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NEWS FROM THE GETTY

DATE: February 25, 2009
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE'S "TANGO WITH COWS" PROVIDES BOTH HIGH-TECH AND HAND-HELD EXPERIENCES

Visitors Experience the Russian Avant-Garde through a Variety of Senses

LOS ANGELES—One of the privileges of being a curator is the opportunity to touch (albeit wearing gloves) rare works of art or to page at will through rare books. Recently, Getty Research Institute (GRI) curator Nancy Perloff wanted to share that privilege with visitors to her exhibition "Tango with Cows: Book Art of the Russian Avant-Garde, 1910-1917," on view through April 19.

She turned to experts at the GRI to help her give visitors to the gallery – and the Website – a more intimate experience with the objects and an opportunity to see the entire book, not just the front and back covers through a vitrine. They came up with two different approaches: one high-tech and virtual, and the other a little more old-fashioned, which you can hold in your hand

Now visitors can stop at kiosks in the gallery, pick up a sound wand, and scroll through every page of digitized versions of several of the volumes on exhibit, while listening to the poetry read aloud in the original Russian, and in English translation.

At the same time, they can pick up carefully crafted facsimiles of the deliberately crude, handmade original books, and feel their heft and textures, down to the creases, staples, and uneven pages.

"We really wanted to open up the books in a variety of ways," said Perloff. "The computer screen allows visitors to experience every page of the book, and to explore the relationship between word, image and sound. The handheld facsimiles provide the tactile experience and the sense of the book as a physical object."

It's a satisfying experience for visitors - which was the goal of the professionals who developed the techniques. "We were trying to make it easy and fun to page through the

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books at the kiosk," said Web Production Specialist Molly Callender. "From the start, we realized that this was an opportunity to provide a lot of interactive ways to explore these books." They found they could create a curated experience, accompanying the individual pages with curatorial comments that provided a context. Combined with the unique sound of the performed poetry - known as zaum' or "beyonsense" - the gallery kiosks offer a very rich learning experience.

And it's an experience available to anyone with a computer. The digitized books and recorded readings are available online so visitors can study them at home at their leisure.

That's not true of the handheld facsimiles – although one viewer remedied that by simply spiriting a facsimile out of the gallery (now they have tethers). That is a backhanded compliment to the team of photographers and conservators who created them.

"Normally, in conservation we're much more limited in what we do when we clean, repair or stabilize something," said library assistant Genevieve Cordova, who's been caring for the GRI's works on paper for 16 years. "This was an opportunity to be truly creative, and to rise to a challenge. As we worked on it, we realized 'hey, this could be really great.'"

Cordova found herself carving paper with a scalpel to create the uneven edges, and then coloring those edges with dry pigments so they didn't look white and new. She creased the paper to match the originals, and worked with the pages so they would function mechanically like the originals, falling open at the same places and turning in the same way. She even used good staples directly under the images of the rusty staples so that they appeared authentic.

She worked closely with image technician Jobe Benjamin, who has been working as a photographer at the GRI for 20 years. He found a comparable paper to the originals, and worked hard to match the original colors, to great success. "This project was one of those rare occurrences when we got to take things as far as we could creatively," he said.

What they created overcame the challenge of displaying rare books and, according to Perloff, allowed people to see, touch and understand the books in a way they just can't achieve by peering into a vitrine. "The combination of digital and handmade techniques made it possible to transcend each of their limitations," said Perloff. "We've created an environment where people can see, feel, hear, and download these books, and, in the process, discover Russian avant-garde book art."

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The J. Paul Getty Trust is an international cultural and philanthropic institution devoted to the visual arts that features the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Research Institute, the Getty Conservation Institute and the Getty Foundation. The J. Paul Getty Trust and Getty programs serve a varied audience from two locations: the Getty Center in Los Angeles and the Getty Villa in Malibu.

The Getty Research Institute is an operating program of the J. Paul Getty Trust. It serves education in the broadest sense by increasing knowledge and understanding about art and its history through advanced research. The Research Institute provides intellectual leadership through its research, exhibition, and publication programs and provides service to a wide range of scholars worldwide through residencies, fellowships, online resources, and a Research Library. The Research Library - housed in the 201,000-square-foot Research Institute building designed by Richard Meier - is one of the largest art and architecture libraries in the world. The general library collections (secondary sources) include almost 900,000 volumes of books, periodicals, and auction catalogues encompassing the history of Western art and related fields in the humanities. The Research Library's special collections include rare books, artists' journals, sketchbooks, architectural drawings and models, photographs, and archival materials.

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