

Three reasons for coming together

**Opening speech by Inga Surgunte,
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Distance

The National Library's permanent exhibition was opened in 2016. During the last development stage, from 2015, our creative team sought out the best examples of book exhibitions from which to learn and take inspiration. We realised that it was not easy to get one's bearings in the array of exhibitions dedicated to major book-publishing themes. The two concepts *printing heritage* and *printing museum* embrace extremely diverse exhibitions, both in terms of exhibits and in the choice of communication tools. Since our exposition concept had been decided by then, and we already knew that we would be giving preference to books over utilitarian objects or works of art, and certainly over printing technologies, we looked at the exhibition practices that predominate in European national libraries. The British Library, Royal Danish Library, Royal Library of Belgium, we also discovered the Museum Meermanno in the Hague, Netherlands, and the Finnish Book Museum in Sastamala, Finland, and the very inspiring artistic initiative *One Thousand Books* of Denmark's *Lodret Vandret*. Beside making these joyous discoveries, we also realised that there is actually not much similar to what we were going to do!

Exhibitions, where a printed or hand-written text is the dominant object are not the most popular exhibition genre. (We have our own reasons for believing that such exhibitions should exist, but we also know why this genre presents difficult challenges, and we will discuss the reasons why during the seminar!)

Compared to art exhibitions, whose concentration and frequency mean healthy competition, which naturally leads to an understanding of the criteria for good exhibitions, the most significant book/text exhibitions are scattered across different countries, but on a local scale, a book in a showcase more often looks quaint, not inspirational. It seems to us that being so far from one another hinders the exchange of ideas and mistakes, thus development is hindered. We wanted to meet to overcome this distance between players and maybe artificially create the closeness and friction that spark creativity. We were also driven by curiosity – we wanted to see our peers face to face – those who, like us, spend every day trying to reinvent the wheel. And we are very happy and grateful that you accepted our invitation and saw something of value in it.

The need for practical, applicable knowledge

There is a real consensus among Europe's museums, libraries and other cultural institutions about the goals of our work: we want to provide an open, inclusive, accessible, visitor-oriented, perhaps even participatory, service that will be utilised conveniently and thoughtfully by children, grandparents, experts and people in wheelchairs. We no longer formulate our mission statements from our own perspective by stating that we want to display what we possess, but say that we care about what is stated in the CENL mission: *to increase the visibility of heritage collections and open them up to new generations*

of users through exciting services. The NLL's own mission statement is *to promote the utilisation of our creative cultural and scientific heritage in support of Latvia's development.* We want to bring the heritage we hold closer to our users, visitors, and, even more – to the audience we feel is ours, but we have not yet reached.

Exhibition activity cannot be detached from communication about cultural heritage. Even more, in the current practice of museums and other memory institutions, exhibitions are the most commonly and successfully used instruments of heritage presentation; they are so visible and recognisable that there are still visitors who believe that museums or archives hold nothing more than that displayed at the exhibition. Even though, in my personal view, exhibition development often hides a certain amount of laziness (not questioning oneself about other possible communication tools), they undeniably have proved themselves to be the most significant medium, and are therefore worthy of the most meticulous examination and the most critical analysis in light of our currently relevant mission statements. It goes without saying that no exhibitor sets goals of being exclusive, unfriendly, interested only in their own research interests and in the ratings of a couple of high-ranking experts, closed, overly complicated and boring, turning exhibition walls into printouts of lectures ... But ... do we always know how to turn our good intentions into concrete practical choices? When visitors say they feel uncomfortable in the dark, but rare books require it. When the exhibition layout already has too many books, and even more have not made the cut, and we have to understand how to give each and every one its own life and magic aura. When a book locked in a showcase has become mute, unreadable, disconnected from its natural environment, we want to give it a voice, but not overwhelm its presence with digital gadgets or vivid works of art that will easily win the battle for attention ...

When returning from seminars for museum specialists, I often get the feeling that I cannot bring home all I have learnt, something always falls by the wayside. Because the gap between theory and good practice in art and ethnography museums and my book exhibition seems too wide. These two days are an attempt to hold a seminar from which we will all return with our bags full. Therefore, we are separating out just a single branch from the broad tree of printing museums – only exhibitions whose displays are dominated by printed or handwritten text – to examine this branch closely and carefully.

Interdisciplinarity

Museum and educational research, also design theory, have accumulated noteworthy knowledge about the behaviour of visitors at exhibitions. Contemporary artists and designers continue to experiment, museum researchers, sociologists – to study and search. Book exhibitions need to have access to the latest advances from the most diverse sectors, so we need to network not only amongst ourselves, but also with neighbouring sectors. Today, among us we have people representing contemporary art, a drama teacher, designers, researchers, librarians, museum educators, decision makers and assigners of finance, a peace ambassador, rare-book exhibition researchers ... I am pleased that such different players have come together, because we will not, each on our own, achieve the best result that our visitors and our audience deserve in the broadest sense! Because, in this day and age, exhibition development is teamwork, where the professional input of every individual has equal importance.