

Dorothee Wenner

FAMILY AFFAIRS

From my point of view, there are several types of archives: those that are explicitly meant to be used and that, already in their internet presence, are presented as user-friendly-and others that are closed systems that treat potential users as intruders, to be kept at bay if at all possible. For instance, with odd opening hours, inscrutable organizational systems, muddled and confusing catalogs, cranky archivists... The film collection at the Arsenal falls into a rare third category, for from the very beginning the Arsenal was an open archive, geared toward use and accessibility-through screenings of films at the Arsenal, through the affiliated distribution arm-and through its openness to many filmmakers, production companies, and collectors, who wanted to know that their prints were in safe hands. Like a confirmation of this philosophy, open to the world and geared toward use, Living Archive began in 2011 as an initiative to extend the possibilities for accessing the film collection in various ways. But how? In fact, the accessibility of the films was and is everything but transparent, and even for me, who has worked with the Forum for over 20 years, it's not really easy to get a clear sense of it. Many of the films-despite impeccable, climatically controlled, and nearly dust free storage in Northern European shelving systems-seem to be hidden, buried under virtual cobwebs of unclear screening rights, the fragile state of the prints, and complicated special regulations. The reflections on how to find new possibilities of access to this treasure chest, which the film archive in Spandau in fact is, began with the somewhat liberating insight that this is more of a cabinet of wonders than a classic archive. I see the difference above all in the fact that in a cabinet of wonders-much more so than in a classic archive-the character of the collectors is reflected: their personal preferences, findings marked by chance events, discoveries made on journeys, the sweet but inherently vain aspiration at systematization and completeness of the collection, the relational network of friends, acquaintances, like-minded others, and employees, who, as collectors and discoverers, have contributed to the shape of the archive in the 50 years of its existence. This is how I came to the key position occupied by Ulrich and Erika Gregor-and to the 1001 stories that I've heard about them

over the years. These stories combine into a philosophical and practical meta-level, nourished by the pleasure of discovery, the joy of adventure, wit, pioneer spirit, courage, sophistication, anecdotes, and the passion for collecting. The phenomenal film knowledge of Ulrich and Erika Gregor hovers above this film archive as its actual organizational system.

But the nature of the Gregors' film knowledge inhibits any attempt to produce an "orderly" or systematic connection with the archive. It is, quite simply, too comprehensive. And in fact, doomed to failure, even with a single glance over the databank index of all the films and videos in the Arsenal, over the valuable files, collected by the Gregors and the Forum and Arsenal employees, which today adorn the back walls of several offices at the Arsenal, over four decades of Forum catalogs, the Arsenal programs in various formats, the brochures and books in the archive, the Gregors' mysterious, fathomless private library, not to mention the still unorganized audio recordings of Forum discussions on cassettes—it's all simply too overwhelming. But the Gregors' way of telling a story, coupled with an enviable capacity to remember, presented this project with a simple—because it's quasi-private—alternative.

FAMILY AFFAIRS is an "oral history" project in the framework of Living Archive. It is the beginning of a collection of film stories documented on film, which explain how the individual film prints found their way into the Arsenal archive. As "net-flicks" that will be accessible to anyone on the Arsenal website. We met in Ulrich Gregor's library—and just got started. Following a random pleasure principle, free from any constraints to limit ourselves to going alphabetically, chronologically, by names or geographical categories, the Gregors started talking, sometimes together, sometimes individually. We restricted ourselves to around 10 minutes per film, although one story sometimes involves several films. One FAMILY AFFAIRS film, for instance, is about a gift of ten Indian films that the Indian people—represented by a high-level government delegation—presented to the German people, represented by Ulrich Gregor and the Friends of the German Cinematheque—as an act of international understanding in 1991. The occasion was the Festival of India, a gigantic cultural festival, including a film program administered by the Arsenal, which toured throughout the entire country. The gift was in thanks for the

Herculean achievement of having curated and organized this film program—supplemented by a comprehensive publication. The presentation of the gift occurred in the context of the celebratory opening ceremonies at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. Oil lamps were lit, talks were given, and scrolls with jeweled cases were presented. Ulrich Gregor talks about how he photocopied these scrolls—and how he then later used this paper, elegantly and incontrovertibly, as proof of having the screening rights for these films. Erika Gregor was able to add to the story of the origin of these ten films in the archive with titillatingly uplifting memories of the ceremonial act. Perhaps it was mostly due to her clever manner that the Indian delegation HAD to give such a generous gift to the Arsenal at the end of their visit? In the action, so typical of Erika Gregor, a role was played in this special case by: young girls with long blonde hair, Mercedes limousines, and an encounter with Otto Wallkes.

The title FAMILY AFFAIRS not only refers to the completely intentional entertaining quality of these “net-flicks,” but also to the “extended film family” associated with the Arsenal archive in so many ways. In the very first collection, people turn up who work in the most diverse parts of the world and who belong to worldwide networks that somehow also had their effect on the archive. The initial speakers in this hopefully constantly growing collection are Naum Kleemann, Kanako Hayashi, Gaga Chkheidze, and Peter B. Schumann. In the stories that they tell in FAMILY AFFAIRS, so full of useful information about film scholarship and history, they speak of pistols and fax machines, about Fidel Castro and cleaning ladies, about tolls, witch hunts, Odessa, Bulgarian policemen, and much more. These keywords—it should be expressly noted—do not reproduce the actions in the individual films, but describe the stations of individual film prints on their way into the archive.