Abstract
The article explores how academic and arts-based research have been combined in curating the contemporary, media-rich exhibition *The Time of Freedoms*, which is part of the permanent exhibition of the Estonian National Museum. The article shows how the success of exhibition-making practice depends on the skill of switching codes from the more strictly procedure-oriented sociological/ethnological, to an arts-based approach that relies on being processual and performative. After contextualizing the exhibition and positioning the curatorial team, the article discusses three parts/exhibits of *The Time of Freedoms* exhibition: *The Sacrifice Stone* and *ATM*, *the Synthesiser of Freedom* and the *Stories about Freedom*. These vignettes are then used to discuss the roles of arts-based research in this exhibition design process and outcome.

Keywords
Museum communication; arts-based research; exhibition as research.

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1. INTRODUCTION

When the Estonian National Museum (ENM) – founded in 1909 – opened its first purpose-built building in 2016, the *Encounters*¹ main permanent exhibition invited the visitor to step into the museum at the contemporary moment and to then move backwards through the timeline to the earliest settlements on Estonian territory. The entry, the first section of the exhibition, which is the focus of this study, was called *The Time of Freedoms* and aimed to represent contemporary Estonia.

We, authors of this article, are media researchers. The first author Pille Runnel was chief curator of the *The Time of Freedoms* exhibition and Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt a long-standing research collaborator. This text draws on our experiences and roles in this process using a reflexive, dyadic autoethnography² to explore the exhibition-making across the four categories of research-creation³. The study emerged as a series of con-
versations between us authors, resulting in an interactively produced analysis. During the process, one of us (Pille Runnel) also revisited her personal archive of fieldwork notes from the exhibition production process, as well as formal and informal documents from her archive of meetings, status reports and e-mails.

The three exhibits we will discuss (and which will be introduced below), were selected on the basis of our reflections on the examples and phases of the exhibition production process, focusing on the shift between a more traditional research approach and an arts-based research approach. After the analysis of these three exhibits, we return to a discussion on arts-based research, approaching art not as an object of knowledge and representation, but as a practice set in particular contexts. We see arts-based research as an iterative process set to face unexpected, contingent challenges and problems from the moment of finding data (drawing it from different disciplinary contexts, archives, formats and genres) to the creation of artistic output. Our paper looks at the context of exhibition design, which as a form of museum communication (a subset in media and communication studies) can be seen as a way to communicate existing knowledge. Through analysing how the iterative process of making the exhibition generates new knowledge, we argue, that it also falls in the range of arts-based research, encompassing a diversity of research options.

2. MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AS PART OF EXHIBITION PRODUCTION

Exhibition-making is a collaborative process. Early discussions among the large production group pointed to the need to raise awareness about the ENM’s relations to contemporary times and, Estonian culture, which was conceptualised as encompassing all the cultures and peoples who share(d) the same territory. The exhibition aimed to be open, allowing for a diversity of interpretations, which posed a curatorial challenge. Another challenge was the rapid transformation of curatorial approaches and means, with curators evolving from curators as academically trained scholars to curators as members of a team, where they held the sometimes-overlapping roles of curator, designer and museum pedagogue. This challenge was felt most strongly by the team working with *The Time of Freedoms*, the most contemporary part of the exhibition. This (part of the) exhibition started with the 1990s and provided a space that allowed visitors to gradually move from their non-museological present to a museologised presence.

Any creation “involves an initial gathering of material, ideas, concepts, collaborators, technologies, etc.”, and it is important to (briefly) explain the positions of the members of the team, which was operational from 2009 to 2016, when the new exhibition opened, and brought together a diversity disciplines and practices. Pille Runnel and Agnes Aljas, a jack-of-all-trades, have a background in ethnology. Pille Runnel completed her PhD in media and communication studies; Agnes Aljasis is currently working...
On her PhD in the same field. Another team member, Taavi Tatsi (BA, history) was engaged with the project for the duration of his PhD studies in media and communication. Ehti Järv (MA, ethnology), joined the team in 2011 and Karin Leivategija (MA, visual anthropology) joined the team in 2014 for the filmmaking of the Stories about Freedom exhibit. In 2009, the 3+1 architectural bureau won the competition to become partners for the exhibition design and Marko Raat, BA in film and video, became the lead audio-visual curator of the exhibition. Multimedia artist Timo Toots, BA in photography, worked as an interaction designer for the exhibition between 2013 and 2016. Given the academic profile of a considerable part of the curators of The Time of Freedoms, the process has identifiable roots in the work that sociologist and media scholar Marju Lauristin carried out on Estonia as a transition society in the 1990s.

On the side-lines of the exhibition-making was the ‘Museum Communication in the 21 Century’ research project (2008-2014), led by Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt. Most of the curatorial team of The Time of Freedoms participated in this project as researchers. The discussions on democratic participation, museum communication and visitor engagement formed the backbone of many of the decisions and confrontations in the exhibition-making process. In these discussions, the international collaboration with Nico Carpentier played an important role. The team gained experience from the museum’s Exhibition Lab, set up within the research project to experiment with methods of studying museum communication.

In the remainder of the article, we will focus on three exhibits, that will feed into our later discussion on what kind of arts-based research moment became distinctive for the exhibition process. The three vignettes of the selected exhibits contain narratives of how these exhibits made it into the exhibition space.

3. SACRIFICE STONE AND ATM

At the beginning of the exhibition, in a space dedicated to the 1990s (part of the thematic circle about religious freedom) stands a stone with few token coins on it. The stone is about 1 meter high and has a circumference of about 3 meters. This dimpled stone from the 1st millennium BC was brought to the ENM in 1994 when it obstructed work on the Tallinn-Tartu highway, receiving a place at the previous permanent exhibition. Every now and then, a visitor stops at the stone and adds a coin to those scattered on and around the dimples. Almost next to it, Estonia’s first ATM is displayed. It is non-functional, but easily recognisable as an object that dispenses money.

While often associated with a Scandinavian cult of the dead and stone worship, the function of the stone is not agreed upon among archaeologists. Thus, it was considered not suitable for the part of the exhibition dealing with prehistory. Instead, its placement became a cross-media game for curators: an artistic, playful experiment, where removing the artefact from one context into another became a form of recoding, bringing up new meanings and triggering new interactions. As the only artefact that was transferred

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directly from the previous exhibition, it linked the two exhibitions becoming a com-
memoration of the previous exhibition and a symbol of the 1990s, rather than an archae-
ological find. Locating the stone next to the ATM unleashed a whole new dynamic. The
initial goal of curators was to place a fully functioning ATM in the exhibition as an ar-
tistic intervention and a musealisation of contemporary banking practice. However, this
plan could not be realised due to banking regulations, or rather, the unwillingness of the
banks represented in Estonia to establish an ATM in this unusual context. As a form of
resistance, a non-functioning historical ATM was used, presented as a traditional, static
museum object. Unexpectedly, the contemporary sacrifice stone next to it became more
interactive than the ATM, even generating money. As people started leaving a significant
number of coins as symbolic offerings on the stone, instead of negotiating regulations
for the financial operation of the ATM, the curatorial team had to discuss procedures for
the financial operation of the stone.

4. THE SYNTHESER OF FREEDOM

“Welcome to Estonia”, “Choose order!”, “Let’s do it!” – random slogans for foreigners,
legendary slogans for the locals, along with pieces from radio shows, music videos,
politician’s speeches and familiar symbols from the 1990s, such as Tallinn’s TV tower
or the logo of Tiger Leap Foundation can be revisited at the large table-shaped installa-
tion. At the edges of the table, box-shaped cavities with up to 20 floppy disks (3.5”) in
each with different colours to signify different topics and available content, inviting pas-
sers-by to explore. Placing a disk in an appropriate slot will start a visual (e.g. a logo),
text, moving image or sound on the central screen and combining one of each will allow
for a remix of different cultural artefacts.

Figure 1 - The Synthesiser of Freedom invites visitors to explore mixed media
[Photo by Berta Vosman]
Users are able to mix different media formats: sound, video/photo and text-based media, seeing the result of their activity at the centre of the table, which is reminiscent of a turntable. Your age and experience will influence whether you just mix somewhat familiar faces, music videos and graphic images, or whether you recognise phrases, words and song titles in their context with links to specific historical events. Visitors can explore the table on their own, or with a group if they visit with friends; or they can join strangers already exploring the table.

*The Synthesizer of Freedom* represents how freedom of expression emerged in Estonia in the 1980s. The initial starting point for concept development was the media research background of the curators and their interest in contemporary remix culture and the ways in which it could be transferred to represent the public media culture of the 1990s. The process started with listings of culturally significant elements. Initially considered an additional layer to a traditional showcase displaying objects from the 1990s, the introduction of elements on the small screens caused the curators to recognise the potential of this kind of content for learning about media through participatory collaborative and creative activities. This was developed by Timo Toots, who helped to find the appropriate form for the exhibit. Remix culture builds on practices where the boundaries between media production and play are not distinguishable. Visitor’s collaborative use of the mixer results in new, but ephemeral pieces. When mixing the content, users can produce and reconstruct (which is simultaneously an act of publication), but not save or share the collaboratively created pieces.

5. Stories about Freedom

*Stories about Freedom* is a spatial multimedia installation consisting of a massive concrete screen with 74 2-4 minute short interviews projected on it and 9 concrete ‘speech bubble’ seats with projected quotes. The interviews have been edited into a continuous video. The projections on the speech bubble seats are random interview quotes in Estonian, Russian and English. The exhibit represents the underlying principle of the whole exhibition – to offer different viewpoints on particular topics or events. The interaction between the text from the videos, the quotes from the interviews and the viewers creates new encounters.

Initially, the goal was to produce a film-based exhibit merging approximately 100 stories. This documentation aimed to represent world views, and collective and individual identities, providing a collective snapshot portrait of society in a particular era. The 2-4 minute stories were to be produced through a set of open-ended interviews, where people could say what was in their minds and hearts.

With previous experience of both research interviews and film-making, those curators with a background in ethnology set out to carry out a pilot study. In the workshops discussing exhibition-related filming, film curator Marko Raat critically deconstructed the result, arguing that the open interview footage showed a lack of contact between the interviewer and interviewed and thus lacked any potential to address the visitor.

At the next stage, Ehti Järv set out to work with the exhibit in collaboration with the museum’s cameraperson, following the principles of ethnographic fieldwork. The

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11 Personal notes by Pille Runnel, 2011.
resulting set of videos (short insights into people’s lives) were reportages rather than engaging encounters with the lives and minds of people, and this attempt also had to be discarded.

By this time, an urgent and obvious need to skip a scholarly approach and cross to the artistic side had become evident. The project was entrusted to the new curator, Karin Leivategija\textsuperscript{12}. She proposed narrowing the topic to the perception of freedom, which meant that while the opinions expressed are different, the unitedness of the interviews brings the film, rather than the interview, into the focus. Karin’s toolkit was subtly different. When in the field alone, her interaction with the interviewees was different. Instead of taking the role of dominant participant with explicit control of the filming situation, Karin moved the camera in an observational role in the background, foregrounding the conversation.

Enter multimedia artist Timo Toots, who uses technology as the material of his work and focuses on the relationship between users and technology. Experienced with digital installations, Timo brought yet another new skill set, working spatially and focusing on the material aspects of media. Karin’s interviews had emerged from the tradition of ethnographic film-making. In her footage, people, as well as their visual backgrounds, formed the story. Initially, Timo still suggested stripping the interviews to the bones, using them as the text-only part of the forthcoming installation. This proposal rejected the particularity of interviews in their context, suggesting a bold abstraction of different viewpoints and opinions.

Figure 2 - Different perceptions of the concept of freedom interact at the \textit{Stories about Freedom} exhibit [Photo by Pille Runnel]

After intense negotiation, the audio-visual format was retained and was merged into the installation. Yet, the filmed material was not just considered according to its filmic qual-

ity, but approached as content to be merged into a digital-material hybrid object. The curators were involved in negotiating the final outcome, but from the curatorial, rather than artistic-authorial, position. What was initially planned as an independently displayed set of ethnographic interviews, morphed into a mix of genres and media where video, sound, text and spatial installation meet, creating a new artistic object.

6. WHERE IS ARTS-BASED RESEARCH?

Arts-based research attempts to challenge traditional research forms both on the level of research as a process of data collection, generation or analysis, and on the level of research presentation. Chapman and Sawchuk argue that creation-as-research is the most complex and controversial as it is about investigation and understanding of technologies/media/practices by actually deploying these and pushing them in creative directions. In our case as museum communication researchers, an exhibition that is a laboratory which gathers existing research and generates data for new research and presents results in a creative form can be seen as “a form of directed exploration through creative experimentation, analysis, critique and profound engagement with theory and questions of method.” This paper details some of the arts-based research practices within the exhibition and is therefore one of the many ‘traditional academic outputs’ produced within creation-as-research.

The category of research-for-creation. Tracking down creative ideas and negotiating artistic forms was part of different stages of exhibition development. This case suggests that as a result of research negotiations, arts-based research can gradually evolve from what originally started as more traditional (cultural) research. This transformation was triggered by several needs, including acknowledging the barriers faced when accessing the academic presentation of knowledge, its occasional lack of eloquence and a need for efficient research communication. The wider cause of the exhibition team was to develop an exhibition that would be more than a revised and renewed overview of the cultural and social history of Estonia, backed by academic research. The grounding principle of the permanent exhibition – dialogue and openness to different interpretations of lived experiences – was a conscious divergence from academic discourse and the way it suggests objective or at least unambiguous explanations.

The general requirements introduced by the museum were gradually agreed upon at the level of the architectural concept and tonality of the permanent exhibition, followed by conceptual development of different layers of the exhibition (presentation of artefacts, multimedia layers and digital-material installations). For example, the principles of the audio-visual exhibits aimed to make the exhibition experience different from the content and formats that people consume in daily life. As a result, the Stories about Freedom exhibit underwent a long collaborative development in an attempt to find a way to conduct interviews that would support the audio-visual concept of the exhibition as well as being distinctive as a creation and include the exhibit’s research question of how different people perceive the concept of freedom.

14 Ibid., 19.
15 Ibid.
**Research-from-creation.** Addressing the use of existing works as ways of generating research data and reflecting on the participatory ambitions of the exhibition was part of museum practice before the formal start of production of the *Encounters* exhibition. Some of the ideas were developed and tested at the Exhibition Lab in the framework of studying museum communication, with a focus on engaging audiences. These experiments had indirect input to the development of the exhibits discussed above.

**Presenting the work in creative forms.** The goals of making the exhibition open and of representing a diversity of interpretations and voices meant that the curators let different media pieces, databases and individuals tell the stories. The role of the curators was to bring these voices together, rather than telling a story of their own. This role also included looking for suitable forms and utilising aesthetic approaches within the exhibition team to facilitate the ability of the research work to communicate with the general audience. Utilising the aesthetic approach started from content creation, such as fieldwork. The fieldwork sessions for the *Stories about Freedoms* had not just to be conducted according to the standards of ethnographic fieldwork, artistic credibility in terms of style and film language became as important as asking the right questions.

**And finally, creation-as-research.** In writing this text, we have taken the exhibition, which is arguably creation-as-research, and reflected upon it using the tools and the formats of a traditional research text. Research creation is by its nature experimental and processual, generating situated forms of knowledge and revealing different contexts and methods for cultural analysis. Especially in the context of the 1990s, at the *Times of Freedom* exhibit, the creation-of-exhibition-as-research is relevant because the lack of collections and established sources required new sense-making practices of Estonian culture of the most recent decades. Recent history and societal changes have been discussed in detail in several sociological studies, but there were almost no studies in ethnology that approached the transition from the point of view of individuals and the perspective of everyday life. Through experimental processing, the curators sought to establish an original approach to this period and make sense of it by contemporary collecting activities, situating the knowledge and experiences in the exhibition context. The success of the exhibition-making practice here depended on the skill of switching codes from the more strictly procedure-oriented sociological/ethnological, to the arts-based approach, especially visual anthropology, which relies on the “processual and performative nature of film-making itself”.

We have discussed the individual exhibits as research-creations. When choosing individual objects or works for display, one is sometimes hard-pressed to see the arts-based research in the process. At the same time, when an exhibition as a whole meets the audience, it becomes an enacted reality. In scrutinising the research elements within the exhibition, we also aim to legitimise museums as research institutions, whose research goes beyond collections as sources for research or exhibition halls as spaces for display. In addition to being spaces for provocative artistic interventions, the exhibitions themselves are creation-as-research where different forms of traditional and non-traditional academic exploration meet.

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