

## The Market vs. The Museum

*The following statement was given during the “Open Forum” session on Friday, June 10, 2005 during the 61<sup>st</sup> FIAF Congress in Ljubljana. It was written on the spur of the moment, as a somewhat unguarded reaction to the presentations and debates on Wednesday.*

*Since the first comments following my statement were extremely “controversial” and wide-ranging, I would like to stress again what I expressed when introducing it last Friday: that I was speaking in the spirit of the polemic, to stir up debate; that it was probably an “improper” thing to do (considering the diplomatic nature of most FIAF proceedings), but that I felt it to be necessary all the same. For reasons of brevity, I didn’t touch on many important issues relating to this topic. Also, I am well aware that the oppositional paths which are evoked in the latter part of this text cannot in any way do justice to the panoramic variety of institutional models that are represented in FIAF. But just as most utopian visions of “our digital future” have never (and will never) really become a reality, my own “dystopian vision” is very much a stark and admittedly unsubtle projection of certain visible details onto a wider and darker horizon, hopefully never to be realized.*

*Since he is the only (living) archive person mentioned by name, I should also add that Nicola Mazzanti – who was sadly not present anymore on Friday – is no stranger to polemic himself, so I took the freedom to respond to his “invitation”. I do, however, look forward to continuing this debate in a more extended and less pointed fashion. In the end, I am most interested to find out which image we – the members of the FIAF community – have (and want to have) of ourselves; and what our perceived role in society is, as curators and museum directors, as programmers and archivists, as “techies”, “politicos” and “passeurs”.*

*I have not revised the text since Friday, but I have tried to straighten out some bad English (of which there is certainly enough left).*

*Alexander Horwath, June 13, 2005*

Thank you for the opportunity to be polemical and to give you some observations and critical remarks about what I perceive to be not just a shift, but a “neo-liberal turn” in film archive and film museum politics. We are currently witnessing this turn or are ourselves part of it – and I think there are good reasons to oppose it as far as one can.

My examples do, in some way, relate to the workshop of the Technical Commission on Wednesday morning, but the language, the rhetoric and the ideology which were partly expressed there are in no way singular cases. I have heard them over and over – and more and more vehemently – on many platforms and in many contexts over the past few years. I think that it is necessary to look at this rhetoric more closely in relation to the unique abilities of the museum as well as the so-called “market realities”.

On the surface, this is a debate or controversy about *Digital vs. Film* and about the question *What Is Film?*, a debate I do not want to engage with here, even though it is far from clear and

getting more and more unclear every day. In our context, I think that the *Digital vs. Film* opposition only cloaks the real opposition, namely *The Market vs. The Museum*, and that behind the question *What Is Film?* one may find the question *What Is the Museum?*

I would like to name just three examples for this shift, three terms which, parallel to the development of Digital rhetoric, have massively entered our language – these three terms are *content*, *access* and *user*. Of course, all three are very innocent terms, and they signify a number of positive things; they signify, for instance, certain democratic, anti-elitist forms of behaviour and the “opening” of formerly “closed” institutions. I would, however, like to draw your attention to the way in which these terms are also being used to install a market logic at the cost of the critical and political functions of the museum.

Firstly: *content* – in other words, our collections. This rhetoric doesn't say *artefacts*, but *content*, much like the Hollywood industry uses the word *product* for films. In this sense, *content* is a combative term to somehow get rid of the material artefact which every content is irrevocably joined with. This use of the word *content* desires a kind of “free flow” of content, much like the “free flow of capital” in contemporary finance capitalism.

Secondly: *access*, meaning the way in which archive and museum collections are being presented to the public and are enriching public knowledge. The way *access* is being used in the neo-liberal rhetoric, it mostly means *consumption*. Not: creating and curating various forms of engagement with the artefact, but turning the collections into image-banks for intermediary dealers and end consumers.

Thirdly: the *user*, meaning the person who comes in contact with our institutions and our collections. By *user*, the market-style rhetoric does not really mean the interested citizen who is met at eye-level by the museum and who in turn is called upon to meet the artefacts and collections at eye level. Quite the opposite: In this rhetoric, *user* stands for the disinterested consumer or the overly-interested intermediary dealer or “provider”. The consumer plugs into our image-banks to graze on them like a cow grazes on a meadow, whereas the intermediary dealer or provider plugs in and grazes on our image-banks like corporate raiders graze on various smaller businesses, inhaling them in the process.

The ideology which lies in this specific terminology was best expressed on Wednesday morning when Nicola Mazzanti presented his vision of the future work of film archives and museums: nobody needs programmes or educational presentations anymore, nobody needs exhibitions curated with a specific knowledge, from a specific position. All forms of making-the-artefacts-public, of communicating them, of passing them on, will be “user-driven” – just like the market usually is (or, rather, seems to be). In this vision, the museum is either obsolete or it becomes something like a “server of the world”, fulfilling every conceivable need. The user creates his or her own programme, just as it is done everywhere else on the audio-visual market – we are therefore speaking of *content-on-demand*.

At this point I should make clear that, in my book, a museum is a very different kind of place and space, a different kind of social practice. The museum is a critical, ethical and political tool which stands in direct opposition to whatever social mood or climate or ideology is hegemonic at a given time. The museum does so in many ways. For instance, by simply

reminding the visitor of previous and alternative forms of social and cultural organisation; and thereby reminding him or her that the current social and cultural climate is not the only one imaginable. That the dominant forms are never “natural”, but historical and man-made. Furthermore, the museum is a different kind of social practice because it offers unlevelled, unaligned *difference* per se through the material shape of its artefacts; it offers specific and accountable viewpoints and arguments about culture and society through curated programmes and exhibitions, by communicating with the visitor from an identifiable and transparent position.

The museum, as I understand it, is also a space in which one can find respect. Respect both for the artefacts that are collected, preserved and exhibited and for the person who views them in order to engage with them. The museum collection, finally, is not an image-bank created by chance, but an active and poetic process which should be presented just as actively and poetically.

All of this, by the way, does not prohibit a museum to fulfil additional services to commercial or non-commercial users, to make a Digi-Beta off a film in the collection, to create a data-stream of certain of its holdings, or to sell a clip to television – if it chooses to do so and if it is in a legal position to do so. It’s just that this is definitely not the *main* social function and mandate of a museum.

The neo-liberal rhetoric attempts to paint the museum in a very different light. Since the market always needs to portray itself and the unrestrained flow of capital and content as the most natural and desirable of all things, every space or tool which functions as a critical reminder of alternative options must be presented as an obstacle. This is where the image of the “dusty” and “musty” old museum comes in. An image that was used quite frequently on Wednesday to convey the contrast between the bright and light world of free-flow Digital on the one hand and the heavy, dusty, old-fashioned world of film and the museum on the other. In addition, any supporter of the museum as an ethical or critical tool is swiftly deemed to be “conservative” or “naïve”. Along these lines, one would actually think that the term *Archive* should evoke even stronger images of dustiness and mustiness – at least that used to be the prevalent image of the archive among large parts of the population. But the *New Archive* in neo-liberal terminology is not at all dusty and musty – because it is the image-bank, the valuable asset, the bright and shiny server of the world.

By painting the dusty old museum as conservative and as an obstacle to the New Archives' swift conversion into the servers of the world, and by painting dusty old film as an obstacle to the digital regime, the neo-liberal rhetoric functions exactly the same way as it does in the social and political arenas: Whatever rules and regulations the social state has implemented to protect the rights of workers and employees, or the solidarity between the generations, or the fair access to health services, and so on – all these rights and regulations and the groups which represent them (such as unions) are now being painted as “backwards”, “conservative”, “defensive” and “naïve”, as obstacles to the free reign of the so-called market forces which one is supposed to join offensively. As an ideological tool of Cultural Darwinism, the current use of the term *Digital* in a certain cultural context mirrors the use of *The Market Forces* as a tool of Social Darwinism. The *free flow* which is invoked by both terms attempts to separate itself from – and get rid of – the material objects and material relations from which they both derive.

I would also briefly like to point out that the neo-liberal rhetoric of Digital often comes with a rather specific tone and aesthetic of presentation which seem to give it credibility because they are so wonderfully ironic and, you know, *seen-it-all, know-it-all*. A certain sarcasm or cynicism that is likely to even resort to parodies of the bad English spoken by others. As an homage to its preferred presentation tool, I would like to call this type of speaking *The Powerpoint Speak*. It borders on a kind of postmodern propaganda language, because both technologically and in terms of visual aesthetics and intonation, this Powerpoint Speak leaves very little room for reflection, for pause, for eye- and ear-level communication and for critical understanding.

I feel that we are in the middle of a process which might actually show that FIAF contains two very different types of thinking, or even consists of two very different types of organisations. As far as I understand the history and the identity of FIAF, the idea of the film museum, of the Cinematheque as a critical and ethical tool stands very much at the centre. At least that seems to be the legacy of people like Iris Barry, Henri Langlois or Jacques Ledoux. In the past two decades, the questions of archiving, of conservation and preservation have become much more prominent than they used to be, and rightfully so. But we might now find ourselves at a moment in time when the newly professionalized archive leaves behind the idea of the museum as a critical tool and turns into a digital image-bank, riding on top of perfectly managed cold-storage facilities for untouchable nitrate and acetate films.

At the end of such a process, this kind of archive would be fully aligned with and affirmed by the market, and therefore represent a kind of nothingness. In political terms, it would be the actual conservative, or better: neo-conservative place.

The other type of organisation would be an archive which is also a “critical museum”; a confrontation of concrete artefacts and social practices; an actively and poetically constructed collection; a place in which curatorial thinking and work can be felt and be argued with. It would stand counter to the ideology of the market.

I must admit that the latter type of organisation will probably bring a lot of grief – the grief of having to endure, engage with and survive the current cultural politics which run on the fetish of the Digital and digitisation. On this point, however, I would like to quote William Faulkner, by way of Jean-Luc Godard: *Between grief and nothingness, I will take grief.*