

Festival reviews

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Oberhausen: An interview with Lars Henrik Gass

Enrico Camporesi

Founded in 1954, the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen (Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen) is one of the pioneering film festivals for short films and a major venue for experimental, documentary, and artist's film and video. Throughout the decades Oberhausen has been the site of crucial turning points in film history. In 1962, during the eighth edition of the festival, 26 young German filmmakers (among them Alexander Kluge, Edgar Reitz, and Peter Schamoni) delivered the Oberhausen Manifesto' – a 'call to arms' for a new type of feature film, the emergence of a film school system, new film funding models, and the death of the old cinema.² In 2012 the manifesto reached its 50th anniversary and was commemorated as a milestone in the history of the festival,³ while a new anniversary is now approaching: Oberhausen celebrates its 60th edition in 2014.

Aside from the competition section the next festival edition will present a themed program titled Memories Can't Wait – Film without Film (curated by Mika Taanila), director profiles for Wojciech Bąkowski, Aryan Kaganof, Mara Mattuschka, Deimantas Narkevičius, and the second chapter of the archives section (inviting institutions such as Harvard Film Archive, EYE Film, and Temenos Archive to present their collections). In this interview, carried out at the Moskva Hotel in Belgrade on 11 December 2013 during the Alternative Film/Video Festival,⁴ Oberhausen festival director Lars Henrik Gass discusses some crucial issues regarding the role of film festivals, the moving image in the art world, and the need for producing thought through film and video events.



Lars Henrik Gass

Camporesi: The first thing that I wanted to ask you is a very basic question. You have been directing the festival for some time [since 1997] and I would like you to speak briefly about what you were doing before that and what eventually lead you to Oberhausen.

Gass: I actually have an academic background, so I was working as a lecturer in the early 1990s and also as a critic. But I was not working in film festivals at that time and my first job was in Mülheim an der Ruhr. I was the artistic director of the European Documentary Film Institute, which does not exist anymore, but that's not my fault! Two years after I started with this institution my predecessor at Oberhausen [Angela Haardt] left her position because of political problems with the city administration. There were rumours that the city of Oberhausen wanted to transform the festival into something very commercial and so people were asking

me to apply for the job – and it was fine with me because my contract was ending anyway. I was the youngest person to apply for the position and I don't know how I got it. It was a pretty scary situation because I had no idea about short films at all and even now, I still don't know! The festival has many different layers and that is something I find really interesting – but maybe this was not your question.

Camporesi: But it could just as well be the next! Precisely since Oberhausen already had a history, I think that when you took the job you must have taken this into consideration in order to make it coherent with its past and with its crucial role within the film festival world. Because we know that, despite the generic name 'short film festival', people who go there are looking for something more specific.

Gass: I knew about the whole Oberhausen festival history because my father used to go there in the 1960s. It was partially linked to my personal history, as you can see. On the other hand it was exactly the time when short film ceased being a public phenomenon, which means they stopped being projected in cinemas. When I started working at the festival I found that the most interesting and innovative work was for music television in Germany. So I said to myself, 'why are these people not shown in film festivals?', and I started to develop a section dedicated to more experimental music videos, which had an enormous impact – surprisingly enough, because it was unusual to show music videos at festivals at the time. Later the art world became very important. It's not exactly that we try to be part of the art world, it's more that we create a particular form of display for artist's film and video – which is still very much connected to the 'black box' – to be structured around an audience, immobile, watching one film after the other, which from my point of view is still a valid cultural technique.

Camporesi: You mean a regular screening space as opposed to the 'white cube'?

Gass: Yes. There is one thing to add to this. I said that the festival has many layers and I find it encouraging that the festival is not dedicated to a single genre or type of production such as documentary, animation, and so on. Sometimes people say that the festival is about animation and documentary but I always answer, 'no, it's about the short form'. Maybe it is not even about that anymore. It is more like a laboratory for artistic innovation. This is its main quality. So, precisely because it is not devoted to a single thing it can have different interesting developments at the same time.

Camporesi: I guess these multiple layers can also be seen in the basic structure of the festival. You show new work but there is also an important role played by the retrospectives that are held. I was thinking for instance about last year's focus on Luther Price, which introduced him to European audiences.

Gass: As you know we don't call them retrospectives but rather 'profiles', because that section is dedicated to artists and filmmakers who are still working. So their work is not, technically speaking, already 'historical'. In addition to the profiles we also have programs by guest curators⁵ which follow a more thematic perspective. Sometimes the concept can be difficult to grasp, and this was the case with last year's edition.⁶

Camporesi: In terms of organising, do you name the curator and then they set the theme, or do you rather choose a theme and pick someone to curate a program on it?

Gass: That's an interesting question. Occasionally we look for someone to work on a specific topic for us and sometimes it works, sometimes it does not. Also, people approach us of course. Not that many, but they do. The most satisfying solution is when people approach us and they really want to do it, and that's something I feel more at ease with. Because sometimes people might be flattered or pushed in a certain direction that they do not feel at ease with and that's something I try to avoid.

Camporesi: Can you name an example? A program conceived by someone else that you particularly liked?

Gass: Kinomuseum [2007] by Ian White⁷ was very important for many reasons. It was a critical point within the festival in terms of considering the festival's role with regards to the art world and how to define its own role, also to take a critical position within the art world. It was also important because White had been linked intimately to the festival for many years already. He represented this development. White had the capacity and the ability to frame things in a specific way. It was just part of his character.

Camporesi: The Kinomuseum event can definitely be considered more than a film program. I was thinking about the book that came out, also the roundtables and discussions held at the festival.⁸ I find it interesting, because it was a way of displaying thought from a different background than academia. This is also an important part of Oberhausen. The major events are always linked to a way of reflecting on things.

Gass: In the ideal case it works like that, but sometimes we fail too.

Camporesi: Nonetheless the will to go beyond the simple event is always there.

Gass: Yes, of course. It is very true and I think it's important also when we consider the historical roots. The festival had a sort of educational perspective from its inception. This is something you can still feel. I think that's an important part of the historical heritage of the festival that should not be erased. I am thinking of

education in the sense that what we show is not to be considered as entertainment only. The festival is not trying to be entertainment.

Camporesi: Yes, this is pretty clear just by looking at the programming. There is a new seminar happening at Oberhausen this year, the joint event with the Flaherty Seminar and LUX.⁹ How did you start thinking about having such an event during the festival?

Gass: The need for this event has arisen from what we were saying earlier. We try to frame the experience of the festival not exactly in an academic sense but in a critical one. It's neither an artistic seminar at an art academy nor is it an academic seminar in a university. We try to develop something that is in between these two types of events and that can be expressed by a film festival better than any other place. I am usually very critical about the festival space, even regarding our own work. In one sense the festival still produces a very important social and artistic energy because it gathers many different people at the same time. We are simply trying to gather them in a different sense, in a more condensed way. It was quite difficult to formulate this idea of the seminar because nowadays the financing of such projects has become increasingly difficult. So for the first time ever we decided to ask for fees and that gave me a huge headache, because it seemed in contradiction with the spirit of the festival. You know that we never ask for entry fees for the films at the festival. It was important to cooperate with the Flaherty Seminar and LUX because they do a good job with organising these things elsewhere. They have models that are similar.

Camporesi: What are the goals of the seminar and what do you expect from it?

Gass: We will gather 30 people together for the seminar. The participants will discuss the results with the audience at the end of the festival, because it is important that the seminar also makes a public appearance. Also, the agenda is not predetermined. It will be flexible. I like this idea because it is deeply linked to the people participating. It is not bound to a single curatorial statement. There is one person who is coordinating it, Federico Windhausen, and next year there will be another one. We will try to experiment with it and we will have to see what happens because maybe we'll try a different format next year.

Camporesi: It is important to have these initiatives, because the contemporary scenario of film curatorship seems to be particularly dynamic. What are your opinions on this topic? In the art world it seems a little clearer what curatorship is, but with the moving image the issue looks a little more complicated. There was a whole book devoted to this issue published by the Vienna Filmmuseum, a very necessary publication in my opinion.¹⁰

Gass: That would be one of the questions of the seminar for sure, but it has not been programmed in advance. Compared to the artist's school at LUX we don't say 'we have to have artists'. There will be a selection to have different kinds of people and a well-balanced group.

Camporesi: You mentioned in the beginning of our interview that you still see some potential in the regular screening room. What are your thoughts on the contemporary situation of film and video where migrations and displacements seem to have become the norm?

Gass: That's a huge field of problems. I have been thinking about these issues for quite a while and it is difficult to give a straight answer. I don't necessarily think that film can only be displayed in a cinema. But the way it is displayed in the art world is really a problem, and on different levels. There is a need for attention to the historical phases of film, and there are specific technical needs. There are also very practical reasons. I think it is pointless to put a three-hour film in an art exhibition for people to see it with the fashionable attitude of 'I'll just have a look'. I don't get along with such choices in curatorial terms. At film festivals it can be a problem too. We can also fail in meeting our own standards. In a world that juxtaposes film and video and other formats it is very hard to display all of these in a professional way. It is difficult to come up with satisfying artistic results, but we try. I still think that the festival can be an appropriate outlet for artists' film and video if it's done in a proper way. But I understand the needs of some artists not to be displayed in a festival situation. It is the huge market power that comes from the art world right now, especially since the film world, if we want to put it in a very rough way, fails to reflect a development of the last 10-15 years that the art world has understood – the fact that filmmakers turned to the art world because they could not find funding elsewhere. That was an enormous mistake and we can simply try to balance this in a different way. One of the things that I am trying to do is to generate a funding system incorporated within the festival.

Camporesi: There are two changes involved, the technical one and the socio-economic one. What are the new challenges?

Gass: For me the challenge would be to incorporate this funding system because of the link between the film/video and art world. I am struggling against that conventional film world that is totally determined by the industry and at the same time I try to fight against customised artists' film and video. There are a lot of professionals coming to Oberhausen and we have to use the energy of all these people in order to create new funding tools and open new perspectives for creativity."

Camporesi: It seems to me that Oberhausen stands at a crossroads. It is a platform for the art world but it is still a film festival, not an art fair or a biennial. It is in between the two worlds.

Gass: I would say in a way it is a biennial, except that it takes place every year!

Notes

1. <http://www.oberhausener-manifest.com/>
2. On the manifesto see Marchiori 2014.
3. On that occasion two publications were produced: a double DVD co-released by Film-museum Munich, International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, and the Deutsche Kinemathek and Federal Archive, featuring 19 films from the period between 1958 and 1964 that were directed, produced, photographed, or edited by one or more of the 26 filmmakers who signed the manifesto; and *Die Oberhausener. Provokation der Wirklichkeit*, an edited collection of documents and texts on the manifesto (Hue & Gass 2012).
4. On the 2011 edition of Alternative Film/Video in Belgrade see Kranjc 2012.
5. For instance, the Luther Price profile was compiled by Ed Halter, a New York-based critic and curator and co-founder/co-director of Light Industry in Brooklyn.
6. He is referring to the program Flatness: Cinema after the Internet conceived by Shama Khanna.
7. As the programmatic title indicates, Kinomuseum focused on the relationship between cinema and the museum, presenting works by both historical and contemporary artists ranging from Georges Franju and David Lamelas to Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa and Seth Price. At the time White curated five programs and invited five other personalities (Achim Borchardt-Hume, AA Bronson, Mary Kelly, Mark Leckey, and Emily Pethick) to conceive one program each. <http://www.kurzfilmtage.de/en/looking-back/2007/theme/kinomuseum.html>
8. See Sperlinger & White 2008.
9. Founded in 1955 by filmmaker Frances Flaherty (Robert Flaherty's widow), the Flaherty Seminar gathers artists and filmmakers for a week to reflect on the moving image. Aside from presenting screenings (one curator is chosen each year to shape the edition) it provides a more intimate and intense space of discussion compared to other film festivals. London based arts agency LUX supports and promotes artists' moving image work (experimental film, video and installation art, performance art, animation, documentary, etc.) through distribution, exhibition, education, publishing, and research.
10. See Cherchi Usai, Francis, Horwath, and Loebenstein 2008.
11. Gass wrote an article dealing with this topic (Gass 2009).

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Brazil's International Disability Film Festival Assim Vivemos

Ana Gilbert

I am I and my circumstance. – José Ortega y Gasset¹

A blind person and her companion proceed to the information desk at the festival center and request audio description equipment. A sighted person also gets one. Entering the screening hall, the employee in charge of collecting tickets instructs me to do the same. Curious, I turn and approach the information desk. The employee says, 'Yes, it's audio description equipment, don't you want to try it?'



Fig. 1: 6th International Disability Film Festival, Brazil