

■ Differentiated Cinema

George Clark

'Does the museum fail?' was the question at the heart of the Kinomuseum project. The International Short Film Festival Oberhausen posed the question through a series of specially curated programmes reflecting on the ability of institutions to represent culture. To discuss failure is to emphasise what museums tend to disguise: the gaps and conditions that govern their collections. Kinomuseum was an attempt to examine the institutional construction of authority and to construct models of exhibition for film and video that embraced criticality. Conceived and curated for the festival by Ian White, the project was positioned at the intersection between 'the museum's seemingly unlimited ability to reproduce itself and the threat that reproduction poses to the art museum's primary function as the keeper of objects'.

To enter into the museum, works have to follow the principle of the unique object, which in the case of reproducible media means the editioned work. The principle of controlled exhibition is in opposition to industrial cinema that operates on mass simultaneous exhibition through distribution. Artists' film and video pose distinct problems to both of these models and, although they do enter both institutions, it is largely through subscription to their conditions. By creating a 'differentiated cinema' Kinomuseum sought to find ways to engage with artists' critical relationship to institutional models of exhibition as well as to further collapse the division between how cinemas and museums operate. The project followed the lines set out in a quotation from André Malraux in the catalogue: 'The museum was an affirmation, the museum without walls is an interrogation.'

The dialectic between affirmation and interrogation was constant in the festival's ten cinema programmes that ran in two parallel sections. Half were curated by Ian White and sought to 'replace the institution itself with its exploration' and half were guest-selected by three artists (AA Bronson, Mary Kelly and Mark Leckey) and two curators (Emily Pethick, Achim Borchardt-Hume) under the brief to present a room inside the project's 'imaginary museum'. Museums themselves already make steps towards other configurations of their role, especially through their use of film or other media to extend the reach of their collections. An early example was *The American Wing*, 1935, a film made by the Met-

ropolitan Museum of Art in order to show its historical displays around the country, which juxtaposes exterior shots of historical buildings with their replica interiors from the museum, creating a collection that would be physically impossible for the museum to accommodate.

The Kinomuseum programmes constantly sought to intervene and penetrate into other areas. Mark Leckey's brilliant performance/lecture titled *CINEMA-IN-THE-ROUND* drew links – between Philip Guston and Honda's pristine Fischli and Weiss rip-off, *Felix the Cat* and Hollis Frampton's structuralist film *Lemon* – in order to outline his fascination with visual culture's ability to become more than its material. Similarly corporeal was Seth Price's cannibalisation of his own commercially sold video works in *Digital Video Effects: 'Editions'*, 2006, where he challenged ownership of artistic objects through the appropriation of his own work.

The need for a 'differentiated cinema' that could fracture the conditions of exhibition was contested by Alexander Horwath in a discussion around the project. He contemptuously shrugged off the proposal by citing Vienna's Filmmuseum, which he runs, as already fulfilling the proposition. His inability to engage with the project's terms of enquiry only made clear the need for a reconsideration of how institutions operate. His stance is epitomised by the conservative film programme he has curated for Documenta 12 that uncritically reflects the trajectory of modernist art cinema since the 50s and only serves to enforce a division between cinema and art. Thankfully in the same panel Chrissy Iles, in declaring 'there are no pure spaces', illustrated the diversity of auditoria and exhibition halls in order to show that the division between institutions lies more in cultural discourse than material characteristics.

Festivals have the rarely fulfilled capacity to be 'other' spaces and to open up the cinema or museum for investigation. Oberhausen, throughout its 54 years, has sought to generate alternative models of exhibition, although it currently struggles in the presentation of new work by its attempt to treat its 5000-plus submissions fairly. At their best festivals can become centres for conversations and debate, which Oberhausen this year sustained remarkably. The conditions of the festival found a surprising mirror in Pierre Bismuth's *Following the Right Hand of Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in Casablanca* selected by curator Borchardt-Hume. The work consists of an abstract line drawing generated, as the title suggests, by

tracing the hand movements. Projected as a 35mm-film loop and accompanied by the soundtrack of *Casablanca*, it became the perfect mirror for the film festival, made up as it is of international guests (read 'exiles') all stuck together in a small town half trapped, half on holiday, all looking for ways out.

The programme managed to reflect back on its material conditions: the constitution of the audience and the corporeal dimension of spectatorship. Morgan Fisher's diagrammatic *Screening Room* involves a dislocated POV shot that wanders into the auditorium. The film ends when the projected image and the screen merge to create an inverse out-of-body experience, placing the spectator back in the auditorium. Mary Kelly's programme, *Fall Out*, presented three 'distinct images of catastrophe' in order to return us to the present. Central to all three was The Speculative Archive's *Not a matter of if but when*, made in Damascus in 2005-06, which attempted to find a way to address directly the uncertain state of Syria and the Middle East. Each work was shown in a separate auditorium, which created physical divisions between them and located the distinctiveness in the bodily movement through real space.

The spectre of death haunts museums as it does the recorded image. The role of museums to educate and act as a collective memory for the world sits awkwardly with their role as nationalist and imperial emblems. The contradictory responsibility of these institutions was evoked in Alain Resnais's *Toute la mémoire du monde*, 1956, a remarkable study of the archival structures employed by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Made the year after Resnais's film *Night and Fog*, it is a disturbing and ambiguous companion piece to that film, challenging one of the bedrocks of western culture. By penetrating the structure of the museum and exposing its mechanism, the film, like Kinomuseum, is both shattering and critical of the museum's project. ■

Kinomuseum, 54th International Short Film Festival, was at Oberhausen, Germany from May 3 to 8.

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