

*Report from Copenhagen – CPH:DOX*

By Cynthia Close

Sandwiched between the Sheffield Doc/Fest (November 4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> 2009) and the industry giant, IDFA (International Documentary FilmFest Amsterdam, November 19<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup>) the CPH:DOX Copenhagen (November 6-15<sup>th</sup>) has had to fight for its place on the international circuit of “must attend” events for those of us engaged in the business of docs. While still a young festival, founded in 2003 (the industry component was only added in 2006) it is definitely well worth our attention.

This year I was lucky enough to have been extended an invitation to participate in the forum section (November 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup>) of the program as a representative on a panel that focused on the current distribution scene in the US, and to serve on the industry side of the table during the pitch sessions where 14 filmmaking teams were given the opportunity to present their projects to an eclectic group of panelists. It was a chance to mingle with old friends and colleagues like Debbie Zimmerman from Women Make Movies and connect with folks like Emily Russo from Zeitgeist and Richard Lorber of Lorber Films and Alive Mind. There were familiar names such as Patricia Finneran of the Sundance Documentary Fund and Adella Ladjevardi from Cinereach on the funding side of the table, all moderated expertly by Thom Powers, programmer at the Toronto International Film Festival. Mark Atkin of Crossover Labs/Documentary Campus Masterschool and Karolina Lidin, a familiar voice and face from Toronto’s HOTDOCS Forum, moderated the project presentations for the pitch sessions.

The Forum was an intimate, invitation only affair hosted with panache by the Danish Film Institute that provided impressive physical spaces and was the activity hub of both the festival and the forum. The film screenings, requisite parties and events took place at various sites across the city, all easily accessible by a combination of feet or bike – given that there are few gas guzzling vehicles that dared to make their way across cobblestone streets whose names seem to change without warning. Being from Boston, this was normal for me but confounding I’m sure to most others from out of town.

Of the 14 projects pitched there were 2 that really knocked the ball out of the park; *Armadillo*, a unique film (especially in the light of so many films about middle east wars) on the psychological effect of war on a platoon of young Danish soldiers fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, by the talented team of Janus Metz and Ronnie Fridthjof. Their extraordinary footage brought me to tears. This project has the potential to be one of those transcendent films about man and war like *Apocalypse Now*. As of this writing, it looks like my second choice pick, *Enemies of the People*, an intimate and poetic approach in attempting to unravel what happened and why on the Killing Fields of Cambodia by the very experienced director Rob Lemkin and his collaborator Thet Sambath, one of Cambodia’s best investigative reporters, has been singled out at IDFA. *A Free Mind* by the noted Danish producer Phie Ambo (director of 2007’s Joris Ivens nominee *Mechanical Love*) also generated significant interest.

Like all good hosts, CPH:DOX treated their guests well, with ample food and free flowing alcohol to grease the wheels of industry and to assist in helping filmmakers to connect with those who can help them get their films made and distributed. There were a lot of events packed into the schedule along with a series of one-on-one meetings with producers that reminded me of an experiment in speed dating.

It is rare on these occasions that I get the chance to see films in their entirety in the confines of a darkened theater. With more than 200 films at 8 theaters and nearly a dozen additional venues, that was indeed the case for me at CPH:DOX. To compensate, the festival offers most titles available for viewing at the DOX:MARKET a digital VoD lab situated on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of the Danish Film Institute. It is here where a distributor has the option of shopping around and making the best use of limited time to sample what the festival has to offer. It was a pleasure to use and certainly as well organized as any digital market I have encountered before. It is here where we can get a good overview of the films and a sense of what distinguishes CPH:DOX from the rest of the pack. Combined with the beautiful and extensive printed program I will be able to make use of this experience in the months to come.

Logically, Danish filmmakers have a strong presence at both the Forum and the Festival. This years academy award nominee, *Burma VJ* from Anders Ostergaard and Michael Vesterbro which premiered at last years CPH:DOX has helped raise awareness of the great talents coming out of Denmark. In addition, if you are looking for films that expand the boundaries of the Documentary genre, then this is the festival to attend. With featured artists like Nathalie Djurberg – seen at the 53<sup>rd</sup> Venice Biennale with her sexually macabre claymation films, Vincent Moon's approach to the music documentary and Philippe Grandrieux's philosophical explorations on the meaning of making images, there is plenty intellectual meat to chew and digest.

There is also no shortage of cash awards and competitions, with 6 categories vying for attention. This years top DOX:Award went to Harmony Korine's envelope pushing *Trash Humpers*. While I hadn't seen it during the festival, Korine's off the wall video acceptance speech certainly made me wish I had. Award ceremonies signal that it is time to think about returning home. Thanks to festival director, Tine Fischer, and more personally, thanks to Forum organizers, Tine Mosegaard and Riina Sporning Zachariassen for a really wonderful experience.

Funding for such grand events is never easy and getting more difficult, even in places like Denmark where there is strong government support for culture and the Arts. CPH:DOX has recognized that challenge and by joining in the DOC ALLIANCE with it's sister organizations; DOK LEIPZIG, IDFF JIHLAVA, PLANETE DOC REVIEW WARSAW and VISIONS DU RÉEL NYON, presenting greater opportunities, collectively, for the filmmakers whose work they choose to represent now and in the years to come.