

THE ROLE OF DIALOGUE IN THE “ENCOUNTERS”, THE PERMANENT EXHIBITION AT THE ESTONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM

(Paper given in the conference Across Borders VII: Cultures in Dialogue,

April 27-29, 2017, Tartu)

Kristel Rattus, researcher-curator, Estonian National Museum

Last October, the Estonian National Museum opened a new house and, together with this, new core exhibition(s). Building and equipping the new house meant not just changing the physical environment, but creating an entirely new cultural complex. This raised both practical and ideological questions. What should be the content of the new building? What could be maintained from the existing National Museum, and what should be changed? What sort of museum would Estonian society need? The museum kept on coming back to these questions. Discussions around making the “Encounters” became the central locus of the re-defining process of National Museum’s identity during these years¹.

The ENM

The popular image of the ENM has been bound to pre-industrial Estonian peasant culture. This image connects strongly to the Estonian national identity. All the previous core exhibitions (opened in 1927, 1947, 1994) (Nõmmela 2010; Reemann 2011) focused mostly on the Estonian pre-industrial peasant culture. With the exception of the display, which was opened in 1947 and bore the mark of Soviet ideology, the other ones expressed a

¹ The preparation period of the building and exhibition was long: in 2006, the architectural competition winner was announced; during the second half of 2008, the working group of curators started its work; and in April 2013, the cornerstone of the new building was finally laid. The real making of the “Encounters” took place in 2008-2016, during which the team of curators and designers decided on and developed the exhibits.

national-romantic frame of mind. That was probably due to the emotional moods of the periods when the exhibitions were opened: in the 1920ies, the Estonian society celebrated the liberation of the reign of the Baltic German nobility; in 1990ies, of the Soviet occupation. However, other social and cultural groups than Estonian peasants were (mostly) absent from all the three exhibitions.

From 1990ies onward, the museum expanded its grasp and started to treat a broad variety of topics about everyday culture (the everyday life of the Soviet period, townspeople, women, summer guests, etc.). Yet, this shift was expressed by temporary exhibitions, not by the core exhibition.

In the strategy for the Estonian permanent exhibition “Encounters”, the curating team set forth the objective as creating an exhibition about the life of all the peoples and cultures that historically existed in what is modern Estonia. No matter how unrealistic was the goal, it summed up the most essential: putting all the people who have lived on Estonian territory and their activity in the centre of interest, meaning the Estonian population as a whole, not just speakers of the Estonian language. We wished to create a communicative space that would allow people from different cultural and social backgrounds to identify with Estonian culture. What we, as a national museum, strived for was to act as a democratic forum that would be equally accessible to all people of the state. The museum also envisioned a need to include more societal groups at the decision-making level of content creation for the museum.

The title of the Estonian core exhibition is “Encounters”. Actually, it is an overarching name for a complex of 12 different exhibitions. There is a brief overview of Estonian cultural history, the “Journeys in Time”. In addition, there are different themed exhibitions, which complement and broaden the overview. Among them, one can find customary topics for the ENM, for example, displays about Estonian pre-industrial peasant life and life during Soviet times. Besides, we experienced with totally novel themes. We present handlings of archaeology, linguistics, and folkloristics. We have exhibitions about people’s immediate surroundings, like home and natural environment. We also have displays about present-day culture: food and urban life. Making the “Encounters” was like working in a

transdisciplinary laboratory: the contributors came from multitude of disciplines and interdisciplinary fields of inquiry. This versatile body of different themes has been integrated into a whole by the concept of everyday culture.

The principles

To achieve the desired level of broad-based engagement and to display and interpret multiple cultural heritages, we needed to find a method that would allow presenting different and sometimes conflicting viewpoints. Here, the concept of dialogue became the central element – more in the sense of polyphony rather than a dialectic. The notion was used both as the theoretical underpinning for the exhibition concept as well as a practical exhibition creation method.

We interpreted “dialogue” as a principle that would not try to discover the one and only meaning of a cultural phenomenon and would stress the natural multivocality of culture. Showing cultural phenomena from different viewpoints seemed to offer an opportunity to create a multifaceted, a so-called “thick” (Geertz 1973) description of culture and to avoid the reduction of real-life controversies that are inherent to any cultural situation. Such interpretation of dialogue, on one hand, would not repulse the subjective approaches of everyday-life situations and, on the other hand, would take into account their relations to tradition and context into which they belong (Gadamer 1975: 269).

Secondly, the notion of dialogue also referred to a collaborative, communicative museum and community projects, which also had an important position in the agenda of the museum.

Proceeding from the ideas of the participatory museum, the ENM focussed on the idea of mutual communication with the audiences, and visitor empowerment.² The wish to involve audiences as active partners was based on the recognition that both museum and society needed to understand its cultural heritage(s) as common and shared. The right to use it,

² Visitor empowerment means a situation in which the museum gives visitors more decision-making power (eg, about what and how to collect, display, or interpret).

but also the responsibility to maintain it lies with the people and institutions together (Runnel and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2010: 125).

Staging the “dialogues”

In the “Encounters”, different perspectives about cultural phenomena and historical events are presented mainly by juxtaposing subjective positions based on various source material and by introducing interactivity into the exhibition hall. We show diverse subjective viewpoints and personal experiences of people of different age, gender, class, nationality, etc.

In some cases, “staging a dialogue,” meant juxtaposing original objects of different social and cultural groups. In other times, we meant to “give voice” to different people in the literal sense; for example, by showing individual life-worlds by means of personal objects, letters and autobiographies.

Besides original objects, we also used several interpretive media, e.g. databases, installations, newly staged films and visual representations of researchers’ hypothesis. In case of pre-written culture, we obviously could not show alternative contemporary viewpoints. In this case, we juxtaposed different source materials and means to obtain knowledge by showing, for example, how present-day researchers create their own interpretations.

These ways of staging dialogues are, however, passive. Additionally, we tried to bring mutual communication between the museum and the audiences into the exhibition hall. There are exhibits, which ask visitors questions and later show other visitors what the previous ones have thought or preferred (for example, some language games). In one case, we collect new information by the method of crowdsourcing.

Furthermore, the museum has introduced the so-called open curatorship projects, inspired by the ideas of Nina Simon as expressed in her book “Participatory Museum” (2010). Since 2010, the museum has proclaimed a contest for exhibition projects, named “One’s Own Museum”, which is meant for non-museum-professionals. The winner is ascertained by public voting and gets the opportunity to carry out the exhibition project in the ENM. To

give the display a professional form, the museum helps with financial support and practical expertise. The aim is to encourage and enable different social and cultural groups to present their culture in their own terms. In the “Encounters”, there is a special hall for open curatorship projects (the so-called Do-It-Yourself-Hall).

The hybrid language of multi-modal storytelling

Besides written texts, we have also used visual, aural, spatial, etc. sensual means in order to include more data and add different viewpoints to the exhibition or just to make the display more emotional.

For example, digital exhibits enable us to give visitors access to far more of a collection, than could possibly be placed on any display. This also means that visitors’ access to the collection is much less constrained by the mediation of curators (Henning 2006: 83).

In the “Encounters”, we mainly use touch screens to show large bodies of data. There are displays of whole collections or curated selections of collections (photographs, images of physical objects). In some cases, multimedia designers have given a visual form to the hypothesis of researchers, on the basis on different kind of historical or numeral data.

Besides documentaries, which we have treated as historical documents, we display several new staged films. These, too, have been made on documental basis (for example, autobiographical memories, archive documents, and even some previously published handbooks). Films’ aim is to create emotional intimacy and help visitors to understand the viewpoints of the authors of these memories. Films also enable us to show longer and more sophisticated narratives than can be done by means of the written exhibition texts.

Nevertheless, all these films are newly created works of art, which we have not tried to hide.

Finally yet importantly, there are the so-called hands-on-objects, which aim to provide rest and fun. Still, each of them illustrates some historical cultural phenomena. To put them to work, visitors have to make a physical effort. This activity hints to the original context or meaning of the exhibit. For example, there is an exhibit, which demonstrates a Soviet-period radio and plays contemporary news and music. Besides Soviet radio stations, there

are also Western ones. If someone wants to listen to a Western station, he or she has to scroll a button to find the station. If one stops scrolling, the Western radio station would soon disappear and Soviet radio programs would start playing instead. Thus, the radio gives the visitor a hint that listening to Western programmes was interfered during the Soviet times.

Such multi-modal exhibits, which rely largely on multi-sensorial experiences have been criticised and for good reasons. For example, it has been pointed out (Hein 2000) that they may create new layers of meanings, uncontrolled by the curator, some of which may be unwanted.

On the other hand, such exhibits also facilitate storytelling and help the museum to get rid of “long and boring” textual blocks which, even if not so long and boring, are not comfortable to read in the multi-sensory environment of the exhibition.

“Encounters” is not an easy exhibition for visitors. Based on a large amount of visual elements that are to be interpreted intuitively, the exhibition has no one unequivocal interpretation. The visual form of the exhibition is a sort of a hybrid language that blends different objects, texts and multimedia. The design techniques add new layers of meaning to the exhibits. Visitors come up with their own interpretations, some of which may not have been intended by the curators and designers. This, too, is a dialogue and encounter – a meeting with new ways of thinking that can be added to the exhibition, if desired.

Bibliography

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1975. *Truth and Method*. New York: The Seabury Press.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture. – *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 3–30.

Hein, Hilde S. 2000. *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Henning, Michelle 2006. *Museums, Media & Cultural Theory*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Nõmmela, Marleen. 2011. Ühe mälukoha loomisest: esimene eesti rahvakultuuri püsinäitus Eesti Rahva Muuseumis. *ERM Ar 54*, Tartu: Eesti Rahva Muuseum, 14–37.

Reemann, Vaike. 2011. Püsinäitus on protsess. *ERM Ar 54*, Tartu: Eesti Rahva Muuseum, 38-65.

Runnel, Pille, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Pille. 2010. Muuseumikommunikatsioon ja kultuuriline osalus Eesti Rahva Muuseumis. *ERM Ar 53*, Tartu: Eesti Rahva Muuseum, 118-132.

Simon, Nina. 2010. *The Participatory Museum*, Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0.