

# Why The Museum? The Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Value of Gross's Exhibit Analyses



**Gregory J. Schneider-Bateman**

*University Of Wisconsin - Stout  
Menominee, WI*

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## Introduction

When reviewing Alan Gross's extensive contributions to rhetorical theory, one is struck by the relative frequency with which he turns to museum exhibits to develop his insights. This surprise fades quickly, however, once one appreciates how his rhetorical vision reflects a deep, consistent commitment to creating a vibrant public sphere where cultural values, scientific and historical knowledge, and public memory can be meaningfully and democratically engaged.

The choice to carry out this commitment to the public sphere through the analysis of public exhibitions is striking for another reason, one Gross himself appreciates: "The miscellaneous character of historical museum exhibits – the mix of artifacts, documents, labels, visuals – seems to stretch the machinery of classical rhetoric beyond the breaking point" (Gross, 2005, 5). Add sound, video, space, and interactive experiences to his list, and the exhibit's miscellaneous character is extended further still. Yet Gross is undaunted, for as he notes, the complex character of museum exhibits only *seems* a challenge. And indeed, across four case studies, Gross confidently produces insights by effectively wrangling the modern exhibit's multimodal character: *Food for Thought* at London's Science Museum (Gross, 1994); the Smithsonian's failed *Enola Gay* exhibit (Gross, 2002); *Vienna 1938* (Gross, 2005); and the Hamburg Institute for Social Research's exhibit on the *Wehrmacht* (Gross, 2006). The ease with which he explores these complex texts not only illustrates his deftness as a critic; but also captures the productive power of rhetorical analysis.

In this paper I bring these four cases together in an effort to clarify what Gross, and the field of rhetoric of science by extension, gains by turning his critical eye to museum exhibits. Specifically, I argue that the museum context allows him to illustrate the value of rhetoric to interdisciplinary audiences, to extend rhetoric itself by offering new theoretical and methodological frameworks, and to simply and without too much fanfare further integrate multimodal texts into the purview of rhetoric. While Gross's museum work might have the feeling of a side project, I hope to instead illustrate that by turning to exhibits, Gross has done a service to the future of rhetorical criticism.

## **Interdisciplinary Contributions**

While museum exhibits are clearly rhetorical artifacts and their design relies upon concepts from the rhetorical canon, the museum community rarely conceives them specifically in rhetorical terms. Indeed, during my own interviews with curators and exhibit designers at science museums, I am often asked to explain what rhetoric is and what it can do for them. In two case studies, Gross makes answering these questions easy. For example, if one is in a science or natural history museum one can simply point to Gross's elucidation of the roles of rhetoric in the public understanding of science. If the context is historical in usual sense, Gross's contribution to the controversy surrounding the canceled *Enola Gay* exhibit does similar work without the theoretical baggage. Both approaches offer models for integrating rhetoric not only into the museum community, but also into the broader fields of the public understanding of science, sociology, and history.

Because Gross is so closely associated with the rhetoric of science, it comes as no surprise that his first case study was of a public science exhibition, *Food for Thought*, at London's Science Museum. Embedded within his landmark article "The Roles of Rhetoric in the Public Understanding of Science," this brief case study is easy to ignore or take for granted. Indeed, the museum exhibit gets no mention in Condit et al.'s excellent survey of work that followed Gross's initial interdisciplinary foray (Condit *et al.*, 2012). Yet his rhetorical re-description of Sharon Macdonald's and Roger Silverstone's work on *Food for Thought* is a key moment in his argument (Gross, 1992; see also Macdonald, 2002). Through re-analysis of the exhibit's textual and spatial elements, Gross shows how the exhibit is bound to the pacifying "deficit model of science communication" instead of to the more politically empowering constitutive model of rhetorical action. More damningly, he shows how the exhibit's rhetoric of accommodation "absolves the food

processing industry of responsibility for food safety” (Gross, 1994, 12).

As a result, Gross’s analysis establishes the conclusion that rhetorical analysis can be “an independent source of evidence for sociological claims” (Gross, 1994, 13). This explicit demonstration of interdisciplinarity is important for two reasons. First, as Condit et al. show, his work helped shape future intersections between rhetoric, sociology, and the public understanding of science. This influence should not be underplayed. Equally important, though largely ignored, is the fact that Gross expertly demonstrates rhetoric’s ability to deepen and extend the analysis and criticism of an already well-documented exhibit. By re-situating in rhetorical terms the broader debate surrounding the deficit and contextual models of communication within the public understanding of science, he powerfully illustrates rhetoric’s critical role in museum studies as well. His brief re-description of *Food for Thought* is itself a savvy rhetorical choice that allows him to convincingly situate rhetorical analysis in multiple disciplines.

While his work with the public understanding of science makes sense within Gross’s larger intellectual trajectory, the science museum is not, however, his museum of choice. Instead, the historical exhibit preoccupies his attention in his remaining three case studies, and in the first case employs a strikingly different interdisciplinary approach. For whereas Gross’s work on *Food for Thought* is an explicit appeal to rhetoric’s place in broader interdisciplinary conversations, his piece on the failed *Enola Gay* exhibit at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum is a masterful rhetorical analysis that never mentions or explicitly applies a rhetorical framework at all. The result is an interdisciplinary contribution that is at once less obvious and potentially more powerful.

Tracing the controversy surrounding the *Enola Gay* exhibit’s creation, revision, and eventual cancellation, Gross laments what its ultimate failure means for efforts to create public memory: “Mounting [the exhibit] would have located the struggle for the meaning of Hiroshima where it belonged, not between academic and political elites, but within the consciousness and conscience of every American” (Gross, 2002, 484). Rhetorical scholars of public memory should feel at home with this with conclusion. Memory work is a public act, and in the face of controversy, institutions and spaces it can either shut down or open up the possibility for public meaning-making. By criticizing the exhibit’s closure on rhetorical rather than the usual educational grounds, Gross offers museums a different set of arguments for proceeding under conditions of

controversy. In other words, Gross provides a rhetorical justification for what the work museums *could* (and in many cases, want) to do. Consequently, it is inescapable that if the history exhibit is viewed as primarily educational controversy remains problematic because the educational framing will generate arguments over the correct interpretation and the political and ideological baggage that attends these debates. If, however, as Gross argues, the exhibit's purpose is viewed rhetorically, as a space where controversies themselves can come alive and where the public can grapple with the meaning of events, then controversy becomes productive, not problematic, and the exhibit can begin to function in a memory space that is living and ongoing. That Gross makes this case without explicitly foregrounding his rhetorical sensibilities seems a risky move. How can the community adopt a framework that isn't clearly offered? Yet, I argue, this is exactly what makes this piece successful to both the museum and rhetorical communities. It is an exceptional piece of rhetorical criticism that at the same time provides an accessible justification for museums embracing the power of controversy.

Together these two cases, *Food for Thought* and *Enola Gay*, illustrate ways in which museum exhibits afford rhetorical critics with an opportunity to extend their insights. Further, the value of these insights cannot be conceived narrowly in terms of rhetorical theory or, even more narrowly, the facts of the exhibit under review. What Gross's two interdisciplinary contributions highlight is how rhetorical analysis can illuminate, empower, and promote the concerns of other disciplines and practices.

## **Disciplinary Contributions**

Gross's disciplinary contributions are no less significant. In two key pieces on Nazi German history as it played out in the public sphere, Gross enriches rhetorical theory while at the same time solidifying the importance of public exhibits as texts worthy of our attention (Gross, 2005). He does this on two fronts, first extending a more traditional rhetorical notion – Chaïm Perelman's concept of presence – and then incorporating a new theory into the rhetorical tradition, specifically, Jürgen Habermas's theory of systematically distorted communication.

It is in response to the challenge posed by the "miscellaneous character of historical museum exhibits" mentioned above that Gross elaborates Perelman's notion of presence into global presence. For Perelman, presence is a narrow effect of discourse. It is about what is brought before the eyes and ears and consciousness of an audience. While easily applicable to spoken and written texts,

in the museum environment it is more difficult to ascertain what is inflected with presence and what is not. By manipulating new categories of rhetoricity – figure/ ground, space, and time – Gross's extension of presence to global presence captures ways in which exhibits (and other multimodal texts) orchestrate a variety of resources into an argumentative whole.

To illustrate how these categories generate global presence, Gross analyzes *Vienna 1938*, "an exhibit commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the [...] Nazi take-over in Austria" (Gross, 2005, 6). This case study allows Gross to make two important contributions. First is a point about power, knowledge, and public memory. As he convincingly demonstrates through the exercise of his new categories, the exhibit, counter to its intention, frees the "Austrian consciousness and conscience from the moral and fiscal responsibility of the Holocaust" (Gross, 2005, 7). In Gross's reading, the exhibit effectively forecloses a controversial history that he believes must be thoroughly opened up. Consequently, global presence becomes a powerful means of assessing exhibits that on their face and by their mission might initially seem like brave interventions, but in fact and effect are the opposite. In making this case, Gross's second contribution is to illustrate the value of global presence as a broad, powerful optic for dealing with the challenge of analyzing the coherence of multimodal texts that should not be ignored.

Gross's emphasis on the "networks of power and knowledge" that led to *Vienna 1938*'s failed argument in the public sphere dovetails nicely with his next piece, which incorporates Habermas's notion of systematically distorted communication into the rhetorical canon (Gross, 2006a). While not as methodologically specific as the categories that build global presence, Gross's application of the concept of systematically distorted communication to this case does similar work: it illuminates the ways in which an exhibit intended to productively depict difficult moments in national history instead serves to further reinforce the Austrian nation's amnesia about its past (Gross, 2006a). In this case, Gross attends to an exhibit developed by the Hamburg Institute "designed to alter the national consciousness of the German people" (312). The exhibit's use of photographs of life on the front, however, immediately sparked controversy because many failed to represent what the exhibit claimed they represented – rather than honest historical images, they are clearly "stylized depictions," essentially propaganda (315). The institute pulled the exhibit and subsequently released completely revised version.

Counter-intuitively, yet in a way similar to his appeal in the *Enola Gay* case, Gross argues in favor of the initial exhibit's use of inaccurate images exactly because its lack of representational fidelity is evidence of systematically distorted communication. In other words, the visual misrepresentations were, in a more sophisticated and more important way, accurate representations of insidious Nazi distortion of the historical record. Thus the images functioned to highlight how photographs, or indeed their absence, colluded in a nation's inability to grapple properly with its past. Ironically, when the revised exhibit re-contextualized those photographs with new academically accurate captions and explanations, the visuals became subsumed under a different and more comfortable form of systematically distorted communication. The exhibit's new political correctness hides the past equally effectively.

Because Gross deals with photographs and their array in the original Hamburg exhibit, the concept of systematically distorted communication becomes useful for assessing visual components of multimodal texts. In so doing, Gross follows his studies of the failed *Vienna 1938* and *Enola Gay* exhibits, both of which could have been assessed via systematically distorted communication by evaluating and reframing how history exhibits might function in the public sphere. Thus, methodologically, the idea of systematically distorted communication joins the idea of global presence as a framework for explaining how multimodal exhibit elements shape and reflect issues of public memory. Neither piece (indeed none of the four) provides a rote methodological toolkit. Indeed, Gross's work is more sophisticated and more useful than that would be. The museum considered as a complex multimodal text is not theorized as such. Gross simply does the work. As a result, his analyses are arguments for the power of museums insofar as they are in their very nature rhetorical texts. Gross has developed a full visual/verbal theory of meaning making elsewhere (Gross, 2014; see also 2006b, 2007). But it is worth noting that while scholars including Gross himself continue to explore how multimodal texts fit within the rhetorical purview and can be examined with rhetorical methods, Gross's masterful case studies leave no question that such texts do belong to the sphere of rhetoric and rhetorical criticism.

More important than his methodological developments is a broader contribution. All of Gross's cases allow him to articulate missed opportunities for exhibits to generate meaningful debate. While this theme is most clearly expressed in his work using Habermas and Perelman, the value of his museum corpus cannot

be separated from his commitment to the construction of a vital public sphere. It is at this point that his concern with museums becomes most coherent and most striking.

### **Exhibits, Controversy, and the Public Sphere**

In each of his four case studies, Gross selects exhibits with an eye toward controversy's relation to the status quo. *Food for Thought* took on a controversial topic but failed to generate comment for reinforcing agribusiness as usual. *Vienna 1938* similarly failed to generate controversy, even though it was clear that it largely absolved a nation of its racist and anti-Semitic past. The proposed Hiroshima exhibit was so politically provocative that it never got built. The Hamburg Institute exhibit was so controversial it was removed and radically revised. Gross faults each of these exhibits with failing to provide meaningful opportunities for the public to "struggle for the meaning" of the present or of the presence of the past in the present. Because these exhibits disappeared, were ignored, or reiterated the status quo they became flat exercises in academic clarity, failing to live up to their real potential as crucibles of productive deliberation. Yet even though Gross's cases indicate that exhibits intended to engage or provoke a public into being might often miss their mark or, perhaps worse, do not get built at all, he has not lost faith in the potential of such exhibits to succeed. Gross's museum work offers a powerful reminder coming from the discipline of rhetoric that museum exhibits can fulfill their promise as vital forms of public address.

This reminder, and the rhetorical frameworks he develops alongside it, is not important only for scholars of public communication and public memory. It is also critical for scholars in museum studies and practitioners in museums themselves who advocate for and design exhibits that are to function as lively intervention in the public sphere or sphere. For instance, Fiona Cameron's influential recent work on museum controversies is an excellent example of the overlap with Gross's work on the wider field of museum studies. Drawing on recent sociological theories, Cameron asks a key question: "How can museums effectively engage contentious topics in new ways considering that in a contemporary complex society, pluralism and discursive conflict is an emergent contemporary condition?" (Cameron, 2010, 3). Her answer, developed across a series of articles, is based on two foundations: recent social theory and visitor interviews (Cameron 2007, 2008, 2011a, 2011b; Cameron and Deslandes, 2011). Relying on Bruno Latour, Ulrich Beck, and Zygmunt Baumann, Cameron calls on museums to open up controversy, offer multiple voices and

perspectives, acknowledge uncertainty, make transparent political commitments, loosen cultural authority, and understand their place as one node in larger networks of information and meaning.

While rhetorically framed, Gross's readings are based on very similar commitments. He highlights the way exhibits exist within larger cultural network and he demands that museums embrace controversy and occupy weaker authority positions. In addition to developing exhibits that reflect sociological reality, Cameron complements her theoretical position with evidence that visitors want exactly these kinds of exhibits (Cameron, 2007, 224). Thus she calls for exhibits to offer environments that trust and allow visitors to actively and creatively negotiate the complexity of information in the public sphere. Similarly, each of Gross's four pieces culminates in an full throated, optimistic belief in the capacity of citizens to creatively and democratically navigate complex and controversial representations that challenge all-too-easy narratives of national and political identity. Gross's ability to sharply illuminate how the exhibits he critiques fail to live up to their potential as rich and engaging sites of public communication prefigures and aligns itself with current conversations in museum studies (see Cameron and Kelly, 2010). Thus, his work effectively informs rhetorical practice, museum theory, and exhibit design.

Gross once mentioned to me that he had planned to write a book about museum exhibits. At the time, two of the pieces we have examined were in process or under review and he had begun to work in earnest on visual rhetoric. However, looking back at how these pieces cohere theoretically, methodologically, and politically, the rough outline of a book takes shape. With contributions to disciplinary conversations on public memory, methodological advances in visual, spatial, and multimodal rhetoric, and with a deep commitment and faith in the public sphere, we might lament that Alan has not yet given his full voice to this project. But, bequeathed to us, these four pieces provide a foundation upon which we can and must build.

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