

## Library Users: A Virtual Debate Among Artists on How and Why Libraries Matter to Them

A virtual debate between Liesbeth Bik and Jos van der Pol, Luísa Cunha, Candida Höfer, and Jyrki Siukonen, moderated by Penelope Curtis

*Un débat virtuel entre des usagers singuliers : comment et pourquoi la bibliothèque concerne les artistes*

**Liesbeth Bik, Jos van der Pol, Luísa Cunha, Penelope Curtis, Candida Höfer and Jyrki Siukonen**

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/perspective/6762>

DOI: 10.4000/perspective.6762

ISSN: 2269-7721

**Publisher**

Institut national d'histoire de l'art

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 31 December 2016

Number of pages: 29-38

ISBN: 9782917902325

ISSN: 1777-7852

**Electronic reference**

Liesbeth Bik, Jos van der Pol, Luísa Cunha, Penelope Curtis, Candida Höfer and Jyrki Siukonen, « Library Users: A Virtual Debate Among Artists on How and Why Libraries Matter to Them », *Perspective* [Online], 2 | 2016, Online since 30 June 2017, connection on 20 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/perspective/6762> ; DOI : 10.4000/perspective.6762

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# Library Users: A Virtual Debate Among Artists on How and Why Libraries Matter to Them

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*I was pleased to take on responsibility for this collation of views. I could have asked a lot of artists, and my choice is perhaps not the most obvious. Obvious omissions might include Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Douglas Gordon, to name just two recent artists who have worked a lot with books. But it seems to me that they have worked more with books than with libraries, or with private libraries rather than public. The four artists featured below have all, instead, focused much more on the form of the library and its quality as a public space. Their interest may be more architectural, or more organizational, but they all look at the physical and conceptual shape of the library and the way it represents public access to greater learning.*

*None of them ever met each other except in this debate, which took place outside real time and place, and perhaps that is fitting for a piece about libraries, where works and authors collide and inter-mingle without their authors' knowledge. On occasion there are unexpected rencontres; Cunha singles out the General Library in Coimbra, a mid-twentieth-century library which Höfer also photographed, alongside her photos of the much more famous sixteenth-century Biblioteca Joanina. That contrast, in this case, just across the road, highlights the fact that these artists like "plain" libraries as much as beautiful ones, if they work well. Each artist answered my questions, rather than the questions of others, and thus I am the library user whose search colors these results.*  
[Penelope Curtis]

**Penelope Curtis.** *Could you describe when and how you first became interested in the library as an idea that has had relevance to your work?*

**Jyrki Siukonen.** I had a day job in a public library when I was making works for my first solo exhibition. These activities somehow overlapped and in 1985 I organized an exhibition in the library. It felt natural, but was not yet based on any methodological insight. It was only five years later in Hannover, when I was doing an installation piece and at the same time using the resources of the Leibniz-Archiv that my artistic work and the library began to link directly with each other.

Leibniz, a major philosopher but also a great librarian, has inspired me over the years. I have not only done several works based on his ideas (**fig. 1a-b**), but also translated some of his texts into Finnish for the first time.

**Liesbeth Bik and Jos van der Pol** [as Bik Van der Pol] have been working as a partnership for some time, and their work tends to ask questions.

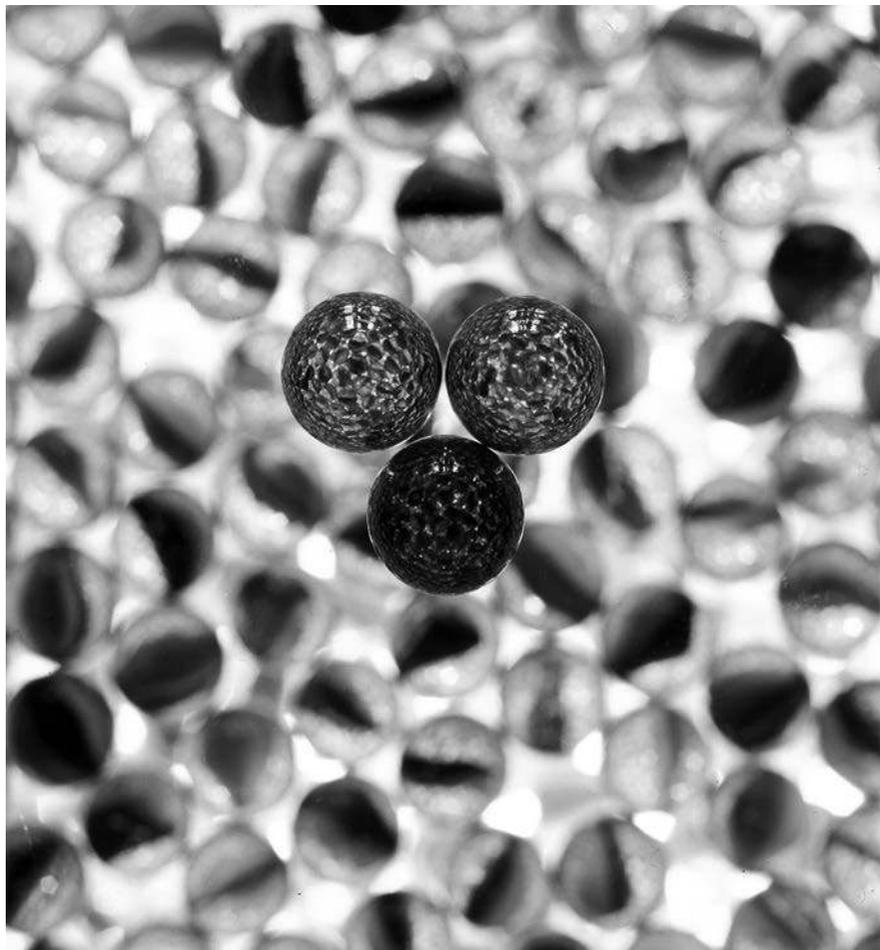
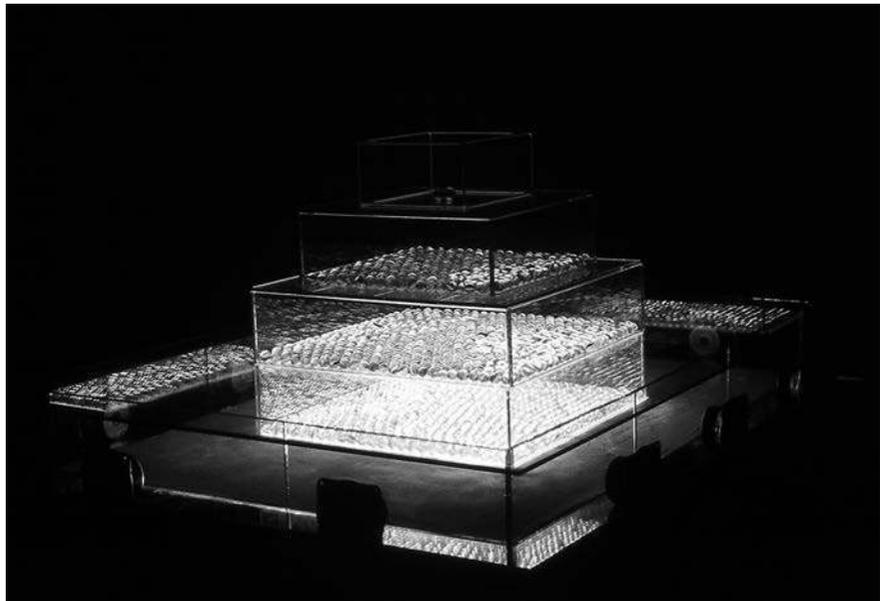
Questions of society, of conventions, of the established way of doing things. Although based in Rotterdam, they spend a lot of their time on the road, exploring the specific conditions of specific sites in response to which they develop their work.

**Luísa Cunha** lives and works in Lisbon, where she is an established figure within the Portuguese art scene, having taught many of the younger artists who are creating that scene today. Her work is fundamentally based in language, in the practiced use of her voice, of time and space, making for a gentle but insistent enquiry that may unsettle the listener/viewer.

**Penelope Curtis** is a recent arrival in Lisbon, after working in London, Leeds and Liverpool. Many of the artists she has met over her career have found the library a fascinating subject, and in the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds her work, and the program she led there, were regularly based in the library itself.

**Candida Höfer** is particularly well known for her photographs of libraries all over the world. Based in Cologne, she may well be seen as one of the Dusseldorf School of photographers in the line of the Bechers. She has photographed many libraries, famous or not, and these interior views play a substantial part in an oeuvre which focuses on public space and its impact on its user or viewer.

**Jyrki Siukonen** loves libraries, and is deeply informed by them in many ways, as his answers below clearly indicate. Generally based in Finland, north or south, he also spends time abroad, especially now in Berlin. He is as much a library-user as a viewer, and has worked on pioneering translations into Finnish, including works by Leibniz, Swedenborg, and Horace Walpole.



**1a.** Jyrki Siukonen, *The Cenotaph of Leibniz*, 1986, glass, pigment, electric light and soundtrack (Thelonious Monk, *Misterioso*), Tampere (Finland), Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986.

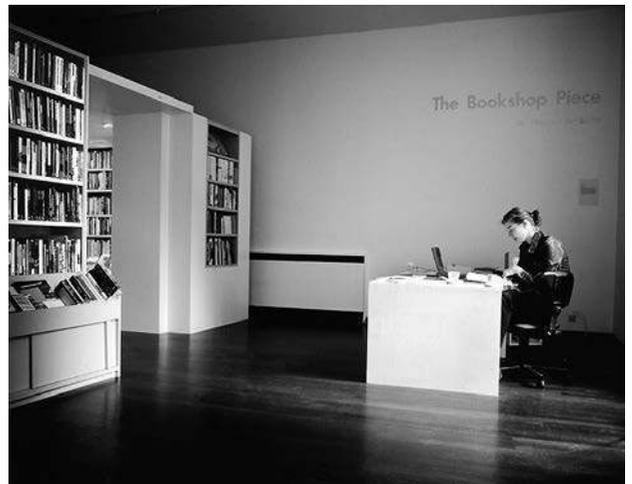
**1b.** Jyrki Siukonen, *The Cenotaph of Leibniz*, detail, 1986.

Leibniz really makes you think about the library as a kind of super tool. To enter a great library is similar to entering a computer; when seeking information you are like a small program that runs through this complex “machine”, and produces answers to something. Since artistic questions are often ambiguous the answers may not always come out as clear-cut. Among other things, libraries are great safe houses of obscurity.

**Luísa Cunha.** This happened in 2007 when I was invited by the Portuguese curator Delfim Sardo to do a work for the library of the Museu de Arte Antiga (The Museum of Ancient Art) in Lisbon. It was a group exhibition entitled “O Espelho de Claude” (“Claude’s Mirror”). The title of my piece was *Biblioteca (Library)*.

**Candida Höfer.** In 1993 I had been photographing Asplund’s Stockholm Public Library and in 1994 Smirke’s Reading Room at the British Museum (fig. 2). Both libraries had fascinated me because of their perfect balance among order, harmony and elegance, and because of their – what I would call – theatrical approach to knowledge. And then I started looking more systematically for different kinds of balances and approaches.

**Liesbeth Bik and Jos van der Pol.** If we understand a library as a collection of sources of information that is made accessible to a defined community (Wikipedia), *The Bookshop Piece* (1996, fig. 3) that we made in collaboration with Peter Fillingham, was the first work that we would see as a response to your question; a temporary, exact, and completely functional replica of the bookshop of the ICA in London, a large collection of books made available to the art community and wider audience that we installed in the Museum Boijmans – Van Beuningen in Rotterdam. That piece for us also marked a departure from the studio. At that time, we spent a lot of time in London and the ICA bookshop was an exciting place, full of books and magazines on criticism and theory, a machine for thinking, and a place for encountering what you were not specifically looking for, or maybe did not know you were looking for. This space of discoveries was certainly more interesting than our studio. We wanted our artistic practice to be discursive, a space of experience, a crossover between actual space and thinking-space, as we observed this as a lack: art practice does not develop in a vacuum, but manifests itself in the theoretical framework of the art world, as well as in the socio-political milieu of our contemporary society, and the studio no longer sufficed. Taking a permanent leave from the traditional concept of the studio as an embodiment of authorship, inspiration, and genius, our early pieces were a way of coming to terms with the studio as a past, a relic, and replacing it with, for example, a kitchen, a shower,<sup>1</sup> or a bookshop. With the introduction of the copy of an existing bookshop in a public museum, we emphasized the importance of shared knowledge and the broader context of art as practice that we understood as a dynamic process of production, of acting in, with and from the world.



2. Candida Höfer,  
*The British Museum Reading  
Room in London, 1994.*

3. Bik Van der Pol, in collaboration  
with Peter Fillingham,  
*The Bookshop Piece, 1996,*  
circa 5,000 books; copy  
of the ICA Bookshop, London,  
Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans –  
van Beuningen.

**Penelope Curtis.** *Could you differentiate between form and content, and say a bit about which is more important, and why? (E.g. how have you used the library as a tool, in terms of its organization, methodology, representation ...)*

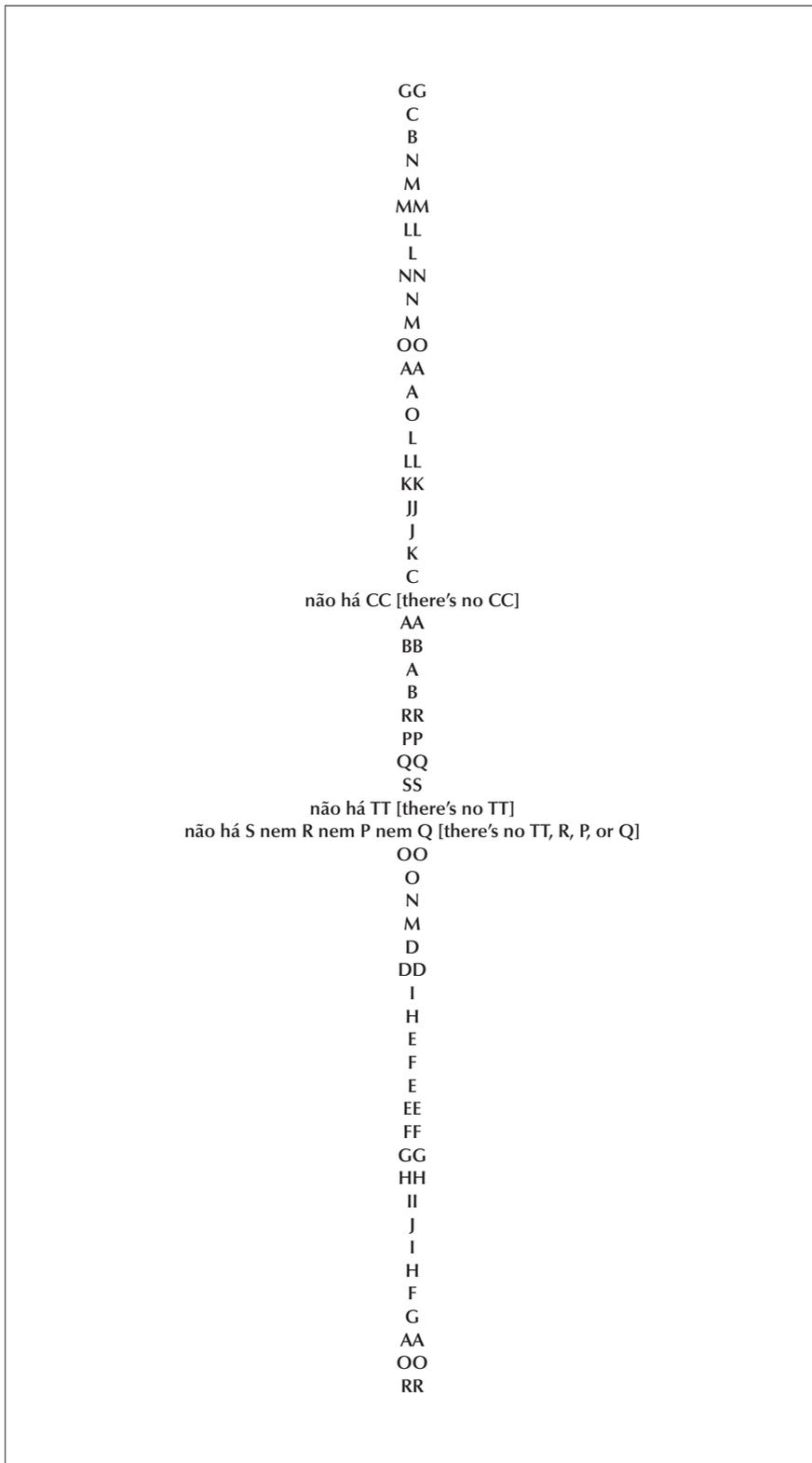
**Luísa Cunha.** In the case of the piece mentioned above, the alphabetical organization and its occasional missing elements were what attracted me immediately. I did a sound piece with recorded text spoken by me. Four audio columns placed on the floor in each corner of the room emit a voice pronouncing characters from the Portuguese alphabet. These characters are placed on top of the bookcases of that old library. They correspond to a cataloguing order. The order in which characters are pronounced follows the apprehension of the place of the documents on the shelves and of the library cataloguing and shelving systems by the viewers from the moment they enter the room up to the moment they leave it. Rhythm, speed and intonation vary according to how each viewer is getting their personal hold of the logic of the organisation and the placement of the bookcases connected to the architectural features of the room. Characters that are pronounced twice, like “GG”, are determined by the existence of bookcases placed in a “mezzanine”, that corresponds to a visible first floor. Exactly below it, on the groundfloor is a “G” bookcase. Something similar happens with hotel room numbers that are preceded by the floor number. Sometimes one notices missing letters and that correlates in the sound text with an intonation expressing a simple enunciation of a fact or incomprehension (**fig. 4**).

**Jyrki Siukonen.** I guess I was, like so many others, first attracted to the architectural atmosphere of these traditionally silent buildings. Later I found myself inclined to Borges’s vision of the Leibnizian universal library or the encyclopedia. That is, I began to see it more as a process than a place. It has many interfaces – old reading rooms arguably being the most pleasant ones – but no form that I could describe. The same applies to the content; what does “everything” look like? Yet, I consider myself an old school formalist. In other words, I don’t believe there is content without form. So far things in the digital clouds tend to follow familiar forms: it may be an e-book, for example, but we like it to resemble other books as well.

If the library is a process rather than a place, then to work with and within the library means that you build it every time anew. There are several reasons why the result is likely to remain fragmentary, of course; one of them is our own physicality. Because the process library is an abstraction, we often need something we can manage, simple things like books on a table, a reading lamp, a notebook. These things are surprisingly important and they constitute a place. One year I spent weeks in the British Library reading room researching early twentieth-century aviation. The following year I sat on the same chair, at the same desk, turned on the same lamp, and dug into something utterly different and three hundred years older. Two totally different processes and collections, yet I had this tremendous need to underline the sameness of the place. Perhaps it helped me to keep up the illusion that there really exists one library – or one me.

This is one way of saying that at any moment the contents of the universal library could collapse into a fearful chaos. Perhaps my interest in librarianship grows from this fear. The order is the tool. Yet there is no rigid order for all things. Librarianship is always about negotiating with the material and its inbuilt links; the complex referential nature of library order also leaves plenty of room for artistic interpretation.

**Liesbeth Bik and Jos van der Pol.** After this first knowledge archive, the “librarian approach” has become a solid part of our practice, as we have become increasingly invested in when and how a collective space “takes place” and what such collectivity possibly allows us to share or divide. We developed an understanding of relations as having an impact on



4. Luísa Cunha, text for the *Biblioteca (Library)* piece, 2007.



5. Candida Höfer, *Stadtbibliothek Stockholm*, 1993.

(social) space, generated by dialogue and collaboration. It has developed as an explicit tool to create new questions and find new answers to site-specific or site-sensitive problems and situations with a particular focus on the public realm and the role information plays in it. We look at how public space “functions” and how it can be experienced as a form of “close-reading” and this is often a collectivist approach. Without those we talk, walk, and work with, we will not “encounter” specific knowledge; it appears through a reflective process of progressively gathering insights and inroads while looking at expectations, dynamics, communities and the way language (textual and visual) is employed as a carrier of action. What can publicness potentially mean in a particular situation? How is knowledge created and who has (or allows others to

have) access? These are, we feel, crucial questions that we aim to generate through our work. If our artistic practice is a way of learning, then initially we are the ones learning. We are not interested per se in adding something “new” to the cycle of production of commodities. Instead borrowing, copying, cutting, and assembling from what already exists in the pool of the ever-growing production of commodities (which includes, of course, images and texts) seems a more apt way of dealing with this stream of information in order to enhance our imagining of what can be thought of as possible, or a departure from the premises that thinking (it) already makes (it) happen. Searching for the missing or lost by lifting stones and poking underneath; collecting cases around disappearance, perfection, excessive control, repression, compulsion, and withdrawal as well as state fiction and ambiguity, coincidental histories, preservation, and more... the almost meditative action of copying generates imagination and ideas while the material transforms into common, shared knowledge that evolves in dialogue, eventually provoking action.

**Candida Höfer.** I think I have already alluded to what I see as attractive. It is the blending of form (basic geometric forms, for example, of the building as such, the allocation of reading spaces, the arrangement of shelves, the role of light) and function – that is the capability to find and the opportunity to explore.

**Penelope Curtis.** *Could you describe one (or more) of the libraries that has been important to you, and in what way? (E.g. real or fictional, one you know or have seen in reproduction, one you have used, or not, one whose owner is known to you, or not?)*

**Candida Höfer.** The two libraries I have mentioned before for the reasons already given (fig. 5) – and – in addition to them and because of its monumentality having been restrained in order to be made functional – Trinity College Library in Dublin (fig. 6).

**Luísa Cunha.** I recently saw the General Library of the University of Coimbra, Portugal for the first time. I was invited to take part in the Coimbra Biennial of 2015 and I visited the Library, where Lawrence Wiener exhibited an excellent work. I was attracted by the files. I think I would be able to make a video, a sort of unquiet video, in an unquiet search for a precise piece of information.

**Liesbeth Bik and Jos van der Pol.** In the early 90’s we got hold of the book *L’Exposition imaginaire*.<sup>2</sup> Artists, curators, critics, writers, were invited to respond to *The Artists’ Studio*, a painting by Courbet. This painting depicts the artist, the painting he is working



on, and a lot of people: the studio as a world, an archive of stuff, a gathering of people around something: a community called to order to study, chat, and hang out around artwork. Though not a library at all, we do conceive this painting as a library: a collection of sources of information that is made accessible to a defined community. After this painting, the artist's studio could be conceived as a public space, theatrical perhaps, performative for sure, that generates public through sharing a specific experience.

6. Candida Höfer, *Trinity College Library in Dublin*, 2004.

**Jyrki Siukonen.** I guess we are all haunted by the image of a burning library, be it the semi-mythical library of Alexandria or something fictional like Peter Kien's library in Canetti's *Die Blendung* (Auto-da-fé). It can be an image we have come across in memoirs, like the story of some Russian Formalists heating their rooms with books in Petrograd in the winter of 1919, or the live report shown to us in the evening news about the destruction of the National Library in Sarajevo.

In Finland the first university library, founded in 1640, was lost to fire in 1827. Only about 800 books loaned to the professors and the students survived. I have used several of those books. The wildly accidental nature of that small collection that became the seed of the National Library of Finland, continues to fascinate me. NLF is of course my home library and as such the most important to me. They used to hold art exhibitions, and in 1989 I did my project *The Garden of Leibniz* there, which meant a lot to me.

Beautiful buildings notwithstanding, libraries are collections organized following a particular system. The joy of working in libraries in different countries lies exactly here: you never find one and the same book in one and the same place. I can name no favorite, but, of course, certain uncrowded libraries have become dear during particular projects, such as the library of the Royal Society in London. Some libraries I cannot visit anymore. The Finnish Institute in Rome sits in a wonderful Renaissance villa on top of Gianicolo hill, but unfortunately their research library is located underground. Mold has affected the cellar so badly that I cannot breathe there. The idea of a lethal library is painful but rather interesting.

**Penelope Curtis.** *How do you think of the library nowadays, in an age when so much reference work is done on-line? (E.g. Has it become more of a historic entity, more of an architectural space, or an oasis that is viewed nostalgically?)*

**Liesbeth Bik and Jos van der Pol.** Despite the increasing number of shows, biennials, museums, art centers, magazines, books, catalogues, and, of course, the Internet, it has become increasingly difficult to find one's way through this growing jungle of data communication... this is the paradox of total availability and the lack of capacity or capability of access. Excess with no shared experience, simply because of the lack of shared, embodied space. Perhaps immediate access to everything creates this lack. Perhaps one has to experience the "heat" or the energy, the excitement of running into something, perhaps encounters have to hit to take hold, and perhaps superabundance does create spaces of abstraction without responsibility. We think there is a lot of wisdom in Marcel Duchamp's idea of making it harder instead of easier to see the paintings, in his comment on his work *Mile of String* (1942). He knew that "making it harder to see [the paintings]" (and, as a consequence, requiring an effort) would make us realize why we look at them. Developing formats and strategies for (self-) reflection and assessment also may help prevent processes from disappearing. Books, publications, printed matter may embody these processes. Spaces of experience created by these processes occupy a niche, a free space where one could think and feel. The consequences of making (free) choices between concept and reality can only be thought when the experience of differences is also performed and lived.

**Candida Höfer.** The library will take new forms but will remain needed as a real world space. Reference work, as you have put it, as well as reading and writing more generally, are solitary affairs that create a latent loneliness in many people, a loneliness that needs to be compensated for by doing the solitary thing in the company of others. As soon as libraries learn that they should serve coffee, they will regain their users from the corner coffee shops that are currently addressing those needs.

**Luísa Cunha.** Libraries exist. Work done on-line as well. Each one has its place. I consider them as tools. As I used to say, I am a slave of my ideas and emotions: what they demand from me, I have to accomplish in the sense that the means have to be the right ones, be it work on-line, sound, photography, performance, painting... even the means I have never worked with.

As an artist I think I could work the concept "library" in many ways. For example I could break the idea of an oasis through something not supposed to be there, something provocative or, on the contrary, I could underline the idea of an oasis. In the same way the library as a historic entity or an architectural space would also be a possible basis for work. It all depends how I am touched by things, by thoughts, and concepts. Some of them do not interest me at all.

**Jyrki Siukonen.** I have always been nostalgic about the library, but even then the most important aspect of it remains democracy. For a child like me, coming from a low-income working-class family, the city public library was the single most important educational tool and a springboard for social ascent. From that point of view, I should perhaps not complain about the 24/7 on-line access to information, no matter how fragmented. Yet this insomnious possibility to look for “everything” does not necessarily increase one’s capacity to work. What is missing is librarianship – and now I want to see it in a broader sense than just professional systematization of knowledge, as something that carries with it an ethics and a worldview, perhaps even a culture. Without that you can easily drown in “everything”.

On the one hand, the present situation follows the ideals of humanist polymaths and promoters of Enlightenment, namely, collecting knowledge for the good of mankind and opening it for all to use. On the other, this comes with a whole new economy of mis- and disinformation. Our everyday universal library is a noisy political battleground rather than a quiet haven of learning. Perhaps such havens can exist only in a state of inertia. There is a famous library in Wolfenbüttel where both Leibniz and Lessing once worked (**fig. 7**). The collections hidden in that building, fine as they are, will hardly help us to solve the problems of our age. So yes, in some respects we are dealing with a historic entity and a space devoid of real life use.

I remember I could not get in to the Wolfenbüttel library because I had my 4-year old daughter with me. So we went to the playground and had a good time. Some librarians clearly misunderstand their vocation as guardians of knowledge.

As for myself, I am an artist who makes small things and a researcher who studies old stuff. I cannot sincerely claim that my practice will save the world. But I will try my best and I will keep doing it in the library even if it is but warm ashes.



7. View of the reading room, Wolfenbüttel Herzog August Bibliothek.

1. We are referring here to *The Kitchen Piece* (1995) and *The Shower Piece* (1995), by Bik Van der Pol in collaboration with Peter Fillingham.

2. Evelyn de Beer, Riet de Leeuw (eds.), *L'Exposition imaginaire. The Art of Exhibiting in the Eighties*, The Hague, 1989.

