

IDFA

Symposium on the responsibility of film and cultural institutions

A draft Report



This publication is published under the Creative Commons license
Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0 International - With mandatory
Attribution and only for Non-Commercial Use

P. 04	[01]	Introduction and Invitation: International Symposium the Position of Film Institutions
P. 12	[02]	Workgroup 1: On the Positionality of a Film Institution
P. 22	[03]	Workgroup 2: Representation: Whose Spaces, Whose Choices
P. 30	[04]	Workgroup 3: The Place of Money
P. 37	[05]	Conversation 1: between Tabitha Jackson and Jemma Desai
P. 50	[06]	Conversation 2: between Orwa Nyrabia and Mohanad Yaqubi
P. 71	[07]	Notes from participants: Biggest takeaways
P. 75	[08]	Notes from participants: What was not discussed
P. 78	[09]	Colophon

[01] Introduction:

IDFA 2023 was a very special edition. It took place four weeks after October 7th, in an atmosphere of extremes. The polarization of the film world and of Dutch society shocked the festival, a tension catalyzed by a disruption at the opening night. Every step of the way, the choices and actions, the words and deeds of IDFA's team and the filmmakers were placed under intense scrutiny. It was a painful, albeit meaningful, highly demanding, and particularly eye-opening moment. It became evident that the questions raised and the challenges examined were not limited to IDFA, nor were they solely related to the massive urgency of the Palestinian tragedy. It was an ordeal that exposed major shortcomings in the very fabric of cultural institutions' worldviews, practices, and overall positionality. The problems related to the conflict and the response to the genocide in Gaza revealed a structural problem: a heritage of an outdated mindset when diversity and inclusion were considered "solvable" by simple steps, without revising the entire mentality behind the whole endeavor. It also became clear that the map around our work – the ecosystem art institutions operate within – often limits our ability to act with originality or courage, leaving us bound by too many forces institutions also help sustain, negotiating our own voices, and separating us from what institutions claim to be, and from what art and culture are. It was clear that IDFA as an institution needed to discuss, to think together, and to question more than what seemed to be the immediate challenge. That's where the idea arose to come together with others and examine these challenges further in a deliberate and principled way.

In the months that followed, as the ripple effects of those days spread, other festivals went through similar or comparable experiences. A discussion about the core, the basis of what we try to do as cultural institutions – especially, but not only, in film festivals – became necessary. It was also necessary to ensure that the relation to the Palestinian question is discussed in a manner that allows for reflection, for building a worthwhile and different ethos that would be applicable not only to the Palestinian question and not only to this particular moment in history. It was also important to examine the events of IDFA 2023 and for IDFA to be accountable for its choices. At the same time, it was even more important not to get stuck in a narrow mindset where evaluating that particular moment is all that matters. The problems around and within institutions were much larger than that.

Participants met over three days in Amsterdam, in IDFA's newly opened Het Documentaire Paviljoen in the city's beautiful Vondelpark. The symposium started by promising no promises, starting from a clear premise: not find

solutions in three days; and to examine the questions. Initially there was the fear of the symposium turning into a collective therapy session for institution leaders. Fortunately, it did not. Difficult topics were discussed, new questions were carved out, and previously dismissed questions were sometimes simply acknowledged.

The challenges examined in these three days were huge. Serious solutions for such challenges cannot, and should not, be imagined as simple action plans. It is not merely a problem of workflows, but rather a problem of the normalization of a certain gaze. Participants observed that the issues examined often went beyond the immediate. They challenged our very idea that we, as film and cultural institutions, are just or simply “good”, that represent what is good in this world. Because even though we strive to be, we can now recognize that we do good on many levels, but under those levels are other, deeper ones that we did not see, and now we must.

Publishing a report about these discussions was itself a topic of discussion. This is not an attempt to offer conclusions or solutions, but to map some of the questions that emerged. The symposium was closed to the public to try to protect an atmosphere of openness and sincerity, to bypass the well-established norms of public relations that prevent us from speaking freely and suffocate the process of questioning ourselves and our work. Still, publishing a final report felt to some of the participants like it would defeat the purpose. Some were concerned that it might become just another symposium that ends with a .pdf file to be forgotten, while the aim is to push a small snowball down this cliff and help it grow larger and larger.

This draft report is now published with that in mind, as a work in progress, an open-ended questioning, that does not aim to offer final conclusions but instead highlights some of the questions that arose during the conversations. My hope is that others around the world will be intrigued to contemplate and discuss this further. It is not about getting on the same page about any of these matters. What I think we need is to collectively acknowledge that this reality is not sustainable. We cannot keep doing things the same way.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the organizing committee – to Rima Mismar, Tabitha Jackson, and Isabel Arrate Fernandez – who were generous in their contributions to the process of imagining the symposium. My thanks also go to Cees van ‘t Hulenaar and the team of IDFA for taking this idea to heart with much care and dedication and for making it happen. I am also grateful to all those who participated and to the wonderful people who volunteered as our notetakers. Finally, I am thankful for the kind and caring work of Roxy Merrell in editing this publication, and of Tjade Bouma in designing its layout.

[Orwa Nyrabia]

Invitation: International Symposium the Position of Film Institutions

Symposium invitation

Recipients

Symposium invitation

**International Symposium
the Position of Film Institutions**

26-28 August, 2024
Het Documentaire Paviljoen (IDFA)
Amsterdam

Symposium invite draft 8.doc (21K) x

Send ▼ 

Film institutions, including festivals, are being challenged today. The well-established authority for film festivals as institutions that define quality, assess value, appraise careers, and work in mysterious ways of their own, is being challenged. The film “industry”, with film festivals, is frequently described as a system of exclusivity, designed by and for those historically in power, those with accumulated fortune, and who are failing to let go of their position of power over the Other, failing to see the Other as a peer.

The “art” of filmmaking itself, on the other hand, seems to have expanded over the past two decades, with democratized access to technology, and many more films being made everywhere around the world. The gap between “industry”, and “art” seems to be growing, and is exposing paradoxes within the claims and the mandates of those individuals and institutions who hold power in the field.

Within this context, film festivals are at a period of transition, stuck in a polarization between power-funding and filmmakers-new audiences. Traditional industry and audiences still hold the keys to economy and thus, to mainstream media, and they are at odds with a new generation of filmmakers, film workers, and new audiences, who do not present an alternative economy yet. The position of film festivals is risky, and a reconciliation between the two sides seems to be difficult. This is not a festivals’ challenge, but a much larger conflict between paradigms, between eras, or socio-political systems, in their interaction with art and culture, and with the institutions that deal with arts and culture.

Many of us are going through a period of fear and hesitation, it is a new terrain. The usual understanding of public relations, crisis management, and communication are all failing to help. Depending on our usual understanding of fairness or opting for a “balanced position” that used to offer comfort seem only to add fuel to fire. Many of us are faced by the same paradox: on one hand there is our historical definition, the paradigm within which we operate, a system of meaning and an economic work frame, that we know how to navigate, articulate, and within which we have been comfortable for a while. Then, on the other hand, we experience the growth of a new wave of a different political position, different artistic-political practices pushing towards a different paradigm that is not yet clearly articulated, nor well examined in practical terms. Will we wait or do we want to take an active role in that process? Many of us are not resisting change, at least on the political and the philosophical levels, and are trying to imagine this as a moment of evolution, rather than becoming relics of the past or the protectors of tradition, should we fail to adapt.

The aim of this convening is not to answer questions, or to develop solutions. The problems we are trying to examine are much larger and strategic than being sorted out in three days. What we hope to reach is a new set of questions. We hope to be able together to challenge some of the convictions and practices we take today for granted, and to propose a more open questioning, that will allow us to think differently, and hopefully with time would lead to continuous progress, to new paradigms, to ever-changing answers to these ever-changing realities around us.

Orwa Nyrabia

On the Positionality of a Film Institution

For decades now, film festivals, as well as other cultural institutions, operated on the principle that they are vehicles for the artists' questioning of the world. A distance between the role of the artist and the role of the exhibitor/supporter was always deemed necessary, although rarely articulated (in the film world). The operating theory has been that we need to offer empty screens, "white walls", for the artistic work to be received by various people who could possibly agree or disagree, but would have the space to calmly do so, to contemplate, nonetheless. When not seen as a detached celebration of beauty, the role of art and culture institutions was to operate as igniters of civic debate through film, art, and culture. From within the paradigm, one could argue that it would be an anti-political act for cultural institutions to take over the role of the artist, themselves polarizing audiences, consolidating audiences. Because that would mean killing the aspired civic debate. Furthermore, a cultural institution's political statement used to be mainly found behind and below its curatorial choices, open to various audiences to experience diverse artistic expressions.

Today, many voices, artists, activists, staff, and audience members, are demanding that cultural institutions break the shroud of silence. Our position, where our 'statement' is behind and below, is being challenged. We are also seen as conformist, for we frequently defend our "white wall" approach, or hide behind it, only when in contradiction with the majority's voice. To dismiss such calls, on the grounds of knowing better, is not a serious option. We need to examine this further, and to engage in a debate that could examine and redefine the way we understand - and use - the voice of the institution.

Representation: Whose Spaces, Whose Choices

Over recent years, we have been witnessing escalating critique of cultural institutions. Institutions that were previously seen as the reference, accredited as the appraisers of artistic/cultural quality, and entrusted with judging artistic excellence, providing generations with inspiration and aspiration, are today described as being exclusive, blind when it comes to colonial history, gender equality, and systemic power structures. It is a notion of cultural institutions (mostly, but not only, Western) being built for and based upon exclusive majoritarian cultural, historical, and ethical values that do not sincerely welcome, nor serve other audiences and artists, but rather impose that they assimilate into the dominant culture, as a condition for their inclusion.

Almost every Western cultural institution tried to introduce new programs of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Some created dedicated departments, others organized various events, exhibitions, workshops, and some introduced quotas or worked on diversifying their own teams. Still, what is being done does not seem to be effective, or to affirm a sense of justice,

equity, and a renewed cultural debate. The critique of these attempts has only been growing, and becoming harsher, showing more disappointment, and even despair. Meanwhile, arts and culture gatekeepers are either regressing to defensive modes, or expressing failure to imagine what is expected today. The aim of being inclusive was understood as welcoming the “other” to share in some part of the privileged position of a majority. Then, as the “other” arrived, it became clear that said inclusivity can only mean changing the entire paradigm. On a more strategic level, the question becomes: do we imagine a future of a diversity of exclusivities? or a new space where everybody meets?

At the heart of this discussion is the complexity of political and financial power. What makes it necessary that we try to describe a more wishable future. Interrogating such difficult questions can help each of us move forward. We need to highlight the issues we’ve been trying to avoid, to move past the current paradox, where we are stuck between the conservative reality of our paradigm and our attempts to progress forward within the small space that is left for that.

Both the workflow / design and the philosophy need to be interrogated, and an attempt at re-imagining seems to be overdue.

The Place of Money

In most of the world, governments do not support or subsidize arts and culture, but rather allow or do not allow, censor, or look away. In most of the world cultural institutions are negotiating their very existence on a continuous basis. For decades now, European states were the exception, presenting a model that many others aspired and believed in. That very model, with all its shortcomings and with the differences between European states, is now at risk. Between far-right politics gaining more grounds, and some others’ resistance to reexamine their position and gaze, financial allocations for arts and culture are shrinking, and a phenomenon of linking financing to compliance with the social and political positions of governments is starting to grow into what can now be described as censorship. Arts and Culture were often seen as instruments for defending democracy. Today, that is all in question.

On the other hand, Arts and Culture rely heavily on non-governmental financing. The proportion between public funding and private funding can be used to measure the political balance in a Western state. It is, however, a continuous negotiation that often puts a cultural institution in a weak position to accept arbitrary terms out of financial need. Short-term sponsorship and support require an institution to work again and again, hire sufficient staff, and prove itself again with every new year or project. This results in high reliance, and the fear of losing financing looms continuously, adding a certain useful challenge, as the rules of competition would suggest, but more importantly suggesting compliance in various

ways, that can be subtle or not. In a European context, and comparably in other contexts, the work of art, that of documentary film even more, is about representing the underprivileged, with funding from the privileged. How can that not mean that the Privileged sets the rules of how they can be criticized, or not, by those left out? How can culture resolve this paradox?

Curatorial choices, and ethical positions, are bound by these questions. In times of upheaval, financial support can translate into political control, or to art and culture being used in whitewashing. When it can, it will.

General House Rules

The overall goal is a productive discussion process that produces open documents, thought processes, rather than conclusions or rules that claim to express a mutual agreement, a consensus, among the participants.

Participants are invited to contribute as thinkers, as individuals, and not to adhere completely to the documents of the symposium, but rather to use them as a starting point for further examination, in the process of trying to measure and control agreements and actions with different stakeholders in the best way possible to protect autonomy, within their different contexts and within their own beliefs and codes.

Despite the high stakes and the moment of great anxiety, participants are expected to seek calm and moderated contributions, which does not mean compromising their positions, but emphasizing mutual respect and the goal of finding common ground.

The symposium will be by invitation only, and all invited participants will have to agree to a high level of confidentiality. Reporting on the process will be based on the consent of the participants and will be highly controlled.

The outcome of the symposium should be seen and presented as an open-ended process, not as a set of conclusions or even recommendations.

Outline

All invited participants will be divided into three working groups according to the three main questions highlighted earlier in this document. The total number of participants is expected to be 30-40. Each breakout group will have a lead chair who will be responsible for facilitating and articulating the reports of the breakout group discussions. Each chair will be supported by a note-taker and the production team.

Each working group will begin with a plenary online meeting to provide an introduction and explore starting points for further group work.

During the three days in Amsterdam, participants will be invited to participate in a program of daily conversations, moments of social interaction, but will also be divided into three workgroups to continue working in the online meeting. Over the course of the three days, each group will produce a report with key findings, questions and reflections. The chair will be responsible for delivering a final document from each group.

After the Symposium

A dedicated space on the IDFA website will be developed to openly present the documents of the symposium as a provocation to the sector. The ideas are to work on a document that includes written diaries of the participants, write-ups of the daily conversations next to the results of each working group.

Participants will be invited to help with dissemination and cascading, and a series of talks at various film festivals around the world will build on these open documents, developing new ideas from them or challenging them. It is hoped that the outcome of the symposium will be a shift in thinking and vocabulary that can lead to different forms of progress in different contexts, whether directly related to the symposium or not.

Team

The organizing committee consists of Tabitha Jackson, Rima Mismar, Orwa Nyrabia and Isabel Arrate Fernandez supported by Marina Buric, Berry Scheider, Monica Baptiste and Tamara Raab.

[02] Workgroup 1: On the Positionality of a Film Institution

“Babylon is falling. Do we try to save it, or hasten its demise?”

Symposium attendee

In the months since August 2024 when we gathered in Amsterdam, many of the challenges that cultural institutions face have persisted, but some have increased in intensity as the political climate has darkened. The same tune but in a different key.

The symposium participants came from across the globe and could speak from their experience as cultural workers in Africa, Asia, South America, Europe, North America, and the Middle East. They represented film festivals, museums, scholarships, and broadcasters. For some the music was all too familiar, for some its discordance was paralyzing, for others it has been a time to learn how best to respond to its beat.

At the beginning of 2025, a Trump administration once again came to power in the US, but this time it took its cues more directly from the authoritarian playbook as it went after culture and academia. The first lesson from Timothy Snyder's 2017 book *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* was widely shared: “Do Not Obey in Advance.”

But Snyder's second lesson: “Defend the Institutions” did not get nearly as much traction. In the cultural realm, there seems to be an ambivalence about whether protecting our existing institutions, founded in a different time, and rooted in different values, is the best way to secure our future/fulfil our purpose. Or whether creating new forms of radical collectivity and collaboration is the more effective path forward.

During a call, in advance of the symposium, we asked each member of our working group why they had accepted the invitation. Many felt the urgency and necessity of coming together to discuss the condition of cultural institutions (through the three lenses of money, representation, and positionality). Others mentioned feeling that certain topics could not be discussed openly in their countries of work, and that to come together and talk freely about these things would mitigate their sense of isolation and allow us to confront difficult and complex questions with honesty and a genuine sense of inquiry. Others were relieved simply to be given the time to reflect on and question the work they are doing, amid an unrelenting schedule of production and crisis management.

So, during the course of long hours of discussion, soul-searching, and soul-baring, our task, in the words of Adrienne Maree Brown, was to recognize that “there is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have. Find it.”

Deep thanks to all who took part and those who took the notes that form the basis of this summary. Quotes in italics are from the session notes.

[Introduction and workgroup report written by Tabitha Jackson]

1. “Context is king”

Jonathan Oppenheim

“Context”, in the words of the great film editor Jonathan Oppenheim, “is king”. It determines meaning, it dictates stance, it elicits emotion and informs behavior. So, when we gathered in August 2024, the conversations in our group were reflective of our own particular set of contexts.

In our individual lives as committed cultural workers, we were still dealing with the fallout of the pandemic, the financial precarity of our institutions, our own exhaustion and that of our co-workers, and the challenges of living our own personal values in a complex cultural and geopolitical moment.

In our field (or at least parts of it), the deep and difficult work of “de-colonizing” cultural institutions continued, and a sometimes-painful reckoning of the harms caused by our own practices was being addressed with efforts towards greater inclusivity, a new ethics of care, and a closer focus on the real-world impacts of power and privilege. Voices that had not been listened to demanded to be heard and responded to. We saw artists taking collective action to hold institutions to account, and institutions struggling to respond to the conflicting demands of stakeholders, donors, boards, staff, and their own mission. In the US, the 2020 murder of George Floyd (and countless others) by police officers had caused a global outcry and a moment of racial reckoning that had forced institutions and corporations to respond with commitments to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) , however shallow and performative many of them were turning out to be.

In the wider world, Israel's war on Gaza had been raging for 10 months, after the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023. Russia's war on Ukraine was in its 30th month, with civil wars continuing in Syria, Sudan, and Myanmar. The climate crisis continued seemingly unchecked, authoritarianism was on the rise, and 2024 would see at least 80 countries representing a combined total of 49% of the global population going to the polls.

One member of our group used the acronym VUCA to describe our context – Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. A term that was initially used by the US Army War College to describe the post-Cold War new world order and then, tellingly, became co-opted as a framework used by business strategists to better understand the threats and opportunities facing their corporations. (In recent times alternative acronyms to better reflect our present era have been suggested including BANI – Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, and Incomprehensible.)

No matter how we choose to describe it, we were meeting in the aftermath of some notable responses to these conditions at major cultural events in Europe and the US including Sundance Film Festival 2022, documenta fifteen¹, IDFA 2023, Hot Docs 2024, and Berlinale 2024².

And so, this was the context, or at least some of it, that was shaping us and what we brought into the room.

2. “Live the questions”

Rainer Maria Rilke

Rilke's exhortation to “Live the questions” acted as a kind of temperature check for our working group. Each member came prepared with the questions that were most preoccupying them as they contemplated Institutional Positionality. There were of course repetitions and overlaps but here is a representative sample of what people were asking themselves:

Power:

- What is positionality? Is there an interplay between individual and institutional positionality? Is there a tension, and can it be resolved?
- How can cultural institutions [better] acknowledge and address their own positionality?
- In what way does the positionality of artists/filmmakers affect their access to resources, platforms, and audiences?

Neutrality:

- What to do when neutrality is not enough?
- Do institutions have to stay *neutral* (even in the face of injustice)?
- What constitutes neutrality when institutions are already entangled in situations with diverse artists/funders/stakeholders?

¹ www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v44/n15/eyal-weizman/in-kassel

² www.filmcomment.com/blog/no-other-land-palestine-strike-germany-berlinale-2024/

- How can institutions take a position amongst diverse stakeholders?
How do we bring those stakeholders along when we do?

Trust:

- How do we reckon with the gap between what our institutions say they do, and what they actually do?

Institutional voice: The I/We question:

- How does *my* position become *our* position? And how do we hold space for the different positions within an institution? Relatedly, whose position is the position of the institution?
- How do we balance being a platform for others to take their position versus taking our own position?

North South East West:

- How can institutions operating from positions of systemic privilege collaborate transnationally with artists in ways that recognize other cultures and ways of working that do not necessarily fit with our frameworks? How can we listen, find each other, and co-create new ways of working? In this sense, how do we work with or through difference, hold conflicts, recognize inequality and unevenness in relation to privilege, and create equity?
- How does the positionality of curators and programmers within cultural institutions influence the representation within cinema, particularly in terms of whose stories are prioritized or marginalized?

Beyond the walls:

- Are we reaching our audiences in a truly meaningful way?
- How do we begin to cultivate audiences, sponsors, donors, members who are aligned with our vision or are open to learning from the filmmaker's work we support?
- How do we act in solidarity despite differences?
- How do we address the crisis of media and the crisis of media journalism? Where are the deeper thinkers and how do we support the work they are doing and circumvent those who perpetuate flat analysis or clickbait drama?

Safety:

- How do we protect those we work with?
- Do we need "secret publics"? How long will we need them for and what can they achieve?

Purpose:

- In this particular time, do we need film institutions or festivals?
What is their individual purpose, and does it determine the positions they should take?
- How do we think about free speech versus social justice? Is there a fundamental tension? Can it be resolved? If not, how do we live with the contradiction?

- What is the North Star of our work and what is the most compelling articulation of it?

Direction:

- In order to get to the future we want, is here the best place to start from?

3. Positionality vs Positioning: The Meaning of Things

As we began our group conversation it was pointed out that some of us were using the words “Positionality” and “Positioning” interchangeably. They mean different things of course and being precise in our language would better illuminate the things that could be changed and the things that could not.

“Positionality” describes how an individual or an institution is situated as a result of historical, social, political, geographical forces, and the power and privilege that has accrued or been denied because of them. “Positioning” on the other hand is the process by which an individual or institution makes strategic choices in order to convey where they stand relative to others. It is intentional and outward-facing communication.

Or as one person put it:

“Positionality is given. Positioning is taking. Positioning also allows for the possibility of re-positioning. Positionality is fixed.”

Perhaps what we had been witnessing in our field was the badly timed collision of the overdue internal work of recognizing the implications of institutional positionality, with the often hurried and reactive work of positioning. A new age of accountability had arrived, banging hard on the institutional doors from the outside, before the deep reflective work around privilege, power, and purpose was properly under way on the inside. Amid this instability, a firm foundation was hard to find. Many institutions reverted to silence or crisis PR responses, and individuals – whether board members, staffers, or artists – found themselves grappling with their own positionality and trying to determine their own positioning.

But of course, there is positionality within positionality. During our discussions we noted the emergence of something we called The David Syndrome. In all struggles that were recounted where David and Goliath were invoked, everyone always thought of themselves as David. Even the leaders of large and powerful organizations failed to recognize that they are also Goliath. In other words, as we critique the positionality of many of our cultural institutions, we must also recognize that they are themselves part of a larger political and cultural battleground that is being fought upon around the globe.

4. “You can’t be neutral on a moving train”

Howard Zinn

Neutrality as an alternative to taking sides was a big topic of conversation for our group. The argument for a politically engaged stance has had meaningful historical precedents – notably during the political events and protests that led to the cancellation of the Cannes Film Festival in 1968. But the perception of institutions deploying it inconsistently and using the notion of neutrality as a convenience rather than a deeply held conviction came up many times.

“Neutrality seems to appear when institutions don’t want to engage in the complexity of the conversation.”

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 saw many cultural organizations demonstrating solidarity by issuing statements on social media and displaying the Ukrainian flag on their websites and in their public spaces. Some of those same organizations later invoked the principle of “neutrality” as a reason not to respond to calls for public positions, or protests against Israel’s bombing of Gaza.

The reason why this might have been the case is less relevant here than the effect that such blatant inconsistency had on trust and good faith.

*“Just from the nature of what we choose we are not neutral.
There’s a disconnect around who we are.”*

But that aside, our group questioned whether the notion of institutional neutrality was at best no longer fit for purpose or at worse an illusion.

Does “neutrality” fail to acknowledge the inherent subjectivities of film festival curation and selection?

Does “neutrality” willfully ignore the institutional complicities and complexities of diverse revenue streams and opaque portfolio investments?

*“Neutrality just becomes neutralization”
(**Neutralize** – verb – To render something ineffective)*

Is remaining “neutral” in the face of oppression or genocide an abdication of precisely what many cultural institutions say they stand for?

Does neutrality really safeguard artistic freedom or is it being used to avoid accountability and/or interference?

However laudable the intention, does neutrality ultimately just preserve the status quo?

5. North South East West

What we see is determined not just what we look at but where we look from. Perspective and point of view is rigorously critiqued in works of art and independent film, but not as rigorously, alas, when it comes to the institutional landscape in which they are created. As several of the symposium attendees noted, the conversation and the shared preoccupations would be radically different if there were different people in the room, and if the room was in the southern hemisphere. Cultural resources and gatekeepers still remain clustered according to patterns of colonialism, far from many makers, their audiences, and their lived experiences.

"I've been working for years in my job examining the patriarchy of festivals. The authority, in terms of imperialism, in terms of power, in terms of Eurocentrism, is a question of patriarchy."

"Freedom of creative expression is the most important thing to me. I see that the power of expression in countries of the global majority is being restricted and repressed by the dominance of Northern power centers."

"It's always about the Westerner. As the saying goes: 'How do you get your film into a Western festival? Convince them they are saving you'."

These consequences of geographical positionality led us to talk about curation and how often curation alone is the statement that a festival or art institution relies on to express its positioning. Curation therefore is seen as almost sacrosanct and its integrity is protected by remaining in the hands of a few, while being wrapped in a cloak of secrecy. Or at least that is how it can feel to those on the outside of the closed curatorial space.

So, when the curatorial space is opened up to other perspectives and some control is necessarily ceded by the institution, it comes with risk and the possibility of controversy (as we saw with documenta fifteen). And when the new people allowed access to the curatorial space are artists from the global majority, it makes evident some of the tensions that come with progress.

"It puts a mirror in front of a Western institution, which needs contextualization all the time, and it has to be processed within the Western canon of understanding that if it can be presented. Once you leave that open, there's a conflict. [...] And this is actually the center of tension. If you believe in inclusivity and leaving the curation open, you will always face this problem. We have to plan it, to plan the openness. Not just to say it. And to invest in this openness."

“I think it just illuminates the fact that these are closed spaces. And once they become open, what is considered disruption is just an encounter with the other, who has previously been excluded from the space. And I think the reality for our industry is that there are many people who are skilled, equipped, and have the desire to be within this space but who do not have access to it. And so, when there is an opening and access, no one's prepared. It was ‘safe’ because no one else was there.”

6. North Star

“We don't have to be aligned on the way of thinking as long as we are aligned on the purpose.”

As institutions are increasingly being called upon, from both inside and outside, to make statements on issues of the day, the group discussed the importance of a North Star – the clearly discernible purpose of an institution that remains a constant and visible guide to action.

When universities found themselves in a similar position, they looked to their North Star of academic freedom. If the purpose of the institution was to foster academic freedom in the pursuit of truth wherever it may lead, then to take an institutional position on a particular issue would undermine its own reason for being. This was not articulated in the language of neutrality, but of a core purpose that all could see.

Many mission and vision statements have not been helpful in this moment because they are too vague, are not familiar to staff or to public, and were perhaps written by a branding or communications agency to be rhetorically pleasing rather than stress-tested for real-world decision making.

If the purpose or the institutional “why” is understood by staff, financial stakeholders, and audiences, then the odds of acting with boldness and consistency, while retaining trust and good faith in an age of complexity seems greater.

To use an example of a common tension in our field, an organization whose articulated North Star is “freedom of speech” might make different decisions when faced with calls to take a position on an issue from one whose North Star is “social justice”. This is not to say that the subsequent course of action is then easy, but at least it is expected and legible.

Language matters, and one thing we spent time discussing was how some of the language we are being trained to speak was alienating us from our own work and distancing us from the artists making theirs. “Metrics, growth, return on investment” is language from the corporate world and while it might be helpful in translating the value that we see into the value that they might be looking for, it is not our language and is not necessarily

rooted in the purpose of our organizations. Management speak has crept into our day-to-day interactions with our staff, and with it, we run the danger of losing our ability to articulate authentically why we do what we do.

“In this neoliberal economy, the way we pitch our work, the way we seek fundraising, results in consciously and subconsciously integrating the priorities of our donors and the buzzwords of our main sponsors. Gradually our mission statement becomes a pitch rather than a contract. How do we return to our own core starting points that are truly autonomous, truly our own expression of our values, of what we want?”

7. Onwards

For the organizers of this symposium, coming together to talk honestly about the complexities of the present moment was always planned as an goal in itself, not a means of finding fast “solutions” to over-simplified problems. In the words of Alan Watts: “When you are dancing you are not intent on getting somewhere... The meaning and purpose of dancing is the dance.”

We began with questions, and we ended with new ones:

- How do we make the institution a structure that enables rather than imposes?
- What does it take to be both prepared, and also not prepared? We don't want our institutions to only be in the mode of risk management.
- Can festivals work together in the spirit of complementarity rather than competition – one doing something that another cannot do?
- What if we're solving for the wrong model – capitalism rather than techno-feudalism?
- How do we create something more like the constitution or the principles of decision-making – something closer to action?
- How do we repair?
- How can we put ourselves in the mode of always going back to the roots of why we are here, our *raison d'être*, and never take this for granted?

Personally, and increasingly, I came away from our conversations with less ambivalence about the role of institutions, and more desire for a kind of networked movement-building based on what Aruna d'Souza called “Imperfect Solidarity”. Solidarity across differences. Solidarity that stems not from empathy but rather towards a duty to protect that which we most care for.

Enough of prioritizing individual institutional stability over mission when the rubber meets the road in this time of accelerated change. Instead, we walk

forward collectively, following a bright North Star that is clear and visible to many. A constellation, in fact, that will illuminate a path towards truth, beauty and justice. Only then can the political headwinds pushing back freedom of expression and exchange be met with an equal and opposite force that, ultimately, must prevail.

[03] Workgroup 2: Representation: Whose Spaces, Whose Choices

This report on our conversations about Representation: Whose Spaces, Whose Choices workgroup is based solely on notes taken at the time. Many thanks to the notetakers who were in our group.

It is impossible, of course, to do justice to what was said. I have tried to capture the range of perspectives, convey the tone and voice (the lines in italics are quotations recorded in the notes), and characterize the direction and themes of our discussions. In working through the notes, I'm conscious of two kinds of distance that may have shaped my report.

First, whether due to background, education, professional role, or something else, I felt my position differed slightly from the position held by most in the group. I was less willing than most to abandon the framework of inherited institutions – the “big tent” model. Also I was more inclined to believe that societal conditions should change art practice as much as the other way around. But the conversations tested my core assumptions. I was unsettled in all sorts of ways, and I have felt that again in writing this up. I mention this because I suspect that, if someone else had given the report, they might have offered a more adventurous, assertive interpretation of our proceedings.

The second distance is temporal. I am writing nine months after the fact [workgroup took place in August 2024, date of writing is May 2025] from the United States, where a political assault on cultural and educational institutions (and many aspects of public life) is now underway. Versions of this assault are familiar to those in other countries. It is at the government level and in civil society. More than last year, I find myself in a defensive stance, and my commitment to advocacy – for the needs and interests of filmmakers and for institutions that serve the public interest – is in the mode of protecting and surviving. I'm sure I'm not alone in that.

I am grateful to have participated in this gathering. Thank you to the organizers – it has been both a privilege and a pleasure. My deep appreciation goes to all participants, especially those in the Representation: Whose Space, Whose Choices group. I hope you find this true enough to what was said.

**[Introduction and workgroup report written
by Dominic Asmall Willsdon]**

1. Who or what?

Our starting point was a pair of questions – Whose spaces, whose choices? – and a number of paragraphs under that heading in the symposium's concept paper. So, the question of representation was that of who is represented by film festivals and let's say other cultural institutions (such as music and literary festivals, biennials, contemporary art museums, etc.), and of how those institutions can do justice to diversity. (Six months ago, I'd have preferred a word that's less ossified, but I do not want to skirt saying diversity now.) The crux of the topic in the concept paper was this:

*“Do we imagine a future with a diversity of exclusivities?
Or a new space where everybody meets?”*

That is a distinction between multiple kinds of institutions, each defined by an identity, and a kind of institution that accommodates differences. What we could call the “small tents” versus the “big tent.” (Can there not be both?) The identities that define the small tent institutions might be racial or ethnic, or they might not.

*“Representation in the West too easily becomes about skin
colors and cultural history, but we need to think of represented
identities as broader in scope. For example, there is the question of
representation based on political position.”*

Diversity of position comes with more evidently mutable and shareable markers, so the institutions defined by positions could too.

Our conversations focused mostly on artists and filmmakers as the constituency to be represented, with institutions seen as spaces meant to serve creators. We paid less attention to audiences – perhaps because filmmakers are seen as the source of filmmaking, while audiences are the destination. If we somewhat neglected audiences, I think that might be for two reasons. First, there is a tendency to think of representation in pictorial terms, re-picturing what already exists, rather than politically (like parliamentary representation). Institutions represent multiple constituencies – filmmakers, audiences, others – and need to navigate competing interests. Second, we as a group of film professionals perceived the events at IDFA 2023 (which prompted the symposium) to be about

tensions between institution and filmmakers, more than institution-audience. Who or what? A different prompt might have led us to ask whether an institution primarily represents not any group of people (e.g., filmmakers, independent filmmakers, a certain audience, its workers/collaborators, a board, government, etc.), but a thing or idea: a practice or activity (e.g., documentary filmmaking), perhaps, or a principle/value (e.g., freedom of expression, beauty, social justice, the public interest).

2. We liberals

The prompt offered another starting point: the challenge, driven by artistic-political practices, to the institutional status quo. What is the status quo? Let's say, it is a paradigm of institutional character rooted in liberal European philosophy of the public sphere. The liberal public sphere assumes people can check their particularities at the door to engage in dialogue (as a core democratic practice) that transcends personal traits and context. But this model has been criticized since the 1970s or earlier, and – as we discussed – may now prevent more than it enables.

An alternative might be a network of specialized competencies rather than one institution trying to accommodate everyone (or, rather, anyone). Instead of dialogue (or its refusal) within one space, we could have dialogue (or its refusal) between multiple spaces.

Questions: Which alternative best enables dialogue and cooperation? Who benefits from each model? Can liberalism be sustained by other institutional forms? What would be lost if we abandoned the liberal ideal? What could be the terrain on which new post-liberal institutions could be built?

3. Embrace conflict

Cultural institutions face a choice between including conflict within their walls or positioning themselves to win external conflicts. If the former, the key question is: how much conflict are they or we truly prepared to allow? Societies are polarized. People retreat to their own circles as safe spaces. Countering these tendencies requires recognizing that diversity entails conflict.

Instead of managing, containing, or preventing conflict, institutions should embrace what we might call “generative conflictuality” – treating conflict as inevitable and essential rather than something to be avoided or resolved. This means learning to dwell creatively in conflict rather than trying to dispel it, accepting that there may not even be common ground for traditional dispute, and allowing for genuine disagreement and antagonism while practicing the vulnerability that conflict requires.

The stakes are significant. If embracing conflict leads to dialogue, that's valuable. If some institutions need to fall away in the process, that's acceptable, as long as something meaningful takes their place. The current institutional model has become conflict-averse arguably because conflict requires vulnerability and pain, which many institutions won't risk. But that aversion may be limiting their potential to have impact and change (assuming that change should be a goal). So, the central question is: how do we practice "good conflict" that generates rather than destroys?

4. Church and school

"People within the community, practitioners, attach meaning and own identity to the festival, and when trust is ruptured it is seriously devastating ('This is our equivalent of church, not just something to be corporatized!') (Or rather, 'a place where we sit with stories that are moral, holy, meaning-making.')"

Tents or churches? I don't remember who said documentary film festivals are our equivalent of church. Reading it, months later, in the notes taken at the time, I find it one of the most unsettling statements recorded at the event. Years ago, I might have let it be, set it aside, heard it as coming from a view of culture that's not mine, and – significantly – not the one on which the institutions that employ me are founded. But it is different now. The new small tent institutions are not just smaller, not just less conflicted (or doubting) about themselves, they can be founded on a moral, rather than political, worldview much as religions are. Politics is a matter of power, but morality is a matter of justice (which is beyond politics). Who feels comfortable calling the new institutions sanctuaries for moral stories and practitioners devoted to justice?

It is worth asking whether the collapse of the church is necessarily a collapse into the corporate. Here "corporate" might have three characteristics: big, bureaucratic, and for profit. I can imagine a defense of the big, bureaucratic, and not-for-profit. What if the institution is not a church but a school? What if it is a school system?

"Equivalent of church" is at odds with my, frankly, school-based sense of the purpose of cultural institutions, but I know it's a vision of them that has force. Church-based institutions feature a particular kind of conflict: apostasy or betrayal.

"The institution builds trust over the years, yet it becomes so vulnerable as though it had never existed. It takes a long time to build trust, yet in a split second, you can lose it."

"Trust is not necessarily broken, it simply needs work. Being called out can be a moment of generative conflict."

5. The individual

The symposium was personal and emotional from its first minutes. This was not only because we wanted something other than a regular professional encounter, but also because there is the question of how the individual, as a person in full, can inhabit an institutional identity. Many in the room had little time for the traditional distinction between professional and personal identities. Many wanted to reconcile or merge those identities, so that work might be more an expression of the self.

“How can the institution function while the individual is still able to be an individual? Being ourselves within an institution is really hard at the moment; to be an individual, you have to speak your voice.”

“While working for institutions, we also have our opinions, and we shouldn’t lose ourselves in the institution we work for.”

The institution comprises persons and yet exceeds them. Or does it exceed them? Many saw the voice of institutions as no more than the voice (collectively, perhaps, like that of a choir) of those who work there.

“How does the ‘I’ become the ‘We’ of the institution? What is the voice of the institution when there are so many diverse perspectives and opinions?”

Even these questions, which allow for a certain big tent diversity of viewpoints, still presume that institutional voice expresses the thoughts and feelings of those who currently steward it.

“How does the ‘I’ become the ‘We’ of the institution? What is the voice of the institution when there are so many diverse perspectives and opinions?”

Even these questions, which allow for a certain big tent diversity of viewpoints, still presume that institutional voice expresses the thoughts and feelings of those who currently steward it.

“What is an institution’s statement? Is it the expression of the people who currently make up the institution? Or should institutions aim to make statements that would be right and valid even if different people were there?”

We may be witnessing the erosion of the traditional distinction between a person and the office they hold. If so, what drives this shift? The weakening of institutional authority itself likely plays a role. As institutions lose their elevated status, so too does the status of their offices. The collapse of office into individual identity perhaps mirrors a broader characteristic of contemporary politics, where institutional roles increasingly merge with personal brand and identity.

If institutional voices are ultimately the collective voices of a group, then we need to address questions of institutional hierarchy. The traditional patriarchal model found in many film festivals – with one figurehead handling external relations while others manage behind-the-scenes work – has proven unproductive and limiting.

When an institution that has been built collaboratively makes a statement, whose belief is it expressing? The board's? The majority view among staff? Government? But maybe it would be better not to see such statements as expressions at all but instead as acts.

6. Being together

Film festivals (and other cultural institutions) are spaces of convening; bodies in spaces. Yet besides the shared, parallel experience of art works, the mode of convening, or manner of being together, is primarily *dialogue*. Plus, in the case of documentary film, the artworks are primarily (not always) discursive themselves. Dialogue dominates the documentary field.

How could we create different modes of being together, beyond dialogue?

“We could do more to explore, for example, embodied and performance-related modes. These may be more appropriate for addressing trauma and allowing joy.”

Our emphasis on dialogue faces a challenge when confronting trauma – wounds that cannot be addressed through calm, secular discourse rooted in rational exchange. (It says “secular” in the notes, and I keep the word.) Dialogue can fall short when dealing with experiences that are beyond the reach of reasoned discussion.

Alternative approaches might include somatic and kinetic healing methods that offer pathways that bypass the dominance of hegemonic and patriarchal frameworks, acknowledging that some forms of understanding and recovery happen through the body rather than through words.

There may be a tension between honoring trauma's complexity and maintaining democratic dialogue.

7. Scale and networks

Many said that, to foster genuine encounters, institutions must be redesigned. Current institutional components – gatekeeping mechanisms, filtering systems, hierarchical decision-making structures, and top-down communication strategies – no longer serve their intended purpose and may actively hinder meaningful engagement.

Partnership-based networks could replace autonomous institutions. Curation can be a collective practice rooted in community needs rather than institutional imperatives. This suggests horizontal rather than vertical relations, with lateral connections between participants replacing traditional hierarchies.

Think differently about timing. Moving beyond the once-yearly festival model toward continuous, decentralized events could better serve communities. Distribution becomes not about reaching the largest audience but about connecting work to its most relevant contexts. Scale presents both opportunities and challenges. Small ecosystems operating close to their resources can demonstrate remarkable self-sufficiency and sustainability, thriving outside mainstream festival networks. Yet larger institutions offer broader reach and resources. Can institutions, at scale, function as public amenities – serving diverse populations equitably without requiring extensive bureaucracy? The challenge for large festivals is preserving independence; for smaller ones, it's supporting quality work without capitulating to industry standards.

Networked models offer promising alternatives: decentralized systems driven by distributed expertise rather than concentrated authority. These approaches emphasize interdependence over competition. Co-ownership structures, with central steering committees empowering local communities, could be viable pathways forward. True pluralism in storytelling requires plural institutional forms.

Current experiments may seem clunky, but dismantling existing systems might be necessary to create space for alternatives that better serve diverse voices.

When festivals fail, this may be a matter of natural cycles rather than disasters – clearing space for new approaches.

8. Risk and the price of change

“We are all holding up a stick in this big tent, and we do not know who will be the first one to let go in the spirit of igniting change.”

What if we let go? What are the risks? If we ignite change, will we (and who are we?) gain more than we lose? Shifting to a new paradigm will have costs. Yet:

*“Maintaining the institution is not the ultimate goal.
Maybe institutions are meant to be temporary.”*

In the third quarter of the twentieth century (more or less) in certain democracies, under particular, contingent, and unrepeatable conditions, liberals built cultural institutions that were meant to accommodate a plurality of viewpoints and identities as well as necessary conflicts.

Two things are true. Given the demands of the present, these institutions are not fully fit for purpose, and if we lose them, we won't get them back.

[04] Workgroup 3: The Place of Money

“Not only a trip into the uncomfortable, it is important to also stay outside of the comfort zone, because otherwise we will be unable to pose the interesting, important questions.”

Symposium attendee

The Place of Money workgroup came together to critically examine the intricate financial landscape within which film festivals and cultural organizations operate, and to analyze its substantial influence on institutional functions, core values, and professional relationships. Participants' engagement was often driven by a perceived sense of being “ill-equipped or helpless in this particular moment of disruption that affects the arts sector globally” and a recognition of the necessity for dedicated intellectual space to move “outside of the comfort zone, because otherwise we will be unable to pose the interesting, important questions.” Discussions were centered on the understanding that “some ways of working are no longer sustainable.”

Initially, we met online to share thoughts on our expectations, our reasons to participate, our fears, and the possible pitfalls for the symposium. Starting from our daily practice, the conversation ranged from the large structural challenges to the more concrete, and this helped us to navigate the sensitive discourse once we met in Amsterdam. Our group consisted of individuals from different continents, bringing together experiences

and views that did not always align, so, the thematic scope remained flexible, as we acknowledged how deeply financial concerns are entangled with questions of positionality and representation across diverse actors, including festivals, funding bodies, individuals, and creative practitioners. As one participant put it: *“It is more about the political positionality and money: the position in the middle of festivals/funds/markets is key—be it money or cultural capital (that in the long term, reflects financial capital).”*

Going over all the notes of the symposium ten months after [workgroup took place in August 2024, date of writing is April 2025] the conversation took place was a paradoxical experience. On the one hand, I was intrigued and re-provoked by the urgency and relevance of the themes. On the other, I was overwhelmed by the persistent, growing reality that money as a tool of power is everywhere. Today the world is even more unstable than ten months ago and the lives of so many are tied to the financial and thus political interests of a few. On top of that, in several countries we are also seeing how funding for cultural institutions has become a political decision, one that can restrict or enable creative expression.

Our time in Amsterdam was a brief safe haven: a chance to exchange openly, to pose questions, and to confront challenges head-on. In other words, a space to question the status quo, so that this conversation, which remains as relevant as ever, can continue and be taken forward elsewhere. This recap draws on extensive notes from group meetings and plenary sessions, recorded by a group of amazing notetakers. Quotations are directly taken from these notes.

**[Introduction and workgroup report written
by Isabel Arrate Fernandez]**

Framing the conversation

Central to our discussion was a shared concern for how Eurocentric the dominant funding models remain – for festivals, institutions, and independent documentary production. A central tension we identified was the role of funding: while we all agreed that filmmakers should be at the heart of the practice, the current system often puts financing (intended to support filmmakers and institutions) at the center instead.

Several critical themes emerged from our exchange, shaping the flow of our conversations, the notes we kept, and reflections we later presented to others.

Although we engaged in a wide range of complex and sometimes challenging topics, our discussions were consistently anchored by a shared vocabulary – a set of guiding keywords that, importantly, carried a constructive and hopeful tone. These words not only captured where we are now, but also our collective aspirations on how things could be

done differently.

Qualities like nimbleness, nuance, and balance emerged as vital for institutions navigating today's shifting landscape. At the same time, we made space for deeper questioning: Whose values are being prioritized? Who benefits from the systems in place? In response, solidarity, transparency, and complementarity surfaced as cornerstones for ethical collaboration.

There was a strong call to stay close to audiences and communities, to commit to working in sustainable ways, and to leave space for real transformation. Underpinning everything was creativity: not only as a goal, but as a guiding principle for institutions like film festivals.

Sustainability of independent filmmakers

A foundational concern throughout was the urgent need to address the sustainability of independent filmmakers. We saw their ongoing viability as central to the health of the entire film ecosystem. Even experienced filmmakers face precarious financial conditions, and we questioned whether current systems are truly capable of supporting stable careers.

We also emphasized the need for institutional honesty about the real value and efficiency of existing structures. The sustainability of cultural institutions from the sustainability of the artists they are meant to serve.

"Any positive growth, even incidental, should also positively reflect on the filmmakers as well."

Critique of outdated funding models

We shared a strong sense that many of the funding models currently supporting institutions and film production are outdated and no longer reflect today's realities. Often rigid by design, these structures struggle to adapt – especially when applied outside Europe and North America or to emerging filmmakers. We also critiqued the prevalence of funder-driven agendas, which can conflict with artistic intent and create additional tensions.

Funders tend to prioritize growth, impact, and profitability over creativity and long-term sustainability. This often puts artistic purpose at odds with institutional expectations. A key reflection was that reliance on public funding can foster a false sense of security, and that we must explore alternative, more resilient funding models. What if the European funding model were to disappear altogether?

We also acknowledged that the dominant economic model – despite being widely replicated and held up as a standard – is inherently flawed. Built on

exploitative structures, it leaves little room for true fairness. There are few, if any, realistic scenarios in which all stakeholders in the chain are fairly compensated. Fairness cannot simply be imposed on the existing system; a new model – one that assumes fairness as its starting point – must be imagined.

Participants from regions outside of Europe shared how cultural initiatives in their regions have often thrived in the absence of public funding, relying instead on community relationships and informal support systems. In many cases, they have had to navigate complex or contested funding sources – linked to foreign governments or private interests – yet still found ways to sustain artistic production. In contrast, European models often rest on a presumed, and perhaps fragile, guarantee of public funding.

Navigating ethical dimensions of funding: “All money is dirty money”

“Here’s the conventional wisdom, which might be true, which is all money is dirty money, but the power of ethical funding is, feels like an invitation towards a solution.”

We engage in a nuanced exploration of the ethical complexities surrounding funding sources. The widely cited phrase “all money is dirty money” captured the moral tension many institutions experience: working with ethically problematic funds in order to do meaningful cultural work. This prompted deeper reflection on the concept of *ethical funding* and the contradictions embedded in the broader capitalist structures upon which the industry depends. There was a call to acknowledge and openly discuss these dilemmas.

The fundamental need for model and organizational change

A clear consensus emerged around the need for both systemic and internal organizational change. We agreed that institutions should be encouraged to move away from unsustainable or legacy models and embrace transformation as a slow but necessary process. Change, we agreed, cannot simply be externally imposed or symbolic; it must come from within and involve commitment, self-reflection, and sometimes discomfort. As one participant said:

“Change comes from within, not to be solved by parachuting in.”

Institutions as intermediary and advocates

We explored the intermediary role of institutions – such as festivals, funds,

and markets – within the film value chain. These entities sit between filmmakers and funders, carrying the dual responsibility of artist support and financial accountability. We discussed the difficult balance institutions have to strike, and how much influence they hold – not only financially, but in terms of cultural capital. Institutions were described as bridges or agents that connect creators to audiences, ideally without becoming gatekeepers.

We also reiterated the potential role institutions could play in negotiating and advocating on behalf of filmmakers – to ensure filmmakers are no longer at the bottom of the value chain.

Building on that, we explored how institutions might adopt a more active advocacy role on behalf of filmmakers. This includes pushing for fair contracts, equitable screening fees, and better placement within the industry value chain. We encourage institutions to act as intermediaries not only between funders and creators, but also as negotiators championing filmmakers' rights and visibility. We asked whether institutions could define a shared mission in collective service to the community.

Advocating for decentralization

Decentralization emerged as a key value, proposed as a remedy to institutional and economic centralization. We emphasized the importance of making room for local, contextual expertise and more agile, self-regulating structures. There was strong interest in “small tent thinking” – favoring more distributed systems with internal checks and balances, capable of responding flexibly to specific regional or organizational needs. We saw decentralized models as spaces of innovation and knowledge exchange from which broader lessons can be drawn.

The imperative for transparency and voice

We voiced the need for greater institutional transparency and a firmer, more vocal presence in public discourse. The phrase “time to say things loud and out” emphasized the need to acknowledge the fragility of the ecosystem and to open honest conversations about trust, funding pressures, and power imbalances.

There is growing mistrust between artists and institutions, especially in politically charged contexts. Filmmakers and audiences alike expect institutions to take visible, principled positions, especially in increasingly polarized times. As cultural institutions face increasing external pressures and internal strain, we emphasized the need for more candid, informal dialogue among institutions: to rethink alliances, resist imposed restrictions, and better support filmmakers without pretending the system is functioning smoothly.

We also emphasized the importance of ethical alignment: the many relationships that make up a film festival or cultural institution (audiences, creators, staff, etc.) should reflect and reinforce the values the institution claims to uphold.

Acknowledging multiple realities

In our conversations, we emphasized that the global film industry operates within multiple, simultaneous realities shaped by stark geopolitical differences. From this, we urge for the inclusion of diverse positionalities in industry conversations and decision-making processes. Recognizing different starting points – whether in access to funding, definitions of success, or working conditions – was highlighted as essential for any meaningful systemic change.

Protecting multiple definitions of success

Throughout our discussions, we strongly emphasized the need to uphold and protect multiple, context-specific definitions of success. We challenged dominant metrics – often driven by growth, visibility, or prestige – as insufficient or irrelevant for many global contexts. For some filmmakers, completing a film after many years of struggle may represent profound success. That's why we urge institutions to validate such diverse benchmarks, recognizing success as non-uniform and deeply contextual.

Final remarks

“We do have power to make decisions, model behavior, allow people to imagine what they're not yet seeing by doing it and using Jemma's sense of performance [in the conversation between Tabitha Jackson and Jemma Desai]. You rehearse things to figure out how to make a new formation.”

Throughout our time together, The Place of Money workgroup explored the financial challenges facing the film and cultural sector – and kept returning to the sense that current funding models are no longer working. Not only do they often reflect Eurocentric bias, but they also fail to meet the needs of those they claim to support.

A strong consensus emerged around the idea that independent filmmakers should be at the center of the ecosystem. But this belief frequently clashed with reality: in practice, the pursuit of funding often ends up driving institutional priorities.

This raised difficult but necessary questions:

- What would it take to shift the balance?
- Can funding structures support creative work without shaping it?
- How can institutions navigate the push and pull between artistic purpose and financial survival?

In our conversations, we emphasized the need for greater honesty and transparency, for more decentralization and responsive ways of working, and for institutions to take on a stronger advocacy role – especially in support of those most precariously positioned.

Ultimately, we found that rethinking the place of money isn't a side conversation. It's at the heart of imagining what film institutions can and should become.

[05] Conversation 1: between Tabitha Jackson and Jemma Desai

INT. DOCUMENTARY PAVILION – AFTERNOON

[In the Podium Hall of Het Documentaire Paviljoen in Amsterdam's Vondelpark, on a late morning of a sunny summer day. A mixture of couches and chairs is spread around to evoke a 'living room' atmosphere. On a small stage, two chairs are placed. Standing up, Tabitha Jackson presents Jemma Desai, and Jemma takes the stage, and reads an extract from a recent keynote she delivered at the International Documentary Association (IDA) Getting Real conference in Los Angeles in April 2024. Her full speech is [here](#). As the attendees applaud her, they both take seats, and the conversation begins]

[TABITHA JACKSON]

Yesterday, we asked each other why we said yes to this, to come and be together here. Why did you say yes?

[JEMMA DESAI]

I didn't say yes straight away. And maybe it's easier to say why I said no. I guess I had only understood what was happening at IDFA, during the withdrawal of films, from afar, and also from friends who had withdrawn their films. And I guess I questioned the sort of "good faith" engagement with this. It felt like this convening was trying to fix something that actually needed to be sat with. And then the more I talked to people, the more I realised that it would be valuable to come and share some things that maybe wouldn't otherwise be said in this room.

I think that if I'm really honest, I'm very ambivalent about participating in a space like this right now, as I'm sure many people are. I'm not saying

that nobody else in this room is ambivalent too. I'm really curious to see what people think they're doing here, what we all think we're doing at this time. It's a question that I hold. And also, there's limited energy right now to engage with anything. I think after talking to you, and to others, the few conversations I've had so far, there's obviously a value in people coming together to process. And I think that's maybe something that I can offer, something towards a way to process.

[TABITHA]

One of the reasons I very much wanted you to be here is because I think you bring something into the room, which is based on years of reflection about what this landscape is for you and for other cultural workers. I think it's interesting when you say what we think we might be doing here. The intention was, in a sense, not to have a plan, but to have an encounter and to see what emerges. After doing some thinking about how we make sense of the time that we have, to be here together, see what emerges – yes, process, but also question and challenge – that is part of what I wanted in this conversation with you, and also with the room... a processing, a questioning, a challenging, maybe seeing things in a way that we hadn't, or that I hadn't before. Because that feels like part of the work. It's not all the work, but it's part of the work. So it's a kind of an act of faith – and good faith – for people to say yes, to come and do this, including you.

And so I've been thinking about what seems to be an almost existential crisis in nonfiction film, which is not simply the usual existential crisis, about lack of funding and distribution and sustainability, but is a combination of things which coalesce into the two heads of trust and truth: polarization, politicization, misinformation, disinformation, the pace of technological change, generative AI ... etc. And then the other factor is the form of our work that is most promulgated. In Europe and the US, that is overwhelmingly the three-act storyform. And, just personally, I think it's dangerous to encounter the world as a story. I love stories, there's a reason why we need them, but that is not what reality is. And for me, the prize is trying to understand our place in the world and how the world works. And stories can help with that, but they can also obscure the complexity and the nuance and the tensions of it all. So thinking about form, the form in which things are expressed is also really important.

That's another reason why I've been drawn to your work, because it is political and poetic, and there is dreaming within it, and there is anger within it.

[JEMMA]

Thank you, Tabitha. I want to respond to a couple of things that you said. I think that there were so many things in what you said about story, and the stories that we tell to ourselves, but also the stories that we're sold. And the moment that we realized that it's a story and not a truth, or how a truth can be a story, and all of those different things. There's a book that I discovered recently called *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives*. It's all about

narrative therapy, but it's not individualized therapy, it follows people in situations which are geopolitically unjust. The author, David Denborough was doing a lot of group therapy with women in Palestine who had been imprisoned, and there's this diagram in it that the women drew, which was a figure of a person with a black ball. The black ball was the "problem," and it was inside the person at the beginning, and then it comes outside of the person. So the idea, the tagline of this drawing, is that the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem. And I think some of the stuff that you just said just now – that the project of independent filmmaking is important for democracy, and so on. Well, a lot of us don't believe in democracy anymore, and some people never did. And I think maybe that's where the work I've been doing has lead me. In these last ten months, I've been getting closer to some people who I've already known, but getting very close to them now because they've been very emotionally raw. I'm feeling how these histories of injustice – which are abstracted in the work that we watch, in the study that we do, in the institutional critique that we write – are very present. They're destroying people's lives, and they're destroying people's mental health, and they map quite clearly on to the ways that we organize our work. Where I'm at at the moment is really trying not to take these things as metaphorical things, but as very practical instructions – that the systems that we have to organize our work replicate quite clearly the systems that organize this genocide.

And that might seem like a huge leap, but if you look at it, then there's a lot of logics that replicate themselves. So I think about moving from where I work. I think about Angela Davis talking about doing abolition closest to where you are, and moving out from there. Other people have been thinking in other directions, they speak to authority figures, and that's how you make change. There's lots of different ways that you can make change. And I think one of the reasons why I think about this is also because of the particular limitations or opportunities of my life. I don't work in an institution anymore. On purpose, I don't work in one. So I don't have that kind of power anymore, and I don't want it. I'm also a mother, and in the period of not working in an institution, I've really wanted to learn more from local organizing and mutual aid and neighborhood organizing. So those are the things that I learn with, and that's where I come to this kind of idea – albeit skeptically – about whether approaches like local organizing and mutual aid really fits in this type of institutional setting [the symposium]. Moving from the practices that we do every day is something I think about a lot.

[TABITHA]

If my question is something like, how can we best – meaning with care, with ethics, with values – protect independent artists to make their work? If that's the question, then I want to figure out where I spend my time and what models I use to inspire me. What's your question for yourself in this moment?

[JEMMA]

I guess this question of protection, this idea that there is this benevolent

thing that can protect you is just not true. So for me, I question how I can close the gap between my intention and my practice. If I have the best faith in humanity right now, then that is a question that I would ask. I would not, absolutely not expect anyone to protect me or anyone that I love. I don't understand, I just can't – I feel really emotional even thinking about this because it's just... I open my phone every day and all I see is organized abandonment, on a mass scale. And I am part of that because I then close my phone and just sit there. So I think protection is the wrong question. I think the question for me, as I've just said, but also for us, is, how do we close the gap between intention and practice? And it's hard, it's not easy. The whole world is set up to make us not live up to our intentions. If we have good intentions, whatever good means, maybe we can make a shortcut to some shared assumption of what that might mean: that everyone gets to live without trauma and pain in their lives. But then, actually, aren't we living in a moment which shows us how far we are from that, and how implicated we are in the opposite of that? So I think, yes, we can talk about protecting artists and filmmakers and of course that's part of closing the gap between intention and practice. But there's some really simple questions that we can ask each other about: how we are with each other, what we think is ordinary on a day-to-day, and how we deal with what we think is extraordinary. So to be very concrete, an example might be someone coming on to a stage and saying something that we think is frightening or disruptive. I think we need to question what we think is ordinary and what we think is extraordinary, and to be ready for whatever that thing is that we think is extraordinary... because actually I think disrupting things should be the new ordinary, because what we are witnessing every day is not ordinary, it shouldn't be ordinary, I don't know why we're normalizing it.

I think the question is, how do we
close the gap between intention
and practice?

[TABITHA]

Okay, so then the implications of that, *how can I narrow the gap between my intentions and my actions* –

[JEMMA]

– practice –

[TABITHA]

... what's the difference for you between practice and actions?

[JEMMA]

...Some of my work is rooted in performance, I'm doing a PhD across

visual arts, film, and performance and I've been trying to think of my film programming and other film work partly in a performance lineage. The way I think of performance, with the help of many others, is in thinking about performances not like acting, not embodying something that you are not, but rather about the attempt to complete an action. That's what a performance is, and with an intention. So you're trying to complete an action in a certain form – you talked about form as well earlier – the attempt to complete an action is one thing, but the practice that allows you to have the skills to complete the action is a different thing. And the practices are the things that we do every day without really thinking. Or they can be intentional practices if we want to do something new. But every day you will do something without thinking, things that you've just learnt to do, like the way you brush your teeth or sometimes you'll just walk to work without looking at anything, or you can do those things intentionally in order to do them differently. It's about change.

[TABITHA]

Right now, we're here in this space, which is a space that many of us have worked in, or are working in, within institutions. So "change" is a word I can grab onto that I'd love for us to think about together. Sometimes you have to see something to be able to imagine it. I guess my question is how does one start without necessarily knowing the destination, and how does one start going on the journey from within these structures that – depending on their age – are now in a phase of self-protection? There was one thing I read ages ago when I was looking for insights, and I found your work *This Work isn't For Us*, a study of diversity initiatives which includes testimonies from arts workers, and described what you and others had seen and experienced in this cultural space, with the hope that people would read it and understand it, and change could happen. An insight that resonated with me was that ultimately, even if people want to, they often can't make the change from within their institutions. They are in some way stuck. It's interesting to know how you got to that conclusion.

Ultimately people, even if they want to make change, can't make the change from within the institutions. They are in some way stuck.

[JEMMA]

I wrote *This Work isn't For Us*¹, (which is essentially a Google doc) as a research paper about what it felt like to deliver diversity policy as a person of color. As a working class person of color. As someone from London in a London institution with no one from London in it. And many other examples. In that process of delivering the diversity policy, I thought I

¹ heystacks.com/doc/337/this-work-isnt-for-us--by-jemma-desai

would write the paper and I would send it to my managers, and they would be like: “Oh wow, I didn’t know that. Oh, we should change it.” It sounds really naïve now, but I really believed that. I thought that I had just not explained it properly. This is maybe not unusual for many people who do political organizing. But this was my moment of understanding: I’m not just a person moving through a space, I’m a person moving through a system. And that system is structured by many other things other than me and my relationships. It’s structured by institutions and rules. It’s structured by historical forces. It’s structured by different government agencies... all of those things. But I think to really answer your question about the practicality of change in and by institutions, I don’t think it needs to be so abstract, that we need to imagine something so utopian, that it’s out of reach. This is why I often talk about Black feminist abolitionists, because they’re really practical. They write things that are really easy to read, and they’re really practical. Similarly to the somatic work that I do, it’s really practical. You take it step by step. First of all, you sit with what is. You look at what there is and ask: “What are we doing? What is the logic of what we are doing, and how is it leading us to where we are?” And then you might also think historically: “What is the history of this practice? Why was it set up like this way? Would I choose to set it up this way with all of the values that I have? No. So if I didn’t choose it, then why am I still doing it?” That’s the thing, these small things, these small practices. I’ll give you an example. One of the jobs I had after I left the British Film Institute (BFI) was at Berwick. And we looked at our program process...

I’m not just a person moving through a space, I’m a person moving through a system. And that system is structured by many other things apart from me and my relationships. It’s structured by institutions and rules. It’s structured by historical forces. It’s structured by different government agencies... all of those things.

[TABITHA]

...and Berwick is a really interesting film festival that specializes in non-traditional nonfiction.

[JEMMA]

Yeah, artist film, visual arts, works in progress, all types of different things.

It's a very interesting space, the Artistic Director is interested in conceptual questions. We were coming out of COVID, and I got really interested in ideas of mutual aid. And with mutual aid, you're not looking to higher-ups to help you. You're not going to the BFI and saying, "Oh, change this thing," right? Which is what I was doing with *This Work isn't For Us*, or thought that I was doing. This was like, okay, we're going to figure this thing out together. We know that this isn't how we want to work. We know that awards aren't necessarily how we want to celebrate the people that we choose. How can we shift this?

We started looking at the language of the film festival. We looked at the language of the jury. We looked at "submission" as a term of engagement that implicitly demands that artists submit to us. And, what role did that submission put us in as programmers, what relational dynamic? We looked at all that, and we saw that we could shift it. And doing that doesn't change everything, but it changes something, so we started to really think about our approach. We got rid of the prize, we gave everyone the money equally. What I realized was that one festival changing something doesn't necessarily mean anything, because the festival is part of a big ecosystem. You need lots of people to move at the same time with you, and you need them to understand why they're moving in that way.

I'm talking about looking not only at what is, but also at the history.... Those systems protect a kind of relationship to culture which is only about 250 years old – rooted in European colonialism and elite access. So it makes sense that we have all these problems, doesn't it? The root to this is just there. I'm not saying that everyone in this room can change all of that and undo all of that, but you could certainly look at that more than tinkering around the edges. I think that yes, we'd need to imagine something different. We also need to look at what is. And a lot of the ways that we've been educated, as filmmakers, cultural workers, whatever, is to hold on to this elite access, this idea of culture as rarefied. We'd have to give that up as well. Then it would be something else. Then it would be cultural work.

[TABITHA]

I want to go back to this word "protect". It's not that I wish to protect the systems that we have in place, that were put in place not for us, not by us, and with a different set of values and sense of the world. No. But I do want to use the word "protect", not in the sense of "preserve" but in the sense of "safeguard" because I think there are strong headwinds against artists who wish to express something freely: from the constricting demands of the market-driven culture industry, to the rise of authoritarianism, political censorship, imprisonment and worse. And for me that freedom of creative expression is a valuable act whether or not I agree with its content. And assuming that the artist's practice is ethical and not harmful, I do want to be a part of protecting their ability to do that. Is there nothing that you would wish to protect about the work and the ability to do the work?

[JEMMA]

All I'm saying is that the idea of protection in our industry, in our industries, is not rooted in the kind of protection that maybe I would think of when I think about my relationships with my loved ones. It's rooted in property, it's rooted in land, it's rooted in all of these things. And I'm not trying to abstract this, I think these questions about what protection really means in our industry are especially relevant right now, given everything happening in the world and in our industry, and I think that's why we're here. So, when we say protection – and think about what's being protected in a contract with a filmmaker – it's not "protection" that's used, "exploitation" is the word that's used. So I don't know, all I'm saying is, take a step back and think: "Okay, am I really doing what I think I'm doing? And if I'm not, how have I suddenly ended up in this place which is so not aligned with my values?" And usually you can find a document that helps you to find out why. No, really. Usually you can see, there's all these words that I've been using, like "exploitation" and "submission" – all these patterns of interaction I've been participating in, because that's how we always are. And we can be differently with each other, but then we'd have to do work that we don't usually think of as our work, you know, the relational work of connecting with people differently, beyond hierarchy and transaction.

That relational work has been so necessary during this time, because people have been completely tenderized, and hopefully people have been softened, or hardened perhaps as well. And I think maybe going back to why I said no to the invitation [to the Symposium], and why I then said yes, and part of the reason why this convening happened, is because of the filmmakers withdrawing their films [from IDFA 2023]. And the people who took their films out were really angry, and really hurt, and I don't think there is any architecture in a film festival, or even in a cultural institution, to hold that. That [emotion] is a very valid, ordinary reaction that I think should be normalised right now, that reaction. But yet all I've seen in the last ten months is everyone trying to stabilize that emotional response, and just act as if that was extraordinary, and how we should be is like this, sitting very calmly and talking. I just think that, actually, this response to emotion is a failure [to properly engage with the enormity of suffering we are witnessing], and these are supposed to be spaces of gathering, right? So, then, those emotions, and expressions of political commitment, and commitment to each other, where is the space for them? I talked to people before I arrived, and people are very angry still. They're angry that the statement [on the festival's website did not explain why certain films had been withdrawn. Why was the statement not changed? Who is this for? Who is this space for if that can't be changed? Through the deep feeling, you're talking about protecting people's work, people's work comes from their humanity, from their feeling. So shouldn't that be protected first, before the product that they provide for us to consume is protected?

[TABITHA]

By their work, I mean their capacity to work, their ability to work. It's a semantic point, but it's the ability to protect their ability to make work.

[JEMMA]

And this is part of that. Right?

[TABITHA]

Right.

[JEMMA]

This is part of the protection then, the ability to make work, because honestly, who wants to make work right now? I don't know. I question it every day. Everyone has a desire to make work, but who can function in that way...

[TABITHA]

I agree that some people can't continue with their usual practice, and say, "This work must be put aside, because I must do something different," but other people say, "I must work because these are the only tools I have to express this inexpressible thing."

Instead of having this convening where everyone is processing, what would a convening look like to, to really address the fact that there has been this breach of trust, or this failure of relation, or to consider not just repairing, but reorient what we do so that we can hold this.

[JEMMA]

It's a contradiction that people are facing right now. So, yes, there is a desire to express in a certain way. I have that desire too, lots of people in this room have that desire. But people that are engaged in activism right now, engaged in paying attention to what is happening in the world, in all the different ways – Gaza being only one, but being a huge one that people's attention is on – especially as visual people are fighting that desire, the skills that they have, and then attending to a real-world absolute catastrophe. We talked about intention and practice, but how can you close that gap of dissonance in this work? I think that's what people are speaking to. And that's what they were trying to do when they took their films out of IDFA and Berlinale. And, people now feel like they're being punished for that, rightly or wrongly, maybe they're wrong to think that. But if there is that feeling of mistrust, then how is that being repaired? So instead of having this convening where everyone is processing, what would a convening look like to really address the fact that there has been this breach of trust, or this failure of relation, or to consider not just repairing, but reorient what we do so that we can hold this? Because it's not like the

world is getting better, right? It's not like suddenly this period will end and everything's going to be fine again.

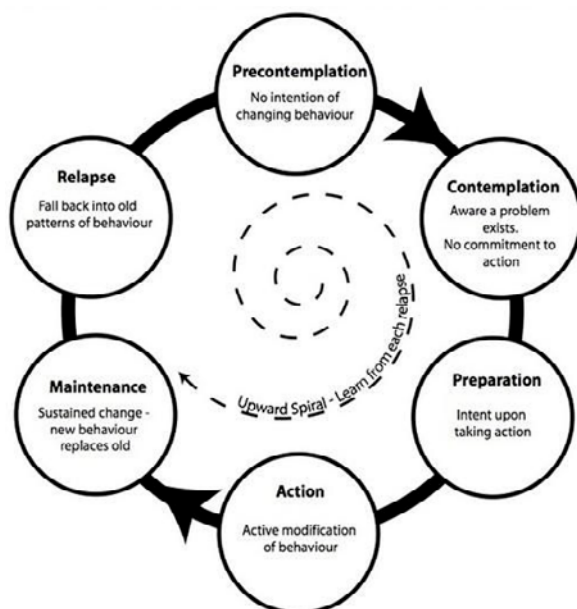
[TABITHA]

I'm glad we're having this conversation and want to open up the room, It feels important to process together – even with disagreement.

We talked earlier about moving from a “safe space” to a “brave space.” This moment is about embracing complexity and letting you decide the conversation.

[JEMMA]

There are lots of models of change, which are really interesting. And obviously, as organizations, you'd have a theory of change. But this one is really embodied.



The reason why I wanted to show it is this is the kind of thing that therapists would use with someone that's trying to stop smoking, or change a habit that they no longer want to have. At each stage, this is how prepared someone might be for the change that they want to make, and at each stage, there are different supportive actions that you can take. Usually, the supportive action for something like *pre-contemplation* or *contemplation*, where there's a lot of ambivalence about whether you want to make the change or not, would not be the same supportive actions that you would take if someone was in *action* or *maintenance*.

And the reason why I wanted to show you this is so that it might shine some light on why some people don't want to participate in certain spaces, or why your best efforts might not seem like very much at all to some people. Because if you're already in an action or a maintenance stage of doing something, making a change, you feel like you're making a change in

the world. And someone, or an institution, or an organization, who's actually quite ambivalent about making that change – because actually they're okay with it, because it serves them – they're going to have completely different activities that are going to support them to be in that stage.

So one of the things when you're in this contemplation, pre-contemplation stage, is that you do a lot of consciousness raising to support that person. So, like in *this* space, we're talking about it, we're thinking about it, we're reflecting. It's not necessarily very interesting when you're in a maintenance and action stage, because you already know that, you've been through it. And I think that gap [between those in the contemplation or pre-contemplation stage, often institutions, and those in the maintenance and action stage, often artists and activists], that mismatch, is one with which we need to reckon. One of the reasons that that mismatch exists is because the ambivalence is not that you're getting ready or that you're in pre-contemplation. The ambivalence is cooked into the system because there is no reason for it to change. It serves a certain group of people. So yeah, I just wanted to show a very practical example.

One of the reasons that that mismatch exists is because the ambivalence is not that you're getting ready or that you're in pre-contemplation. The ambivalence is cooked into the system because there is like no reason for it to change. It serves a certain group of people.

[RESPONSES FROM ROOM]

I come from a place, from places, where a lot is forbidden and where thankfully documentary cinema is still considered a threat. So, whatever happens, making films really matters, really makes a difference. And showing them is also very meaningful. I come from a place where we have often invented the spaces where we show them, the festivals where we show them. And perhaps what you are asking for is not change, but rather for reinvention. Maybe we need to reinvent where we show films, and it needs to be very small. It needs to be within our reach. I have a double life in arts and in film, and I mean, if film festivals are complicated, you should think about museums... these heavy buildings, often corporatist or colonial, like, real colonial legacies. They can't move, they can't change, they can't reinvent themselves.

[JEMMA]

Thank you so much. My master's is in cultural heritage, and so I did a lot of this "heavy museum" thinking, I think that's where this understanding of how this structure replicates itself also comes from. But the "gathering" piece, I've been thinking about that a lot, that we need skills that aren't actually practiced in a film festival. When you gather people around, when you're for instance creating an independent cinema space in the way that you're describing, you need to pull in favours, and you need to work together. And you can't just defer all the time to someone above; you have to figure it out yourself. And so when these conflicts happen in these spaces that say they're spaces of gathering, then that gap is really felt, isn't it? Because we're just like, "Oh, I have to talk to the board, the board will tell me what to do." And that's actually a relational failure among us. But those spaces are fewer and fewer, and one of the reasons why they're fewer and fewer is because festivals take up so much space. So, I agree with you, I think small gatherings where we come together, where we give our films for free. Those spaces of circulation are so valuable, because you get to practice to be together.

How do we organize disagreement?

[SPEAKER]

Thank you so much, both of you. A lot of thoughts come to mind, and I want to say the one thing I'm obsessively now thinking about, and that is that war imposes an insensitivity towards nuances. We start seeing things in binary: us and them, enemy or friend, etc. on the basis of very clear descriptions of who is – like, I'm also one of those millions of people who grew up under dictatorship where the Secret Service actually studies you on the basis of whether you are *positive* or *negative*. So, "You are either with us or against us," in another way. But then it all comes with big slogans. And it doesn't matter if you really agree with the slogan or disagree or have an opinion, what matters is that you just repeat it. Because repeating it is your act of submission to the system. And to me, this is what I'm always scared of.

To me, there is something here that I find necessary to think about: How do we organize disagreement? How do we acknowledge that we do not need to fully agree and repeat after each other, or parrot the same positions, in order to be caring, to be in solidarity together, to be respectful together, and appreciate that nuance is not life or death, is not zero and one, that there is a range here and that we can actually find tools, instruments of living through disagreement in a way that is enriching rather than the disagreeing person being just a shithead.

[JEMMA]

I think that what you're talking about is being able to withstand contradiction, of which that is a capacity that we need to grow, for sure, as humans, because the world is a contradictory place and people behave in

contradictory ways, against and for their values. The somatic work that I do is absolutely not about fixing people. It's about being more aware of what you care about in the world and then living your life alongside that. This is work that many of us don't do because we are in systems where we're taught to care about certain things, and taught to value certain things. And then we realize if we are racialized in a certain way, if we inhabit a certain class position or whatever, that actually those values aren't in line with our own thriving. So it's about making choices and about understanding why you're making the choices that you're making and being able to make them more autonomously and with more choice for everyone, essentially. It's definitely not about fixing people or therapizing people or anything like that.

But if there is a sense – which I am told every day by people that there is – that there's a shared set of value systems that we all kind of adhere to, then how can we get better at meeting that and also acknowledging that we're not actually there, we're not living our value systems as we say that we are. So how do we get there? Everyone is in different places needing different support to get there, because we all inhabit different positions. And the other thing about these frameworks is that they think through how we are shaped by the environments that we're in. And as we are shaped by the environments, we take on conditioned tendencies, things that we don't even notice anymore that we just do habitually. And sometimes it's people that *aren't* in those environments, aren't in a position of having been conditioned, that show us what we're doing.

[TABITHA]

Jemma, thanks so much for being here today. And thanks to you all for listening, that was meaty, thank you.

[06] Conversation 2: between Orwa Nyrabia and Mohanad Yaqubi

INT. DOCUMENTARY PAVILION – AFTERNOON

[In the Podium Hall of Het Documentaire Paviljoen in Amsterdam's Vondelpark, on a late morning of a sunny summer day. A mixture of couches and chairs is spread around to evoke a 'living room' atmosphere. On a small stage, two chairs are placed. Mohanad Yaqubi and Orwa Nyrabia take seats, dressed casually, smiling and whispering to each other while symposium participants are settling in their seats. Around 40 are in the room, including two note-takers. Orwa picks up his microphone from a side table]

[ORWA NYRABIA]

One of the very interesting effects stemming from these days that we are spending together here, is that I have no performance in me anymore. You know, usually I would hold the microphone, stand on stage and come up with something smart to say, but I think this kind of process is pretty disarming and it's not that kind of talking anymore, is it? So, Mohanad Yaqubi is a filmmaker, an artist, a scholar, and Mohanad has been, for years now, engaged in the most committed and continuous way, with the efforts of the Palestine Film Institute. Since before it was founded, actually. He was involved in the precursors towards founding it, and then directly founding it, trying to find its shape and form, until today. And this is a history that precedes the crises that prompted us to come together to talk now. This is a history that is the reality of the past... How many years?

[MOHANAD YAQUBI]

Seven, eight years now.

[ORWA]

Seven, eight years now. And we can maybe examine this together with him to try to see what happened, and how we got here, but in context. Because as we agree – or at least I hope we can agree – history did not start last year in October. I think the friendship that brings us together here actually grew at IDFA, in large part, way before I was working for IDFA. We used to meet here in this place, and also in Cannes, where you had a tent with very few giveaways...

[MOHANAD]

Yeah. Sheffield maybe once as well.

[ORWA]

And now here we are. So, I will start by asking you... Why are you here? Why did you say yes to the invitation to come?

[MOHANAD]

Thank you, Orwa, and it's a pleasure to be here again. I don't think this is our first talk, we've done other talks together before at IDFA. And yeah, it's a bit strange. It's very important to remember that I don't work for an official institute, since many people here are representing institutions. I'm trying to help other filmmakers feel supported, and to understand what's going on from the side of industry. And it's not a mission. For me, when I started making films, I just made films. I made maybe 10 short films that nobody ever saw, then I realized that, yeah, one needs to have an understanding of how the other side works, and to build up one's own distribution. It was very Marxist in the idea of seizing your own tools, and pushing to go out and get out, rather than waiting for somebody to come and take you in.

So, this is where I started doing a lot of work with filmmakers. And my personal experience is that I didn't graduate from a film school, I'm a mechanical engineer. When I started working in film, it was within a collective that was called Idioms Film. And that's it, it was a collective, we were eight people learning everything from each other. I was more into editing, other people were more into filming. I was carrying a tripod, I was learning how to do grading, how to do the budget with others... It was all with the objective to learn.

After that, when I went to study at Goldsmiths in London, that's when I learned of militant filmmaking by name. This was how militant filmmakers, filmmakers who were joining revolutions and social change movements, this was their way of making films, which indicated several different things about what our cinema is actually like today: there is a social realist film industry, which comes from the East camp, and there is the educational film industry, which comes more from the US and which is more about the individual being part of the machine for the purpose of producing. I'm bringing this into the conversation just to comment on how the industry, from my perspective, is structured, and who is talking to who, and who represents what.

And this is connected to my research on militant cinema, Palestinian militant cinema. I like to tell this story... Many people might know that when I went to study in London, Rachel Moore was a lecturer there. She talked about Third Cinema and the discussion between whether it is Third World Cinema, or a distinct Third Cinema, and so on. And then she started to mention many Palestinian productions, Mustafa Abu Ali, Hani Jawharia, the relationship with Jean-Luc Godard, the relation with Alvarez, all of this. And I was sitting there, at age 26 or 27, a guy coming from the Middle East who wanted to study cinema, and suddenly realizing that my own history is a big part of this, and a big part of initiating this kind of cinema history.

So that's where I got fascinated by the practice, and I made a film about it. Then in 2018 I was with my friend Rashid – God bless him – who was going to buy a falafel sandwich in Ramallah. I was also at the falafel shop, and he told me, "Listen, the Ministry of Culture called me and they want to do something in Cannes. Would you be interested?" The year prior we had done something related, bringing a delegation for Cannes Docs. I was like, "Yeah, let's do that. But we do it as what?" And that's when we started building up the Palestine Film Institute. Because they, Marche du Film at the Cannes Film Festival, just want a name when they're signing a contract – they said, "Who is signing the contract?" and we said, "Palestine Film Institute," but it's innocent. Well, it's not as innocent as it sounds, because there really was a Palestine Cinema Institute that was established in 1974, and it gathered and rallied and mobilized a lot of the film scene of the '60s and '70s around the Palestinian struggle, until '82.

Filmmakers who are part of PCI (Palestinian Cinema Institute) produced a huge number of films, many of which have been scattered until today. So we imagined a personal ambition about this, and we decided to think of a way to make an institute that would be a continuation of history. So it's not necessarily something about *now and here*. One of our missions, besides supporting filmmakers in presenting their projects and their films, is also to make a connection to history. So one of the primary objectives of the institute was the idea of preservation, and making a kind of a curation that is both from the past and from the present.

I think Rasha Salti had the best comment about the 2018 pavilion... We had a pavilion in 2018 at Cannes; there was the Israeli pavilion, there was a Palestinian pavilion, there was a lot of tension. It was my first time being in an international setup where the geopolitical tensions were just in your face at all times. There were French snipers on top of buildings. When we had a party, the mayor of Cannes called, asking "Why am I hearing Arabic words?" and then you realize how right wing the mayor is, and like, there was a lot of stuff going on around this. And Rasha came, and she said: "This is the best celebration of Cannes 1968!" It was the 50-year anniversary, and many people came, like, old French filmmakers with big grey beards, saying "This reminds me of something."

At that moment, we felt we had something that was working, and that

we were kind of connecting histories, which is the main point of working within film institutions and the power of those film institutions. Previously we had all been spread out – I would go pitch at a festival and I would always see another two, three Palestinian filmmakers, colleagues, and we would always end up in the same bar. So we came up with the idea to gather ourselves in order to get accreditation for cheaper, and to maybe even organize to get some money since we would all be coming together anyway. We made a group to pretend to be an institution that could ask for funding. We were very much aware of the power of representation at that moment, and then it became very serious when people would ask us what our position was. That was 2018, and then we kept coming and going. At IDFA in 2018, we had a market. Adriek [van Nieuwenhuijzen, Head of IDFA Industry] was a big help with that, and many of the people who we love are here. Then came 2019, and we continued for five, six years until... what happened.

The Israeli war on the Palestinians that started after October 7, 2023 was a turning point for the PFI because suddenly there was a demand – it was as if the film industry remembered that there is Palestine. There were questions about positionality, and what our politics should be. We felt the need to re-educate through cinema, and that's when we came out with a program called *Unprovoked Narratives*¹. Even Jim Jarmusch shared it on Instagram.

It was important for us at a moment where everybody was kind of lost, and hearing from all sides “unprovoked attack! unprovoked attack!” and meanwhile the program that we had put together was entirely made up of films from Gaza made since 1971. So we had 12 films from '71 until today, talking about the same thing, which is all pre-October 7th and sees all of the same tactics of destroying homes, opening roads so the tanks can come in, all of the separation policies that have been imposed on the population... It's very evident in film, and I think that's where film is so powerful, because you can't lie in film. You can lie in narratives, but you can't lie in images. Images always tell what is going on. This moment also showed us a lot about who is telling what, and the importance of knowing what you are seeing, because I realized at that moment as well that people don't really see. We don't, as audience. We don't see what is on the screen, we see only what we understand. The process of seeing or watching is really a process of understanding, and we understand according to our ideological gazes. It's not that what is on the screen means the truth, and this becomes very evident, because you can see the same film that, after October 7th, now has a totally different meaning. Suddenly, people are able to see things other than what they had been seeing up until now, and on the flip side, people stopped seeing things in films after October 7th that they had previously thought were in those films.

Within this atmosphere was the moment for this concept of micro cinemas, where a lot of young people were screening these films, and this is why we

¹ www.palestinefilmstitute.org/en/unprovoked-narratives

made sure that these 12 films were available online to download. There was a direct need for a response. It was a moment where we had to operate more like a political party, rather than a film institute, or being able to think with the objectivity or subjectivity of a film institute. We couldn't operate within this framework anymore because of the feeling that we are now representing this place that's been under attack, under genocide. We knew what the drill was, but we didn't expect the extension to be this long.

I think that's where film is so powerful, because you can't lie in film. You can lie in narratives, but you can't lie in images. Images always tell what is going on. This moment also showed us a lot about who is telling what, and the importance of knowing what you are seeing, because I realized at that moment as well that people don't really see.

And then it so happened that we were here at IDFA in November 2023, with all of this complexity. I mean, I was feeling from the beginning this heavy load and what the expectation might be, because other film festivals were canceling [their edition for the year, after the start of the war]. Cairo Film Festival, canceled. Carthage Film Festival, canceled. And I can't remember all the others, but there were cancellations of [some] festivals because they didn't really want to face the question. And that's when we felt that festivals are not simply a place to show films, they are a political space, and in a very direct way. They encompass a reaction, a reflection of what the state believes, and how much control the state has over it. Godard, for example, didn't only see Palestine as a place. It's an identity, and it's an identity for a whole moral structure of what you believe in. When you say "Palestine", we know what things you think about and what your position is on coloniality, and what your position is on neoliberalism. A lot of things come out of that.

So, for example, the El Gouna Film Festival in Egypt, which is run by a businessman, decided to go ahead because they are not controlled like the Cairo Film Festival. And they postponed, obviously, but they had more room for maneuvering. It reveals a lot about how we are dealing, and I think what happened since then, since IDFA till today, is that many have shown who they really are. As in, what are the real political faces – not of the people,

but of the institutes. I mean, we are here today because we're friends, and we are here in a safe place to talk about these things. But in other places, this is not the case.

I was on the train, on my way coming to IDFA last year, and I saw that there was this thing happening [the Pro-Palestine protest on the opening night of IDFA 2023]. I saw it on Instagram, like the everyone else, about the sign [the protestors held up] on the stage, "From the river to the sea." And keep in mind, I'm a survivor of documenta fifteen²³. Yeah, I had my project there at documenta fifteen, which was dealing with the connection to an archive we found in Japan about Palestinian cinema. We had thanked one of the filmmakers who helped us, Masao Adachi, and suddenly after five days in the news, the narrative was like: "Japanese Red Army taught Palestinian how to make bombs." That was the leap that was taken. So, with this experience in mind, and now looking at IDFA, I was wondering how you were going to deal with it. I was really feeling for Orwa and the team, wondering if you were ready to deal with the avalanche that I was sure was coming. Because concerning Western consciousness, Germany is the compass related to anti-Semitism discourses. So if they did that in Germany two years prior, I'm sure many people here were ready for the impending public attack. The minute you say or do anything around Palestine, context doesn't matter. Once the accusation is there, the way that the media responds is set. It was a very hard moment to watch, feeling that I knew what was going to happen and that I knew how you were going to play it.

And that's when we felt that festivals are not simply a place to show films, they are a political space, and in a very direct way. They encompass a reaction, a reflection of what the state believes, and how much control the state has over it.

[ORWA]

Of course, I needed to ask you to hop on that train about 10 times before you hopped on that train, Mohanad. I was writing you, "I need you here! I needed to consult you and I needed your mediation. Why are you not here yet?" But first, I have to talk about what matters the most from the survival angle. You skipped one point in your story. You cannot just tantalize and

² www.e-flux.com/criticism/477463/contested-histories-on-documenta-15

³ www.artnews.com/art-news/news/documenta-advisory-panel-subversive-film-tokyo-reels-censorship-1234639147/

mention the falafel sandwich that started all of this and not tell us how it was.

[MOHANAD]

I mean, as long as it's not a five-euro falafel, it's good. It was great.

[ORWA]

In all seriousness, I think it was a very special moment at IDFA. But to me, it also was a continuity to everything else that came before it. So in the way that I, with so much pressure and so much – of course, that was a very busy moment anyway – but on top of it all, and the months preceding that opening night... I always thought that there was a history of trust, that there was a background of years of built trust. And I did not have the right sensor to the level of pain and shock that everybody was in, which resulted in really threatening, or revealing, the fragility of that trust, and then breaking it all down in one second. And I must say, I, at the same time, acknowledge all responsibility for that. But at the same time, I must mention that I did not know how fragile it was, the trust. You know, I thought that we were relying on that history, and I confess that I was surprised by the size of the problem with regards to what happened at IDFA. Some colleagues here told me from the first second, "Brace for impact, tomorrow will be a big day." And I literally said to them, "Nah, not true." So yeah, that also is about one's own trust in the world, and also having that tested.

[MOHANAD]

These kinds of attacks have been happening for a while, and as a survivor of the documenta fifteen attacks, I am always surprised how institutions are not ready for this kind of attack. Not only regarding Palestine, but many other topics as well. We are now talking about the example of IDFA and Palestine because it's current, it's now, but this kind of thing reveals how institutions – film institutions but also in art and in the cultural world – they're not ready. And I feel like there is a structural problem in the relationship between the role of the institution and its mission of protecting the integrity of the filmmakers, and the integrity of the participants, if they can just leave them.

After documenta fifteen, I totally lost hope that my film *R 21 aka Restoring Solidarity* would screen in any European festival after it had been attacked for, like, three months, and I more or less decided that I would go South to screen it. And then suddenly I got a call from a programmer at IDFA who said, "I saw the film, I want it in the program." I was like, "Really, are you sure? Are you sure you wanna kill your career?" And this is somehow why I'm here now, because it's kind of like returning a favor. If you ask me why I am here, it's because you stood up with my film in a moment where it was hard to stand, and now I am also standing up for you when it's hard to stand here. This is also about positionality.

But at that moment – when there was an attack from the media on my film⁴⁵, and there were accusations that “IDFA is screening anti-Semitic films,” and quoting German media – even at that moment, I felt that the institution was not ready to protect us. That’s why we didn’t even respond to the media, because I felt like, well, is the team here ready to come with me in this response? Because once you start responding, you will get like 20 reviews after that, and then you will have to keep responding for another six or seven of these reviews. So were we ready? I felt like we were not ready, me personally, but also I felt that from the discussions we had then, that we should just let it go. But at least we accomplished the mission. We had the film saved from slander in this circle, but it comes around again. That happened in 2022, and then in 2023, they came back around for you.

[ORWA]

Very true, but I do want to say that I’m not sure about this point that institutions are not ready... I think that institutions do not even realize they need to be ready, and I think that there is a big difference there. I think that institutions – in many places, but let’s say in prosperous Western countries – are really much more relaxed to their experience over the past few decades, where things are much more moderated, mitigated, and where trouble or dispute or controversy is always happening in a different place far away. And there are many types of controversies that are obviously necessary to be prepared for, but others, not so much.

So I must have a bit of compassion here towards the fact of *not knowing*, and to say that such pain, such experiences, are transformative, and that now everybody knows they should be ready. Now, nobody can doubt, because I think this is about the difference in tempo, or the difference between where we are in our histories in different parts of the world. And to me, to my personal experience... I mean, I remember the first time I worked in Europe, I was continuously trying to learn to cool down. Because I couldn’t understand, for example, “What’s the problem that it’s five o’clock?...” That was not a part of my language. That was not something I understood. But then I learned to respect how things are done here.

[MOHANAD]

Yeah, and to eat cake and have coffee at five.

[ORWA]

Yes, right. But to me, this is about the encounter of cultures and mindsets. There is a dominant culture that today is having a moment of reckoning, of meeting the Other for the first time. In a way, meeting the Other that it colonized for centuries but didn’t meet. And now suddenly it is like, aha,

⁴ Yaqubi’s film *R 21* aka *Restoring Solidarity* was screened at IDFA 2022, following an attack on it earlier that year in documenta fifteen in Germany. Two articles appeared in Dutch press during the festival, one accusing IDFA of platforming anti-semitism, and another quoting German press accusing the film of anti-semitism. The festival’s opinion was to not respond.

⁵ niw.nl/foute-film-op-idfa/

Palestinians? Indonesians? et cetera. And in a way, this is about admitting that “we don’t know”. And to me, that is a continuation from a lot of good work.

Homi Bhabha is influential on me here, in the way that he speaks of the notion of *unknowability* and the notion that a connection starts from being modest and accepting that you will never know. That is, in a way, the starting point of standing against the theory of empathy in documentary film, for example. So, I do think that this requires some acknowledgement of where these different milieus are, and where different societies and different political social setups are located in their own histories. And to understand that sometimes transformation or trying to connect together requires a calm sitting down and talking together in a safe space. And sometimes, what can we do? We take a hit on the nose.

[MOHANAD]

And when this institution itself is not a safe space, that’s where it becomes a conflicted issue.

[ORWA]

Again, that comes to the foreground entirely, but also in a new light. You suddenly see it from a different angle that you didn’t necessarily see before. I want to ask you just to continue this exercise of safety, to tell us – and I could tell you too – about the personal toll of doing this work.

[MOHANAD]

Yes, the personal toll is heavy on many of us, I see that play out in many ways. For example, this year in the art school where I teach, usually we have 10% delays in submission of assignments. This year, we had 35% delays. And you can imagine that’s multiplied in all of the art schools, or any of the social sciences where people are kind of connected. And that’s a huge toll – I’m talking about my students who are really coming from, like, urban, middle class, little towns around Flanders who shouldn’t really care about what’s going on in the first place. And even they are affected, 35% of them, that when you speak to them, they say, “Too much is going on in the world, I can’t focus.” And imagine if you compare that toll to the one on someone like me personally, who had family in Gaza, who lost a house in Gaza, with many family members and friends, and the face of the place that you knew and grew up with, which are not there anymore.

And at the same time, always being forced to stand there and be representative. Like, every time there is a screening of a Palestinian film in Belgium, somebody will call and ask if I can come and speak about it. And it’s like, “Hey, that’s not my film.” But then it’s just about being there to give some kind of a political talk around it, and not feeling like I can’t say no because I feel it’s a part of the mission. I’ve been learning, I’ve been making films, I’ve been teaching, all in preparation for this moment. So when the moment comes, do I have the luxury of burning out?

So the toll is high, but at the same time, also being a part of it... I recently did an interview with *Télérama*, the weekly French culture magazine, I think they were conducting an interview about this specifically, and I said that for me, being, working, and having a structure like the PFI really saved my life from succumbing to the impact of this enormous toll, because this is the place where I can feel that I am adding to a body of work. Whether it's writing a statement or responding to a request of a National Film and Television (NFTS) student, for example, who is contacting the PFI to say that they are releasing a statement to support Palestinian cinema and to stop the complicity of film schools in the ongoing genocide, it's incredible. Like, NFTS, that's one of the schools that I wanted to study in. And now here they are, actually responding to what we've been dreaming, and with a recognition. So yeah, the toll is heavy. But at the same time, we can't complain. We don't have the luxuries of the First World. I don't have that possibility. Because the minute you rest, all that remains is the idea that all those people who died... you couldn't stop their death.

Maybe this is romantic, maybe this is over, but then when we work within structures where we are asked to respond, this is where we are responding. We were responding all the time, for example, to the Berlinale⁶ [Berlin International Film Festival] after IDFA. That also took a big toll on us. Because at the end of the day, we're humans. And we deal with humans, we don't deal with institutions. I wouldn't come to IDFA because I care about the institution. I come because there are people here. We drink together, we speak together, we see each other away from the structure. This is something important. So, we came to IDFA. We had this breakdown. And we saw the emotional impact on the rest of the team, not only me, but the rest of the team, the filmmakers who were working here. The energy was totally down. And then Berlinale sent us word that they wanted to give us five accreditations – they usually give us these every year for the Palestine Film Institute – and we had to write saying no, that we couldn't trust them in taking care of the safety of our filmmakers. If a filmmaker comes from Palestine, they don't know anything about what's going on in Europe. If they come from Palestine, wearing their keffiyeh, doing what any Palestinian should be doing, they will be arrested. I said, "Can you guarantee me today they're not going to be arrested?" And I told them, "Once you can answer this question, we can talk." And they never got back to me, obviously. But another point of impact is that both before and after October 7th, the fact that there are many different constellations of filmmakers who are trying to find their way away from institutional structures while still trying to produce.

I meet young people who have a million and a half views for a short film that is online on their YouTube channel. These people don't really care to send their films to IDFA, or send their films to Berlinale, and this is a growing demographic. And there are people telling us that they want their films to be on our platform, the PFI platform⁷, because that is meaningful

⁶ www.screendaily.com/news/berlinale-workers-criticise-festivals-response-to-gaza-conflict/5190476.article

⁷ www.palestinefilmstitute.org/

for them and because they want to control their own way of distribution. It begs the questions: why are we pushing, why are we still here? I always ask myself, why are we still here? Why are we not working by going to the South? We had a beautiful experience this year going to the Durban Film Festival, and it was the first time that the filmmakers in the delegation didn't feel such a toll. They were there speaking freely, finding the solidarity they need. They didn't need to justify their position as oppressed. And when you say "apartheid", everybody nods, they understand what apartheid is. The toll comes from other things. When you come to IDFA, where you have to explain where you're coming from, what is going on, why you should be supported, why a film is important, there is a lot of explaining that you need to do in order to contextualize things within a Western setting, whereas in other places, you don't need to do that.

So we ask ourselves, why are we trying to save institutions, "we" the PFI, as Palestinian filmmakers? Or are we here trying to help friends, and to find an image of unity and a way that we can move forward? Because I don't think the world can continue operating within this system that we are in. Somebody is on top, seeing the industry in a certain way, while the rest of the industry... In Belgium itself, there are 1,200 students graduating as filmmakers every year, and 70% of them don't know what IDFA is. And that doesn't mean that they're not making films. They're actually grouping together, they're making films, they're inventing structures, they're traveling somewhere else. So then, where should I stand? When we are meeting as the PFI, I always question what the priorities are.

Is it not a process of discussion and negotiation, and mutual compromise?

[ORWA]

I don't know. I understand what you're saying, but I really don't know if that's [the questioning of the value of institutions, such as film festivals] something to think about further in this way. Because it's not up to me, and I think neither up to you, to decide what matters today. We cannot suggest that an institution that doesn't agree with you – and that certainly is not IDFA – would say, "Yeah, but there are other countries too. There are also other disasters in the world. We don't have to make all of them happy. If you're not happy, go to your YouTubers." And then where would we get? That's not an experience that would carry us further.

Mohanad, I want your help in trying to find an answer to the following question: Is it not a process of discussion and negotiation, and mutual compromise? Because we always find ourselves in places where we agree on a lot, but from one side or the other side, a wrong word added at the end of a sentence can ruin everything you have ever done in your entire life. And that did happen, at some point, and it happened at the opening of

IDFA in 2023 too. It was this feeling of, “Hey, we’re with you. But you just used the slogan that, in our context, makes a step over a line that we are not sure we ourselves want to step over with you⁸.” And when we [IDFA] responded to that with the first statement⁹, we crossed a line with a few words that were, to colleagues and dear friends, way beyond the line of what they could accept. In a way, if I strip it down bare, it really becomes about four words here and four words there that crossed lines on top of a voluminous mutual ground. But then, it does become about these words now. You see what I mean? And I’m not saying that those words are not important on either side. I’m just saying that there is something here about the process of discussing and negotiating versus what I’m calling *war mode*, where it is all break-bone. You know, like, “You say the word, or else I break you,” you know? “Or else it’s over.”

[MOHANAD]

But it’s exactly what happened with us at documenta fifteen. The media wanted us to say that Japanese screenwriter and director Masao Adachi doesn’t have any connection with the project [Tokyo Reels], to denounce any connection with the Japanese Red Army [as Palestinians, and as artists]. And we said: “Impossible.” We can’t denounce our history. I can’t say that Adachi or the Japanese Red Army don’t have anything to do with our project. The collection itself, it’s not connected to them, it’s not their archive. But the idea that somebody feels entitled to come and tell you, because of their white fragility, that they are not accepting that you are saying certain things... it’s like, I mean, go fuck off, you know?

It feels like taking a stand, but I understand we’re in different positions – I’m part of a collective called Subversive Film. So you are expected to do that kind of thing [take a position] in these situations. I wouldn’t throw friends under the bus, not in that sense. But how to lessen the impact and harm of doing that [holding others accountable] in this kind of context? You know, that’s what I mean. What I see from my position – where I see other filmmakers’ standing [filmmakers in the IDFA 2023 film selection] – it feels like they were thrown under the bus twice: first when they were not allowed to say whatever they wanted to say [by IDFA’s first statement denouncing the slogan “From the River to the Sea”], and then again when they were removed from the website [following their withdrawal from the program]. I know there was a technical issue, or whatever, but it’s a very hard thing when you have friends whose films were there, and suddenly everyone’s checking the IDFA website, and they are not there anymore – because they decided to show their solidarity with Palestine. That was very hurtful. It’s a question of what we’re here for today, whether we are able to bridge the

⁸ At the time, the slogan “From the River to the Sea” was recently banned in Germany. Although the Netherlands’ supreme court ruled against criminalizing the slogan, it was at the center of heated statements in the Dutch parliament. These high political stakes made the use of the slogan very sensitive, and also made the activists insist on their right to use the slogan.

⁹ Following the IDFA 2023 opening night, IDFA published a statement distancing itself from the slogan “From the River to the Sea” while applauding the activist’s right to protest.

gap and build back this trust or not. Because Berlinale did that too, other festivals too, because each one influences the others.

[ORWA]

I, of course, don't know what happened exactly with other institutions, but I think this is a very interesting, small, micro case study that I do believe is very important. My view of this is: Filmmakers withdrew from the festival. Technically speaking, the first response was acknowledging that we cannot sell more tickets to these events that will not happen, so the film pages went down; they were unpublished on the website. Filmmakers immediately put forth a list of demands that seemed, at the time, impossible for us to meet. We were asked to publish the filmmaker statements on the film pages and send them to all those who bought tickets. How to immediately republish the filmmaker statements on the website and email them to all those who bought tickets for the canceled screenings was, at the time, simply a very scary request, that it would make an already volatile situation burst even further. It also was not easy to do at the moment, technically, and in the middle of an ongoing festival. But then we did discuss internally, and we decided that these films should come back on the website with a clear note that refers to the context of how and why they withdrew, along with the filmmaker statements, et cetera. And that did not happen somehow, I must admit, and I apologize to all of them.

Who is eligible, who is able to
withdraw? Who is able to refuse?
And how much are we putting
restraints on filmmakers who cannot
withstand these restraints?

[MOHANAD]

This [republishing the film pages] would be the first thing to do, now.

[ORWA]

It just didn't happen yet, although we decided to do it and we did discuss it, and we wrote the text... So this, including the subconscious act of forgetting, is quite questionable on our side, yes. I must admit that I can't defend it. It's just bad. And I do think it's very important, and is part of a transformation process that is needed. Like usually, if someone were to withdraw their film, why would they want their film page on the website, you know? So taking the film's page down is what would be the usual. But then the filmmakers this year taught me that that is questionable, telling us: "Why not keep the pages and publish the statements? You have a responsibility."

[MOHANAD]

Yeah, you have a responsibility.

[ORWA]

And, after many discussions and serious reflection, IDFA's choice and decision – if we want to talk about the word that I'm becoming more and more allergic to – is to have *integrity*. If we want to talk about the integrity of the curatorial process, then these films were indeed selected. There is value in acknowledging that.

[MOHANAD]

Yes, that's very important. We [filmmakers who were at IDFA 2023] had this discussion as well, and it reflects the state of the industry – who is eligible, who is able to withdraw? Who is able to refuse? And how much are we putting restraints on filmmakers who cannot withstand these restraints? By its nature, the industry extracts your political wellness by this contractual system. Many of the filmmakers wanted to withdraw, but they don't own their own rights; their film rights are determined by their distributors. Some of them even had films at the Docaviv, [the Tel Aviv International Documentary Film Festival], and in not wanting to be a part of Docaviv, found that their hands were tied. This is something which is not the case with other kinds of artists.

This is also the existential question for many of the makers who are reflecting on what is going on, this notion of, "Why am I making something that will not even reflect me? Would it not be better just to create low-budget films that are closer to what I believe, and to maintain my ability to maneuver in a politically changing world, so that I am empowered to make it more effective? Or do I just want to be a part of a system..." Because again, you make a film with a budget of one million, and then it's watched by 10,000 people, while somebody else is making something for, I don't know, 5,000, and it's watched by millions of people. So what is the standard here, really? In a world where people are becoming more politically conscious, and where people are becoming more involved, they also want to have more power in this. And if you don't follow these trends, it will become another structure of an archive that's like... You know it's there, but nobody cares about it.

[ORWA]

Yeah, but we're getting stuck in one tunnel that we're looking at, because I keep repeating that to myself: what happened at IDFA 2023, in my opinion, was a necessary and good learning. Profoundly. It was just way too expensive. But, still, it was a good thing. We all went through a difficult challenge of learning, of thinking, of discussing, and that was uncomfortable, and that was painful, and that was very problematic and costly. But still, if I look now, Mohanad, this is a festival that started with a Free Palestine banner on stage, and an Artistic Director applauding it next to it, and ended with about 40 people speaking up in the award ceremony, 32 of whom made very clear statements supporting the Palestinian people and amplifying what's happening with regards to the genocide in Gaza

today. And all of this was also the image of that edition of the festival. We had all of these difficult moments in discussing what happened, and the statements, and so on, and this resulted in a festival that I think broke world records in how many times the phrase “from the river to the sea” was said on stage. So I think in a way, you also can see this as a transformative process. All of that pain was happening, but at the same time, there was clear expression, and it happened. This point is also important. I don’t want to downplay the problem or the misjudgments and the missteps. They are very important. But they are also one part of this transformative journey. And I do believe in transformative journeys.

[MOHANAD]

Of course. But, what do you [as a festival] offer now? Besides having a premiere at IDFA and circulating and doing all of the business of industry, what else do you offer the filmmakers in terms of the political question? That is very important today for the rest of the filmmakers who are submitting and working. And if you don’t do this, I feel we are going into a 2024 crisis.

[ORWA]

Absolutely, but that’s not even about IDFA. That’s certainly about all of us.

[MOHANAD]

For sure.

[ORWA]

I do believe, Mohanad, that a recalibration is necessary. Because in a way, what were we offering before 2023?

[MOHANAD]

A safe space, maybe?

[ORWA]

Yes, it was a safe space in the sense that people felt they could stand on a stage at IDFA and say controversial or non-consensus opinions, and that our audience and our team and our staff and our communication were embracing and supporting that. And then came this surprise test (for me). And to me, what do we offer? A recalibrated version where we learn from this, where we try to rebuild that sense of safety and support. But learning from this revealing moment in which we felt we were suddenly betraying ourselves, because this is also about us. From our viewpoint as staff, as a team, as an organization, it was very painful to be seen as censoring people. It is not a small thing to get a flood of comments being considered antisemitic online, whilst at the same time being accused by others of censoring Palestinian filmmakers, activists and their right to freedom of speech/protest, not least given our own commitment to Palestine and being in solidarity with Palestinians. There’s nothing positive about that experience. That is absolutely a difficult experience.

[MOHANAD]

And also, in an atmosphere like this – where you're in a city where the encampment movements are likely to restart in November, and where there are other institutions in this city taking much more progressive positions than this institution – how are you going to maneuver this? That's a lot to maneuver if there is no political stance or something that you are offering to the filmmakers in order to contribute to the bigger discussion happening in the city. Okay, IDFA is international, but IDFA is also a reflection of Amsterdam, which is really changing. You see it from the academic side, you're seeing other institutions that are opening up... How are you going to say: "I'm in tune with you and I'm going to make a safe space."

Safety is not a totem. It is about being together. It is about accepting that we don't have control, but that together we don't have control, rather than being arrogant about it.

[ORWA]

I want to go back to your notion of First World and Third World. We don't ask this question in the Third World. This is a very First World question.

[MOHANAD]

Yes, exactly.

[ORWA]

"How will you guarantee that you will stop the movement of history and an entire society that is facing very difficult questions that it doesn't know how to act towards while so many people are angry in opposing directions? How will you guarantee that I can come and be myself and say whatever I want and that you will protect me from the whole world shaking around us?" These are questions by filmmakers that I am hearing now, being addressed to a film festival or a film organization.

In a way, this is about being together in this moment. It is not about guaranteeing anything. It's about me [as a hosting organization] telling you [the filmmaker], "I'll be next to you." That's what I can offer. I can tell you that I'll be there, with all of my weight, that we will be there for you, and we will be there together. And if we get into difficulty, we will not throw you out and run away. We will not hide away, we will be next to you and we will take it together. This is what I would like us to offer. So it is not about saying that we found the protocol that will disconnect our space from the world, no. The world is welcome and the world is chaotic and it is problematic. And safety is not a totem. Safety is not a totem. It is about being together. It is

about accepting that we don't have control, but that together we don't have control, rather than being arrogant about it.

[MOHANAD]

A very dystopian vision.

[ORWA]

No, I don't think so. I honestly don't think so. I think it is very arrogant to look at the world shaking up today, and to think of myself as having control over it, that would be arrogant – I'm talking about my position, here. So I think there is something about the basic sense of togetherness, of solidarity, and saying that we believe people have the right to express themselves freely, and that we will stand there next to them... And that if they come under threat, that we will be there together and they will not be alone. That's the safety I can speak of, and that's how I believe we ought to work.

[MOHANAD]

As the PFI, we didn't want to leave any ambiguity in our demands hanging according to some words. That's why we felt very compelled – not only in relation to what is happening today, but also in general and on the request of many filmmakers – to ask ourselves how we should proceed. And that's why we came out with a code of conduct, with the Industry Protocol in Times of Genocide¹⁰. This came out of a three-month writing process, with people reflecting on what happened at different film festivals since October 2023. It's on the website of the Palestine Film Institute where you can read more, but I will just read the demands we ask from film institutions and film festivals, which we feel are important to address. Not only in just saying it now between friends, but for it to be addressed by institutions. And it's not about one, it's not about all of them, it's about the steps that we can take towards making us all feel a bit safer.

It's important to state that the International Court of Justice ruling was very important in shaping the language of the code of conduct. And after July 18, 2024, when it declared Israel's occupation of Palestine illegal, and declared Israel guilty of apartheid: "The PFI calls on the film industry to respect the international regime of human rights by severing ties with Israeli institutions that are complicit in these crimes." This call was articulated into action points, outlining the PFI demands that film institutions and film festivals can implement. Regarding freedom of speech: "Defend the freedom of speech of Palestinian filmmakers and their supporters." And in this one, we could even delete the word "Palestinian" and just say "freedom of speech for anyone and their political positions." Regarding the protection from censorship and aggression: "Provide protection and public defense to those censored, defamed, or attacked for their public opinion and public support of Palestine and the Palestinian people's rights." It's an obligation, this has to be part of the mandate of any cultural institute. Regarding the support of Palestinian filmmakers, this is

¹⁰ www.palestinefilm.institute.org/en/industry-protocol

related to: “Sponsor delegations of Palestinian filmmakers by extending funding and logistical support.” Don’t take it for granted that Palestinians or any people from such destroyed places can just be here to tell you what’s going on. You have to reach out and bring them to you.

Regarding severing collaboration and bonds with institutions or individuals complicit with the Israeli state: “Adhere to the guidelines of Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement,” – this took a lot of discussion, but at the end of the day, we feel BDS is the framework that has been working for 20 years, and it’s actually based on the anti-apartheid framework of South Africa, which worked. We don’t need to re-invent the wheel – “...as well as the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI).” Regarding ethical funding, which I feel is very important and is also something that concerns us both institutions and individuals: “Refuse philanthropy and donations from corporations, foundations, funds, institutions, or individuals enabling and/or profiting from the occupation and genocide of the Palestinian people.”

These are minimum demands. I don’t know exactly how we’re going to operate, but it’s very hard to go to a festival that is funded by a complicit bank, or funded by Elbit Systems weapons sales. Five years ago, it was hard to say these demands openly. Back then, we were happy to say, “Yeah, you can just leave us in this corner and we’ll just stand here and not cause any problems, yeah sure, put the snipers up there, we’re not going to...” But today, whether we are quiet or not, behaving or not, we are all targets, so let’s at least try to work towards something meaningful. I’m asking all the institutions attending here, not only IDFA, to adopt the PFI demands, to start working it through your institutional structures, because this would be a sign of an institutional change. And that’s what is required at this moment.

[ORWA]

I think it is lovely that you’re here and that we are not reading this only online, and that we can try to understand a little deeper what you would imagine to be an acceptable response to these demands. What is the form that you’re imagining? Is this about publicity, is this about certain types of actions? Is this about how high we score on this list, about doing every single item here? Help us see with you how this could look.

[MOHANAD]

If I saw that films withdrawn from IDFA last year were put back online again, with a reference to what happened, as the PFI I would put forth that there is credibility in the fact that you have not canceled or censored those filmmakers. For example, that is something that you have to show; I’m not saying all of them, but that is one point that would have great impact.

[ORWA]

I hope you have felt the sincere truth that I fully agree with this. I need to talk about this, because I’m not here to leverage. I just want us all

to be understanding this process, because when we get a list of demands as institutions – and again, I’m not talking about only IDFA – I want us to really think, see, and ask: do we not have still the space to sit down and talk, and see what’s good, and what’s possible? Because words like “adhere” and so on are a bit like what IDFA did wrong. It can feel a bit like “take it or leave it”. Is this a line of discussion that is open and possible to be a conversation between every institution and the PFI? Or is it a “you’re with us or against us” list?

[MOHANAD]

This is not sacred scripture, at the end of the day. We are not saying that these can all absolutely be done. We have, in the same protocol, points for filmmakers, and we do not say there that they must boycott. We’re not that zealous. We advise filmmakers that they don’t need to boycott festivals, but if they participate, to use their rights... To speak up, in front, at the Q&A, in the introductions. If they get censored, how should they gather people around them... It’s not something we need to negotiate. But in the Protocol’s title it’s written “in the time of genocide,” so we are just talking about in the time of genocide. Maybe a year from now, two years ago, this would not have made sense. We didn’t understand – we heard about what happened in 1948 to the Palestinians, but we couldn’t really imagine it. Now we are actually seeing it.

When we talk about culture, culture is not really a product. Sometimes we see it as a product, but in times of crisis, culture is a front.

[ORWA]

I want to make sure that this encounter, this symposium, gets your message to the fullest. That’s what I’m trying to do. I think that there is so much propaganda and manipulation with regards to understanding what BDS is, and what Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) says, and what we’re talking about here. And for transparency as to my positionality, I am proudly one of the first 100 people to have signed the very first PACBI statement years ago. And I have had, over the years, many difficult moments of conflict with different chapters of BDS because there were times that I disagreed with the way that their position was being interpreted. And to me, there is always this very thin line between pacifist action and stepping over to a place that is, to me, questionable in how clearly ethical it is. But here and now, after you’ve read this to us, what should we understand from adhering to the BDS guidelines? What does that mean from a film festival viewpoint?

[MOHANAD]

It means that you, as an institutional body, make sure that the funding you're getting will not affect your political stance. It's not about going directly to the BDS statement. Rather, get the spirit of this text, which is: Don't be in such a position, and, instead, try to build up your own structures. And we understand that this is not something that can necessarily happen in a year or two, but the whole economy of what we are sponsoring, and what is being sponsored, is shifting. I'm always giving the example of Belgium¹¹, but there was a big connection between the Palestinian movement and the climate movement, because the same companies who profit from settlements are the ones who are profiting from violating, or delaying, EU regulations regarding cars.

When we talk about culture, culture is not really a product. Sometimes we see it as a product, but in times of crisis, culture is a frontline. And protecting this frontline is more important than having sponsorship. And this is related to everyone, this is what makes an institution a cultural one. Reading in the invitation to this symposium, I could sense the conflict between an old world and a new world, that things are changing... But how do you move from one world to another?

It's really by changing our perspective on how we see things. That doesn't mean that we always see them in the same way – perspective changes. Maybe in five, ten, or 50 years, we will laugh at the idea that we even used to watch films or driving cars. But we have to be conscious, feeling grounded in the moment when we are actually doing something.

This is where many institutions got things wrong – they conflate the conflict between what the institution, as a corporation, is and has to do, and what the people within the institution have to do. That led to a lot of burnout, a lot of conflicts, and a lot of emotions. Because an institution serves its board, but it also has a mission to serve others, like its members.

[ORWA]

But that's history, that's humanity. We always need to make a big fuss about change.

[MOHANAD]

Of course. And we use the moment to make the change.

[ORWA]

That's who we are. We cannot just say, "Yeah, we've done it a million times, so we know by now, let's just surrender and move to the next plan." The next plan is always only the result of a negotiation. And that's how we operate as a species.

¹¹ Several Belgian universities joined an academic boycott of Israeli institutions and showed institutional solidarity by establishing a distribution network for Palestinian filmmakers, called United Screens for Palestine: unitedscreensforpalestine.org/venues-and-partners/

[MOHANAD]

I want to read something, because I promised to respond to the closing statement yesterday, about the line “ask for everything”, which is from *Revolutionary Letter #19* by Diane di Prima. It reminded me a lot of another poem by her, from *Revolutionary Letter #2*, which also says a lot about my state of mind and can maybe answer this positionality question, and I would like to read it now. She wrote in this letter: “The value of an individual life, a credo they taught us to instill fear and inaction, ‘you only live once.’ A fog on our eyes, we are endless as the sea, not separate, we die a million times a day, we are born a million times, each breath, life and death: Get up, put on your shoes, get started, someone will finish.”

[07] Notes from participants: Biggest Takeaways

At the end of the symposium, participants shared their biggest takeaways – key reflections they hope to bring back to address in their institutions and to their practice and work:

The importance of evaluating how to work towards the creation of a safe space for dialogue, encounter with a set of guidelines able to set the parameters but also fluid and flexible enough to be able to take the needed steps to support a clear crisis such as Israel/Palestine.

We are all in this together and are stronger when we stand together. We can be even stronger if we join up more.

'Babylon is falling... do we help Babylon fall faster?' Yes. And loved the build on this – to notice what orgs are failing and which are sustaining.

Discuss the 'North Star' as a leading principle within our own institute.

Honesty is the best policy.

Make the change through practice.

Feeling of solidarity, support and understanding in the doc film industry.

An avoidance of putting individuals on pedestals.

The fragility of all kinds of institutions because of funding... government, corporate conditions and some willingness to change, resist, adapt.

Filmmakers at the center.

The need of implementing a deeper conversation on how the dichotomy and gap between the individual and the institutions can be better managed.

Someone wise suggested that we are here to 'refine our questions'. This is a notion I am taking back. How can we refine our collective intentions, visions, actions, in a more ethical, clearer way that truly reflects who we are and what we wish to offer?

Change(s).

Mission/values needs to be more like a contract or a constitution.

Are we willing to program films and other events that are for sure provocative, or do we feel self-censorship? These are questions we need to ask ourselves.

Challenge every existing metric of success. Ask 'why?' If it does not lead back to the articulated purpose, you need to change the metric or change the purpose.

Review and re-evaluate the value of fest/institute and use this to unite the team.

Avoid growth addiction.

Initiate film programs/sites with a group of likeminded activists to explore new ways of making film screenings occasions for assembly-community, communing.

A reminder we are first and foremost here for (our) filmmakers and to remain in true and open dialogue with them.

Prepare for the end of the legacy forms of documentary practice.

The most important takeaway for me is that I thought it was very important that the institution has a (or more) philosophical/principled starting points/intentions but more and more I realize that concrete operational measurements are (the most) important. To close the gap between philosophical and operational intentions.

To be able to distinguish between the 'I' and the institution/structure that has come into being through years of existence and understand why that's necessary and desirable.

The importance of the intersectional bridge between freedom of speech and social justice.

Be clear about in whose voice the institute is speaking. Explicit, even. Especially if the organization also celebrates diversity of thought.

We need to reinvent ways of practicing. As daughter of a Black woman filmmaker who has been fighting all her life and paid a high cost for her freedom, after these three days of exchange I think that dialogue is not enough. So I will act and propose to:

Mutualize films and practice with PFI and with Mohanad's school, or anyone interested.

Making links between my catalogue and political/colonization/feminism.

~~(Acknow)~~ Acknowledge more articulately and visibly the interdependency of curatorial practice.

Not all are open for change.

I appreciate honest outcomes based on actions.

Contribute to making safe space into brave space.

Secret publics are needed to continue this work, but they must not exist as silos. Understand or define and articulate your institutional voice — and accept it — or leave the institution.

Be as transparent and honest as possible when crisis comes.

Which business models do we want?

Choose freedom of expression, but articulate its social justice dimension.

Feeling of solidarity, support and understanding in the doc film industry.

There is uncertainty about the current and future role of institutions to bring about or adapt to the changes (that are needed) as well as how to address the power inequities that are intertwined with key structures and daily practices.

Openness, doubt, daring to take risks and fail if it derives from an honest effort to make things better and seek change. Because this is the moment.

The readiness to acknowledge and embrace a conflict rather than hide away from it.

Interdependent subjectivity.

'Culture is not a product, in times of crisis it is a front,' said by Mohanad.

Recalibration/reset of institutional models should have filmmakers ~~at~~ at the core.

We all feel like Davids fighting Goliath.

The necessity of knowing your 'North Star' and being clear about it to the outside world, 'why are we here'.

We need a clear purpose of existence that is outlined.

To defend your independence as a platform for free speech.

~~Community and,~~
Maybe we don't ever be ready, so...

Articulate your purpose as a guide to action, state it daily, close the gap between purpose and intention.

There is—on a personal level—strong commitment to and belief in solidarity, ideals and the value of culture/art/documentary filmmaking that motivates people to continue to invest their (emotional) labor despite discomfort, troubles and trauma.

'In times of crisis, culture is a front (not a product).' Yes. Would like to reflect with my team on this positionality—how we can take it up a gear. Doc society is political and plural. Beyond films, how can we better use our resources to uplift impacted communities and institutions in our field.

Leaders must recognize they are in a position of power. That cannot be everything to everyone.

There is a shared sense of ^{crisis} crises and the feeling that this is a transformative moment that requires rethinking and repositioning (of film festivals).

The urgent need for new institutional/organizational design that will allow for more collective power, courage, solidarity.

To start change incorporate different geopolitical realities.

The PFA initiative list.

[08] Notes from participants: What has not been discussed

At the end of the symposium, participants were invited to reflect on what was not discussed – unvoiced concerns, urgent questions, and critical conversations that still need to be had:

The place of filmmakers (artists) within an institution. We are working for them. We should think of how and what can we sustain creation.

*How do we see the future of our field?
And what are your proposals?*

What are the responsibilities of film and cultural organizations to artists and audiences?

Genocide, and what that means for artists.

We have partially discussed ways of coming together and initiating action together that could strengthen our commitment for change, taking more risks together, refining our intentions, but it would be good to discuss it more. While we are primarily here to ask questions, some concrete actions, steps, takeaways or suggestions which are formed collectively would be welcome too.

I feel that we, to a great extent, evaded the perspective of the audience that we are ultimately there for, and the importance of preserving an open space for democratic open dialogue at any point in history and especially now as so many forces are closing in on that space... So what are the measures to preserve this space?

Self-censorship.

We have discussed how the big tent might become as responsible as the small tent, but not whether the big tent needs to have other kinds of responsibilities as part of a shared ecosystem.

How does a place of disagreement look like?

- Concrete actions.
- We have not discussed the values we/ the institutions stand for.
- How to close the gap between intentions and practices?
- What could be new opportunities in these times of crisis.

Is it possible for a festival/ institute to be politically engaged by showing films (its curation) or are more outspoken statements needed to contribute to transformation?

The future of institutions. Is there another way or place to present films? The world has changed, so the way of watching films and consuming images. How can we get prepared? Example: Berlinale in 1970 was in chaos. The response was to create in 1971 'Forum' as a place for other Kinds of films.

How they may reinvent the parameters of meaning-making at their events. Blue sky thinking: Instead of Q&A with filmmaker and audience, organize 'curated publics' where different people are brought in connection, dialogue with each other in response to a communal viewing experience.

- Procedures of safety related to freedom of expression.
- Talk about Palestine as a cross point between moral and theory, past and future.
- The awareness or narrative-making machines that the film industry presents, and the historical responsibility of empowering perpetrators' narratives over victims and the oppressed.

For me, the place of money starts with positionality: a more or less clear (as clear as possible) positioning. Can, or must, an artistic institute be political without its art? Is the art not central in the political position? Is art the voice? Or is this not enough? Art makes us stand out from activism and politics and through art we can make a difference.

Collective solidarity among institutions or people in leadership positions who will be at risk if punitive actions, defamation, attacks happen, when a daring political action is undertaken. Does this symposium represent the 'seed' of a solidarity network?

The operational.

I feel that we did not fully address how an institution can actively bridge the gap between conceptualization and practice. Also, I feel that more time could have been spent on practical steps to take to fight against censorship of the Palestinian cause and rights. Perhaps I would have welcomed more time on the role of film education and how it is handled within institutions. There is an overall festival ecology that needs to be redesigned as for too long has ignored how the fundamental structure of the film industry is often informed by logic of exploitation of labor and management of power rather than focusing on a meaningful triangular exchange between markets, audience, and industry.

That film festivals are interstitial places (cheer out to Orwa for loving Bhabha 😊) by definition between the local and the global, changing the conditions under which meaning is made from film.

That an institution is not an intermediary, it is a site.

It's a local (Dutch) question, and too big for me as a person... Conversations have mainly departed from our experience of tensions between institutions and the various stakeholders who are invested in them, or who they invest in, from the premise of those who are already invested. How do we deal with a future of those who are radically against what we do—ultra-right populism...

Rat race between institutions (biggest?) holds back change. Who will be the first? Festival as a political outspoken place requires checks and balances. Who holds a festival accountable?

[09] Colophon

Organized by IDFA in Het Documentaire Paviljoen, Amsterdam with the support of Ministry of Education Culture and Science and Stichting Democratie en Media

Organizing committee:

Isabel Arrate Fernandez, Orwa Nyrabia, Rima Mismar, Tabitha Jackson
supported by Kinga Borowska, Marina Buric, Berry Schneider,
Monica Baptiste, Tamara Raab

Chairs:

Dominic Asmall Willsdon, Tamara Tatishvili, Tabitha Jackson

Notetakers:

Ron Ma, Sarah Teixeira, Eveline Keathoven, Monica Baptiste, Jasminka
Beganovic, Farah Hasanbegovic, Lev Silivnik

Editor:

Roxy Merrell

Graphic design:

Tjade Bouma

Copy editor:

Sarah Teixeira



This publication is published under the Creative Commons license
Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0 International - With mandatory
Attribution and only for Non-Commercial Use