

## 100,000 Kilos of Film

### **Speech by Stefanie Schulte Strathaus (Co-Director, Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art) at the opening of the Arsenal Archive on April 12, at silent green**

Dear guests,

The first film to find its way into the Arsenal Archive in the 1960s weighed 17.2 kilos. That was too heavy for the co-producer of director Lionel Rogosin, who was trekking through Europe, unsuccessfully trying to sell the film *COME BACK, AFRICA* (USA, South Africa 1959). So he asked Erika Gregor, co-founder of the association Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek (today: Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art), if he could leave the film in her apartment. “Only if you haul it up to the attic yourself,” was her reply.

This was followed by 3.5 kilos of Cuban films. Santiago Álvarez came to Berlin after attending a festival in Leipzig to show his film *NOW!* (1965), and saw to it, so the legend goes, that four other Cuban short films were fetched from beneath Rudi Dutschke’s bed and were permanently consigned to the Arsenal.

After a program about May ’68, which took place in the same year of 1968, 5 kilos of films stayed behind in Berlin from the French “Cinétracts,” the so-called “pamphlet films,” and shortly afterwards there was a visit from the Argentine director Fernando Solanas, which led him to giving the three parts of his film *LA HORA DE LOS HORNOS*, a total of 37.5 kilos, to the Arsenal.

Even before the first International Forum of Young Film (today: Berlinale Forum) was started in 1971, there were already 100 kilos of film. In the very first year of the Forum, Erika and Ulrich Gregor decided, along with their colleagues, to have the films subtitled in German, which meant producing new prints, which could then remain here and could be shown in German-speaking areas outside the festival context. Films by Angelopoulos, Ôshima, Buñuel, and Renoir were subtitled, as well as a short film by the Algerian director Sarah Maldoror, or the classic of the American Women’s Movement *THE WOMAN’S FILM* (Judy Smith, USA 1970), which was shown alongside Helke Sander’s *EINE PRÄMIE FÜR IRENE* (BRD 1971). All the films remained in the collection and were distributed over the years and eventually decades.

At first the films were stored in the private apartment of Alf Bold, who lived above the Kino Arsenal in Schöneberg, which had opened in 1970. From the early 1970s until his death in 1993, Alf contributed significantly to the programming at both the Arsenal and the Forum—and not just through his particular passion for avant-garde cinema, which brought a number of jewels into our archive. But very soon he had to relinquish his apartment to the films prints, which were not only heavy, but also took up a lot of space, and find another apartment. But shortly thereafter even his old apartment, which now also served as an office, didn’t have enough space, so more and more cellar spaces were rented in the immediate vicinity, and finally another apartment, where the archive and the people who worked in it could spread out.

My own work at the Arsenal began in one of these cellars, since my first task involved shipping film prints, which were only accessible by way of narrow wooden stairs under a trap door. To this day I still have the ability to judge the weight of a film by sight, without even having seen it on the screen.

Before moving to Potsdamer Platz in the '90s, we had to explain to the architects that we needed room for films, a lot of room, as close as possible to the projection room, so that they could spontaneously be integrated into a program. That seemed so absurd to them that they promptly forgot about it, or they imagined that a film was the same size as a VHS cassette. As an emergency solution, the Arsenal Cinema 2 was cut in half and 3,000 kilos of film have been stored about the spectators' heads ever since. But the majority went to an external archive in Spandau, where almost no one ever went except for our archivists. Certain films stored there were as good as forgotten.

But new (old) films kept being added, such as those by Jack Smith. As part of the HKF sponsored project "Live Film! JACK SMITH! Five Flaming Days in a Rented World", we developed for the very first time, along with Marc Siegel and Susanne Sachsse, the idea of approaching archival work from an artistic/curatorial perspective, and with as many participants as possible. After this experience we began another large-scale project "Living Archive: Archive Work as a Contemporary Artistic and Curatorial Practice," sponsored by the German Federal Culture Foundation and the Stiftung Deutsche Klassenlotterie Berlin, eventually followed by "Visionary Archive," supported by the TURN Fonds of the Federal Culture Foundation.

What all these projects had in common was the value placed on multiple perspectives, starting from the idea that archival work could not work without a self-critical discourse that took account of power relations and ownership structures, or that examined what an archive actually is and can be, both with regard to its material side as well as to its history and the many phantasms that are linked to both. Against this backdrop, each and every film, whether known or unknown, became a new discovery, and part of a production process of research in which films were digitized, but, closely linked with this, where new artistic, curatorial, and film-distribution formats could emerge as well. In the lonely halls at Spandau they only seemed to get more and more lost.

Until Jörg Heitmann and Bettina Ellerkamp, themselves filmmakers with histories, both their own and one related to the Arsenal, bought up an old crematorium. Their vision was for this place to become a site of transmedial reception and projection, which went quite well with our work. And what makes more sense than moving a "Living Archive" into a former crematorium in the act of transforming itself into something new?

It was an unforgettable moment, when Erika and Ulrich Gregor came by silent green after the move and saw, for the very first time, all the film prints gathered together in a single place, well-organized and accessible. Almost like a happy ending, although actually this is just the beginning, since what's special here is the four screening rooms, which can be rented on an hourly or daily basis, and the lively surroundings. Above all we see this as an extension of our cinemas at Potsdamer Platz, and as a perpetuation of the good experiences that we have had with the earlier projects, where we learned a great deal about what might now continue to develop here.

I would briefly like to mention a few of these experiences:

1. The general public often imagines that the world is more digital than it really is. More and more, I'm confronted with the idea that not only have all films already been digitized, but they're all available online. This is an absolute misconception. I do not know how many films have been digitized, but I can estimate that it is less than 5% of films that were shot on analogue. What has been digitized are primarily films that were already known, classics, or at least films that had already found their way into institutions, which usually means that national criteria were used to decide which films are significant. Exceptions occur when filmmakers themselves look after their own work, or when the films are digitized according to the specific interests of projects in the areas of art, culture, or academic research. This is why it is necessary to create wider access to the analogue holdings.

Only in this way can we avoid the increasing shrinkage of our collective film memory through this misunderstanding.

2. Public access does not imply any risk toward the films or to film rights.

Opening an archive does not endanger it; on the contrary it stimulates it and expands it, thereby developing more than just the potential to call canonization into question. The projects have shown us that opening the archive neither threatens the analog material, which is in part very valuable, nor the rights. On the contrary: it is only through the extensive research and active networking outside the archive that several unclear matters of ownership and rights could be settled to everyone's benefit, and a great deal of material has been safeguarded. In the four years since the projects discussed here, we have been able to digitize 39 films, to make 16 new analog or digital prints, and to renew numerous contracts so that the films can be shown again.

3. Digitization is not the same as safeguarding the material—and also does not automatically result in being inscribed into film history.

As for long-term archiving, we don't yet have enough experience, since the medium of film is not old enough. So far we have only been able to work from the experience made in analog areas, if at all. But deciding that everything should be saved on analog is also unrealistic. Too many films are held outside the large archives, which are the only institutions that would be in a position to do this, and then only if they had sufficient financial means.

Film is heavy stuff – in every respect. We assume that safeguarding and restoring material are uncontroversially important tasks of archives, and we must all struggle to do a lot in this area. But without an associated production of knowledge, that not only has effects on the public, but also starts from there, and which can also be manifest in contemporary cultural productions, these activities remain meaningless. We can do justice to our responsibility for the material entrusted to us no better than by understanding the archive as living and visionary, and as functioning through participation. Every archival viewing of a film, every text written about them, every link between an old film and a contemporary context, serves to inscribe it into history. Here at silent green, in the midst of cultural production, presentation, research, and public discourse, we have the ideal conditions for this. 100,000 kilos of film only carry weight when they are moved and in doing so can move something else.

4. The history of film is far from over.

The many contacts that we have made in the recent past prove to us that throughout the world, and particularly in the non-western world, there are still thousands of inaccessible films, sometimes even entire collections. This has the potential to cause us to rethink film history fundamentally, if only due to the great number of these films. But it is not only unknown films, of which several are here with us, that demand this. A present in which the relation of film to the other arts or to society is constantly questioned, in which borders are shifting and new territories are being formed, presents a challenge for all existing narratives and organizational systems.

In closing I would like to announce two of our upcoming projects. The Department of Foreign Affairs has provided us with generous support to work on 1,500 kilos of Georgian films, some of which will be made accessible in the next several months, as well as some Sudanese films, the weight of which is still unknown, since some of them are still in the Sudan. For the opening of an archive also means always being open to letting new things into it and back out again.

As for the Arsenal Archive, a new, quite special film landscape is now opening up. Each individual film that lies in the rooms beneath us, which you can visit afterwards, can be seen as an attempt at an aesthetics of cinema, which understands itself in its time as a social and political practice of the present to open or change something. Perhaps that utopian moment is the key to a living archive.

And a brief PS: My eye's judgment has indeed deceived me after 25 years, that is, the move felt as if we had 100,000 kilos of film. In the meantime, however, Ulrich Gregor did the calculations and there are exactly 57,050.20 kilos. But if we include the digital films, estimating their ideal weight and adding them in, I still think 100,000 kilos is just about right.