

## Enthusiasts, and the Enthusiasts Archive

Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska

*released under a **Creative Commons: Attribution ShareAlike v2.5** License*

As artists we have been collaborating together since 1995, and have, in turn, worked with many curators, academics, historians, archivists, gallerists, people with technical expertise, enthusiasts, collectors, and many, many others. During this time, we have moved away from the habitual aesthetic appearance of art and its exhibition— and even from the production of autonomous objects as art<sup>1</sup>— and closer to a collaborative, research driven way of practicing. Echoing wider cultural shifts, we have turned our attention from sites of art production – the studio – to the spaces of distribution, exhibition and consumption – the gallery, museum and archive.

We have been interested in thinking about and working alongside many of the organisations that choreograph the exchange of values between art and its publics. We have worked with various galleries (both public and private), museums, art schools, publishers and broadcasters. When you work with these institutions and their exhibitionary technologies – technologies which include the means of collection, installation and display; the production of publications, catalogues and promotional material; educational projects; the writing of wall texts, audio tours and gallery guides, and so on – you become aware that these technologies can be turned upon any object, image, artist, maker, experience, city, country or nation<sup>2</sup>. These powerful distributary technologies are the means of producing, presenting and disseminating the work of the work of art.

The distributary technologies of art are also diffusing into wider economies of display<sup>3</sup>; economies animated by the movement of images, information, knowledge, value, people, goodwill, loyalty and trust. These forces, which have traditionally been misrecognised as outside of finance and within the realm of culture, are now central to our ‘new’ financial economies convened around the slippery exchanges of creativity, knowledge, intellectual property regimes and capital. So we have also been interested in the spaces where art, through exhibition, dissolves into public policy and social management, into promotion, sponsorship and investment, into products, advertising, and lifestyle choices; which has encouraged us to initiate projects with department stores, with advertising agencies, archives, with independent commissioning agencies and corporations.

Each project has resulted in a range of different outcomes appropriate to the project’s location. For example, we have made exhibitions such as **Free Trade** (2003) at the Manchester Art Gallery, using collections of paintings, sculpture, fine furniture, ceramics, and miscellaneous objects , which enabled us to explore the entanglements of art and emerging 19<sup>th</sup>-century capitalism through our rediscovery of the Beatson Blair Bequest; or **Capital** (2001) a series of encounters, triggered by the issue of a gift – a beautiful limited edition artwork, between two iconic institutions and the economies they animate; the Tate and the Bank of England.. We have researched and produced books such as *The Value of Things* (Cummings & Lewandowska, 2001a) which explored, via the British Museum and Selfridges, the parallel ideological and exhibitionary history of the public museum and the department store. And we have built collections, exhibitions and archives – often with amateur

material previously excluded from ‘official’ cultural institutions – like **Not Hansard** (2000) and **Enthusiasts** (2004).

To this end we increasingly use research as a means of identifying the location of our *artwork* as well as any potential exhibitionary form this *artwork* might take. For us, research or fieldwork has replaced ‘site specificity’ as a means of designating our engagement as artists. Research incorporates the recognition that the ‘exhibition’ itself often consists of interlocking yet distributed fields of aesthetics, knowledge, promotion, social practices and economic forces. The exhibition is discursively formed through our act of engagement; it does not pre-exist as an ‘empty’ location waiting to be filled. We have sought to vividly re-animate the practice of exhibition, in which our artworks are no longer viewed as points of origin, founded on ‘individual’ creativity, or of termination, housed in museums and galleries or their stores, but as nodes in networks of social exchange.

### **Enthusiasm**

Exhausted after a series of projects , including **Capital** (2001), **Use Value** (2001), and **Free Trade** (2003), that required endless negotiation with institutions of collection and exhibition, in 2002 we had a chance encounter with Polish film director Krzysztof Kieslowski’s first popular feature film, **Amator** (Film Buff), made in 1979. The main character in the film is a leading member of a factory-based amateur film club. Intrigued as to whether such clubs and film-makers still existed<sup>4</sup>, we made a few speculative research trips in the summer of 2002, enquiring into the existence and remnants of amateur film clubs of socialist Poland.

There has been a spectacular transfiguration of Polish political and cultural life since the introduction of the market economy in 1989. It is as if Poland has played out in a time-lapsed film style, the economic and cultural changes of 'western' Europe. Fifty years of social evolution – from a manufacturing to a service economy – has been compressed into just over ten years. Poland is a crystallization of the forces at play in the rest of Europe; it projects a service-driven, consumer-led future, while content to forget its industrial past and hide its manufacturing present. And yet, all the former state-owned industries – for example those generating power, refining steel or producing chemicals – play a central role in contemporary economic and cultural life. Clearly industry manufactures the goods and energy necessary to generate our material lives, and yet has simultaneously structured our experiences into 'productive' labour and un-productive 'leisure' time: traditionally the space of culture. Although, before the economic changes in Poland, even 'leisure' was organized through factory-sponsored clubs, various associations, sports facilities and even state holiday schemes.

Out of this regulated network, perhaps the most popular clubs were those that encouraged the production of amateur film. With 16mm film stock, cameras and editing tables supplied by the factory/state, a large number of clubs were created throughout Poland from the 1950s onwards. By the late 1960s there were almost 300 clubs in existence. Out of this growing network, and in a mirror reflection of the professional media, film competitions evolved, prizes awarded, and festivals were organized on a local, regional, and eventually national and international level.

The passions of the amateur, enthusiast or hobbyist often reveal a range of interests and experiences generally invisible amongst the breathless flow of the state-sponsored, or professionally-mediated.

The enthusiast is often working outside 'official' culture and its encouragements, frequently adopting a counter-cultural tone of tactical resistance and criticism.

During our trips to Poland we became aware that most of the factories that housed film clubs had closed, or the clubs themselves disbanded. With help, however, we found a few former club members who were still active, and they, in turn, gave us addresses and telephone numbers of other members and clubs. We began to criss-cross the country, visiting people's houses, extant clubs and community centres, and with the aid of a portable editing device we watched hundreds of films.

It became apparent to us that the film club enthusiasts were inverting the familiar logic of work and leisure, through becoming truly productive when pursuing their film-making passion and using work for their own, rather than the factory's or state's, intentions. Perhaps the enthusiast has the same relationship to official cultural production as the gift to financial economies? These grey areas between work and leisure are clearly blurring in our contemporary economies, driven by exchanges of signs, information, experiences and capital<sup>5</sup>. Cultural production, either luxurious to the strictly financial (as in the traditional (?) example of Fine Art) or outside the reach of profit –(as in the practices of the enthusiast or amateur), that which was once marginal to the refreshment of capital, has now become central to the 'creative industries' and the 'new' economies. In these 'new' economies the artist or enthusiast is an ideal employee; astonishingly self-motivated, endlessly creative, flexible, enthusiastic, resourceful and, financially, poorly rewarded. So these are some of

the themes we began to develop, using the culture of amateur film-making to think through and explore a shift from enthusiasm being a site of resistance, to a central driver of ‘official culture’, and the very source of the refreshment of contemporary capital<sup>6</sup>.

As we tracked down the films and their makers we were astonished by their ambition. These were not standard ‘amateur’ films of family landmarks such as births, weddings and holidays, but were an aspiration to cinema. We saw extraordinary films that ranged from two-minute animations and wicked political satires, to short ‘experimental’ and ‘abstract’ films, from documentaries on family, village, city or factory life; to historical dramas and ambitious features with great emotional gravity. There is an astonishing range of material, beautifully crafted and largely forgotten – or, more accurately, ‘doubly-repressed’. Doubly-repressed because the films are tinged with an ideological past incompatible with the ideological present, and because of their ‘amateur’ status they exist below the consciousness of ‘official’ cultural institutions of exhibition – museums and archives.

As a result of our research into these films, their makers and clubs, we found a huge selection of forgotten footage, usually in people’s houses, and sometimes literally under their beds. In 2003, joined by curator Lukasz Ronduda of the Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, we embarked on cleaning, restoring and digitizing as much of the material as we could find money to support.

### ***The Exhibition***

As we worked on restoration and digitization, we began to develop ideas for a new project, a means of exploring enthusiasm through exhibition. We were aware of, and wanted to avoid the legacy of, artists' use of found film footage, where the film material is habitually stripped of its context and appropriated as the artists' property. Through discussion, we realized our need to construct a social, material and conceptual context in which the films could be situated, while all the time being wary of falling into nostalgia.

Almost two years after the research began, the project was first made public in an exhibition entitled **Enthusiasts** curated by Lukasz Ronduda at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle in June 2004 (Cummings & Lewandowska, 2004)<sup>7</sup>. The exhibition comprised a compilation of official newsreels; a reconstructed interior of a film club-house; a selection of films curated into three hour-long film programmes, each presented in a 'cinema' exhibition environment; a collection of festival posters; and an 'Archive Lounge' of films found but not screened.

The first exhibitionary encounter for the visitor was a room screening *Polska Kronika Filmowa*. These are short, official state-sponsored films which previewed in cinemas before the main feature, and later on television. The films glorify the productivity of the former communist state; its factories, their workers, material output, state festivals, shopping, cultural events, etc. These films create an introductory ground against which the enthusiasts' films themselves could be appreciated.

The second exhibitionary encounter was through 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 filmmaking 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 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**, the space 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 enabled 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.

### ***Enthusiasts: archive***

From the seed of the idea of the Archive Lounge developed for the **Enthusiasts** 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.

There is an astonishing growth in museums, and in archives and data-banks of images, sounds and information. Indeed, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1996) has diagnosed a virulent ‘archive fever’ at work. These new, emergent forms of archival capital have an increasingly powerful grip upon culture and its reproduction. The problem with most existing public archives is that all creative work is born into copyright; every image, text, film or sound is automatically designated as the property of its apparent author – until death plus seventy years in the UK. Copyright is founded on the right of exclusion – what is contractually mine cannot be yours. Through the fixed-term of the exclusion, copyright removes creative works from the public domain and denies the legal possibility of the creative re-use of the work by others – except with prior written permission. Now, while there is logic at work between relationships of owners or authors and physical artworks or artifacts – a logic of scarcity and a bounded relationship between people and things, this logic dissolves when applied to media made for reproduction, like film, or immaterial goods, like ideas, or information, or previously distinct media translated into a digital code, which is endlessly replicable at negligible cost with no appreciable loss of quality. Most public film and media archives are built from donated material from public broadcasters or film agencies, or comprise of gifts from amateur film-makers. These gifts are usually accepted with an agreement that the copyright, or its management, is assigned to the archive. Some media archives then attempt to turn limited reproduction rights into a revenue stream, they on-sell rights to broadcast media conglomerates for extraordinary fees. These fees are often well beyond the reach of the publics who fund the archive and donate its holdings. Effectively, our moving-image cultural history, our film and broadcast culture, is being expropriated from the very people who paid for its production – it is like charging thousands of pounds to visit a museum exhibition.

Archives, like collections in museums and galleries are built with the property of multiple authors and previous owners. But, unlike the collection, there is no imperative within the conventional logic of the archive to exhibit, display or interpret its holdings. An archive designates a territory and not a particular narrative, but perhaps the archive, too, may be constituted as a creative space for engagement. The material connections contained are not already authored as someone's – for example, a curator's or artist's – interpretation, exhibition or property; rather, it is a discursive terrain where interpretations are invited.

Our experience of working with and struggling to release material from Polish state film archives, or from many public film and television archives in Britain, encouraged us to think about creating a 'critical' creative archive of amateur film, which would – to use a term from recent software development – be 'free' or 'open source'. With the permission of the film-makers we are currently compressing the films and uploading them on to <http://www.archive.org>, an internet public domain resource, from which they can be accessed via the **Enthusiasts: archive** <http://www.enthusiastsarchive.net> website. Uploaded films can be either streamed or downloaded, and therefore exhibited anywhere, at any time. Some films also enable you to re-edit their material or integrate them into a new creative works. All of this is made possible as the **Enthusiasts: archive** <http://www.enthusiastsarchive.net> and all it contains is licensed under Creative Commons Licenses<sup>8</sup>. These licenses work as an extension to copyright and grant you the right to use, copy, sometimes modify and redistribute any film, text or image that carries the CC license. The most important operational clause within the each license is that these rights – to copy, modify and redistribute –

must be extended through your work to others. Through on-licensing, the ‘viral’ heart of the Creative Commons ensures that the source film material and all derivative works will become a legally protected creative resource in perpetuity. Artists and others will be able to watch, screen, download, use and re-use the material for future creative exchange, enriching rather than depleting the public domain. Enabled through technology and licensing, the conventional archive of inert documentation can be vividly re-imagined as a creative space of exhibition, the evolving archive can be found at <http://www.enthusiastsarchive.net>.

Through our founding of the **Enthusiasts: archive** as an artwork, we intend to challenge creative practices – to replace exchanges facilitated by frustration and restriction with those of collaboration and generosity. We want to re-animate the public function of archives, collections and exhibitions in an age characterized by relentless privatization, and, to initiate new practices of exhibition. Practices where, as artists, our ‘creativity’ is not founded on the dominance of the visitor, or where the ‘studio’ is no longer privileged as a space of creative production to the detriment of the exhibition, which is too often imagined as a space of passive spectacle and consumption<sup>9</sup>. Instead, we attempt to collapse those spaces and participants down, so that exhibition is reconfigured as a conscious site of creative exchange for the collaborative negotiation over the ‘making’ and re-making of the work of the work of art. Pursuing this project, we recognize the need to locate our work within exhibitionary institutions, to utilize their authority and resources, and to work with the audiences for contemporary art that they convene. And yet our aspirations for **Enthusiasts** and **Enthusiasts: archive** is to test and exceed the institutional grip upon culture and its reproduction. Our artworks are made from and conceived as a nexus of all the forces made possible through the practices of exhibition – simultaneously aesthetic, material, political, financial, institutional and discursive.<sup>10</sup>

For more information visit <http://www.chanceprojects.com>

released under a **Creative Commons: Attribution ShareAlike v2.5** License

## References

Bennett, Tony (1995) *The Birth of the Museum*, London and New York: Routledge.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Derrida, Jacques (1996) *Archive Fever*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Cummings, Neil & Lewandowska, Marysia (2001) *Capital*, London, Tate Publishing.

- (2001) *The Value of Things* London/Basel, August/Birkhauser

- (2004) *Enthusiasts*, Vol 1 Warsaw, Centre for Contemporary Art

- (2005) *Enthusiasm*, Vol 2 London, Berlin, Barcelona, Whitechapel Art Gallery, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Tapies Foundation.

Foucault, Michel (1974) *The Order of Things*, London: Tavistock.

Mauss, Marcel (1991 [1923-24]) *The Gift* London, Routledge

Negri Antonnio and Hardt Michael (2000) *Empire* Harvard University Press

Titmuss, Richard M. (1970) *The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy*, London: Allen & Unwin

---

<sup>1</sup> There are clearly enough artworks in the world. Major museums in Britain routinely store about 80% of their collections at any given time.

<sup>2</sup> We are conscious of building on the legacy of artists who emerged during the late 1980s, who turned their attention to the structures through which art is produced, promoted, distributed and 'consumed' -for example, Julie Ault and Group Material, Andrea Fraser, Sylvia Kolbowski and a slightly older generation of Michael Asher and Hans Haacke.

<sup>3</sup> What the sociologist Tony Bennett (1995) has traced – since the 19<sup>th</sup> century –as the evolution of an 'exhibitionary complex' of museums, exhibitions and trade fairs, with a parallel development of technologies of surveillance, discipline and control.

<sup>4</sup> A related project **Not Hansard: the common wealth** took place at the John Hansard Gallery 2nd May-10th June 2000. The project was an exhibition consisting of a reading room comprised of over 2,000 publications -not commercially available - produced by local and national clubs, societies, hobbyists, collectors, enthusiasts and associations; a sliver of that which is spoken outside of the professionally mediated. The collection was donated to the British Library.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri make this process explicit in their academic blockbuster, *Empire*. If natural resources are already owned and managed as revenue streams, its logical that the core processes of bio-power itself will - through the force of law – be turned into resources to profit from. Capitalism begins to mine value from 'everyday' structures, habits and practices – like enthusiasm, conviviality and generosity.

<sup>6</sup> See *The Pro-Am Revolution How enthusiasts are changing our economy and society* Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller available at <http://www.demos.co.uk/catalogue/proameconomy/>

<sup>7</sup> Subsequent versions, reconfigured as **Enthusiasm**, toured to the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (1 April - 22 May 2005), Kunst Werke, Berlin (5 June - 4 September 2005), and Fundacio Antoni Tapies, Barcelona (27 October - 15 January 2006) – see (Cummings & Lewandowska, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> The Creative Commons licenses <http://www.creativecommons.org> success rests upon the pioneering work of Richard Stallman and Eben Moglen of the Free Software Foundation. They developed the General Public License [GPL] in 1984 which protects Free, Libre and Open Source software [FLOSS]. The GPL is the foundation of the Creative Commons, and most Open Content licenses <http://www.fsf.org/>

<sup>9</sup> Here we see connections to many other contemporary artists including Thomas Hirschhorn, Superflex, Becky Shaw, the Copenhagen Free University, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Public Works and Jeremy Deller, to name but a few.

<sup>10</sup> For more information visit <http://www.chanceprojects.com>