

MayDay Institute
Future. Front. Novum

‘In every epoch, the attempt must be made to deliver tradition anew’
Walter Benjamin

Preamble

The surviving documents of our collective past have come down to us in shards and fragments, mostly by chance. This is especially true for the material traces of ‘history from below’. It is very rare that conscious, systematic efforts are initiated to protect the ‘archives of dissent’ from loss and erasure. The International Institute of Social History is a shining exception, founded in Amsterdam during the general crisis of the 1930s, to preserve the ‘cultural heritage of the labour movement and other emancipatory groups and currents’, against destruction in the tide of fascism.

The future of our collective past now faces an emergency from a different direction. The crisis has four linked facets: (i) the exacerbated privatization and enclosure of the cultural commons, (ii) the loss of autonomous social spaces which are containers of communal memory and incubators of radical expression, (iii) the imminent threat to individual artists and groups facing eviction and displacement, along with their history, (iv) the attack on places of learning and knowledge production, in particular the shrinking and closing (under renewed neo-liberal insult) of those municipal and university libraries which in the past would have acted as repositories.

A new institution

In the light of this emergency, we propose the founding of a new institution, dedicated to collecting, preserving, and enabling access to archives of dissent and radical expression, especially those now under threat of loss or destruction, focused initially on the British Isles but respecting no borders.

We are calling this new initiative the MayDay Institute in honour of the lost commons of popular memory, in acknowledgement of the current emergency facing the radical heritage, and in anticipation of future festivities in a better world of our own making. M’aidez.

The MayDay Institute will cater to archives in a broad range of media and formats: manuscript and printed documents, correspondence, pamphlets, newspapers, zines, ephemera, broadsides, posters and graphics, photographs, film, audio and video, and the expanding online world. It will respect no disciplinary boundaries and attempt to be ‘meta-categorical’.

The care of the collections will be overseen by a senior professional in the field of book and paper conservation.

Animating principles

While intended as a haven of 'history from below' and a home for orphaned collections, we envisage the MayDay Institute above all as a 'living archive'. Living, in two senses:

First, we are aware of the ethical imperative of gathering material, and recording the memories, of the generation now passing – that is, the individuals, and the groups formed by them, constituting the great explosion of antinomian energy maligned as "the sixties". This will entail a positive programme of oral history, as well as the preserving of documents, to honour and retrieve the residue of lives and committed efforts ignored.

Secondly, we intend through open access, digitization, and educational/pedagogical work to put the archive in the hands of living actors and citizen-archivists, for present and future purposes, both on site and in the virtual realm.

In this sense the MayDay Institute aims to act as both lifeboat and lighthouse. The ambition of the undertaking is simply a realistic recognition of the unprecedented and historic assault on the social democratic institutions which have given partial shelter to, and allowed some space for its artists and cultural producers.

Specifically, we commit ourselves:

§ to push back against the enclosure of the public domain (Google, Corbis, Getty, etc.), and to foster the creation of new commons.

§ to make the collections appropriation-friendly and browsable.

§ to offer anonymity to donors where necessary, to undertake to digitize where possible, and to return original documents where appropriate.

§ to support the unmediated presentation of materials and 'singular' modes of logging and classifying the material in collaboration with donors.

§ to treat and conserve the archives as appropriate in a professionally run laboratory, respecting the public nature or not of certain documents.

§ to 'teach' but to be mindful that the 'educators need educating' and that manifold perspectives can be brought to bear in activating the 'generative themes' of the material.

§ to continually process and present material as it passes through the institute...with film screenings, events, exhibitions, etc.

§ to work towards developing forms and creating conditions that encourage participation at every level.

Governance

MayDay will be run on syndicalist principles of co-operation, mutual respect, and openness to the pitfalls and fruitful dissensus of collective work.

MayDay, furthermore,

§ will remain an "institute-in-formation" that is intended to be adaptable to the ethos and thematics that present themselves through the archival material and the work of the institute.

§ will seek a non-competitive relationship with other initiatives as and when they present themselves, in order to 'ventilate' the institute and ward off 'auto-enclosure'.

§ will keep in mind the spirit of the experimental practice of utopian-leaning anti-institutional initiatives of the past - be these social, educational or revolutionary.

Models

We find inspiration in, and seek comradely relations with:

¶ The International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam
(<http://www.iisg.nl/index.php>)

¶ Prelinger Archive and Library, San Francisco (<http://www.archive.org/details/prelinger>)

¶ Labadie Social Protest Collection, University of Michigan Library,
(<http://www.lib.umich.edu/labadie-collection>)

A home for the institute

There is widespread lack of trust in the archival care and practices of contemporary institutions, as well as suspicion of their motives and interests. We are aware, for

example, that the Cinema Action archive was sold off following eviction from their premises in the early 1990s. Part of the Despite TV archive was lost when the archiving institution mistakenly threw away VHS tapes thought to be copies. We know of an artist who, having deposited his personal archive from St. Martins in the 1990s with the Tate, has recently 'retrieved' it in order to find a home where it would 'be put to work'. We are also conscious of the deliberate destruction of archival material linked to struggle and resistance, and that much archiving is the work of states for purposes of surveillance and control.

In the light of this history, we cannot in conscience offer a haven for archives under threat of eviction unless we ourselves are not in a similarly precarious position. Accordingly we must plan the MayDay Institute as a long-term, stable project.

Inauguration

We will be inaugurating the project at a gathering of antinomians bent on a different history in early May 2011.

GCB, IB, AD, HS, PvMB
April 2011
Bloomsbury