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2017

## ASSEMBLING THE ARCHIVAL CITY: COLLECTIVE CURATION WITHIN THE EYE ON ART RESEARCH LAB



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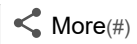
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**T**his is the second part of the first installment of our new “From the Archive” section. In the first (<http://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2017/10/the-extended-city-symphony/>), Floris Paalman introduces the concepts informing the curation of The Extended City Symphony program for the EYE Film Museum. Here, student curators Vincent Baptist and Matthias Nothnagel reflect on how their group approached the assembly of the “evening” portion of that program.

The rapid spread of digital technologies has led to both a rise in the amount of audiovisual material and the increasing accessibility of film footage through databases and archives. When thinking through the process of curation, one therefore must bear in mind myriad ethical, economic, spatial, and political implications that have become crucial in the context of accelerated digitization. In the case of film, which in its century-long development has been a battleground of clashing political views and economic influences, the virtue of curating has come to lie in a reflexive and critical engagement with the material. During an intensive group collaboration as guest curators for the EYE Film Museum in Amsterdam, the question of selecting and presenting archival film material from the museum’s vast collections was immediately concerned with both genealogical issues and political ramifications; for instance, in exploring how the content of advertisements and experimental films have changed over time and in accordance with societal development.



*Una Tipica Storia Italiana (Campari commercial, 1950s)*

The curatorial concept of our specific “evening programme” (which we executed together with a third student, Niamh O’Donnell) within the larger Extended City

Symphony presentation (<https://www.eyefilm.nl/en/film/uva-researchlab-the-extended-city-symphony/>), was influenced by Laura Marks’ notion of the “ethical presenter” as someone who “frames a programme with an argument.”<sup>1</sup> Laura Marks. “The Ethical

Presenter: Or How to Have Good Arguments over Dinner.” *The Moving Image* 4.1 (2004): 34-47. [36]

The argument, in this case, was a critical rendering of the notion of leisure time in an urban context: How did advertisements shape and alter the conception of leisure in the city, and how can these developments be traced via film-historical material? Questions of ethics, and

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of the varying definitions of curatorial virtues—cinophilic, artistic, collaborative—triggered crucial conversations between the members of our group. These conversations particularly addressed the relationship between a specific curatorial concept, namely a subverted notion of leisure time, and the compiled material that gave expression to it. This discussion led to developing a careful balance between advertisements and experimental shorts.

At this stage, Bruce Checefsky helped us form an understanding of our role as curators. “The exhibition space is a narrative space,” Checefsky writes, “the curated exhibition is the story.” Juxtaposing objects of different categories reveals intriguing relationships and blurs the boundaries of traditional museological classification and interpretation.”<sup>2</sup> Bruce Checefsky. “Erasure: Curator as Artist.” *The Artist as Curator*. Ed. Celina Jeffery. Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2015. 97-112. [100] The whole Extended City Symphony program that was presented during the EYE on Art Research Lab was conceived to adhere to Lev Manovich’s conceptualization of “database cinema,” which suggests that a film’s shots are not organized as a strict sequence, but are rather conceived as “collections of <sup>3</sup> individual items, where every item has the same significance as any other.” Lev Manovich. “Database as Symbolic Form.” 1998. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 5.2 (1999): 80-99. [80] At the very end of his article, however, Manovich still leaves room for narrative structure within his concept, and this was something we decided to integrate into our “evening” section of the programme.<sup>4</sup> Manovich, “Database as Symbolic Form,” 98. The idea to install a micro-narrative within the broader programme is furthermore related to Dominique Païni’s conceptualization of film programming as editing. For Païni, the meaning and argument of a film programme, especially in the case of a compilation of short films, is created in and through the juxtaposition of different films: “After all, isn’t programming also laying shots<sup>5</sup> and sequences end to end with dramatic purposes in mind? To program is to *edit*.” Quoted in: Stéphanie-Emmanuelle Louis. “Exhibiting/Editing: Dominique Païni and Programming at the Cinémathèque Française at the Turn of the Centenary.” *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art: Challenges and Perspectives*. Eds. Julia Noordegraaf, Cosetta G. Saba, Barbara Le Maître and Vinzenz Hediger. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013. 326-30. [326] The way in which we tried to “edit” a dramatic structure in our own programme section, will be

further explained below, when considering the various short films we ultimately selected.

Our collaborative experience while working on the programme showed that the notion of cinephilia, as addressed by Peter Bosma as a driving force for each curator, needs to be put into question. If curators are described as cinephiles and curating is based on a “personal interpretation and emotional response,” then one might fall into the trap of emotionality, which turns every film curator into a mere phenomenologist. Peter Bosma. *Film Programming: Curating for Cinemas, Festivals, Archives*. London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2015. [23] Our film selection was therefore based less on our emotional connection to the films. We deviated from this “cinephilic” standard, since, in line with Marks, it was rather a critical and political argument that founded the basis of the film selection. However, Bosma’s work remained seminal in our understanding of film curation, especially regarding the archive and how we could “[repurpose] the collection: adding value, giving it a connection to current times and contexts.” Bosma, *Film Programming*, 87.

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### **We were interested in putting together a program that engaged in an institutional critique**

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Ultimately, curating within EYE’s institutional setting allowed for close critique of our understanding of the process as a whole. We were interested in putting together a program that engaged in an institutional critique, where, as Dorothee Richter writes, “[t]he conventional notion of a closed, presentable, image-like

performance is subverted.”<sup>8</sup> Richter, Dorothee. “Artists and Curators as Authors – Competitors, Collaborators, or Team-workers?” *ONCURATING.org* 19 (2013): n.p. <<http://www.on-curating.org/issue-19-reader/artists-and-curators-as-authors-competitors-collaborators-or-team-workers.html#.WLkavRLhCfT>(<http://www.on-curating.org/issue-19-reader/artists-and-curators-as-authors-competitors-collaborators-or-team-workers.html#.WLkavRLhCfT>)> The institutional workings are thus uncovered, and the intertwined ecologies of artists, artworks and curators become visible. In other words, through becoming curators, we became aware of the relationships between institutional principles, archival politics and curatorial ethics. It is the intricateness of this maze that stimulates and even requires the curator to take up an explicit position within it.

When searching, selecting and compiling a range of short films to envision “evening time” as part of a day in the life of an imaginary archival city, we did not immediately delve into the EYE Catalogue to simply see which material we would accidentally stumble first. Indebted to Marks, the conceptual idea that we initially put forward for our programme was that of “self-improvement,” and how one’s apparent leisure time during the evening of a day in the current, urban society is most often turned into an intense opportunity to further ameliorate oneself and

one's life. This idea of individual improvement or amelioration is tied to the concept of "human capital." As Michel Feher explains: "(...) all one knows of human capital is [that] (...) the subjects that it defines seek to appreciate and to value themselves, such that their life



*Bowling Alley (Pall Mall commercial, 1962)*

may be thought of as a strategy aimed at self-appreciation..."<sup>9</sup> Michel Feher. "Self-Appreciation; or, the Aspirations of Human Capital." *Public Culture* 21.1 (2009): 21-41. [28]

The particular perception of contemporary Western societies that underlies the initial conceptualization we developed corresponds to what Jonathan Crary calls a "24/7 society," which "decrees the absoluteness of availability, and hence the ceaselessness of needs and their incitement, but also their perpetual non-fulfillment."<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Crary. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London and New York: Verso, 2013. [10] Crary's idea of a "24/7 society" relates to a contemporary economic rationality that asks us to accelerate, consume and produce, learn and improve, rather than to slow down, ignore or retreat. In relation to evening time, this logic ties in with the idea that consumption can convert into, or be perceived as, production. Consequently, the barriers between leisure and work become increasingly blurred.

As for the on-site research in EYE's archive database, an initial exploratory query, using a multitude of keywords relating to our conceptual ideas, helped us discover a variety of commercials that were original enough to compile in a programme about the shifting notions of leisure and evening time. The access to and viewing of the commercials proved to be somewhat tricky, since most of these shorts were part of compilation reels intended to screen in their entirety. Because of this technical issue, a chance existed that it would not be possible to transfer specific commercials to a format appropriate for our own programme. Yet, with the help of EYE curator Simona Monizza, the adverts and their compilation reels were ultimately made available for viewing and transferred to digital files.



*Famous Cities of Europe Filmed in Cinemascope: Brussels (Peter Stuyvesant commercial, 1958)*

Out of the multitude of adverts, we selected a balanced mix based on several criteria. The use of a voice-over, for instance, was a key element for its direct address of the viewer. In the context of commercials, a direct address is a powerful rhetorical technique used to persuade viewers to adopt certain modes of consumption.

The voice-over in the two Mackeson Stout commercials is an especially good example of the way in which a direct address instills a disciplinary attitude in the viewer (“You can’t beat Mackeson types”). In the end this tactic reproduces the underlying logic of production and the market. It thus governs and influences people’s attempts to ameliorate themselves through consumption, which ultimately ties in with Feher’s notion of self-appreciation and increased “human capital.”<sup>11</sup> Feher, “Self-Appreciation,” 28.

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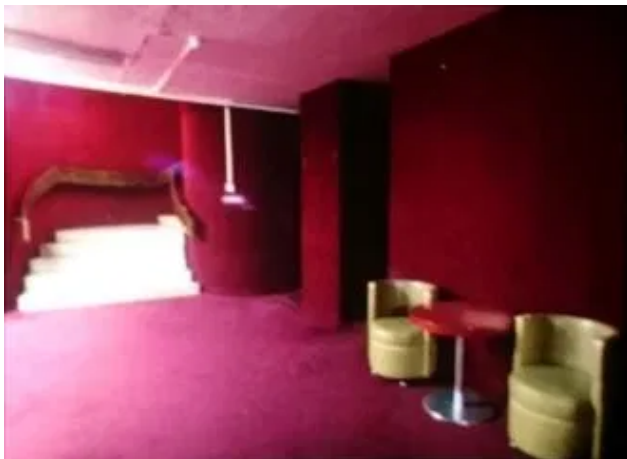
Furthermore, selecting commercials that only deal with addictive commodities (alcohol and cigarettes) additionally subverted the idea of self-improvement in the context of leisure time, of subjects who “seek to appreciate and to value themselves.”<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* Next to this conceptual framework, we tried to mimic the flow of a television advertising block during the evening time by



*Are You a Mackeson Type? (Mackeson commercial, 1954)*

repeating the Mackeson commercials to generate a sense of the “ceaselessness of needs and their incitement, but also their perpetual non-fulfillment,” as Crary formulates it. <sup>13</sup> Crary, 24/7, 10.

We were also struck by how the selected commercials incorporated efficient portrayals of several urban “sites of entertainment” that one can find while going out in the evening. The aforementioned Mackeson commercials bring the audience to both a fairground and a circus stage, while the Pall Mall advert suggests that the consumption of cigarettes can turn a bowling alley into the perfect social event. The other selected cigarette commercial, advertising the Peter Stuyvesant brand, goes even further by taking the spectator on a swirling tour through the entire city of Brussels. In fact, this specific advert was part of a series of Stuyvesant clips that take place in various cities all over the world, and could all be found in the EYE database. The universal relation between city life and advertisements is epitomized in a striking shot during the Stuyvesant installment in Brussels, which displays a wide collection of brand logos as the predominant sources of (neon) light in the urban landscape.



*Hotel Nachtclub (2011)*

During the viewing and selection of the commercials, it occurred to us that we would only be able to make a sufficiently strong statement on the blurred modes of consumption and production, or leisure and work, by also incorporating some short films of a wholly different, namely artistic, nature. The two experimental short films that

we selected (*The Case of the Spiral Staircase* and *Hotel Nachtclub*) unsettled the carefree nature of leisure established in the commercials. While we initially thought of ending our programme with *The Case of the Spiral Staircase* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewL8dx5exQA>), an animated short with an 80s synthesizer score depicting a woman tumbling down from a staircase, the film succeeded so well in creating a playfully destructive (or destructively playful) sensibility as an appropriate anticipation for the rest of the programme, that we decided to use it as an opener.

After the experimental opening of *The Case of The Spiral Staircase* and a series of fast-paced and cheerful adverts, *Hotel Nachtclub*, which explores a formerly glorious but now ghostly deserted hotel complex, was programmed as a subversive ending to the programme. As the first films of our evening programme were meant to create a rather enthusiastic notion of that time of the day, *Hotel*

*Nachtclub*, with its isolated and haunting images and editing, broke with that idea. In its bold evocation of vacuity rather than amelioration, this short film was able to incite a particularly mitigatory viewing experience after being submerged in a non-stop consumerist montage.

For the performative intervention during our evening programme, it was decided to do something rather explicit and address the audience directly, to reflect the format of the commercials.



*'City Cigarettes' offered to the audience.*

Heineken sponsors the EYE on Art Research Lab and offers free beer to visitors before the screening. In conversation with the production team of EYE, it was decided to hand out the beers *during* the programme, as a performance. In line with the cigarette commercials shown, we also decided to hand out chocolate cigarettes. The handing out of beers and chocolate cigarettes was furthermore aimed at subtly pointing to the institutional framework of the film museum. Interestingly, the curator of EYE on Art, Anna Abrahams, asked the audience in a final comment to remove all bottles from the cinema space and to immediately throw them away in order to not interfere with EYE's regular bar. This small side note, for us, was an interesting comment on the workings of the institution of the film museum.

This performative intervention was meant to mirror the work of artists working in the context of institutional critique. As Checefsky explains: "These artists engage in a practice that de-fetishizes the art object in an attempt to engage with everyday life. Their work has advanced the understanding that civic discourse is enhanced when standard curatorial practice is applied to general art production."<sup>14</sup> Checefsky, "Erasure: Curator as Artist," 10. Ultimately, within the institutional context of EYE, we aimed to embed this subversive performative gesture through the process of simultaneously acting as curators and artists.



## Extended City Symphony Evening Programme (full program

[here\(http://www.mediapolisjournal.com/from-the-archive/program-for-the-extended-city-symphony/\)](http://www.mediapolisjournal.com/from-the-archive/program-for-the-extended-city-symphony/))

*The Case of The Spiral Staircase*, 1981, 3', Jacques Verbeek, Karin Wiertz (35mm)

*Una Tipica Storia Italiana* [Campari], 2', 1950s, Starfilm (dig. [orig. 35mm])

*Are You a Mackeson Type?: Juggler* [Mackeson stout], 1954, 27", Dollywood (dig. [orig. 35mm])

*Famous Cities of Europe Filmed in Cinemascope: Brussels* [Stuyvesant], 2', 1958, Starfilm (dig. [orig. 35mm])

*Are You a Mackeson Type?: Kop van Jut* [Mackeson stout], 1954, 27", Dollywood (dig. [orig. 35mm])

*Bowling Alley* [Pall Mall commercial], 1', 1962, Starfilm (dig. [orig. 35mm])

*Hotel Nachtclub* [Hotel Nightclub], 2011, 3', Arianne Olthaar (dig. [orig. BetaSP])

## Notes

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1. ↑ Laura Marks. "The Ethical Presenter: Or How to Have Good Arguments over Dinner." *The Moving Image* 4.1 (2004): 34-47. [36]
2. ↑ Bruce Checefsky. "Erasure: Curator as Artist." *The Artist as Curator*. Ed. Celina Jeffery. Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2015. 97-112. [100]
3. ↑ Lev Manovich. "Database as Symbolic Form." 1998. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 5.2 (1999): 80-99. [80]
4. ↑ Manovich, "Database as Symbolic Form," 98.
5. ↑ Quoted in: Stéphanie-Emmanuelle Louis. "Exhibiting/Editing: Dominique Païni and Programming at the Cinémathèque Française at the Turn of the Centenary." *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art: Challenges and Perspectives*. Eds. Julia Noordegraaf, Cosetta G. Saba, Barbara Le Maître and Vinzenz Hediger. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013. 326-30. [326]
6. ↑ Peter Bosma. *Film Programming: Curating for Cinemas, Festivals, Archives*. London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2015. [23]
7. ↑ Bosma, *Film Programming*, 87.
8. ↑ Richter, Dorothee. "Artists and Curators as Authors – Competitors,

Collaborators, or Team-workers?" *ONCURATING.org* 19 (2013): n.p.  
<<http://www.on-curating.org/issue-19-reader/artists-and-curators-as-authors-competitors-collaborators-or-team-workers.html#.WLkavRLhCfT>(<http://www.on-curating.org/issue-19-reader/artists-and-curators-as-authors-competitors-collaborators-or-team-workers.html#.WLkavRLhCfT>)>

9. ↑ Michel Feher. "Self-Appreciation; or, the Aspirations of Human Capital." *Public Culture* 21.1 (2009): 21-41. [28]
10. ↑ Jonathan Crary. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London and New York: Verso, 2013. [10]
11. ↑ Feher, "Self-Appreciation," 28.
12. ↑ *ibid.*
13. ↑ Crary, *24/7*, 10.
14. ↑ Checefsky, "Erasure: Curator as Artist," 10.