

Enthusiasm

In collaboration with the architects **51% studios architecture**[1] we transformed the lower galleries of the Whitechapel Gallery into a film makers club-room, three beautiful curtained cinema spaces, and an archive lounge.

The exhibition *Enthusiasm* investigates how the amateur, the enthusiast or the hobbyist works invisibly within the relentless flow of 'official' culture, frequently adopting a counter-cultural tone of tactical resistance and criticism. In Poland under socialism even leisure was organised through factory-sponsored associations, and yet these film-makers activities became a space for dreams of love, criticism and freedom.

The first exhibitionary encounter for the visitor was a re-construction of a fictional film club. Many of the film clubs we visited during our research trips were marvelously evocative; they caught and held the traces of the social and creative history of the members and the films they made. The clubs were usually stuffed with framed photographs, printed film stills, caricatures, posters, certificates, medals, prizes and trophies from film festivals, cupboards stacked with unwanted film reels and video cassettes, redundant projectors, old cameras and recording equipment, film editing desks and chemicals, homemade developing tanks and film dryers, tea and coffee making equipment, a fridge, a coat-stand, odd chairs, salvaged furniture, junk and even rubbish. Our installation of a 'club-house' – created from materials borrowed from club-members, scavenged, or bought at flea markets in Warsaw – was inspired by ethnographic museum room tableau. A monitor and VHS deck in the club-house replayed films by club-members documenting club 'trips' and holidays, special events, the process of filmmaking, meetings and festivals. Through inserting loops of self-representation within the fictional 'club', we tried to ensure the collaborative and social nature of the film making process remained to the fore. While at the same time enabling the 'club' to be an actual social space for the exhibition visitor; the club-house became the hub of the exhibition, mirroring its status in the culture of amateur film-making.

On our research trips we watched hundreds of films, in many extraordinary circumstances, often with former club members present. We became wary of imposing our own preferences and taste on the richness of the films themselves, and thus tried to become sensitive to their makers' enthusiasms and hopes. What eventually evolved from screenings and discussions were three porous themes: themes of **Love, Longing** and **Labour**. This enabled us to select the films for exhibition into three film programmes, although in contrast to the conventions of artists' use of 'found-footage' the compiled films were left complete, with their original music and fully credited. Our emergent themes seemed better able to curate the films into comprehension than the arbitrary violence performed by sorting the films into the genres usually deployed (feature, documentary, animation and so forth).

We had found a means of giving an exhibitionary context to the films and their production, but how should a cinema of enthusiasm be represented in a gallery?

Too often we have seen films and the culture of cinema lazily installed for exhibition. Films are routinely digitalized, and projected onto a wall in a black box installed inside the gallery with nowhere to sit, no programme, no running time, nothing. We were determined to complement the film-makers' own cinematic aspirations, and thus we worked with architects Peter Thomas and Cathy de Toit of **51% studios**[1] to find a form of exhibition that could simultaneously express the gap between the humble club and the cinematic desires of the members. What evolved were three beautiful, lush, sensuously curved, vibrantly coloured, five-meter tall, velvet-curtained cinema spaces. Each cinema had appropriate chairs where

visitors would feel comfortable, a screen, soft low-level lighting and a printed programme with film-notes and running times. Through the programme we wanted to hand control of the routes through the elements and spaces of the exhibition back to the visitors themselves. They could sit back and luxuriate in a particular cinema watching the whole programme, or wander from screen to screen mixing their own film selection. As with **Capital**[2], the pace of the **Enthusiasts** exhibition became a space of creative production for visitors, mirroring the collaborative practices employed by the amateur film-makers themselves.

In the cinema entitled **Longing** we screened films of personal, political and sexual love, loss and longing; we explored themes of alienation, ecological anxieties, a fear of war and violence, and a terrible longing to be elsewhere. In **Love**, the films reflected on the joy, banality and celebration of an 'everyday' love of life; they dealt with themes of humor and camaraderie, of families, parties, passion and sex as a radical transgression of the expected. In **Labour** the films traced the beauty, routine, discipline and horror of work in all its forms; themes of celebration, futility, boredom and exhaustion are acutely depicted through films made by people caught within the processes of production.

The last major exhibitionary encounter within **Enthusiasts** was with the Archive Lounge. We were conscious that there were many films that could not be accommodated through our emergent taxonomies. An Archive Lounge would enable visitors to watch, via searchable DVDs, all the films found, collected and digitalized but not screened as part of our cinema installations. Our intention was to make available as many films as possible, to enable visitors to curate their own programmes and recognize that our selection – **Love, Longing** and **Labour** – was part of an interpretive process and not final or in any way authorial.

From the seed of the idea of the Archive Lounge developed for exhibition, we are currently growing a huge and permanent archival extension of the project. Through watching visitors using the Archive Lounge, we realized the possibility for a new kind of exhibitionary space: a space partly opened by new technology, partly through our practice, and partly by a new suite of licenses. We are developing an on-line version of the **Enthusiasts: archive**[3] it's featured as part of the **i-commons**[4] summit 2006 in Rio Janeiro

Organised with the Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, the **Whitechapel**[5] in London, **Kunst-Werke**[6] in Berlin, and the **Tapies Foundation**[7] in Barcelona.

Versions of the exhibition were also shown at **The Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts**[8] Montreal Canada February-April 2007; curated by Renee Baert, and as part of **Breaking Step**[9] a major collaboration between the British Council and Belgrade's Museum of Contemporary Art, from March- June 2007

[1] **51% studios architecture** - <http://www.51pct.com/>

[2] **Capital** - <http://www.chanceprojects.com/node/71>

[3] **Enthusiasts: archive** - <http://www.enthusiastsarchive.net/>

[4] **icommons** - <http://www.icommons.org/isummit/page.php?pID=13>

[5] **Whitechapel** - <http://www.whitechapel.org/content1137.html>

[6] **Kunst-Werke** - http://www.kw-berlin.de/english/set_index.htm

[7] **Tapies Foundation** -

http://www.fundaciotapies.org/site/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=527

[8] <http://www.saidyebrofman.org/gallery/g2007/enthusiasm.html>

[9] <http://www.breakingstep.net/>

From Enthusiasm to the Creative Commons

A text taken from *Enthusiasm 2005* a publication which accompanies the exhibition of the same name. It's an edited email exchange released under a Creative Commons: Attribution ShareAlike v2.5 License, between Whitechapel curator Anthony Spira, Neil Cummings & Marysia Lewandowska. It was republished in 2006 as part of *Documents of Contemporary Art: The Archive* edited by Charles Mereweather.

From Enthusiasm to the Creative Commons

Anthony Spira

Apparently the root of the word amateur means one who has fallen in love and an enthusiast is one whom the 'god' has entered. How have you distinguished between amateurs and enthusiasts?

Neil Cummings & Marysia Lewandowska

We're always nervous in the presence of god! 'Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm,' said the very quotable Ralph Waldo Emerson.

AS

This publication, titled 'Enthusiasm', is the second volume produced in relation to your project with Polish amateur films from the Socialist era. Volume one accompanied the project's first manifestation in Warsaw and was called 'Enthusiasts'. Why did the title change to accompany the shows in London, Berlin and Barcelona?

NC&ML

The first exhibition looked particularly at the social and cultural context of the films and their makers *Enthusiasts*. As we rethink and represent the films, the phenomenon of enthusiasm has become an important concept. Enthusiasm is the motivating force that enables all kinds of exchanges. We are using the films to trace a trajectory of enthusiasm, which seems to have been drained from the spaces of art, culture, free time, sport, and self-organization to become thoroughly instrumentalised; enthusiasm has replaced labour as a resource for contemporary capital.

AS

*So your decision to examine the role of 'enthusiasm' in a contemporary context came through the activity of collecting and archiving forgotten films, films from a pivotal element of recent European history. This follows on from your previous projects, such as *Not Hansard: the common wealth, 2000* where you collected printed material produced by local and national clubs, hobbyists, collectors and associations. And maybe *Free Trade 2003*, too, where you traced the entanglements of art and capital through the Manchester Art Gallery's collection. Could you describe your interest in archives and collections? You have previously said that an archival, documentary impulse in the west is motivated by self-promotion rather than self-preservation; it's a way of writing one's own subjectivity into the historical process.*

NC&ML

Well, we've become interested in working with archives, as they seem to have an increasingly powerful grip upon culture, and its reproduction. There is an astonishing growth in digital databases of images and information, through data banks and image libraries. *archive.org* for instance regularly archives the whole publicly available *www*. It's a gigantic data hoard that already dwarfs public libraries.

Public collections of art in museums and galleries store most (perhaps up to 80%) of their collection at any one time. And these collections (in Britain at least) can never let go of their accumulated material, they can never de-accession.

Archives, like collections are built with the property of multiple authors and previous owners. But unlike the collection, an archive designates a territory - and not a particular narrative. There is no imperative, within the logic of the archive, to display or interpret. And therefore the meanings of the things contained are 'up-for-grabs'; it's a discursive terrain. There's a creative potential for things to be brought to the level of speech, as they are not already authored as someone's (eg a curator's) narrative, or property. Interpretations are invited and not already determined, which is maybe why there is a creative space that many artists are responding too.

AS

What motivates you to make an exhibition out of an archive?

NC&ML

In the case of Enthusiast, there was no pre-existing archive. It was distributed in people's homes but had no public presence. There has been absolutely no interest from public institutions in the cultural production of the amateur or enthusiast unless it conforms to a notion of 'folk art' or craft. We had to track down former film club members by traveling all over Poland. The films were often stored in their houses and in some cases literally under their beds. We carried a portable 16mm film-viewer, so if we couldn't screen the films we could at least glimpse them there and then. Once we had a sense of the range of material, we realized we would have to try and at least seed the idea of an archive.

It's a long story but we found Lukas Ronduda, curator at the CCA in Warsaw and set about trying to clean, restore and digitalize as much material as we could find money or goodwill for. As the collection of films grew, we thought about an exhibition to start the process of interpretation and narration. In some ways we wanted to return the films to their audience. So we contacted the former state and film broadcasting archives in Poland as it occurred to us that it would be interesting to create an 'official' context into which the enthusiasts films could be placed. The archives are now charging extraordinary amounts of money for access, and even more for reproduction rights even in 'educational' contexts. Essentially, a large part of the cultural memory of a nation, which the state produced, is now denied to the very people who financed it. Similar archives exist throughout Britain too, like the Media Archive for Central England or internationally The International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) a collaborative association of the world's leading film archives. It's like charging for access to museums and libraries.

So we began to think about creating a 'critical' archive of amateur film, which in contrast to the former state archives, would - to use a term from software development - be 'free' or 'open source'. This means that donated films will be digitalized and made available online, not only to view, but to be used as a material resource for future filmmakers. We have been working with Alek Tarkowski, Justyna Hofmokl, Lukasz Ronduda and the filmmakers to enable the films to be licensed under versions of the Creative Commons licenses. The licenses are currently being translated, negotiations are underway and a beta version of Enthusiasts: archive is available. The Archive Lounge in the exhibition enables visitors to curate their own film programs. We hope it allows our selection of films under Love, Longing and Labour to be seen as partial, as one possible narrative strand amongst others and not in any way authorial or definitive.

We recently heard that the BBC are working on making much of their educational programmes available online. Thousands of hours of material will also be placed under the Creative Commons licenses as the Creative Archive.

AS

Your own website opens with the following words: 'We recognise that it's no longer helpful to pretend that artists originate the products they make, or more importantly, have control over the values and meanings attributed to their practice: interpretation has superseded intention.' This explicitly explains your choice not to make objects but to treat the world as freely available ready-made material. This attitude is a feature employed by many artists today, even if less explicitly than you, just like a musician sampling and mixing existing tracks.

Could this equally be considered as a curatorial strategy? Perhaps the distinction between your practice and a curatorial one is the degree of intervention with the material that you use. Can you as 'artists' take more liberties with the material than a curator? In a sense, the context, environment, discussions, publicity 'the whole system and presentation - becomes as important, if not more important, than the material displayed.

NC&ML

I think this is getting close to what we've talked about before as a feeling of responsibility or ownership of material for exhibition, interpretation or display; what you refer to as liberties. I guess for us there are only liberties. We are conscious that when you work with a 'curator' and of course this is a generalization - there is a pressure to act responsibly towards the artwork and the imagined intention of the maker or artist. There is an inbuilt deference. And I guess we feel little of that deference. Partly because much of the material we use already exists outside of the museum or art gallery in a wider 'material culture', it becomes art momentarily through our intervention, but can also dissolve back again into the realms of the 'everyday'. And partly because we have been working with the technologies that enable objects and experiences to become artworks - museums and galleries, making exhibitions, producing publications and catalogues, writing wall and text-labels, and so on. When you work with these technologies you become aware that they can be turned upon any object, image, artist, maker, experience, city, country or nation. These important and powerful technologies are the means of interpretation, of producing the work of the work of art. This is where our recent work has resided, in taking liberties with the endless process of interpretation.

Once you turn attention away from the manufacture of artworks, to the technologies and institutions that designate the object as an artwork, then it's right to say that the whole world opens-up as a ready-made. And with this in mind, the practice of artists 'all artists, whether they acknowledge this or not - changes from that of struggling to originate, to struggling to choose. We choose from all the ideas, knowledge, objects, films and images that already exist; so the figure of the DJ sampling, or the curator or the hacker become much more appropriate metaphors.

In fact they are more than metaphors, they're specifically chosen practices. Because if the idea of a ready-made is still vital, it's in Duchamp's gesture, a gesture which didn't create a new object, but a new potential. He precisely exposed the conditions that enable the work of a work of art.

AS

If all the codes of culture are freely available as materials and tools is it possible to distinguish between appropriation and exploitation?

NC&ML

There is a very, very fine line between appropriation and exploitation. And while we talked earlier about feeling little or no deference towards the art object, we take enormous care of social relationships when working with the cultural products of others. This often involves endless negotiation, explanation and collaboration so that everyone involved can see how the project develops and what our aspirations are, and they can decide whether to contribute (or not). Any responsibility resides in these personal exchanges between us and the people we are working with. Clearly, as artists 'and again we'd suggest all artists do the same whether it's acknowledged or not- we are able to capitalise on the creativity of others. The difference is that we acknowledge, make explicit and negotiate the terms under which it happens. We inevitably exploit, but would like to avoid exploitation.

AS

If people do not 'own' what they produce, does the idea of labour become redundant?

NC&ML

Very few people own what they produce. This used to be the privileged position held open for the idea of the artist, someone who was not alienated from the fruits of their labour. But this is clearly no longer the case. The ideal artist has become a model employee in deregulated economies reliant on self-motivation, enthusiasm, creativity, flexibility, and intuition. Labour, far from being redundant has merely changed its nature.

AS

What I meant to get at was that people are remunerated for their time (and effort). If the fruit of our time and effort becomes freely available, it loses any financial incentive. How are people supposed to earn a living if what they produce is not remunerated? Does intellectual property not have a similar value to physical property?

NC&ML

Financial incentives are not necessarily what drives enthusiasm. And maybe, this is something of a contradiction, but the fact that something is freely available does not necessarily mean that there are no financial incentives to produce it. There are an enormous cultural shift underway as we move -in Europe at least- to financial economies of immaterial labour; from the production of goods to the production of services, knowledge and information -like education, or creating exhibitions, or consultation. People often earn more than a living.

As for intellectual property, this seems one of the most keenly contested areas of cultural struggle at the moment across a range of otherwise disparate disciplines. And the simple answer is no. Unlike physical property where my 'use' of that good deprives others, or at least depletes the common pool of available resources ' animal grazing rights is the example usually given. With ideas and knowledge this model is radically inverted. My 'use' of an idea does not necessarily stop other people using the idea. And it goes further, instead of 'use' depleting available resources, the more people using an idea the better it becomes. Sharing ideas and knowledge enriches, restricting their use does not.

By extending property relations to knowledge, we limit rather than enhance. If this applies to knowledge, then why should it not apply to digital goods and copyright? And then why not creativity, or genetic material, or language, or environmental resources?

One of the most interesting on-line developments is the growth in 'free' and 'open source' software, where the program is collaboratively developed, modified and redistributed 'often based on gift economies, like blood banks or organ donation- by programmers and users.

Some of the emerging applications, such as the Linux operating system, which is stable, cheap, virus free and under constant refinement by all its makers and users, is beginning to challenge the 'market-dominance' of commercial 'restricted-source' software, such as Windows. Peer-to-peer networks have re-animated generosity, and wikipedia which is an on-line, 'free content' encyclopedia is the fastest growing resource on the web currently expanding in 105 languages, peer reviewed and under constantly revision. All of these endeavors are sharpening interest in the public domain or the notions of the commons. Essentially they attempt to limit the power of copyright and patents to turn all creativity and knowledge into private property.

These models developed in the digital realm offer interesting ways for thinking about cultural activity, and even for practicing as artists.

AS

The limitless pool of material provided by the internet has accelerated shifts (not only for artists) from passive positions of voyeurism or spectatorship to 'empowered' roles as editors, witnesses, judges. As we discussed earlier, instead of creating material in a vacuum, artists frequently perform as 'facilitators' or 'conduits' providing connections or constructing situations. Who do you see as pioneers of this way of working?

NC&ML

As for pioneers, the Situationists seem to be precursors (theoretically and practically) for much of what is happening at the moment, both on and off-line. And a whole range of (particularly American) artists and practices that emerged during the late 1980s were very influential for us, Artists who began to turn their attention to the structures through which art is produced, promoted, distributed and 'consumed'. We're thinking of artists like Julie Ault and Group Material, Andrea Fraser, Sylvia Kolbowski and a slightly older generation of Michael Asher and Hans Haacke: artwork that became tagged as 'institutional critique'. We found this work both liberating and critical in that it enabled a model of 'art' and its circulation to be built and intervened in. At the same time we were conscious of how the notion of the 'institution' - and the museum is a great example - is devolving out into subtle social structures. The exhibitionary function of Museums and Galleries merge into Public Relations, Education, Development and Sponsorship opportunities; networks of images, brands and knowledge that work upon emotional economies of loyalty, trust and enthusiasm. So here European artists have proved more supportive: Thomas Hirschhorn, Superflex, Tone O. Nielsen, Inventory, the Copenhagen Free University, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Mathew Higgs, Jeremy Deller, to name but a few, have been very, very influential on us.

The role of sociology and anthropology has been key for us too, the work of Michel de Certeau on the practice of everyday life, Pierre Bourdieu and his attempt to develop a methodology for representing cultural practices, and Tony Bennett describing the 'exhibitionary' complex. There have also been a couple of manifestos published recently which are also very inspiring. The Libre Society take models from 'free' software culture and see if they can be applied to other cultural and creative practices while A Hacker Manifesto by McKenzie Wark, reformats a political economy derived from Karl Marx for our new networked times.

ChanceProjects

an archive of the collaborative work of artists neil cummings and marysia lewandowska
1995-2008

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