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Glocal Neighbors

INTRODUCTION

This book, and the conference in which it debuts, summarizes two years of the "Glocal Neighbors" project. This inter-neighborhood and interdisciplinary collaboration was the culmination of a long-term process the Center for Digital Art went through these last few years, since beginning work with the Jesse Cohen neighborhood. This process entailed an unceasing review of almost every aspect of our work, and restructuring our work plan and methodologies as a proposal to redefine the roles and responsibilities of an art center. Thus, the "Neighborhood as a Global Arena" conference is a summary of what has been done, and a declaration of a shift to a new work approach.

The art critic Stephen Wright maintains that art, or the art field, have fallen in love with the stereotypes they have adopted for themselves – an

image of art as an intrinsically subversive-political space, regardless of the content it deals with. The truth is that the art world is a regimented one. It is based on divisions of power and authority, but with a tendency to ignore this truth to avoid self-examination. Art, therefore, is designated its status as the "exception" to the existing world order. It is suspended and autonomous. So, why does it enjoy such status when art is merely an accurate reflection of the existing order?

One of the privileges of art's unique status is what is known as "artistic freedom". However, in the Israeli context, the threat to this privilege has reached new heights – both in the struggle against old centers of power and old elites, and in the desire to preserve them.

Artistic freedom is not a value unto itself. It is of no importance outside the goals it serves. We do not believe in neutral art. We do not believe in any form of neutrality. We do not believe in art that is disconnected from life. We do not believe in art's special status, or in its autonomy. Not when they are used as a means to preserve elites and an unjust balance of power. Art should be free and it should be autonomous, not in the service of itself or those that practice it, but in the service of the society in which it functions.

We do believe in the need to disconnect art from a life enslaved to money and work. From that element of neoliberal economy that has transformed creativity and art to commodities, that has appropriated the language of creativity, and subjugated the terminology of art for commercial needs, using art tools and methods to serve a neoliberal agenda.

Artistic freedom is not an objective; it is art's means of freeing society and itself from the market logic that now dominates it. It is art's ability to function free of commercial and economic interests. It is the possibility to offer unplanned and unregimented time and space. The option of being inefficient and non-purposeful. This, we believe, is art's public and political significance – a power that has the potential to resist market logic. A power that makes possible the creation of communities and human associations, new social and community ties that fend off this market mentality.

Within all this, we would like to understand how a center for art that serves these goals should operate. What should be the role of an art center that seeks to establish community time and space? Extensive debates are held regarding the role of artists in these contexts – as well as widespread discussion on the relevancy of exhibitions to these processes. We want to expand this discussion to understand what kind of art center can serve as a home for formulating these processes, to artists who deal with these topics, and to other partners. How should such a center look? What should it enable? These questions pertain to every aspect of our work, not only its artistic-professional dimension. What would an art center functioning within a network, connected to other disciplines and communities, look like? How would it function within this network as an art center, and what would its role be?

All these thoughts, ponderings, and decisions stemmed from a profound sense of having exhausted every option, and from the feeling that reality requires a different approach. We gained an awareness of the contradiction between the pretensions of the art we wanted to create and present – art as a tool for change – and our work methods, production procedures and the mediation and exhibition solutions we employ.

We feel the need to claim a "fallow year" for ourselves and the institution in which we work, a year in which our almost-automatic work processes, thoughts processes, production, and construction are deferred in order to think on things anew. A thinking that will lead to change, not only on an individual or project level, but also on an institutional level and beyond. An art center associates to other fields and disciplines, to other communities, so changes must impact all of these avenues of communication and collaboration.

Consequently, our next project will be the establishment of a new art center – one that tries to break out of the norms and boundaries in the field in order to be active and relevant to the community in which it operates. A center that will try to release culture and language from the economic logic that has conquered them, and to accomplish this while creating true alliances with individuals from different backgrounds.

But before this venture can be embarked on, we are first required to answer several key questions.

First, who do we serve? Is the role of an art center, however radical, to reinforce the existing institutions and balance of power within the field? Is our role to be those that identify young talent that has yet to be discovered and formulate those new curatorial approaches so that larger entities in the field, institutions and collectors, may benefit in the future from converting what we identified into economic value?

It seems these questions point to several disturbing assumptions. That even when the content that serves as the foundation of our actions is essentially sociopolitical – even when we promote projects and exhibitions that deal with these issues and establish a true connection to actual communities – the choice of conventional art field tools, from working with artists and through to preparing exhibitions and publishing catalogues, actually preserve the conservative divisions and boundaries that exist in the art world.

We have always maintained fidelity to one premise that seemed self-evident: in order to be relevant in society and the community, we must always maintain our roots in the art field, always keep our identity as an "art institution". This premise no longer holds true. It may be that in order to truly function we must cede this, question our appearance as an art center – and even let it go completely.

Our new role should be something else entirely. It should stem from the understanding that we are in the service of someone else. Who is in the Center throughout the day, every day? Who formulates with us the content that will be the Center's focus? Who spends each day expanding the range of our possibilities and potential? These people, who are mostly non-artists, are in daily and constant contact with us. They are our first partners in defining the new role of the Center. The art center does not belong to those who work in it or operate it. It does not belong to the art field. It belongs to the community in which it is located, and to the communities that use it. This does not mean that other communities are not welcome to come through our doors. Or

that the art community is not part of this center. But from the moment we realized who our most primary partners are, we cannot deny the new conclusions that arise regarding our methods of action, and consolidating the Center's new work plan.

The first phase of this process is allowing ourselves a "fallow year" – a period of work without plans or predetermined goals. This time will be utilized for examining and rebuilding the Center's plans, and through this also every aspect of our work, beginning with our accountancy and public relations, through our production, and finally also the physical structure we work in.

The art center must change, not only to address the need of more and more artists and groups of artists that are giving up the boundaries and rules of the art field, but also to serve as a meeting place for these artists and the groups and other communities with which they want to work. This step is designed to serve all of these potential communities, not just the art community. The meeting place itself can only be the art institution, as it has the flexibility required, but for this purpose it must cede its current appearance as an art center, yield its artistic practices (of exhibitions, collections and so forth), and not fear becoming something considered "dangerous" in the context of art: a community center, public center, school or one of their ilk. It is exactly this appearance of art centers that often precludes other communities, those from outside the art world, to enter it.

And so, how will the Center for Digital Art look? Not as an art center? The answer to this will become apparent through work, through the construction of the new art center. Yet already we may declare no fear of straying from the traditional design of an art space. We do not fear creating the essential conditions for true partnerships with our community – a partnership aimed at rebuilding the Center, redefining its scope of activities, the needed roles within it, and the content it deals with. We will not avoid redesigning the Center spaces to meet the needs of those who use them, not necessarily the needs dictated by the abstract community of spectators we are meant to serve.

We want to establish a Center that has partners, participants, and users. A place with regulars, not only visitors. We want to build an art center that is flexible enough to change its objectives from time to time. A center that can be a school, a community center, a laboratory, a restaurant – and also an exhibition space, as needed.

In order to allow this flexibility, we must make the effort to break status and privilege, to undermine professional authority, to share knowledge, and circumvent the endorsement processes that preserve boundaries of power and profession. We will no longer serve as a façade for the fixation of rank and power, but rather provide a space in which these may be shattered, a testament that know-how, experience, and ability are not the exclusive purview of those that have undergone professional training that seems transparent, and ostensibly detached from any ethnic, status, or political context.

Introduction

Along with this flexibility, we hold firm to those fundamental principles of this new art space: principles designed to ensure equal access to all, freedom of thought and opinion, and the establishment of true partnerships and the abolishment of hierarchies. We will hold rigidly to these principles, and they will provide the foundation from which everything in the new art center will spring.

Glocal Neighbors

Gilly Karjevsky and
Eyal Dan**on**

In 2012 the Center for Digital Art joined Cluster, a network of eight visual art centers in Europe and the Middle East that maintain an ongoing collaboration within and together with the neighborhoods in which they are located. The decision to do so stemmed from the understanding that the conditions in these neighborhoods are the result of processes that are, among other things, of a global nature. The reasoning motivating this network's activity is that in face of global problems we need collaborative learning and knowledge sharing on a global scale to address them. The Cluster network provided the opportunity for the art centers, as well as the neighborhoods in which they operate, to learn together. This process lasted two years that included meetings every few months in the various neighborhoods of the network centers, explanations and a review of relevant methodologies and content, familiarization with local partners, study of actions and projects, and above all discussion of the range of problems we have all encountered in our work together.

The Cluster network is an excellent platform that provides support and knowledge sharing between its partners. Being a network of art centers, it utilizes the possibilities and privileges of the art field, where mobility is a prominent quality. However, these advantages are also the source of the network's problem. Like many other projects dealing with or investigating social practices, the privileges are often enjoyed only by art practitioners, and do not extend to those not of the art world. Each of the art centers that comprise Cluster rely on local-neighborhood networks that include partners from the fields of education, social work, youth counseling, and others. These partners, along with our neighborhood residents, are an indelible component of our actions in the neighborhood, but they are not exposed to the broad perspective, study processes and knowledge sharing provided by a network such as Cluster, based in the art field.

This insight led us to initiate the "Glocal Neighbors" project. At its core, this project is similar to Cluster: a possibility of global shared learning and knowledge exchange between neighborhoods. In this case, the process involves not only practitioners of art, but also partners of others fields active in the neighborhood.

The insight gleaned from Cluster, whereby global knowledge is necessary to strengthen local actions, was first implemented in the local network of the Center for Digital Art in Jesse Cohen, Holon even before the project launch. The Center manages a coordination forum and initiated collaborations with the city's welfare department, the at-risk youth department, the local community center along with residents active in the neighborhood. Through the "Glocal Neighbors" project we established a work group that included members from Jessy Cohen and the Nordbahnhof neighborhood of Stuttgart. Thelocal partners were invited to take part in a process that provides local associations and activities with a more comprehensive perspective, and the option of drawing from a new professional database. Thus, "Glocal Neighbors" makes use of the art center's infrastructure for the benefit of its partners, transforming the local network into a global one, offering the essential perspective and interdisciplinary knowledge, and strengthening local actions.

Glocal Neighbors

The logic behind this collaboration between neighborhoods is identical to that between art centers: working effectively on a local scale requires a global network of learning and exchange. This goes against the accepted view that social or community-oriented art in intrinsically local, and cannot be relevant beyond the local sphere. Time and again, works of international artists are questioned solely due to the fact that these artists are outsiders in their place of action, or because of the limited time of their presence. The premise of "Glocal Neighbors" is that there are no foreigners in the global world and it creates many connections points adding up on a time line.

In this way, the "Glocal Neighbors" project allows us to combine two key principles of our activity in Jesse Cohen – addressing the need for a local multidisciplinary network that facilitates cooperation, while also providing the foundation for global learning and associations. The joint work of the Nordbahnhof neighborhood of Stuttgart and Holon's Jesse Cohen is therefore not based on the specific characteristics of each. We have found they are mutually relevant thanks to their both being global neighborhoods, without the need for particular points of commonality. The project partners' understanding that there is a need

for collaboration – and the willingness to learn from each other – is ample common ground.

Nevertheless, the starting point of each partner is different. The Jesse Cohen group is comprised of people who work in the neighborhood, in its art center, community center, and others like them. Despite the group members' own aspirations, this group does not include local residents. Consequently, we try to gradually involve residents in the learning process, in our various activities, and joint meetings. In contrast, the Nordbahnhof group is comprised almost completely of local residents, particularly those who instigate independent initiatives, and artists that live and work in the neighborhood. In fact, the number of group members that are residents exceeds the non-local, institutional representatives. Their work is founded on a local culture of self organization that supplements or replaces the municipal services provided to communities. Also, the Jesse Cohen group includes people who worked together prior to the project, while the Nordbahnhof group was established specifically for the project, and so their group is essentially its outcome. This difference became the foundation of our work together, breathing life into discussions, learning processes and exchange of knowledge as they varied from participant to participant.

Most of our first year together focused on online and face-to-face meetings, consolidating the neighborhood groups and the overall project group, and mutual visits. The first visits were spent mapping our neighborhoods, local agents and activities, and formulating a unique interdisciplinary language. This was accomplished through communal work, drawing its inspiration from contemporary educational approaches that combine online and actual learning. This method of study and work is more compatible with the way we currently live our lives – some meetings and conversations are conducted online, others in-person and unmediated, and this creates a measure of tension that propels us onward in our learning process.

The gaps between online and actual meetings encouraged us to develop methodologies for joint online learning that is more structured and informative, those based on lectures and presentations, while the

neighborhood meetings were reserved for more abstract social activities, and a more undefined wondering. This distinction between forms of knowledge and the spaces in which they are formed was an added benefit to mutual learning, a natural and unplanned extension of the process. Internet platforms facilitate certain kinds of communication. Over time, we learned to dedicate these online meetings to lectures on projects from other countries in the world, structured to include a moderated discussion and review of written materials. This format was adopted from online universities and academies. "Live" meetings during visits were an opportunity to conduct spatially-oriented learning, informal and unstructured conversations, and touring our neighborhoods. We came to understand that these visits consolidate the group and its joint outcomes, while online meetings create a documented body of knowledge and encourage individual learning. In the second year we increased the number of actual visits, but reduced the number of participants in each; pairs of group members then met with neighborhood residents, clarifying the ties between each participating discipline and the subsequent actions taken by the group.

Glocal Neighbors

At stated, the "Glocal Neighbors" project could have taken place between any pair of neighborhoods. Our work groups can function in any location, and this collaboration can be sustained anywhere. The specific locality of each neighborhood is irrelevant, as this is a model that is fundamentally replicable, while also constituting a platform for local activities in both neighborhoods, thus for the creation of locality. Our project outcomes make this evident – in each of our neighborhoods local projects and new collaborations were formed within our local work groups.

As a model of action, "Glocal Neighbors" allows for precisely this type of locality specificity because it creates global learning that is geared toward local action. The model can be duplicated, and we fully intend for it to be so. Furthermore, we do not believe the processes undergone by Nordbahnhof and Jesse Cohen are unique. Global influences have made the reality in each of these neighborhoods increasingly similar. The collapse of the welfare state, the decrease in public housing, immigration, and other changes are worldwide phenomena.

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As for project success –

It is interesting to see that over time those who chose to remain active in the two groups were artists, designers or architects. From our very first days working in Jesse Cohen, one our initial assumptions was that our key advantage as an art institution stemmed from the fact that we do not usually operate with structured work plans, regimented schedules and inflexible evaluation criteria of our work. This is not the approach of neighborhood partners from other disciplines, such as welfare, education, youth care and others. The fluidity of time and space allows us to create interdisciplinary encounters of the kind necessary to "Glocal Neighbors".

As previously established, one of the Center's project objectives was to examine how tools and privileges of the art world can serve our neighborhood partners. In the projects first year, partnerships were established on this basis, but over time disciplinary limitations overcame the desire for project involvement. Time restrictions, the need to coordinate timetables and define roles meant that those who could meet regularly were artists, usually people with flexible schedules, and social workers, who could explain the advantages of the project in their places of work. Residents and other neighborhood employees, who had to justify investing time in the project at the expense of their "real" jobs, gradually gave up their involvement.

"Glocal Neighbors" was active in the two neighborhoods for two years. Throughout, some of our initial assumptions were proven correct, while others did not hold. We found that the most essential ingredient for success was finding the right mix between online and face-to-face meetings. The internet is an excellent tool for archiving knowledge garnered through the project and others. Although it cannot replace older forms of communication – direct, unmediated contact – it can certainly expand and enrich them. It was the actual visits to the two neighborhoods (entailing a group leaving its own specific locality) that

motivated the majority of project processes. One of the best examples for this is the "Jesscafe" project, a community café that was opened by Meirav Twig, a social worker participating in the project. This came about from an incidental encounter during the Jess Cohen group's visit to Stuttgart in April 2014, when Twig was taken to the Nordbahnhof community café. After the visit, an online meeting was scheduled that allowed her to become better acquainted with the café's work methods, funding, etc. This learning process culminated with the establishment of the "Jesscafe" as a community café operating in the neighborhood for almost a year now. This is an interesting example of something that could not have occurred without real, unmediated meetings, but also relied on remote learning via internet.

Glocal Neighbors

Another lesson learned that pertained to basic differences between groups related to self-organization and the role of institutions on the local level. The Nordbahnhof neighborhood has a longstanding tradition of self community organizing and weak ties with local institutions. In contrast, many of those active in Jesse Cohen work in official neighborhood-municipal institutions, and it has no tradition of self community organizing. And yet, as a result of the visit to Stuttgart, some of the typical Nordbahnhof approach to self-organization – the "work with what you've got" mentality – trickled to the Jesse Cohen group, and particularly to the Center for Digital Art. As a result, learning and partial adoption of these independent tactics were then embraced by an art institution – not by residents. This spurred a review of the complex relations between community vs. institutional organizing, which became the cornerstone of our project content: one of the fundamental differences between the two groups generated the most benefit, so it is unclear whether the "Glocal Neighbors" project could even have worked without this basic difference, thanks to which each group complemented the other.

How will group collaborations function in the future? First, we learned that participants must have professional commitment, and that interactions must be balanced in their combination of online and face-to-face communication, with emphasis on actual visits. Now the project moves on to its next phase, based on what has already been

accomplished: concurrent work of both groups as they continue to update each other. Each neighborhood will conduct their own activities on a regular basis. Activities produced by the project, as well as ongoing activities that predate it, become part of the mutual learning process, and of the glocal knowledge base and model.

The possibility of working locally while producing global knowledge is the central starting point of "Glocal Neighbors", and also the basis for its next step. The project created a platform for collaboration, and now partners are free to utilize it as they see fit. We expect new projects to grow on this basis, and are curious to see how each group's characteristics, work methods and member identities impact the directions taken in future projects.

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