

# RESEARCHERS, CURATORS AND DESIGNERS: THE EXHIBITIONS AS THE SPACE FOR COLLABORATIONS

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## Abstract

The article looks at thematic exhibitions that explore certain cultural and historical processes and examines the specifics of the exhibition as a collaborative process between three actors: academic researchers, curators and designers. Such exhibitions, grounded in cultural aspects and built on academic research outcomes, differ from classic art displays in the sense that they lack artworks that “speak for themselves”. Moreover, the research often is based on the written word and original documents or artefacts that are visually uninteresting/non-appealing or monotonous. On this account, the exhibition’s story and visual form is put in the hands of the curator and designer. Does this vital role give designers and curators the authority to rework the research that underlies the narrative? Is the design applied as the exhibit itself? To answer these questions and to explore artistic research in the context of exhibitions, this article discusses the exhibitions carried out at the National Library of Latvia. The article looks behind the exhibition production process to examine the collaboration methods employed by the creative teams consisting of researchers, curators and designers.

**Keywords:** *curator, exhibition, design, research, exhibition design.*

## Introduction

For the National Library of Latvia, exhibitions are a strategic instrument in the representation of culture and various cultural activities carried out there. Not only historians and researchers working here explore different time periods in the

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history of the written word, but also a special section, the exhibition centre with curators and designers, is formed to bring the research to the public in the form of exhibitions, publications, posters and other design products. At the National Library of Latvia, there are also a number of exhibition halls and galleries and the exhibition's scale can be adapted to the nature and extent of the related research. Thus, the institution's infrastructure is professionally organised and the exhibitions produced by the National Library of Latvia are a significant contribution to the cultural scene in Latvia. In this regard, the exhibition production process carried out at the National Library of Latvia provides a basis for the analysis to identify the collaboration methods between researchers, curators and designers and examine their specific roles within academic and artistic research. The analysis provided here is based on her work at the library working on the exhibitions from positions of the co-curator and the project manager.

### The role of curators

It might seem that the term "curator" is ubiquitous and thus well-defined and clear, yet it still carries various interpretations. The authors of the Curatorial Conundrum identify the tension between *curating-as-display-making* (the exhibitionary) and *curating-as-expanded-practice* (the curatorial) [O'Neill, Wilson, Steeds 2016: 7]. They add that the first notion was more typical of the 1990s, while nowadays the latter is more widespread. However, at the National Library of Latvia, the function of curator is still often attributed to project managers limiting their role to practical matters of exhibition production. Moreover, the curatorial concept is not fully grasped or evaluated by researchers and thus in some cases the exhibition production process loses the much-needed guidance the curator could have provided. In fact, the dominant position of curator is still much discussed also within the art scene. If the curator as a public figure representing the institution gains its recognition, fosters visibility and raises the funding opportunities and thus is regarded as an important, even decisive element of the institution's successful development, then the collaboration between curators and artists is much more uncertain in terms of benefits and outcomes. Curators have often been criticised for misinterpreting artists' work or even accused of diminishing the artists' authority by highlighting the curatorial concept while the art works serve merely as its illustration. *This discomfort is perhaps connected to the perception that the visibility of the curator has become something of a distraction from the subject matter*, writes critic Deyan Sudjic [Sudjic 2021: 8].

Interestingly, a similar tension could be observed also between curators and researchers, not only artists. For example, London based critics Maya and Reuben Fowkes characterize problematic overlaps between the work of the curator and that

of art historians. According to them, *References to art history on conference panels organized by curators are often couched in a conspiratorial snigger, as if to say that art historians belong in the archives while curators bring a uniquely contemporary perspective to the past. In their turn, art historians are irked by what they see as the superficial approach to art history taken by curators, who have a tendency to ransack the past for examples to illustrate their concepts while deselecting artists and phenomena that do not* [Fowkes 2015: 53]. While working at the library, the author has observed similar disagreements or even conflict situations between curators and academic researchers. This tension leaves a negative impact on the process of exhibition making if the academic researchers decline to narrow the selection of exhibits or refuse to adapt their texts to the specifics of exposition by shortening descriptions or using simpler language. In fact, such situations lead to the question *what is the role of the curator? and is the curator really needed?*

The answer can be found in the words by Deyan Sudjic, the former director of Design Museum in London: *For museums, which live and die by the size of their audiences, the reality is that an audience is not easily persuaded to come to see a permanent design collection* [Sudjic 2021: 11]. Moreover, the audience is uninterested not only in permanent expositions, but also in thematic shows that demand an involved, educated and patient visitor. How could the audience be attracted if the recent researches have proved that the collective global attention span has dropped to eight seconds and marketing is driven by a well-known marketing rule 3-30-3: 3 seconds to attract the reader's attention, 30 seconds to hold his interest and 3 minutes to tell the story. In this context, the curator's main role is to be a mediator between academic research and the audience by producing an attractive narrative. The curator encourages designers to produce a visual and spatial interpretation of knowledge that could be easily grasped and experienced by visitors. While the researchers are often orientated towards encyclopaedic knowledge and narrow understanding of the subject, *the curator is "tuned to" the relationship with the outside world – to environmental, cultural, political and social context*, writes Fleur Watson [Watson 2021: 13]. As if illustrating this perspective, Deyan Sudjic compares the design exhibition titles. In 1982, the first design exposition, the forerunner of Design Museum, was titled *Art and Industry*. In 1989, when the Design Museum opened, its inaugural exhibition was titled *Culture and Commerce*. Finally, in 2016, when the museum moved to a new building in South Kensington, they opened with the exhibition *Fear and Love. It's a sequence that clearly shows the evolution of curating from a historical study based on historic artefacts to a provocation*, concludes Deyan Sudjic [Sudjic 2021: 11]. One way communication does not count anymore in the museum sector, and such a provocative and original approach towards the research subjects serves for maintaining a responsive and meaningful dialogue with the audience.

What is most important, the concept of curatorial practice has been expanding recently, moving away from the traditional, yet outdated definition of the curator as the central, authoritative figure towards a more experimental, open-ended approach where the curator is a part of a collaborative team working closely together with artists, researchers and designers. The distinct shift in curatorial thinking is summed up by Fleur Watson, *From a curator as a mediating authority to a curator as space-maker who supports and enables a series of experiments and speculations* [Watson 2021: 47].

### The role of design

Only a decade ago design was seen merely as a tool to achieve marketing goals and generate profit, yet currently design tackles social issues, serves as a political statement and is carried out as investigative and speculative projects without practical or functional outcome. *When people think of design, most believe it is about problem solving. Faced with huge challenges such as overpopulation, water shortages, and climate change, designers feel an overpowering urge to work together to fix them, as though they can be broken down, quantified, and solved. Design's inherent optimism leaves no alternative but it is becoming clear that many of the challenges we face today are unfixable and that the only way to overcome them is by changing our values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour*, write designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby [Dunne & Raby 2016: 2].

One of such innovative approaches towards design is practised by FormaFantasma, design duo from the Netherlands. In 2020, their design research project *Cambio* was exhibited at the Serpentine Gallery in London. Designers investigated the timber industry by conducting numerous interviews, researching archives, selecting exhibits and creating their own design objects for the show. The resulting exposition drew visitors' attention to the interaction between a man and a tree and the deep historic roots of this coexistence. Rebecca Lewin explains the duo's research position as follows, *Design can learn from art: the space of the art gallery is above all one of experimentation, of dreaming, of shifting expectations and perceptions in presentations that do not always need to be applied or mass-manufactured* [Lewin 2020: 18]. In FormaFantasma's view, design is practised as a learning and experimentation method rather than a production process: *Experimentation is an integral part of our work. When we begin a project, we don't necessarily have an idea of where we will end up. For us, to experiment is to follow a specific process or form of research which produces unexpected results and allows us to develop a new and original position with respect to our initial ideas* [Obrist Korek 2020: 9]. Thus, they define as the purpose of their work the new knowledge brought to the audience through the prism of design. In this regard, the exhibition was accompanied by an online platform with vast research

materials in written and audiovisual form. To sum up, the practice represented by FormaFantasma can be regarded as a perfect model of the potential that artistic research brings to the design field.

### **The specifics of exhibition design**

Exhibiting visual art generally involves a direct manifestation of the work, which, so to say, “speaks for itself”. However, when the research being represented is based on the written word and original documents such as archive materials and books, there is a strong need for a visual language that interweaves these seemingly unremarkable and discreet exhibits into a vivid story. In this regard, the role of exhibition design is not only to aesthetically please the visitors with an attractive arrangement of the display, but also to develop the thought provoking visual and spatial interpretation of the academic narrative and, ideally, to link academic knowledge and the challenges faced by society today. To achieve such immersion, artistic research is carried out as the collaboration between the curator, researcher and designer from the early stage of the concept development. If academic research is often considered to be complex and specific, artistic research, on the contrary, results in a visual form accessible to a wide range of audiences, however, both these methods of research coexist and, in fact, might be seen as inseparable and interconnected. To look more closely on the combination of these two research methods, four exhibitions as the case studies at the National Library of Latvia have been selected for this article.

### **Sisyphus and Columbine**

The first exhibition to discuss here, is the *Sisyphus and Columbine* featuring art works by Jelena Antimonova (1945–2002), a well-known Latvian graphic artist who passed away twenty years ago. The exhibition was opened in February 2022 at the National Library of Latvia. For the exhibition, Dmitrijs Zinovjevs, the keeper of the library’s graphic art collection, had selected as a starting point the artist’s etchings and other graphic prints. Further work on the exhibition was continued by the author of this article as the co-curator and Andrejs Lavrinovičs as the designer. In the co-curator’s view, the library is a place where one can look for new knowledge and develop a broader perspective of culture and art, thus she put the focus on the artist’s personality and explored it more thoroughly. The co-curator met the artist’s family to acquire more detailed information about her and accessed other interesting artefacts that could be displayed in the exhibition. As a result, the exhibition showed not only traditional graphic art prints, but also surprising, little-known materials about Jelena Antimonova’s creative work, revealing the versatility of her talent. Video footage documented the author’s 1996 self-published *samizdat* with illustrations, created by means of the then little-used and innovative computer. Similarly, the artist’s diaries



Figure 1. *Sisyphus and Columbine*. Photo: Kristians Luhaers.

were a new discovery (Figure 1). The exhibition featured a 1983 planner with the artist's notes, extracts from which were recorded for the exhibition's purpose in order to make them available to the public. The planner notes revealed personal details behind some artworks, such as the fact that the artist suffered from toothache while working on the *Odyssey* series. On display, there were also beautiful bindings Jelena Antimonova created in the early 1980s at the *Plastika* leather crafting studio inspired by mediaeval manuscripts. Video and audio recordings and extraordinary artefacts such as bindings not only held the visitor's interest, but also discreetly shed light on the artist's life. It would not be possible without artistic research carried out for the exhibition. In that way it confirmed the observation by Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, as follows: *Given the widely accepted role of research within curatorial practices, it is interesting to note that, while there has been a lively discussion around research in-and-through art practice – research has not been sufficiently problematised in relation to the curatorial field. This would seem to indicate that the constructs curatorial research, curatorial knowledge and curatorial enquiry already have some tacit standing, even for the champions of more conservative understandings of professional roles and norms* [O'Neill & Wilson 2015: 15]. If artistic research resulted in the elaborated exhibition content, the design this time was traditional displaying the art works in the classic gallery manner.

### The Return

The next exhibition to discuss is *The Return. The Oldest Surviving Book in Latvian* that was on view in 2021 at the National Library of Latvia. As the title suggests, the focus of this exhibition was on the oldest surviving book published in Latvian – the Catechism of Dutch Jesuit Petrus Canisius, published in 1585. Although this book is a key testament of Latvian national cultural heritage, it is not permanently located in Latvia. The only complete copy of this publication is held by the Uppsala University Library. Swedish troops took it across the Baltic Sea in 1621 as a spoil of war, along with other Jesuit books. However, thanks to cooperation with the Uppsala University Library, the Canisius Catechism was brought to Riga to be displayed in this unique exhibition.

The team working on the concept of the exhibition took a radical approach from the start. The list of exhibits was reduced to the minimum leaving one book on display, the original Canisius Catechism. This means that the exhibition's narrative had to be unfolded and brought to the public by means of design. What distinguishes these two exhibitions – *The Return* and *Sisyphus and Columbine*, is the role of the designer. If the designer worked with the given list of art works for the *Sisyphus and Columbine* and merely arranged the art works into the well-designed display, then in case of *The Return* the designer was involved in the process from the very first moment. Moreover, the designer was given the central task, that of finding the visual form of the narrative. The researcher and curator in one person, historian Gustavs Strenga was open to experimental and innovative use of design in order to achieve an extraordinary visual interpretation of the legacy of the Jesuits Order. Together with designers Anete Krūmiņa and Madara Lesīte, they looked for elements that could symbolically embody the Jesuits and their activities. Furthermore, the designers decided to use the contrast between light and dark to interpret the book as enlightenment as well as to create associations with religious practices (Figure 2). The exposition texts were put on the floor, thus visitors had to look down as if they bowed their heads in humility typical of Christian tradition. Such a conceptual and contemporary scenography would not be possible without artistic research done by designers in collaboration with the researcher. As a result of their input and risk-taking approach, the exhibition was well received and brought to the public the discussion of important questions associated with the unique exhibit – the book.

The starting point of artistic research lies in collaboration where designers are granted an experimental and leading role from the beginning. *In many museum and gallery contexts, the design is developed in isolation from the early stages of the curatorial process and then responds to a fixed object list or the collection of works, developing an aesthetic form or “wrapping” for the exhibition. By contrast, the design as an exhibit is mostly conceived, designed and developed well before the final material on display has*



Figure 2. *The Return. The Oldest Surviving Book in Latvian*. Photo: Madara Gritāne.

*been completely researched and established, let alone finalised* [Watson 2021: 34]. To illustrate these two different approaches towards the exhibition design, the author of the article has chosen for the analysis two other exhibitions that have been on view at the National Library of Latvia recently.

### **Beethoven. Orbits**

One of these two exhibitions is the *Beethoven. Orbits* that marked the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the great German composer Ludwig van Beethoven. It was based on a vast amount of academic research conducted by the Professor of the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music Lolita Fūrmane. Her thorough review of the history of the local music scene was supported by many historical documents and artefacts such as books, leaflets and letters. There were approximately 200 exhibits in the display. Thus, the designers were given the complicated task of creating an attractive visual form of the display consisting mainly of monochrome and flat sheets of documents. However, designers Anete Krūmiņa and Tatjana Raičiņeca managed to encapsulate such classic and academic narrative into a contemporary display with attractive details. Not only were design elements such as the interactive system of vertical and horizontal drawers functional, but also innovative through giving a playful visual appearance to otherwise invisible cultural connections. For example, the element

that links together musicians, doctors and librarians is Beethoven's sculptural portrayal. While exploring visual elements associated with the composer's music and personality, the designers stumbled on small statuettes and busts portraying the genius. Such sculptural elements were common interior objects people loved to place on pianos or on shelves among the books. By bringing them together in the display, Beethoven's typical image was formed with his impressive, wild hair waves and dramatic facial expressions (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *Beethoven. Orbits*. Photo: Kristians Luhaers.

There are many legends and unproved stories about the composer's life that academic research ignores because of the lack of credibility, yet they constitute a worthwhile material for designers to engage with. The designers are able to transform such tales into visual stories that do not need to be grounded in academic research. In this case, the designers employed the legend by Carl Czerny, Beethoven's pupil claiming that the Symphony No 5 motif had come to Beethoven from a bird's song in the park. This story served the designers as grounds to form a playful scene. Conceptually imitating the park, Beethoven's granite sculpture was accompanied by green plants and birdsong. As a result, the exposition gained an original and unexpected twist. However, apart from these small interventions based on artistic research, the display was classic and academic as the written texts and historic artefacts dominated.

### B for Baroque

The exhibition *B for Baroque* was conceived differently from the *Beethoven. Orbits* since the concept of the show was in the hands of the designer from the very beginning. Moreover, the approach towards the subject was grasped in an experimental way grounded in the idea that *our knowledge about the Baroque will always remain fragmented. No one has yet returned from the Baroque era to substantiate details about how it really was* [Exhibition texts]. Although the initial starting point were the graphic prints of the period from the collection of the National Library of Latvia and thus the exposition could result in a traditional, classic art display, the concept was developed through the broader perspective of the Baroque exploring it as a cultural construct. Furthermore, the key motif of the narrative taken from Gilles Deleuze in the form of the line *The Baroque continually folds in on itself*, not only encapsulates the era's essence, but also empowers the designer to develop transforming and fluid aesthetics. By adapting the idea that *the Baroque looks like a mirage, bubbles that, like soap bubbles, burst on touch* [Exhibition texts], the exhibition was turned into a wonderland where the public was invited to experience the splendour and misery of the era themselves. Artistic research carried out by the designer Tatjana Raičiņeca in collaboration with the researcher Deniss Hanovs and the co-curator Kristīne Liniņa resulted in the exposition that transported the visitor to the Baroque era with all its contradictions, visual ecstasy, bold rhythms and theatrical performance (Figure 4).



Figure 4. *B for Baroque*. Photo: Reinis Hofmanis.

Although the historic exhibits such as prints and books were interpreted within the academic narrative brought by the Professor of the Riga Stradiņš University Deniss Hanovs, the exhibition itself unfolds as a spatial and sensual experience of the era through the means of contemporary design. If the academic knowledge and written narrative dominated at the *Beethoven. Orbits*, then the *B for Baroque* stands for the design as an exhibit itself balancing on the edge of self-centred approach.

### Conclusion

Each of the exhibitions examined in this article is different and unique as their authors have their own distinct views, artistic tastes and preferences. However, if the team is open to the experimentation, integrates the design thinking from the initial phase and acknowledges the importance of the academic facts as well as artistic research, the exhibition develops as an exciting journey both for the team as well as the public. It is important to acknowledge the role of curator since it works as the element between the research and the design, yet the researchers often decline to accept the authority of curator. As a compromise, the position of co-curator is introduced at the National Library of Latvia where the researcher is considered as the author of texts and the co-curator as the translator working with the conception of exhibition. On the whole, the exhibitions carried out at the National Library of Latvia prove that the success of exhibition lies in the teamwork with researchers providing facts, curators – stories, and designers – language.

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