

JONA PIEHL

GRAPHIC DESIGN IN MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

Display, Identity
and Narrative

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Graphic Design in Museum Exhibitions offers an in-depth analysis of the multiple roles that exhibition graphics perform in contemporary museums and exhibitions.

Drawing on a study of exhibitions that took place at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, the Museum of London and the Haus der Geschichte, Bonn, Piehl brings together approaches from museum studies, design practice and narrative theory to examine museum exhibitions as multimodal narratives in which graphics account for one set of narrative resources. The analysis underlines the importance of aspects such as accessibility and at the same time problematises conceptualisations that focus only on the effectiveness of graphics as display device, by drawing attention to the contributions that graphics make towards the content on display and to the ways in which it is experienced in the museum space.

Graphic Design in Museum Exhibitions argues for a critical reading of and engagement with exhibition graphic design as part of wider debates around meaning-making in museum studies and exhibition-making practice. As such, the book should be essential reading for academics, researchers and students from the fields of museum and design studies. Practitioners such as exhibition designers, graphic designers, curators and other exhibition makers should also find much to interest them in the book.

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The work on this book was completed in early 2020, just before life in general, and also the life of museum institutions in particular, changed drastically. Writing this note in the late summer, the impact of the financial pressures weighing in on museums is thrown ever more into relief and questions of reflexive practice, of decolonising collections and institutions and of acknowledging the political role of museums, have moved to the centre of discussions not just within the field of museums and museum studies but more widely across society, politics and media. I hope, however we will move into the next years, the topics raised here, and the discussion of exhibition graphic design as part of museum making, can inform future practice.

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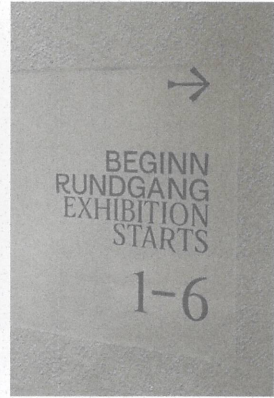
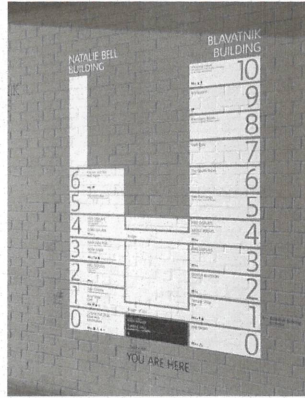


FIGURE 1.1 (A), (B) AND (C) Graphic design in museums and exhibitions.

1.1 (A) (from top left) Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Tate Modern, London; *Garden of Earthly Delights* (2019), Gropius Bau, Berlin; Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg; miscellaneous.

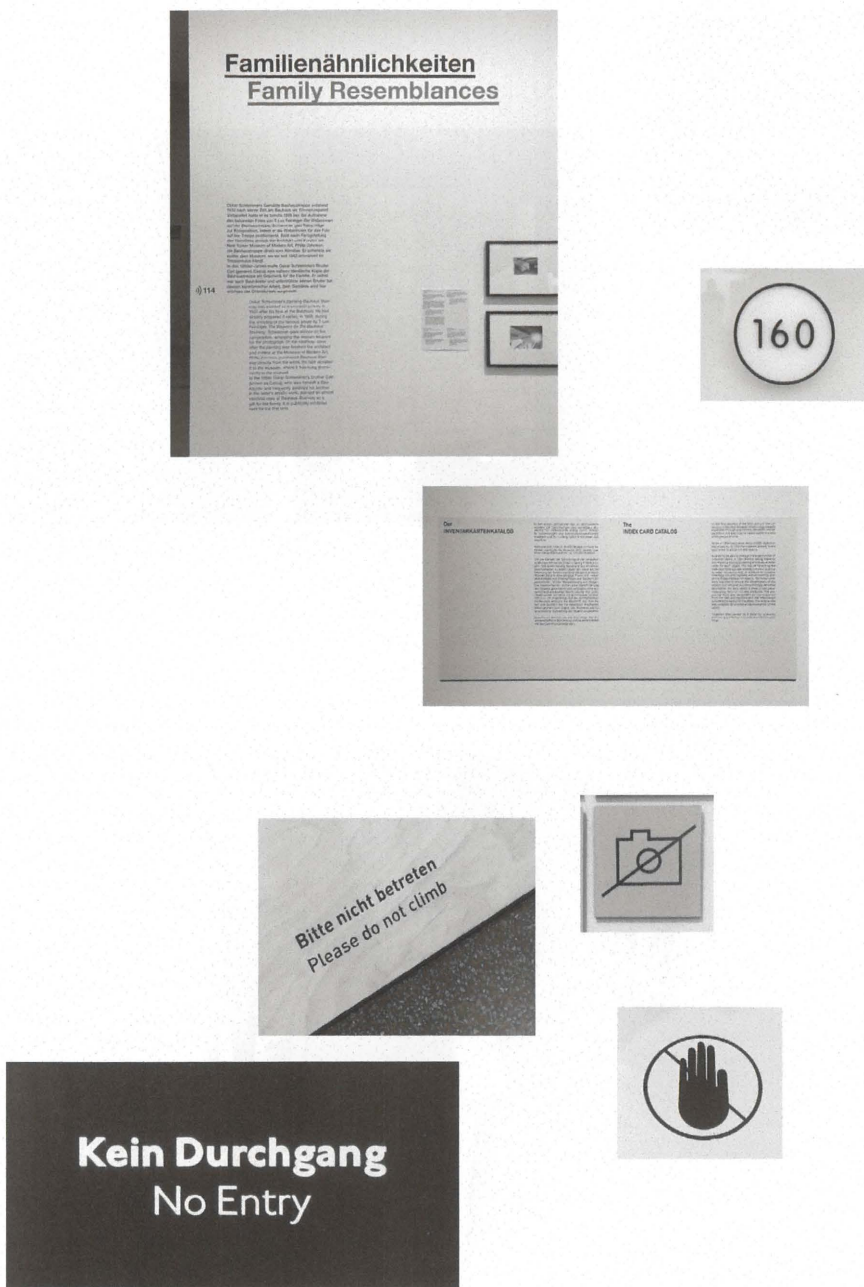


FIGURE 1.1 (A), (B) AND (C) (Cont.)

1.1 (B) (from top left) *Original Bauhaus* (2019), Berlinische Galerie, Berlin; Deutsches Hygiene-Museum, Dresden; *Ausgezeichnet: Künstlerinnen des Inventars* (2019), MARKK, Hamburg; *Kino der Moderne: Film in der Weimarer Republik* (2019), Kinemathek – Museum für Film und Fernsehen, Berlin; Futurium, Berlin; Deutsches Hygiene-Museum, Dresden; Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg.

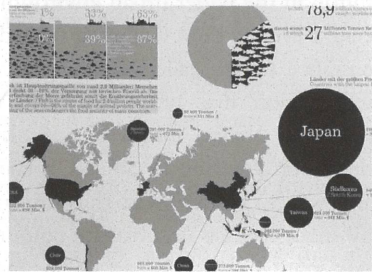
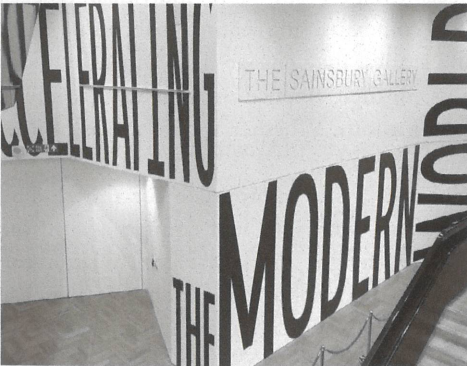
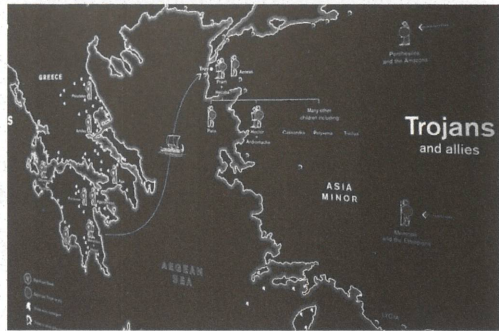
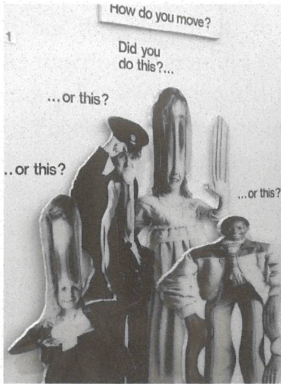
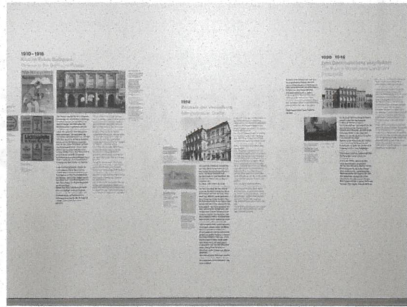
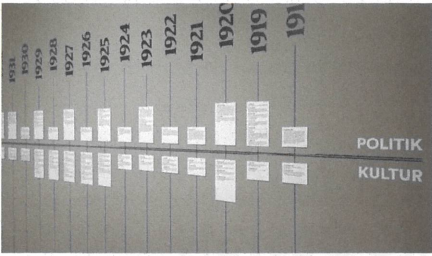


FIGURE 1.1 (A), (B) AND (C) (Cont.)

1.1 (C) (from top left) *Kino der Moderne: Film in der Weimarer Republik* (2019), Kinemathek – Museum für Film und Fernsehen, Berlin; *Museum Barberini*, Potsdam; *Human Biology*, Natural History Museum, London; *Troy: Myth and Reality* (2019), British Museum, London; *Food Revolution 5.0* (2018), Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin; *Cars: Accelerating the Modern World* (2019), Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

1

FRAMING AND REFRAMING EXHIBITION GRAPHIC DESIGN

Graphic design in museum exhibitions

Posters and banners, the museum's logo on the bag from the gift shop or on the museum's website, leaflets, catalogues, gallery plans, directional signs, exhibition titles, wall graphics, text panels, object labels – we encounter many graphic objects in exhibitions and museums.¹ They establish a visual presence of the museum institution in the wider urban environment; they advertise temporary exhibits and associated events; they welcome us and guide us around the museum space, from the entrance to the galleries, from the café to the shop and to the toilets; they carry information that brings museum objects to life, captioning individual objects, grouping objects into larger displays or contextualising entire collections. They draw our attention to objects, spaces and stories, they engage us in times, locations and topics, and at times they frustrate us, in their absence or their misplacement, by small type or unfortunate colour combinations. Whether we are aware of it or not, graphic design is part of our museum experience.

Through texts that are typeset legibly, in a size appropriate for the reading distance and lighting conditions in the gallery, with sufficient contrast against the background, at an ergonomically considered height and in a logical relationship to the object(s) the text refers to, exhibition graphic design ensures that the verbal information in the gallery is accessible. By visually differentiating types of text, exhibition graphics work to organise content in the exhibition space, allowing visitors to find their way through the information on display. At times, graphic design plays a role in carrying the institution into the exhibition narrative, reminding the audience of the physical location of the narrative they are experiencing. But typefaces, colour combinations and visual features can also evoke associations of themes and subject matters; images provide backdrops to displays and frame objects through illustrations, photographs or patterns; maps

and timelines help to locate the objects and show us where and when they were made, used, found, acquired or owned. In other words, graphic design in the museum operates on multiple levels: it may be part of the museum's visual identity, it contributes to the orientation in the physical spaces of the museum and it is a component of the exhibitions themselves and the stories they tell. Exhibition graphics can also take many different forms. There is a growing attention to how exhibitions and museums are designed and in today's exhibition practice we encounter an exciting breadth of exhibition graphics, of experiments with formats, materials and production methods, in which the variety of visual elements and their range of constellations with artefacts and gallery space not only challenge disciplinary boundaries of, for example, graphic design and scenography, but also explore the threshold between display device and content.

The function of graphics in museums and exhibitions, along with its aims and ambitions, has evolved with the development of the institution museum (North 1957). Focusing on the labelling practices of one specific institution, the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, the exhibition *Schilder einer Ausstellung/Labels of an Exhibition* (2019) traces this development from 1830 to the present day. At the Gemäldegalerie, labelling initially started with the prominent numbering of the artworks, the numbers could be cross-referenced against a catalogue in which the visitors would find information about the respective painting, such as artist, dates and origin. Efforts to 'redesign' the labelling since the 1870s resulted initially in small labels mounted directly to the frames of the artworks that included the name of the artist and the title of the work and over the years developed in content as well as format and placement to the extended captions of the 1980s which, known as the Dahlem model, also came to influence the approach to gallery texts in other institutions such as the National Gallery, London. Even if the design of the labels really comes to the fore in more recent years when, as shown in the exhibition, labels at the Gemäldegalerie employ different typefaces and variations of layout and colour for different exhibitions, the visual format of the labels has of course responded to the changes in content and functional requirements over time. Already around the early formats questions arise that are still pertinent today when it comes to exhibition graphics, namely those of flexibility, of object-text relationships in the spatial environment, and, fundamentally, of the role of information, interpretation and museum education.

The evolving role of exhibition graphic design can be traced in the body of literature that is concerned with exhibition graphics specifically or the wider practice of exhibition design. This literature includes, on the one hand, what might be described as practice texts which consider exhibition graphic design as a professional practice and are written to inform practice. Here, exhibition graphics are discussed to introduce the practicalities of exhibition-making, often seeking to guide the reader through the inception, production and installation of an exhibition. The majority of these texts are authored by practitioners from within the field. Among them are Herbert Bayer's *Fundamentals of Exhibition Design* (1939) and *aspects of*

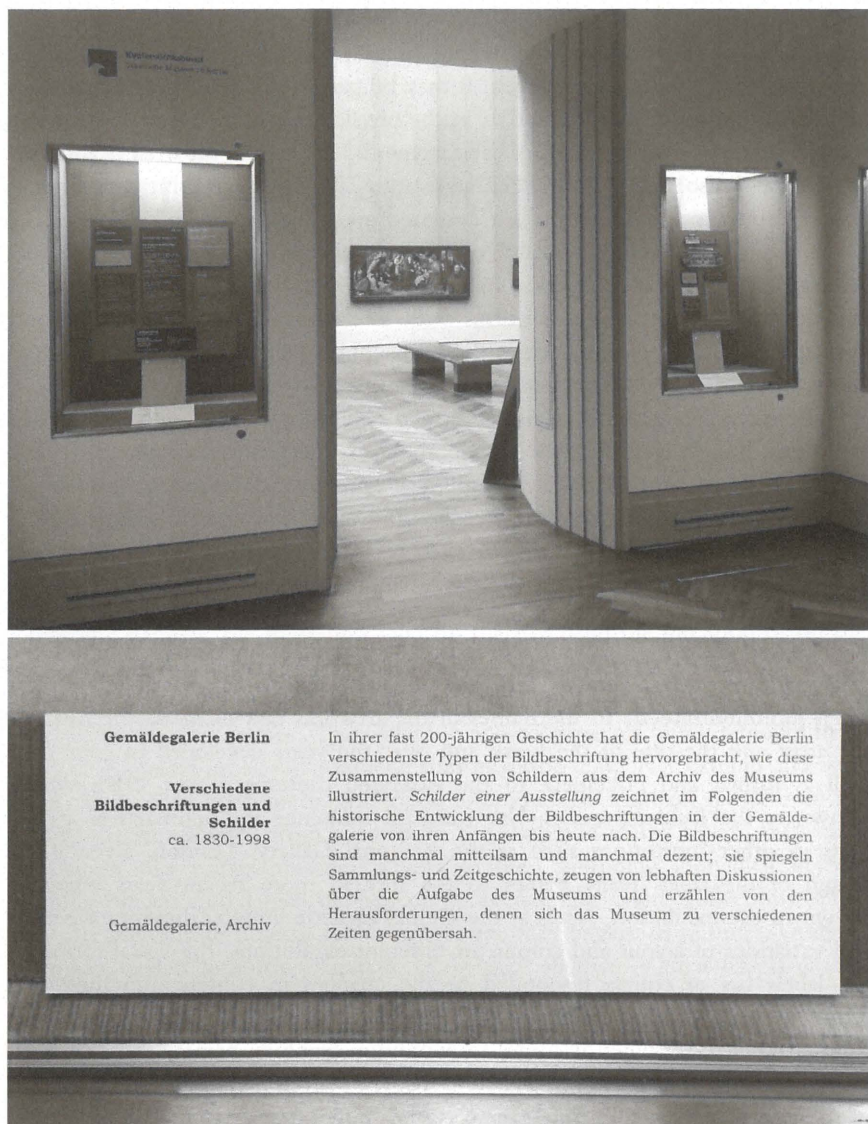


FIGURE 1.2 Formats of gallery interpretation on display: *Schilder einer Ausstellung* (2019), Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

design of exhibitions and museums (1984 [1961]), Misha Black's *Exhibition Design* (1951), written from the perspective of design practice, or Margaret Hall's *On Display: A Design Grammar for Museum Exhibitions* (1987) and Roger Miles' *The Design of Educational Exhibits* (1988), both written from the perspective of the museum practitioner. The latter sounds more removed from design practice than it was, as many of the museums from which these texts emerged had in-house design teams rather than working, as is common today, with external design teams: a designer herself, Hall was the head of the first in-house exhibition design team at the British Museum, which she built up after her appointment as Exhibitions Officer in 1964 (Wilson 2002), while Miles was head of the exhibition and education department at the Natural History Museum, London, between 1974 and 1994 (Miles 2007) where he worked on the *New Exhibition Scheme* which led to groundbreaking exhibitions such as *Human Biology* (1977) (Perks 2015). More recent texts from the perspective of design practice include Hughes' *Exhibition Design* (2010) and Bertron et al.'s *Project Scope Exhibition Design* (2012b), as well as Carter et al.'s *Working with Type: Exhibitions* (2000) which focuses more specifically on exhibition graphic design. Even though some of them show their age when it comes to questions of production processes and technology, well-known and often cited, the texts fulfil an important role in articulating and reflecting on exhibition-making practice, the increased professionalisation of the field, and on the changes in the making of exhibitions and in trying to understand and further develop the role of exhibition design. These practice texts need to be differentiated from portfolio volumes that showcase richly illustrated exemplar projects, often grouped according to different types of exhibitions, from world fairs to commercial trade shows, heritage centres, brand environments and cultural exhibits. While these texts may include scene-setting essays on the history of exhibitions, overviews of current practice or design philosophies, the information provided is typically primarily descriptive of the respective projects.²

A second group of texts that touch on the topic of exhibition graphic design can be found in the literature on display and exhibition practices within the field of museum studies. Aspects of design are covered as part of histories of exhibition-making, content and the construction of meaning in exhibitions, as well as explorations of the (changing) role of the museum in society. Here, exhibition graphics are often referred to only implicitly, as part of discussions of methods of visual communication and strategies of display.³ The references to graphic objects such as labels and panels oftentimes do not address these as designed objects, but refer to them primarily in terms of curatorial concerns, for example, when Bennett writes about the aspirations of museums in the late nineteenth century to open up their collections to the public by 'clear and detailed labelling of exhibits' (1998: 26), when Ferguson enlists various graphic objects ('labels, didactics, advertising, catalogues, [...], wall colors, [...] posters, handouts') as part of the 'exhibitionary procedures' (1996: 181), or when Schaffner (2006) discusses the different text types encountered in art exhibitions and

the relationship between verbal information and the works of art and its influence on how art is experienced. Nevertheless, the texts surface the visual, material form of museum interpretation and as such give evidence of the development of exhibition design and of the growing recognition of design as an integral aspect of museum-making.

Several insights can be drawn from the literature on or around exhibition graphics. First, the literature documents the significant increase in the range of graphic elements typically used in exhibitions. While F. J. North's *Museum Labels* (1957) explores the shift from basic object information to object interpretation that not only seeks to identify an object to the expert reader but instead aims to make the knowledge around the object accessible to a wider audience, more recent texts point to the use of graphic objects as part of comprehensive interpretive strategies and Hein notes that one aspect of creating the 'constructivist museum' – that is, a museum that not only acknowledges the processes of meaning-making as residing with the visitors but that further aims to engage the visitor with the content on display and takes measures to make it physically, socially and intellectually accessible – was 'investing heavily in explicit orientation aids – signs, maps, color codes, distinctive graphics and ideograms' (Hein 1998: 161; see also Hall 1987; Schmidt 2007; Baur 2010). Today, exhibition graphics, while still holding on firmly to the object label, have moved considerably beyond the basic object information. They are not only organised in complex graphic systems that incorporate a whole range of graphic objects from different types of labels, text panels and room titles to extensive wall graphics but also appear integrated in other elements in the exhibition, for example, as part of scenographic stagings or interactive installations, and include physical elements such as flap panels and drawers and digital elements.

Second, in the discussions of visual strategies as part of the practices for staging artefacts and other content in the gallery, the literature not only points to an expanding scope of graphic objects but also to changes in their scale and to an opening to the spatial context of exhibition graphics. This spatialisation of visual elements emerges in the analyses of the use of large-scale photographs, photomontages and collages and murals, diagrams and maps as well as large-scale typography, described, for example, in the discussions of the exhibitions of El Lissitzky and Herbert Bayer in the 1920s and 30s (for example, Overy 2004; Henning 2006; te Heesen 2012; Rocco 2014; also Staniszewski 1998) or those of Ray and Charles Eames (for example, Gurian 1991). Here, visual elements are discussed in terms of both the physical presence of, for example, a photograph, owing its format, its materiality, and the ways in which the placement of different graphic objects in the space promotes a specific engagement of the audience with the exhibition content, an activation of the exhibition space in relation to questions of sequence, immersion, distance and proximity.

Of course, given that exhibition graphics have always been closely bound up in processes of museum communication, the development of the role of

exhibition graphics is not only a question of scope or scale, the literature also offers evidence of a growing recognition of the visual, or more specifically, the pictorial, as integral to the practices of representation and display available in exhibitions, both in terms of the persuasiveness of, for example, large-scale immersive photomontages in propaganda exhibitions (for example, Klonk 2009; Krishnamurthy 2014) and in the development of strategies for non-verbal communication through what may be summarised as information graphics. This is captured, for example, in the writing about the exhibition-making practices of Otto Neurath that recognises the role of visual communication in Neurath's efforts in creating a 'picture language' for exhibitions. Through this picture language, that later developed into the Isotype system, Neurath developed methods and approaches that sought to communicate complex scientific content to a wider audience through charts and visualisations (Kraeutler 2008). Neurath's work had significant influence on Roger Miles' work on the *New Exhibition Scheme* at the Natural History Museum, enabling a paradigmatic shift from an object-centred to a communication-led approach (Perks 2015), with *Human Biology* (1977) a prime example of the expansive use of visualisations, diagrams, charts and illustrations to convey the themes at hand.⁴

This shift in thinking about visual communication and the engagement with exhibition content it can enable links to the substantial changes that museums and museum-making have undergone over the last five decades, evidenced not only in the museums themselves but also in the rich body of writing on museum-making, on museum communication, on visitor studies, on the democratisation of museums and their future roles. The awareness of these transformations carries throughout this book's discussions, whether these are changes from within, for example, regarding practices of museum communication, or changes brought upon institutions due to external circumstance or in response to emerging and ongoing societal discourses. A significant transformation is signalled by the 'new museology' of the 1970s (Vergo 1989) and its shift in focus from the collections and their display towards an audience-centred approach that is based not on the assumption of a single visitor with clearly identifiable preferences and behaviours but on the acknowledgement of the ranges of visitors, who bring different knowledges, social-cultural perspectives and expectations to the exhibition, and, further, the acknowledgement that there is not a single, fixed truth but that meaning is constructed through the display in the situation of presentation (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, 2006). Together with the understanding of the museum as part of the educational landscape, this has led to the establishment of departments for museum pedagogy and an ongoing effort to develop different didactic strategies and new approaches to museum communication, both in the exhibitions themselves and in innovative formats of programming that reach far beyond forms of display and object interpretation (see for example, Roberts 1997; Sandell 2002; Knell et al. 2007; Macdonald and Basu 2007; Simon 2010; Janes and Sandell 2019; Maul and Röhlke 2019). Equally significant are changes

emerging from institutions grappling with their own content, trying to come to terms with their institutional pasts, their collection and acquisition histories or offering reflexions on museological practices as part of their display strategies (for example, Macdonald and Fyfe 1996; Lynch 2014; Macdonald 2015). Other changes are placed upon museum institutions; changes of practice required by changes in funding and support but also in response to larger societal discourses, from the rise of populism to climate change, and their relationship to the museum as a public institution. Both existing institutions and the increasing number of newly established museums are examining their position in society and their role in the representation and construction of cultural and social practices, and the resulting explorations of different modes of engaging with audiences not only entail a rethinking of the exhibition content but also, crucially, a rethinking of the formats of exhibitions as one of the outputs of the museum institution. Here, a growing scholarship on exhibition design within the field of museum studies speaks to an increasing understanding of the opportunities that the medium offers, indicating a shift in the perception of exhibition design from a means of presenting content to an integral component of the exhibition experience (MacLeod et al. 2012, 2015; Piehl and MacLeod 2012).

That said, even if studies that offer detailed analysis of aspects such as the visual rhetoric of exhibition graphic design (Krishnamurthy 2014; Wahlin and Kahn 2016) or its role in facilitating access and learning (Perks 2015) evidence scholarly interest in exhibition graphic design and an acknowledgement of its wider role in exhibitions (see also Horta 1992; Pang 2004; Schmidl 2010; Piehl and MacLeod 2012; Piehl 2016, 2017; Piehl and Francis 2018), the topic of graphic design in museums and exhibitions remains somewhat under-researched. Despite the attention to visual communication and key figures such as Neurath or El Lissitzky and, respectively, their seminal exhibitions,⁵ the practice of exhibition graphic design as part of the communication processes active in the exhibition is still largely overlooked in museum studies. Exhibition graphic design appears mostly at the margins of broader discussions of interpretation practices and exhibition-making, often with a historical focus and rarely systematically problematised as part of current discourses of museum studies, while, in the practice texts, it remains predominantly framed within evaluations of functionality. The concern for access and legibility presents an important and in many ways still unresolved issue in exhibition-making practices that are legitimately shaped by an orientation towards audiences. Consequently, these discussions are (or should be) an integral part of any debate around how content is made accessible to visitors regardless of their abilities or their prior knowledge; how institutions understand and cater for their visitors; and how they enable, in the most practical sense, an equal level of participation and engagement. However, without losing sight of these matters, in this study I seek to move beyond the practical concerns around legibility, beyond questions of production and implementation towards contributing to an analysis of exhibition graphic design

and its role in content creation as a critical practice. The starting point here is the text *exhibition* and the use of graphic design as part of this text. The aim is an engagement with exhibition graphic design that positions the discussion of graphic design at the heart of larger debates around processes of knowledge production, around questions of expertise, authority and the role of audiences in museum interpretation and meaning-making: What makes exhibition narratives? How does design enhance (or conceal) discussions around expository agency and authorship? How is design harnessed to articulate multiple voices, complex narratives and contradictions in the gallery space?

To this purpose, the following puts forward a reading of exhibition graphics as visual exhibition content, which draws attention to the opportunities of using graphic design as a tool in exhibition storytelling but also raises questions of expertise and accountability (who creates this visual content) and accessibility (how is the visual content read and understood). By discussing the role of graphics as content in relation to other, more commonly acknowledged roles of exhibition graphic design, such as supporting orientation and access or extending the museum brand, the book underlines the complexity of exhibition graphic design. With this in mind, I do not wish to offer a discussion of best practice nor do I intend to commend specific visual strategies; instead I seek to move beyond a disciplinary concern to reframe exhibition graphic design as a facet of exhibition-making that can (and needs to) be critically interrogated in response to wider concerns within the field of museum studies. At the same time, the study carries its analysis back into museum-making practice, to build an argument that the potential of graphic design for informing and shaping exhibition-making lies in a critical engagement with exhibition graphics and in the negotiation of their role both in the exhibition and in the museum institution.