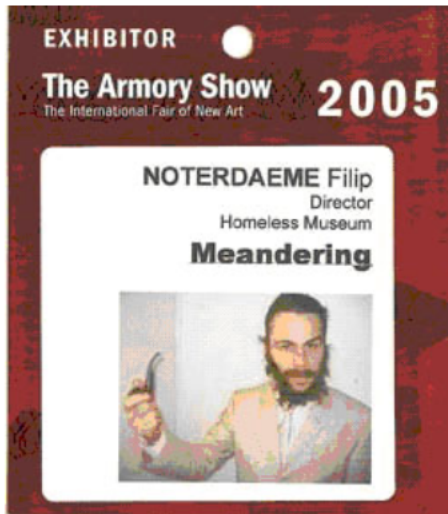


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ARMORY SHOW

HoMu Unplugged: The Homeless Museum at the Armory Show 2005

By Filip Noterdaeme



When Gabrielle Giattino from the Swiss Institute invited me to create a performance for this year's Armory Show, we launched an interactive installation that would bring my brainchild, the Homeless Museum (HoMu) into contact with the international art world. The barebones HoMu "unplugged" performance would run for the duration of the five-day fair.

The set-up was simple: I built a small wooden stand, fashioned after Lucy's Psychological Advice booth from Charles Schultz' Peanuts. Two kindergarten chairs completed this "Homeless Museum." Plastic letters glued on my rough wooden stand spelled the catchphrase "The Director is IN."

Most visitors responded with great enthusiasm to this manifestation of Lucy's booth. Long, engrossing confessional sessions with complete strangers followed. We talked about the fair (I praised the design of the exhibitors' booths and the gray carpeting that covered the entire floor of the premises), about the status of the contemporary artist (I suggested artists reclaim a culturally significant role by all becoming museum directors) and about cultural institutions (I admonished that to prevent corruption they give up their "missions"). Sometimes, statements freely borrowed from the MTA ("If you see something, say something") succeeded at spicing up the conversation. This enabled me to send people out on safety watches ("Go discover a suspicious work of art") or to advise them ("Give to charity, just not here").

Photographers flocked to my booth; handymen got a kick out of the fact that unlike Lucy I didn't actually charge for services; and artists and gallery owners stopped by, warming up to my buffoonery. In the end, my act revealed a human (and humorous) element so sadly missing in the rest of the art fair, where territorial exhibitors cordoned their booths off at closing time with yellow traffic tape, apparently without any sense of irony.

My appearance—complete with fake fuzzy beard, equally fake crocodile shoes, unlit pipe, pink Paul Smith suit, and orange and baby-blue Burlington Socks—did trigger curiosity. But ultimately, it was the eccentric persona that drew people to my booth. Oh, some were rude, disrespectful, and self-righteous, completely ignorant or unwilling to explore what I was driving at. The fact that my stand offered none of the comfort of the seller-and-buyer-model, nor that model's clear behavioral guidelines made them nervous. I quickly dismissed those who wished to give me a hard time in favor of those who were game and could see beyond the masquerade.

If I grew more and more comfortable with the role I had taken on as the days went by, the exhibitors slowly crumbled under the pressure of their efficient salespeople facades. Facial hair sprouted, other hair became unkempt, clothes rumpled, and a growing fatigue began to manifest in their reddening eyes. Frequent trips to the miserable concession stand—\$4 for a small bottle of water and a candy bar—aided in accelerating such disintegration. To me, like the art they were showcasing, these brokers were all homeless, adrift in the art world's maelstrom. When the time came to dismantle, the event's ravaged once-glamorous facade vanished within minutes. Makeshift walls disappeared, and the space was rendered inhabitable once again. Like hobos on the run, we packed art pieces into crates, heaved them onto dollies and rushed to the exit.

This was my first real outing as an artist, besides a small presentation of my work in an artist's studio in 2003, a gallery installation and some well-publicized activism surrounding MoMA's controversial re-opening. My agenda this time was different altogether: Nothing to sell, everything to give. To me, the whole Armory Show had become a homeless museum, one that I appropriated through my presence and my generous project. I even created a limited-edition sleeve for the show's catalogue, effectively pocketing the entire event.

In conjunction with my performance at the fair, the organizers of the Armory Show announced a VIP brunch and private tour of the newly established headquarters of the Homeless Museum, which is located in my own home in keeping with my only credo, "homelessness begins at home." The strictly limited RSVP list filled within only two days of the announcement, but on Sunday, March 13, all 28 listed VIPs failed to show. In their place came a haphazard group of supporters and friends as well as the curious and the ambivalent. The Homeless Museum continues to be open to the public by appointment, free of charge.

If art is increasingly considered as a commodity, one purchased with a calculative, rather than an open mind, the Homeless Museum acts as a barometer of the value of art in the 21st century. Since the greats from Beuys to Warhol have told us that everyone can be an artist, and make art a successful business, a strange misunderstanding seems to have crept in: artistic identity is taken for granted, and the main focus has turned on generating funds. Once part of the anti-establishment, artists have jumped into the maw of the corporate world, oblivious to the fact that the corporate world routinely spits out what it chews.