere do you detect? Is the exhibition design visible or does it make itself disappear? It is precisely the invisibility of the exhibition's medial setting that contributes decisively to the legitimization, naturalization and objectification of knowledge. Do the gestures of showing employ a familiar or unconventional language of signs and forms, are there surprises, irritations or fault lines? And how are evidence, credibility or, conversely, the provisional nature and conditionality of knowledge marked?

### ***d) Institution***

This focus enquires about the institutional authorship and the conditions of exhibiting, which are often concealed. How can the curatorial actor – i.e. the “long chain of subjects” (Bal 2002: 77) that produce the exhibition – be described? Beyond concrete statements by the curators, it is the institution itself that demands critical attention: Can you find institutional aims, a stance or implicit preconceptions regarding the exhibited bodies of knowledge? What aims are pursued? Who is addressed and imagined by the exhibition? Who benefits from the knowledge?

### ***e) Contexts***

Finally, one has to work out the various contexts in which the exhibition is embedded. Against what background was the exhibition curated? Which discourses, theories, problematics and which historical or current debates are “processed”? What broader societal issues or diagnoses does the exhibition react to? Are there references, precursors or analogies? Which cultural concepts or terms appear to be materialized and (re)negotiated here?

#### 4. Read, describe, produce

The next step is to write a first draft against the background of your own questions. Choose a few central exhibition scenes – three to a maximum of five specific exhibition units, an ensemble of objects, a display case, installation or hands-on station – and create a thick description (Geertz 1973).<sup>3</sup> Choose a key scene that forms the beginning of your narrative. This first exhibition unit has a particular significance for your emerging text. Because with this scene you clarify the question(s) that accompany you through the exhibition, you elucidate and exemplify your own epistemic interest and open your analysis. Here, writing is exploratory research with which you associatively ‘read’ and narrate the exhibition. By arranging the selected exhibition scenes, you create your own tour and narrative, your own knowledge.

#### 5. Structure, edit, criticize

You have now produced a first draft of your text. Check whether your original epistemic interest is ‘supported’ by your analysis or whether the material and your subject suggest other approaches. For this, you repeatedly read your draft once again, crystallize the terms and questions addressed therein and devise subheadings. With the help of the analytic parameters of your question catalogue, you can flesh out, elaborate and systematize individual descriptions. Once you have developed an outline and dramaturgy for your text, proceed to the editorial revision stage, trimming, deleting, expanding and reorganizing your material. Your personal perception of the exhibition must now be viewed at a greater distance from itself and in relation to other bodies of knowledge, exhibitions, academic discourses or debates, in this way contextualizing it in societal issues and diagnoses.

The method of knowledge analysis lends itself to the observation by a single person, but can be also be expanded through group discussions, interviews with the actors involved in the exhibition, in-depth archive or collection research as in *Context Analysis*, *Go-Alongs* or *Questionnaires*. The time frame depends on the subject matter, available resources, the writing genre and the publication medium. It is recommended to visit the exhibition several times as well as to allow for multiple writing and editing phases. Peer editing is particularly beneficial for the challenging, subjective approach of this method of analysis in order to ensure the necessary critical distance and intersubjectivity.

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3 Although thick description is, according to Clifford Geertz, not a method, but rather an epistemic and interpretative approach, it has found its way into numerous empirical studies. It assumes that a description and observation of cultural phenomena is not possible without explaining and producing them (Egger 2014: 401–414).

## Case study

For quite some time I had wanted to visit the Gent University Museum (GUM) which opened at the beginning of the 2020 pandemic. It wasn't until a year later that I stood at the museum's ticket desk and received a sticker with the phrase "I am not sure". This unusual slogan points to the museum's programmatic policy: the subtitle *Forum for Science, Doubt and Art* signals a shift towards a distinctive kind of curatorial approach. Science should not longer be shown as a finished result or achievement of individual people, but as work in progress, as human and collaborative processes together with doubts and detours. The museum 'for everyone who dares to think' not only wants to look behind the scenes of the academic world, but also design a new and unconventional science museum – "The Museum of Doubt" (Doom 2020).<sup>4</sup> A museum guard welcomes me at the entrance and wishes me to have more questions than answers by the end of the exhibition. I'm curious!

**1. First impressions:** The exhibition captivates me. Already in the first section I linger for quite some time. In the beginning there was chaos: that seems to be the primal scene of the idea of a Western, rational and enlightened science. However, it is immediately questioned why we order and classify the chaotic world. Does this order really exist? Or is it imposed on reality? The key objects on display illustrate the logic of classification systems and emphasize their production process, their contingency and changeability. I find this to be an unusual number of questions for an exhibition. I like it. I'm particularly interested in the tensions and contradictions that are presented for classification systems, for example: on the one hand they promise to be universal and precise, on the other, they are in constant flux.

**2. Notes:** I make a sketch of the first section of the exhibition (Fig. 1). Later I notice with the help of my sketch that the staging of chaos is organized in an orderly fashion. The display is characterized by a clear layout of the objects and an unambiguous arrangement. Classification systems may be changeable, sometimes perhaps even 'wrong', but their necessity, their evidential and persuasive power is not open to scrutiny. Science endeavours – this is how I read the subtext of the exhibition – to overcome chaos and come as close as possible to the 'right' order.

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4 Museum director Marjan Doom describes her curatorial concept in her book *The Museum of Doubt. A Modest Manifesto by a Science Curator* (2020), for more details see Döring and Lessing (2021).

*Fig. 1: Sketch of the exhibition unit Chaos, © D. Döring.*



**3. Question catalogue:** With this mixed bag, I rather welcome the next section of the exhibition: It is about doubt (Fig. 2). Here, the question is not only what role doubt plays in the production of knowledge, but also how errors can be avoided and how reliable, objective knowledge can be generated. I'm fascinated by the fact that that errors and wrong paths play such a central role in the exhibition. Because this is contrary to the conventional narratives of a story of progress and success in the sciences. And so my questions to the exhibition crystallize: (a): What image of science is being conveyed and how does it relate to my own ideas?

(b) How are scientists (re-)presented? Who is speaking – and who isn't? What is academic knowledge? (c) By what means is this knowledge staged and put up for discussion in the exhibition? (d) What does this say about the exhibiting institution, Gent University? (e) And in what broader contexts and discourses can the exhibition be positioned?

Fig. 2: Exhibition display Doubt, © D. Döring.



**4. Draft:** I quickly find many key scenes: the arrangement in the Chaos section, an interview with a scientist in the Doubt exhibition space and selected objects in various places. Seven theme islands highlight various key scientific concepts, with the exhibition architecture relying on a strong aestheticization and cinematic atmosphere. Here, people marvel, admire, celebrate, but also act – there is a large, even young audience in the exhibition. I produce thick descriptions of individual scenes and, among other things, focus on a large and artfully crafted tree fern sculpture which the Swiss Felix Speiser brought to the university collection from a former British-French colony in Oceania at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The object text for the so-called Nenna sculpture emphasizes that the ethnologist breaks with the hitherto held assumption that non-Western cultures are “backward civilizations”. I’m confused: After all, already the ennoblement to art follows a Western logic and it is precisely this power of definition that remains unquestioned here. Neither is the colonial context of appropriation and research addressed, nor the indigenous use, provenance or the ownership relationships. Instead, the object is used for the narrative of the scientist’s clever foresight.

**5. Critique & Context:** After reading my draft, I’m rather surprised that I’m levelling such harsh criticism at the exhibition that appealed to me so much in the room. Even though it certainly criticizes power and domination relationships in science, it also

emphasizes a history of progress. So what conclusions can we draw? The final step is to take greater account of the contexts within which such an exhibition is created. I had already seen several other current science exhibitions in the German-speaking countries and worked in the curatorial team of a university museum that was created in Göttingen at the same time, the Forum Wissen. What the young institutions have in common is a balancing act: on the one hand, representation-critical debates have found their way into the exhibition, calling for a critical and reflective treatment of science. On the other, universities and museums face increasing pressure in the post-factual age to legitimize the relevance and reliability of scientific knowledge. Taking these ambivalent challenges and political appeals into account, the Museum of Doubt can be criticized *and* appreciated as a courageous and exciting attempt that provides an excellent opportunity to discuss precisely these questions.

## Method reflection

A representation- and power-critical knowledge analysis enquires whether and how exhibitions take on power-stabilizing or canonizing functions or enable emancipatory new productions of knowledge. It represents neither a purely subjective nor a supposedly objective reading, but is rather a reflexive, situated analysis that can be tested for consistency and plausibility of interpretation. The aim is not to evaluate the representation of knowledge (as good or sufficient), but to contextualize it within the institutional and cultural conditions. Here it is necessary to describe the genesis of knowledge – in its ambiguities, negotiations, conflicts, tensions and contradictions. As writers and describers, we participate in these knowledge processes and can critically examine their validity and set it into motion.

The challenge of this approach is to not remain on a descriptive, explanatory or judgemental level. The danger of misunderstanding the exploration of a cultural and implicit knowledge embedded in the exhibition as a potent gesture of ‘extracting’ and ‘discovering’ a truth should not be underestimated. In order to avoid a superior observer position in knowledge-historical analyses, Achim Landwehr (2018: 810) remarks that it is necessary to question one’s own certainties, self-perceptions, habits of thought and naturalization effects. This requires a high degree of self-reflection, in-depth knowledge of cultural contexts, professional discourses, societal debates and – if possible – curatorial empirical knowledge. It is also necessary to combat the skepticism, still widespread today, towards subjective, situated research. Particularly in the exhibition, museum and education sector it is always a matter of critically illuminating institutional and epistemic power and domination relationships. In an exhibition analysis as a knowledge analysis, we see ourselves as part of these relations and can thus practice involved and productive, situative and comprehensible critique.

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