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For some time now, the extent of the world's largest trade fair for books, the Frankfurt Book Fair founded in the year 1454, has no longer been limited to the large Fair Grounds close to Frankfurt's Main Station: profiting from its reputation, a host of galleries close-by offer readings and discussion panels; theatres and cabarets present special plays, national and local newspapers include extensive supplements reporting on the fair, and radio and TV transmit live reports and interviews.

A few select insights into the Fair presented by

*Oliver Schuster*

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**Nederland en Vlaanderen** – It must be noted that literature written in Dutch (which comprises Dutch spoken in the Netherlands as well as its Flemish variant in Flanders) has in its German translations a higher volume of sales than their originals published in both of their home countries together: in 2016 alone so far, 454 new titles came on the German market.

## As A Guest At The Guests Of Honour

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In the pavilion of  
Flanders and the  
Netherlands

Frankfurt's Book Fair taking place for five days each October cannot be surpassed – only by itself: This year there participated nearly 7 200 exhibitors from over one hundred countries, more than 278 000 visitors thronged the narrow aisles between bookshelves and exhibitors' booths which were particularly crowded at times of special presenta-

first one being Latin America. 1988 the format was changed to have such an arrangement every year. After a fairly colourless offering by Indonesia in 2015, this year's imaginative concept of presenting the cultural regions of Flanders and the Netherlands was done by Bart Moeyaert, a writer of children's and young adults' books in Dutch/Flemish well known all over Europe.



**The pavilion of the guest-of-honour countries:** The floor was completely laid out in bricks. On the screen in the back projected a large vista of the sea, pointing out their common history as seafarers – a border, as well as a gate to great adventures beyond the horizon.

tions and discussions – the catalogue listed more than 4 000 of them. It's easy to get lost in this surfeit of offerings if one doesn't compose one's own to-do list making use of the Fair's continually updated special App.

However, it doesn't have to be that way. One can be more than satisfied limiting the visit to just the guest-of-honours' pavilion. It was in 1976 that the Fair came up with the idea to present every other year one country, or rather, one cultural region, the very

For that purpose he put aside his pen for over two years to devote his time completely to this task. He presented the two regions, Belgian Flanders and the Netherlands, with its common language under the motto of: »Dit is wat we delen« (This is what we share). In his interview by the publisher Peter Reichenbach (Mayrisch Publishers, Hamburg), Mr Moeyaert gave insight into his concept for this year's Fair, as well as his writings, his language, his line of thought. »When I go to foreign

countries I as a Flemish have to always explain how I write, why I write in this language. But every time it came to my language I had problems of making myself understood. I often have to face questions such as: ‚Flemish? That’s a language in Belgium?’ ‚Is Flemish similar to Dutch?’ ‚Are your works being translated into Dutch?’ ‚Where is your publisher? In the Netherlands? Why there?’ And I rarely succeeded in my explanations. Now here, we speak German, right?», he continued. »In German, I can explain that easily. But when talking in English, I better say my language is Dutch; I won’t say it’s Flemish. One could probably compare that to the dilemma Austrians may have in a similar situation: they also would never say, I speak Austrian, but rather, my language is German“.

»What is it then that we share?«, Mr Moeyaert continued. »It’s the North Sea. Flanders, the Netherlands, Germany share a whole sea. And thereby, we three countries also share a whole horizon, we are enchanted when we see the sun set on it.« And so, a collective of architects (The Cloud Collective [TCC]) went to work to create a projection on a loosely stretched screen of 2 300 square meters (almost 25 000 square feet) of a beach picture, at the guest-of-honour pavilion (Forum, level 1).

One enters the pavilion, a quiet wide room, walking on brownish red brick floor and is fascinated by the vista of the sea stretching from one end to the other. Barely noticeable is the transition from ocean to sky, from bright to slightly dark. Through the projection on the screen one can make out behind it the outline of bookshelves, much like wicker beach chairs or sky scrapers at some



**Acrylic glass partitions** formed in honeycomb style create »transparent« spaces to experience such as a café, a rostrum, virtual reality places, or a Graphic Novels studio where one can observe artists at work.

distance. Approaching that screen, one has to be careful to take account of the slightly ascending floor. On part of it, glass showcases much like reliquary caskets are placed, in them some pieces of apparent importance to one of the authors, maybe just bibelots? Next to them, pictures of the writer’s study with its desk which they seem to have left for just a moment. Some have it set up in a cosy corner of the living room, others in a room otherwise as bare as a monk’s cell, or on a balcony with a view of medieval Flemish buildings. But on all of them there was a personal computer, almost without exception an Apple product.

### **Gamification**

According to its own interpretation, the Fair sees itself as a meeting point reaching out to many branches particularly movies and games. For this, the terminology *gamification* seems to have gained favour. In the beginning



**Detail of the Acrylic glass wall** in honeycombed structure

**Virtual Reality –**  
View into the endless:

Experiencing the  
opera »Fernweh«  
with heavy VR  
headset and earsets.



Photo: Frankfurter Buchmesse/Katarina Ivanisevic



**Poem Whispering:** Caroline G. reads to visitors marine poems in German or English.

it denoted nothing more than a (computer) game with instructions including incentive and reward. Later, it got more and more elaborate. The new format of exhibitions and conferences THE ARTS+ follows the tendency to combine arts and culture with play and fun. Abbreviations such as 3D, AI, AR, VR pop up. Even if spelled out (and translated into German) their precise meaning most often remains obscure. When it comes to 3D presentation, artificial intelligence, expanded and virtual reality, only a personal try might help to find out about it.

Putting on a virtual-reality headset transforms a small corner in the pavilion to a large home and allows one to stroll through rooms, in any which one direction. My experience was that on one hand I could walk through walls without hurting myself, or bump into a wall I couldn't see on the headset display. One has to be cautious not to try a brisk pace. But this virtual walk was exciting, to experience how »unreal« views could influence one's real movements.

The virtual opera presentation FERNWEH (»wanderlust«, or »yen to see distant places«) in the pavilion really should be something recreational, one might think. Visuals are by Daniël Ernst who also directed. Libretto by the Flemish poet Maud Vanhauwaert, music by Misha Veltuis and Naren Chandavakar.

The leading part is named Asteria, a bright appearance in the sky in the Virgo constellation; she is made out of stardust and gas clouds. The real voice behind Asteria is Annina Gieré, a young soprano from Switzerland. The tragic end: out of her pain Asteria burns up and turns into a black hole. To tell the truth I couldn't listen to

the opera to its very end. First of all, the headset (HTC Vive Virtual Reality; cost about € 1,000.00 [US: about US\$ 800.00]) was too tight-fitting like a tight diver's mask; audio volume was too loud. Though the story of Asteria itself seemed to me very poetical, the visual presentation was not impressive. Finally, the comparison of a 3D visually presented opera was not comparable to a conventional opera at the theatre or an opera movie.

### Poem Whisperers

A few uncomfortable chairs placed on the brick floor. As I let myself drop into one of those to get a bit of rest I feel like getting up again immediately: the metal frame pushing through the seat cover pinching my thighs is just too uncomfortable. But suddenly, a soft voice holds me down and explains to me the purpose of this »whisper chair«. Here, poems are streamed into your ears in »real reality«.

First, I have to choose one of nine pictures with ocean views and then let a young lady reads to me a corresponding Flemish poem either in German or English. I enjoyed four poems but it also helped that I was told that because of my staying for a while I won't have to line up for buying French fries (which, as every Belgian [irrespective of being Wallon or Flemish] will tell you are really Belgian fries) like everyone else – the lines at the *frietjes* stand were longer than those to get an autograph of Mario Adorf (one of the most famous German film and stage actors in the last century) – but could get them right at the pavilion: at the end of the day the *lekker frietjes* are offered to you right here, together with Belgian beer. □

Once upon a time, there was in Gonsenheim a *Kaiserstraße* (Emperor's Street); it was the widest street of the then small suburb of Mainz. Well, in 1933 the name was converted to *Adolf-Hitler Straße*, as it happened to so many street at that time in so many German towns. After 1945, for simplicity sake, the street's name was changed to *Breite Straße* (Wide Street). It still carries that name today though it is no longer »wide«: in the centre of it are the two tracks of the street cars, on both sides of it, it is crowded with parked cars. Pedestrians thread their way around an inordinate number of traffic signs on the border of the walkways, get around racks in front of clothing stores, displays of fruits and vegetables of grocers, and cross the street at free will disregarding marked pedestrian crossings.

Recently, over a distance of barely fifty meters (55 yards) along *Breite Straße*, thirteen traffic signs were put up. Additionally, a traffic light was installed right on top of the existing one for a pedestrian crossing because, as the authorities had it, the additional one was »brighter«. To top it off, another though »mobile« traffic light was installed around 20 meters (22 yards) prior to that crossing. And, that pedestrian crossing had barriers installed that limited a passway of only 50 centimeter (20 inch). One has to recall that already since several months ago, speed limit on *Breite Straße* has been 30 kph (18.6 mph). Why all this? Not too long ago, an obviously distracted driver drove through the red light at the pedestrian crossing and killed a seven-year old accompanied by his mother.

Press reports say that mother and child crossed while the light was green

for the pedestrians. Really? From way back, we remember the cynical saying: »Right side clear; left side, tank approaching«. One of the survival strategies in urban environment always has been: »**Watch it... it's O.K. / The slower one has to yield**«. The driver (37 years of age) cannot possibly have come down the street with his afterburners blazing; he supposedly had a speed between 28 and 32 kph (17 and 20 mph), said the experts, he was not alcoholized, no previous record. He received a suspended sentence of six months, suspension of licence, and was

## Traffic Signs Jungle

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### Bureaucratic Activism After A Fatal Accident



***The sheer number of traffic signs is grotesque.*** With them distracting the attention of the drivers another accident is bound to happen.

fined a penalty of € 2,500.00 (about US\$ 2,750.00).

Because the accident happened at a crossing in front of a school, a causal relationship was implied. »There has to be done something« was heard from many parents. In the wake of that sad accident, the by now familiar reaction happened: placing flowers, stuffed animals and cards at the fence of the school right next to the crossing. And then, the bureaucracy's wheel started



**Barely a baby carriage** can squeeze through the barriers of a pedestrian crossing. The only thing missing is a sign saying »oncoming traffic has right-of-way«.



Traffic Sign Nr. 208

to grind: In the government of the city of Mainz, the person in charge of traffic matters, Katrin Eder (Green Party) charged an independent organization to review the situation at ten schools in Mainz. As a result of the investigation we now see the government's reaction: in front of schools no stopping, no standing, no parking; traffic restriction devices such as bollards, artificial narrowing of lanes, no turns, new one-way traffic streets, deviations,

radar traps. This kind of activism will not result in reduction of accidents because of inattentiveness but certainly will result in an increase of popularity of the Green Party politician: »Look what we are doing to assure the safety of school children.« To question the sense, the cost/benefit aspect of these procedures (costs most likely in neighbourhood of the millions of Euros) will fall on deaf ears.

The risk could rather be the tendency that even the littlest children being already captive to smartphones lack awareness of what is happening in their surroundings. This leads to their not learning to process happenings outside of the screen of their smartphone, to a loss of orientation in their environment.

By the way, some years ago a cyclist was killed because the driver of a just parked car abruptly opened the door of his car, and the cyclist slammed into it. Shouldn't it therefore be prohibited for the whole length of *Breite Straße* to open car doors of the driver's side? □

## Impressum



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Photo by Maurice de Chlourigon

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