



Curating Exhibitions in Academic Libraries: Practical Steps

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Abstract

Curating exhibitions offers librarians an engaging means of reaching out to academic communities and the public. In addition, exhibitions provide a means of exposing hidden collections or showcasing artworks by students and faculty. Together the librarians have curated 10 exhibitions of varying sizes and in different locations. This paper will discuss and examine practical steps for curating an exhibition in an academic library; a list of best practices is included in the appendix. Two case studies highlight exhibitions of students' art and virtual exhibitions.

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Keywords: rare books, special collections, artists' books, collaboration, exhibitions, curating, outreach, hidden collections

Introduction

The Special Collections Engagement survey conducted by the Association for Research Libraries (ARL) demonstrates that outreach with exhibitions is commonplace in ARL libraries (Berenbak & ARL, 2010). All but one of the 79 respondents reported that they have prepared exhibitions using their collections. Only 19% of the libraries responding had “a person or position charged with primary responsibility for exhibits” (Berenbak & ARL, 2010, p. 11). Moreover, the importance of exhibitions and their ability to promote the library were noted by Michelle Maloney (2012): “well-curated displays can transform “passive” library collections into communal spaces of discovery, cultivation, and contemplation” (p. 282). This paper will address the need special collections librarians have when they are first presented with a deadline for filling their library’s exhibitions cases. How to begin?

In recent years, as Jeet Heer (2011) writes: “curated has become a word gone wild” (para. 2). This ubiquity leads us to consider how art curators view the term for the purposes of this paper. According to curator Catherine Thomas (2002), “the range of words to describe “curator” are vast: caregiver, collaborator, facilitator, negotiator, cultural communicator, cultural agitator” (p. ix). This variety of roles means that there are many factors to consider when approaching a curatorial project.

This paper provides practical advice for novice exhibition curators, based upon the work of academic librarians at Concordia University and McGill University, two of the three English-language universities in Quebec. The authors of this paper have obtained their exhibition preparation skills on the job and have included their best practices in the appendix. This paper is the result of an evening of presentations for the L’Association des Bibliothécaires du Québec Library Association (ABQLA) College and Research Section’s 2012 spring event, “Curating exhibits in an academic environment: Practical steps and lessons learned for a successful display,” that was held at Concordia Library.

Literature Review

Exhibitions in academic libraries include many different approaches ranging from the display of rare and special collections within a library to the presentation of art works produced by members of the community. Yet the basic methods and techniques in curating a successful exhibition are common to all.

The concept of libraries using exhibitions as a way to showcase their collections and to appeal to the larger community is hardly new. However, for libraries that are dealing with rare books and special collections materials, the precautions and measures taken to display a successful exhibit are far more involved than for the general collection. Rare books and special collections exhibitions require special attention to such details as material condition, lighting, heat, and humidity (Balloffet & Hille, 2005; Brown & Power, 2006; Visser, 2004).

The Special Collections Engagement survey of research libraries questioned the use of curricular engagement by special collections departments and presented the best and most common practices for such engagement (Berenbak & ARL, 2010). One of the most important findings of the study was that all but one of the libraries surveyed use exhibitions as a way to engage with the university community. Indeed, the survey found that 96% of the institutions use events (exhibitions, lectures, discussions, etc.) to draw in the wider community to the campus (Berenbak & ARL, 2010). The most popular forms of communication used are press releases and direct mailings to inform the public of upcoming exhibitions and events (Berenbak & ARL, 2010).

The survey also investigated whether or not libraries with special collections have any set plan in place to deal with curricular engagement. The majority of respondents, 87%, have no formal policy in place. In fact, 67% of respondents have encountered barriers ranging from lack of staff to low faculty awareness when trying to provide outreach. The survey concluded that, although outreach is seen as vital to special collections, there is not enough being done though there is clearly an enthusiasm and need. Once the need for outreach has been established, a library must then move toward the planning and implementation of an exhibition.

A recurring theme in the literature is practical advice for librarians-cum-curators. Dutka, Hayes, and Parnell (2002) in their article "The surprise part of a librarian's life: Exhibition design and preparation course" provide a detailed outline for how library staff should be handling the task of creating and implementing library exhibitions. The authors recount how the role of curator was thrust upon them at their medium-sized university. Although they had no previous exhibition training, they were able to find success by learning several important lessons. First, would-be curators must consider the educational purpose of their exhibit. Exhibitions are an excellent way for librarians to highlight unique aspects of their collection. By organizing around a theme, the contents can be taken in at the individual pace of the viewer. Engaging the community is about bringing people into the library and increasing the library's

profile and relevance. The authors also examine the necessary components of exhibit design, providing an outline of advice for how best to curate an exhibition.

Both Visser (2004) and Prendergast (2003) in their respective articles highlight other practicalities for exhibition creation. Both authors discuss the importance of material selection. Prendergast points out that the curator is much like a liaison between the exhibition and the audience. The material selected should be visually stimulating but also accessible to all who visit. When dealing with a broad audience it can be difficult to find objects that everyone will understand and appreciate. According to Prendergast, this is why having a general knowledge of the collection is crucial before any materials are selected. This will help in choosing the best objects. Along with the physical objects themselves, Prendergast also highlights the importance of original commentary that is suitable for the targeted audience.

In addition to exhibiting materials from rare books and special collections, some academic libraries integrate exhibition programs of art works produced by students, faculty, or alumni from their institutions. Beal's (2007) article outlines her involvement in setting up a program for exhibiting art works of students at the University of Tennessee Knoxville's library. She emphasizes the importance of having clear policies and procedures as well as working with a mission statement. In discussing these ideas she endorses creating a visible and meaningful space in a library that provides for practical and aesthetic considerations. Another perspective is provided by Kam (2001) who discusses both collecting and exhibiting art works acquired by academic libraries. She acknowledges the librarian's role as curator as being vital to contextualizing the objects placed on display. She points out that exhibitions are an important means of communicating the library's role in the cultural identity of an institution. She emphasizes the need for librarian-curators to question and define their role in providing new readings of art objects and creating a dialogue between object and viewer. Like Beal, she discusses the need to have sufficient institutional resources to fulfil the responsibilities in exhibiting art works.

Finally, a note on exhibitions of artists' books and book works. Hoffberg (2007) sketched "problems and solutions" for exhibiting artists' books which she suggests would never be seen if not for exhibitions. She is a proponent of having a reading table with books available for visitors. Where this is not possible, she suggests having an accompanying DVD with images from the artists' book pages. Additionally, she recommends providing hand-outs on the content of the exhibitions available for visitors.

Exhibition Spaces: Concordia and McGill

The two universities highlighted in this study maintain a number of different exhibition spaces. Both universities have two campuses, each with a downtown campus and another on the outskirts of the island of Montreal. The universities have much in common as both have substantial undergraduate programs in the arts and humanities disciplines. Concordia is much younger than McGill and mainly because of this its Special Collections is significantly smaller. However, as will be discussed, the Concordia visual arts program offers an array of different opportunities, particularly for student and professor engagement.

The Webster Library at Concordia University Library provides an exhibition space comprised of wooden table display cases used to show student artworks (see Figure 1); unfortunately wall space is not available. The exhibition space is located in the entrance area of the library and shifts in its configuration depending on the exhibitors' preferences. Student artists and faculty like the prime positioning in the entrance area for the traffic the exhibition space gets. This way the exhibitions



Figure 1. Display cases at Concordia University's Webster Library, main atrium area. (Photo by Melinda Reinhart)



Figure 2. McGill University Humanities and Social Sciences Library, main floor exhibition cases. (Photo by Klaus Fielder)

potentially reach a large and diverse audience that does not necessarily expect to encounter art works in a library. It can sometimes make it challenging to create a sense that there is an exhibition space.

Concordia University Libraries house a small Special Collections unit which serves as the source of a few exhibitions each year; generally these

include artists' books or other artists' productions (for example, artists' postcards). The situation at Concordia is also unique in that book works produced by students and faculty that are exhibited are often subsequently acquired for special collections.

At McGill University Library, the Rare Books and Special Collections (RBSC) Library has dedicated exhibition cases in several exhibition spaces in the Humanities and Social Sciences



Figure 3. McGill University's Rare Books and Special Collections Library lobby has two vertical cases with built-in display lighting. (Photo by Klaus Fielder)

Library. There are three types of exhibition cases. There are seven free-standing cases made of oak and glass, custom built in the twentieth century (see Figure 2). Each provides a flat viewing surface of approximately 2.4 square meters from two sides, interrupted by a middle wooden support through the center of the case.

Inside the RBSC Reading Room there are eight contiguous

smaller cases that allow for a viewing area of approximately 1.2 square meters beneath wall-mounted prints (Figure 3). The Islamic Studies Library (ISL) has one large Gothic-style exhibition case on the ground floor (Figure 4). The case is centrally located in the ISL with good lighting, both natural and artificial. The case stands 3 by 6 meters, with the ability to display 16 items. Because of the size of the exhibition case, the top four slots need to contain elephant folio size works in order for the onlooker to be able to see the displayed items. The remaining 12 slots can display items of regular folio size.

In Rare Books and Special Collections at McGill University, new exhibitions are curated four times per year in the lobby of the Humanities and Social Sciences Library with the Alcuin Society's book design awards being a permanent fixture for the month of July. The Rare Books and Special Collections lobby



Figure 4. McGill University Islamic Studies Library exhibition case. (Photo by Klaus Fielder)

and Reading Room exhibition spaces have new exhibitions every four months. The display case in the Reading Room alcove is used most frequently for class exhibitions, research group exhibitions, and exhibitions by independent study students. It is also used as a trial case for the curators to test their layout for the exhibitions in the other locations.

Since 2009, the Islamic Studies Library has curated two exhibitions per year. The exhibitions have focused on Islamic manuscripts, calligraphy, and rare books collections.

Collections and Curation

The most astute adage for curating exhibitions should be “less is often more.” This is the first rule in curating an exhibition. As the authors Banks and Pilette (2000) note, “to use every pertinent item may be overwhelming, boring” and thus creates an exhibition that offers too much to be absorbed (p. 189). In addition, it is imperative to conceive of an exhibition that is not too broad as narrower subjects tend to maintain a better focus. The investigation of the collection should begin after the curator has developed a theme or concept. The purpose of the exhibition needs to be clear, particularly in these early stages. A few questions to ask include will the exhibition be a survey show, a cross-cultural exchange, an illustration of a theme, or a topical issue? Other possibilities include curating an exhibition on a timely event, for example, an anniversary of a writer, publisher, and work or on a current event, such as the Arab Spring. Each of these possibilities will allow the curator and the exhibition to harness the audiences’ already keen interest and thus help promote the exhibition.

In becoming familiar with one’s collection, a certain amount of serendipity must be permitted. While new technologies and software programs allow curators access to large amounts of data, they cannot replace personal examination of the material, particularly in terms of understanding how an item will contribute to the exhibition. Indeed, allowing the necessary time to physically inspect and assess the collection is perhaps one of the more underrated aspects of collection analysis. As noted by Mary Prendergast (2003), “in the course of evaluating candidates for display, the curator will uncover contextual meanings and links between objects that will help provide a frame of reference for the viewers and shape the emergent storyline” (p. 395). These connections will help in the design process of an exhibition and will encourage the curator’s creativity in the design and layout of the exhibition.

The collection one has will dictate the exhibition that one will curate. While borrowing materials is significantly easier in the 21st century, it remains complicated particularly for rare

materials. The focus instead should be to work with the collection owned by the institution with the possibility of borrowing as a second option. One should ask: what does the collection have that is unique? Or what will fascinate the audience? McGill is fortunate to have a significant collection of Islamic and Arabic calligraphy. This collection of roughly 200 specimens offers an assortment of specialized characteristics. However, at 200 specimens it is too large for an exhibition at most universities. To curate the collection one must be selective with an eye to highlighting various developments--for example, the different scripts of calligraphy. This is a hidden collection as it is not accessible via the catalog (either online or card), and only a few items have been discussed in select publications. It therefore offers the curator an opportunity to expose this hidden collection to a wider audience.

The hidden or inaccessible elements of particular collections constitute one of the pressing issues for rare books and special collections units at all institutions. This is extensively discussed by Barbara M. Jones' A White Paper for the Association of Research Libraries Task Force on Special Collections the Hidden Collections, *Scholarly Barriers: Creating Access to Unprocessed Special Collections Materials in North America's Research Libraries* published in 2003. In this document the authors detail "the problem, the opportunities, and some recommendations for how our communities might proceed to expose hidden special collections and encourage their use." One avenue to expose hidden special collections which the authors have taken is exhibiting unique materials, such as art installations or first editions of books.

Audience: Assumptions and Realities

In curating an exhibition, particularly in the preliminary stages, it is important to anticipate who the audience will be. Some ideas to consider are what do you as curator envision the exhibition offering as a theme or story? What is the subject most likely to interest the audience? Once the topic or theme has been selected, how are you going to conceptualize on a larger scale the different functions in each display case? And, in the end, what is the story the exhibition and the selected materials will tell? In order to help you understand in a practical sense what you will display, the curator needs to spend time with the collections to assess and understand what each item conveys. However, it is a given that the audience will be larger and more diverse than you anticipate and that they will perceive the exhibition differently than you envisioned.

In preparing the exhibition, it is best to keep it as simple as possible: do not use too

many items, do not complicate matters by having write-ups in difficult jargon, and do not choose a subject that will not engage the generalist. It is a balancing act in which “the curator accepts the role of liaison between the object and the audience and a bland objectivity is neither possible nor desirable” (Baxandall, 1991, p. 33). One of the most important factors to keep in mind is to allow enough space for one’s exhibition to be able to speak for itself. Of course, the curator will have in mind themes and ideas that are to be taken away from the exhibition, but each audience member will have a different interpretation. Indeed, much like a piece of fiction, the exhibition is weaving an intricate story in which each reader will create their own analogies and interpretations. To be able to understand this is vital for the success of an exhibition. Furthermore, it takes time, consideration, and deliberation to curate a succinct exhibition. Each exhibition item offers a different part of the whole story and must be considered as such when conceptualizing the exhibition.

Finally, exhibitions can be highly beneficial for both the library – highlighting its unique holdings – as well as for the curator. An exhibition may be used as a form of outreach that targets class instruction, thus providing new avenues of research for scholars both junior and advanced. Indeed, a well-balanced exhibition with vision can be used as a manner of teaching or for a class assignment, thereby making alternative use of the collections of one’s institution. As librarians’ traditional skills and requirements change, they must be able to adapt. If afforded the space and time, exhibitions will diversify portfolios, unleash hidden talents, and provide the impetus for new collaborations on campus.

Exhibition Policies

Integral to the various aims of numerous academic libraries is an emphasis on outreach and collaboration with the community as well as the physical spaces. Concordia University Libraries’ vision statement indicates the library is meant to be “welcoming, providing a secure and stimulating environment for study and research” and “collaborative, fulfilling our responsibilities with faculty and with university services” (Concordia University Libraries, 2014). At McGill, the library mission statement reveals that the library “creates an appropriate environment to support teaching, learning and research” and “supports community outreach and community partnerships” (McGill University Library, 2013). Exhibition programs contribute to both these objectives.

Both McGill and Concordia have developed meaningful collaborative projects with

faculty and students through exhibition events. At McGill, a number of initiatives have seen students and faculty undertaking research using items from the Rare Books and Special Collections Library following an exhibition exposing hidden collections. The rare books librarians work closely with the students in the realization of these learning outcomes. *The Moravian beginnings of Canadian Inuit literature: An exhibition of special collections from McGill University Library Rare Books and Special Collections* was a collaborative effort with undergraduate students in English literature (Rankin, Stenbaek, Campbell, & Terry, 2010). An exhibition and the accompanying catalog emerged from a fourth year undergraduate seminar entitled “Canadian Slavery and Its legacies: A Curatorial Seminar” taught by Dr. Charmaine Nelson, Associate Professor of Art History (Garland, 2013). Each year, the Interacting with Print (IwP) Research Group, an interdisciplinary and inter-institutional research group devoted to the study of European print culture in the period 1700-1900, selects two graduate students to curate an exhibition on their research question. The student exhibitions are transformed into virtual exhibitions and can be reviewed from the IwP website (IwP, 2013).

Concordia University Libraries partners with students and faculty by providing a library space for exhibiting art works of students in the context of class projects or individual initiatives. Concordia University has a well-recognized fine arts faculty with a large studio arts program. In conjunction with faculty, the Visual Arts Librarian Melinda Reinhart coordinates or co-curates exhibitions of student artists’ works. Among the class exhibitions that recur annually is that of the Urban Clay Ceramics class (Figure 5). Students initially show their work in a public space they select on the campus.

Subsequently, the works are exhibited in the library cases where documentation produced by the students provides a context for the initial setting. The different class projects are one example of embodying the mission statement of the library exhibition policy “to contribute to the cultural role of institution, provide an opportunity to collaborate with community, [and] provide a venue for students to exhibit in a unique public space” (Concordia University Libraries, 2012).



Figure 5. Bianca St. Martin. (2013). Books. Thickening the Plot Exhibition. (Photo by Linda Swanson)

When a library embarks on establishing an exhibition program, it is advisable to consider the development of an exhibition policy. The ACRL Spec Kit (Berenbak & ARL, 2010) indicates that 87% of respondents did not have a policy in place. Having a policy is especially important for programs where works from outside the library's or institution's collection are shown. Beals (2007), who established an exhibition program for student art works, underlines the importance of having clear policies and procedures that provide a framework for students as well as library staff. Policies are also invaluable when dealing with exhibitions that are challenged by members of the community as controversial or inappropriate.

Policies for exhibition programs including art work from outside the library collection provide guidelines to potential exhibitors who are generally not familiar with the constraints of library spaces. From the various examples reviewed, it appears that most policies outline the exhibition committee's responsibilities, the exhibition spaces available, the types of works considered for exhibition, who can exhibit, the duration of exhibitions, promotional methods, security issues, and the responsibilities of exhibitors. At Concordia, the policy is presented on the exhibition proposal form that potential exhibitors must complete. Required information includes the artist's statement, exhibition theme, images, and lists of works with dimensions.

Creating the Exhibition: Time Management

The work to create an exhibition will require the curator to use time management skills to coordinate the various tasks that will bring the exhibition to completion. The preparation of a plan, analyzing the order of the tasks (for example, selecting the works, supporting the work, arranging the items in the cases, preparing case cards to describe the work and the exhibition theme), and discussing the plan with departmental colleagues will benefit everyone involved. It is important to analyze the constraints of the exhibition space, including height within the cases, areas in the cases that have low visibility due to lighting, structural elements of the case construction, or the manner in which the viewer will be able to see individual items on display. Another important question is how many pieces can be arranged in the space to fill it just right and have enough space for case cards and white space? Every curator wants to make the selections look their best. As Prendergast (2003) has observed, "eventually, the job of selection will evolve into one of deselection, as desirable items continue to present themselves despite the lack of space to display them to best advantage" (p. 397).

Experimenting with clustering the works in various arrangements will help to achieve

a balanced grouping with colors that complement each other (Figure 6). The goal is to fill the space for the onlookers from all angles. Sometimes the story can be repeated by different openings in the different works. Be sure to show illustrations and to select a variety of sizes of works.

At McGill, librarians found that the use of an iPad (or digital camera) to document the



Figure 6. Exhibition photograph from Telling Stories: Nursery Rhymes, Fables and Fairy Tales from the Sheila R. Bourke Collection. (Photo by Klaus Fielder)

exhibition layout as the exhibition was being constructed was a very effective way to record decisions. Often months elapse between the time decisions are made for the layout of the cases and when the exhibition is actually installed. Keeping a photographic record is prudent and allows an installation to be completed without “memory loss.”

One final consideration is the security of the exhibition space. In both the McGill and Concordia Libraries, the majority

of the exhibition cases are in public spaces. During the evenings the library lobby is full of students chatting, texting, and leaning on the exhibition cases. The locks in each of the cases, though reinforced, are not very secure. Items of extreme value would never be displayed here despite the presence of security guards. Assess the security risks that affect your exhibition, making sure they are acceptable before the exhibition is installed.

The Exhibition: Visual Effects and Texts

The visual effects and texts in an exhibition are almost as important as the items and materials selected. The options for visual effects include, for example, text only objects or a mixture of pictures, ephemera, maps, or related matter. Furthermore, the bibliographic information provided must demonstrate brevity in its finest form. In short, visual effects for each exhibition will vary for a number of different reasons. The following is a general outline of

personal experiences and anecdotes from McGill University that may be useful.

The preliminary stage of exhibition preparation provides the curator with the opportunity to assess the exhibition before going live. As noted, the curator must decide on the visual effects and texts, including bibliographical entries, each of which will have a significant impact on the look and feel of the exhibition. Indeed, writing for the exhibition “can prove an exercise in compromise” (Prendergast, 2003, p. 399). The challenge is striving to ensure the texts do not use specialised jargon which will deter the audience from appreciating the message of the exhibition. It is necessary to write short, complete sentences, sticking to the adage “brevity through clarity and clarity through brevity.” Care should be taken in the preparation of the case cards for each work and should include a complete bibliographic citation, as well as a shelf mark to enable the item to be located in the collection post-exhibition. Mount the cards on colored paper coordinated with the exhibition colors, ensure the font is legible (12 point at a minimum), and follow consistent rules for spacing and punctuation.

Finally, creating visual stimulus for promotional purposes will entice unsuspecting visitors. The curator should brand the exhibition, limiting it to one or two images that speak to the exhibition’s central theme and play on the imagination of the visitor. In addition, the typeface used should be clear and easy to read. Fancy, elaborate typefaces are catchy and convey artistic talent; however, they are not easily legible, which will impact the visitors’ experience negatively. Rather, as previously noted about the selection of materials for the exhibition, the phrase “less is often more” applies equally to the exhibition’s accompanying texts.

Promoting the Exhibition

Creating a timely and attractive set of promotional materials is a component of exhibition preparation that should not be neglected. There are many ways to reach out to potential audiences, and the key to success is selecting images and text from the exhibition itself that can be repurposed into the promotional material. It is a good idea to arrange to have professional photographs of the exhibition taken as soon as it is installed as these photographs will serve multiple promotional purposes later on.

In addition to promoting an exhibition inside the library, there are a myriad of possible media available to reach a larger audience in the university and the wider community. Posters, pamphlets, postcards, and bookmarks can be displayed near the exhibition area or at strategic locations in the library. Where a budget is available, exhibition catalogues/booklets

can also be prepared. Many libraries also utilize computer screens throughout their libraries for announcements; these can also serve to publicize exhibitions. Integrating relevant images is important for drawing viewers' attention. Most importantly, remember to give oneself ample lead time to prepare all materials for the beginning of the exhibition.

Posters placed near the exhibition area are essential to provide a context to the display as well as reaching not only the informed but also the unsuspecting visitor. If the library or institution has a graphic arts or communications department, it is advisable to have professional posters designed by them. Where students' art works are the focus of exhibitions, it is often possible to have the students themselves design visually engaging posters, especially in the digital age. The poster becomes central to branding other promotional materials related to the exhibition such as digital displays, bookmarks, and postcards that can be made available within the library and also distributed to faculty, students groups, department bulletin boards, etc. Where appropriate, advertisements in the wider community can be made available in community and city newspapers and on relevant cultural web sites, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media.

One example of successful publicity material is the poster for the Ghazali exhibition at McGill University in 2011 (Figure 7). The poster was designed by a team of library staff members. The central image of the poster is from a calligraphy leaf that was one of the materials used for the exhibition.

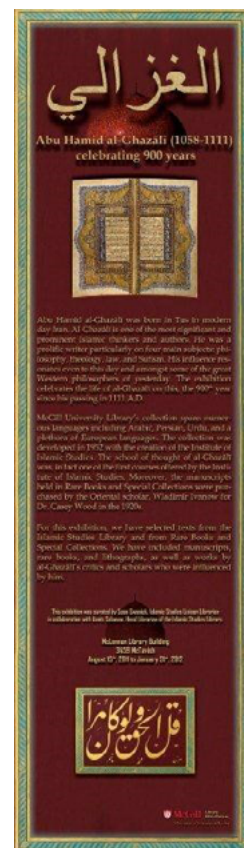


Figure 7. Ghazali exhibition poster, 2012. (Design by Klaus Fielder)



Figure 8. Booked exhibition poster, 2011. (Design by Pata Macedo)

Among some of the posters produced for exhibitions of artists' books and book works by design students in Concordia Libraries, Booked (Figure 8) was designed by graphic design professor Pata Macedo who organizes annual exhibitions using this theme.

Concordia Libraries' Case Study: Exhibitions of Students' Art

Although Concordia University Library does exhibit materials from Special Collections, the focus of this discussion is on the exhibition program at the Webster Library that draws on the works of visual arts students and faculty. Because the exhibition space is restricted to table display cases, the art works shown are two-dimensional or small three-dimensional pieces. Past exhibitions have included ceramics, textiles, prints, and drawings. However, the main thrust of the program is to show artists' books and book works. Generally, the exhibition cases are located in visible areas near the entrance of the library. Libraries have become one of the sought after "public spaces" that appeal to numerous artists who want their work to be seen outside the context of museums or galleries (O'Doherty, 1999, p. 95). Working in collaboration with students and faculty from the Faculty of Fine Arts, members of the exhibition committee organise a program of approximately eight shows per year that last between four and six weeks each. In addition to solo shows proposed by individual students, the library also hosts group exhibitions, generally brought together by a professor as part of a class project. Additionally, the library exhibition committee initiates shows by soliciting students' art works through a "call to artists."

Exhibitions initiated by the library are often the most stimulating but also require the greatest time commitment for the librarian-curator. From the time a "call to artists" is announced using various communication channels on campus to the installation of the works for the exhibition, there are numerous details to address as well as ongoing meetings with the jury committee and the artists. Although an overarching theme is used for these exhibitions, it is sometimes advisable to keep the concept for a show relatively open. It is then possible to identify a theme on the basis of the proposals that are accepted. After the selection of works has been made, communications with student artists involve a flurry of emails to ensure the numerous details involved in coordinating the installation as well as the take down of the exhibition are addressed.

In addition to exhibitions proposed by the library, a growing number of shows are the result of student or faculty initiatives. Supporting student-initiated exhibitions to show their work has led to some of the most imaginative and exciting exhibitions. A number of undergraduate and graduate students have contacted the librarian-curator with proposals to show their artists' books and book works in the library. Among these, in the fall of 2010 a particularly striking exhibition was proposed by two Ph.D. artist-researchers who are in an interdisciplinary program which brings their art practices together with theoretical explorations.

RE: in search of horizons was a collaborative book exhibition which stemmed from their dialogue around their readings of Deleuze and Guattari as well as other philosophers (Figure 9). In addition to exhibiting their artists' book in the library, they made a pdf version of the book freely available online. The print copy of the book was also acquired for Concordia's Special Collections.

Other exhibitions result from proposals by faculty members who welcome the opportunity to show the works of undergraduate students who have few, if any, occasions to exhibit. Generally, the professor takes on the role of curator, identifying themes and preparing texts in conjunction with students, as well as overseeing the layout/setup of the work with students' input and assistance. Most professors involve the students in all aspects of the process, consequently affording them invaluable experience and knowledge about preparing exhibitions. The genuine enthusiasm and appreciation for such exhibition opportunities has reinforced a positive working relationship with the faculty and students. An example of this type of exhibition is discussed in the next section.

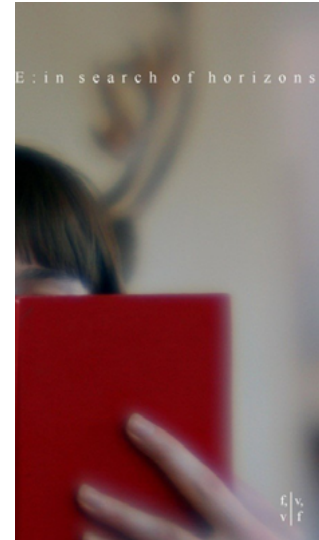


Figure 9. RE: In Search of Horizons. Fiona Annis & Véronique Laperrière M. Limited edition artists' book. Montreal: Griffintown Press, April 2010.

Techniques for Exhibiting Artist's Books and Book Works

Artists' books and book works are central to the exhibition program. There has been resurgence in the use of the book format by artists as well as a growing number of courses at Concordia University on artists' book. In the literature on exhibiting artists' books and book works, curators invariably underline the importance of displaying works in a context where they can be handled for a more meaningful experience of the works (Hoffberg, 2007, p. 13). Unfortunately, like most libraries, Concordia Libraries do not offer gallery conditions where this would be possible; consequently, the library is constrained to showing such works in enclosed cases. In a number of the exhibitions organised by students and faculty, they have circumvented these limitations through inventive strategies to give the viewer a more complete sense of a work rather than simply displaying a two-page spread of an opened book.

In an exhibition of a single artists' book, *Lettres/Letters*, comprised of texts and images produced by students and their professor, the student curators/editors Anne-Marie Proulx and Mariane Bourcheix-Laporte chose to deconstruct the book physically so that they could display

all the pages in two-page spreads (Figure 10). Near the exhibition cases a computer placed on a plinth was used to show the turning of the book pages in a looped DVD presentation that ran throughout the exhibition. By allowing for an experience of the book's construction and

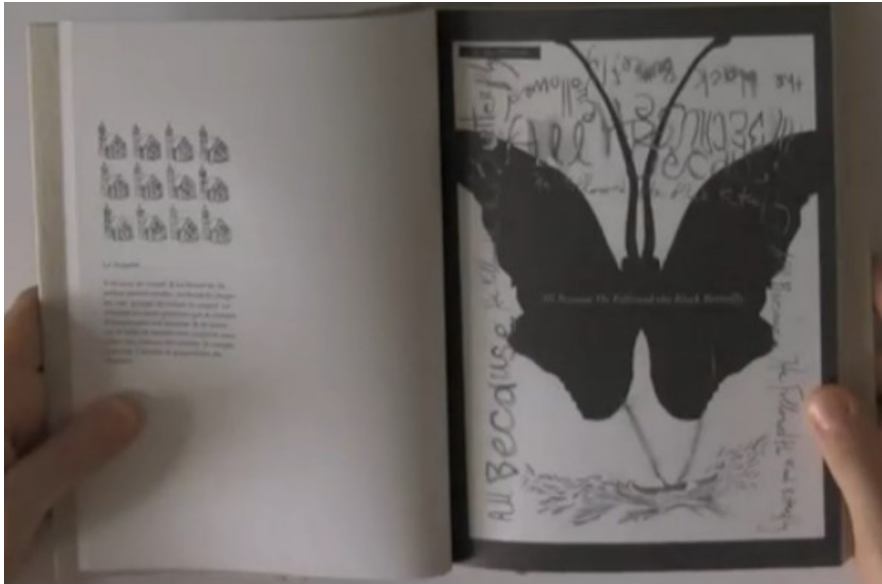


Figure 10. Jim Holyoak. *All because he followed the black butterfly.* (2010). *Letters/Lettres*. Mariane Bourcheix-Laporte & Anne-Marie Proulx (Eds.). Montreal: Éditions MAAM, 2010.

content, this mediation of the work engaged the viewer who could not handle the book

One of the most inventive exhibitions of artists' books centered on three books which were not shown materially in the display. Rather, as in the previous

example, the exhibition entitled *After Party* was comprised of a film loop representing the book pages being turned near the exhibition cases which contained installations derived from the books (Figure 11). The works were produced by printmaking professor Jenny Lin and two students, Kerri Flannigan and Sarah Nesbitt, from her class on artists' books. Both artists produced highly unique installations based on their work in separate cases in an engaging and imaginative extension of the artists' books. This exhibition underlined the importance of being flexible and willing to experiment with the ideas presented in student and faculty proposals.



Figure 11. *After Party* exhibition. (Photo by Jenny Lin)

McGill Library's Case Study: The Virtual Exhibition

The majority of McGill Library exhibitions in the past decade have benefitted from the creation of a virtual exhibition, accessible from the library website (Figure 12). The virtual exhibition extends the life of an exhibition indefinitely and provides a web presence that ensures the exhibition can be found by interested scholars and the public in their Google searches.

Building a website to host the virtual exhibition does create an additional layer of curatorial work and requires coordination and involvement with the digitization team. Ideally, the best planning outcome is to launch the physical and virtual exhibition at the same time. Extra planning is needed to make this a reality and it is worth considering in the inception phase of one's exhibition planning. At McGill Library, digitization takes place in an area within the Rare Books and Special Collections Library so that items never need to leave the premises. The staff in the Digital Initiatives department carefully create digital images from the materials selected by the curator. Special instructions may initiate a discussion of how to shoot the images, especially if the item being displayed is three-dimensional.

McGill Library uses a locally-developed Structured Query Language (SQL) database and set of routines to create metadata linked to each image for display on the website. "Project Metadata" displays a working copy of the image and provides a template containing qualified Dublin Core (DC) metadata for each exhibition image. If there is a MARC record in the library's catalog, an export feature allows the metadata to be transferred automatically into the DC template and to be mapped correctly into the proper fields. The curator then uses the in-house editing system to complete the record for the digital object. The curator is responsible for verifying the image to ensure it corresponds to the material they have selected and determines the display order of the images for the website.

Once "Project Metadata" records have been completed for each image in the exhibition, LTS builds a website using a locally-developed exhibition template. During this design-intensive

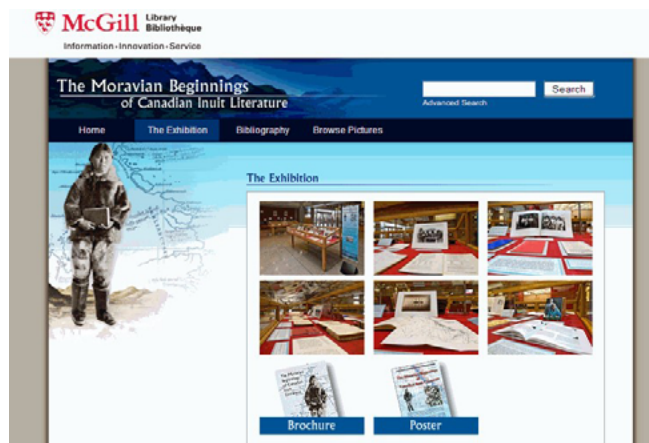


Figure 12. The Moravian Beginnings of Canadian Inuit Literature exhibition website.

phase, the curator is involved in the selection of the images for the exhibition home page and editorial work to ensure that the exhibition texts are transferred to the website without error. Over 20 virtual exhibitions have been created by McGill University Library and can be viewed on the Digital Collections web page where the most recent ones have used the procedures described above.

Conclusion: Why Do Exhibitions?

Why do exhibitions? What is the point? Besides the obvious enjoyment and pleasure of making an abstract idea come to fruition, of showcasing the hidden talents of you and your colleagues, of participating with a broad audience and collaborating with numerous colleagues, why curate exhibitions?

After an exhibition is over, we aim to take a measure of its success. This is often difficult to weigh. Art curator Gilane Tawardos articulates our sentiments about art shows in Concordia Libraries: “there’s no discussion about what the nature of success is: is it successful because three people come to it, or is something successful because you think it’s fantastic, because the artist is really pleased with it?” (Hiller & Martin, 2000, p. 35). Despite the numerous hours exchanging emails, finding furniture, getting text, preparing posters, and so on, working with and supporting student artists by providing an opportunity to showcase their work in a public venue is a truly enriching experience. Moreover, for those users who may never go to a museum or gallery, hopefully their encounters with the art works in the library will be a meaningful experience.

Working with graduate students to explore the library collections in preparation for their exhibition is always a rewarding experience. Students are constantly amazed



Figure 13. Sarah Nesbitt. Broken Things. Installation in exhibition case.
(Photo by Jenny Lin)

by what they find. The intellectual route to a completed exhibition is never a straight line. Following one's intellectual curiosity and creating an engaging exhibition is an enriching activity for all involved.

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Appendix:

Curating an Exhibition: Best Practices at Concordia University Libraries & McGill University Library

The following is a list of the authors' best practices for other librarians who may be curating an exhibition for the first time.

Spaces: Understand the spaces you have to work with, from their limitations to their strengths.

Collections: Understand the collection you have to work with. Select the most interesting pieces that create the story (message) you are trying to convey.

Display items: Support the items to ensure that the exhibition will not damage their state.

Audience: Take into consideration multiple points of view when discussing your exhibition. Consider the exhibition on the micro and macro levels.

Time management: One of the most important and least discussed elements of curating an exhibition. Plan in advance for anything and everything.

Visual effects and texts: Select one or two items that convey the general message of the exhibition. Accurate and complete case cards describing the work and its location in your library are essential.

Promotion: Depending on your institution, this may be handled by a particular committee or individual. However, be sure to market your exhibition with the images discussed above.

Exhibition policy: Developing an exhibition policy provides a framework for all stakeholders and ensures clear communication of processes and procedures.

Collaboration: Seek opportunities to work with faculty and/or students for a meaningful engagement with community.

Documentation: Record all stages of the exhibition from conception to installation.

Technology: Consider various uses of technology from integrating computer screens (monitors) into exhibitions to creating digital versions of exhibitions.