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through networking

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Triangle Conference | sustaining the global art ecologies through networking



30 years ago, the **Triangle Network** started instinctively and spontaneously, perhaps like an **artistic process**. In the beginning, artists Anthony Caro and Robert Loder were looking for a space to store their artworks in Northeast America. The storage space was found and eventually **turned into a platform for sharing and exchange among artists in the area and beyond**. Through specific needs and a sense of commitment from various individuals, the network expanded and materialized. Three decades later, the Triangle Network is a true **global network of artist-run spaces** that aims to sustain informal environments

and enable learning through experimental workshops and events. This **non-hierarchical network** model focuses on art as an artistic process rather than a “commercial product” for the art market, and it is about connecting people rather than generating money. It is about the art communities and the possibilities for sustaining them through shared visions and values.

About the Triangle Conference

The **Triangle Conference**, which took place on **November 26th and 27th 2011 in London**, marked the 30th anniversary of the Network’s founding. By and large the 2-day conference focused on the very **raison d’être of art networks, their assets, as well as their current struggle for survival**. Through presentations and panel discussions, questions were raised to identify the true role of art networks, and how they can be used for professional development or community building. What can art networks do for artist’s rights and freedom of expression? How do they push boundaries and create new content? What are the differences between art networks and institutional structures? Where do art networks position themselves within the art world?

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Triangle workshop[/caption]

The Assets

Through workshops, art networks provide **learning models that are different from institutional frameworks**. As such they enable collective experiences that enhance the public's appreciation for the arts. They also act as binders for communities who are seeking opportunities, resources, and knowledge.

Networks have a diversity of approaches that mostly operate at a micro level yet when put together have the stunning ability to form a global perspective on art and creativity. Unlike the commercial art world, art networks can transcend a number of barriers because they apply a **horizontal framework that puts artists on equal grounds** regardless of their origins, social or educational background. The volume of content produced through art networks is significant but perhaps currently not thoroughly documented and recorded.

"This is a non-hierarchical network with no more centre and periphery. It is about sharing things together, through dialogues and as part of a global network that is based on the notion of art ecology"
- Alessio Antonioli, the network coordinator.

The international dimension of the Triangle Network has enabled **multi-lateral cooperation between various organizations**. They have been useful in the process of **identifying funding sources**, and providing **support to emerging artists and institutions** that do not meet the criteria set by larger international organizations such as UNESCO.

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Prince Claus Foundation website[/caption]

Since its founding 15 years ago, the Dutch foundation **Prince Claus** has been supporting small organizations and individual artists without necessarily going through governments and UN bodies.

“The Prince Claus Foundation is a firm believer that culture is a motor for development and change and we consider that culture is a basic need. The Fund is first and foremost a family, a network, and then a fund. Its open network grows on a daily basis due to the number of people who engage in support activities by providing expertise, knowledge, and resources to the network. The network is based on mutual respect and it is about shared vision and common inspiration.”
– Christa Meindersma of the Prince Claus.

Through its **Network Partnerships Programme**, the Prince Claus has generated a network within a network by gathering sub-regional networks from around the world, in order **“to connect, share, and become a family of minds, a place of recognition.”** (Davide Quadrio, **Arthub Asia**) This organic structure leads toward the development and sustainable balance that are required to generate environments for creative minds. Current network partners include the **Southasian Trust**, **Drik Picture Library** in Bangladesh, **Supersudaca** Architecture in the Netherlands, and **Komunitas Salihara Arts Center** in Indonesia, among others.

Time for reflection and renewal

In her presentation on the **“Principles and Ethics that Guide Cultural Networks”** **Mary Ann DeVlieg** clearly set the tone by referring to the existential struggle facing art networks as they are standing in between the desire to remain informal by operating as “chaotic structures” and on the other hand their need to become stronger business models in order to professionalize themselves and be self-sustained.

While some art individuals hold on to an idealistic paradigm in which art networks are less dependent on money, others highlighted that it may be time to seek **new perspectives and models that breach idealistic ways of thinking about the arts**. Project evaluation, self-evaluation for artists, better strategies, and a clear understanding about the value of art and culture in the 21st century, along with their benefits and processes are crucial elements to consider in the future.

This time of crisis might also be a time for opportunity and change. The

uncertainty of the current global economic crisis and its repercussions on not-for-profit organizations led to conversations about the evolving patterns of art funding – a pattern which has, for the longest time, revolved around a Western model characterized by a North-South dependence in the field of contemporary arts.

The scarcity of institutional funding has more recently led to **new models such as online crowdfunding**. The participatory and open nature of crowdfunding has made **art more accessible and less institutionalized**. This new possibility leaves certain people skeptical, as they suspect a lack of credibility and quality in the selection and elimination process. Yet, as Mike Troughton, founder of the **WeFund** crowdfunding platform mentioned during the conference, it might be time “to accept and get over it”.

Art networks and social justice

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The Hub is a global community of people working to tackle the world's most pressing issues.[/caption]

The position of art and **artists within the “real world” and in relationship to social justice was also in the debate**. Jonathan Robinson of social enterprise network **The Hub** asked whether artists are trying enough to understand the broader context and turn art into a form of political resistance. He asked: for whom are artists practicing in the 21st century? How can they bring social transformations through their work?

The challenge of designing environments for innovation, for networks, is not, in my opinion, about designing occasional hub-like spaces (...) we need schools, youth clubs, hospitals, airport lounges,

prisons, bus stops... We need spaces to be designed with one thing in mind: how to bring people together to actually remake, re-imagine, re-design, and re-build the established order. - Jonathan Robinson of The Hub on how to design environments for innovation.

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Mary Ann DeVlieg and Todd Lester[/caption]

Todd Lester of **freeDimensional** and Mary Ann DeVlieg, Secretary General of **IETM** (International Network of Contemporary Performing Arts) have joined forces to launch and run the **Creative Resistance Fund**, an initiative at the intersection of art for social change. This is another area where art networks have proven to be very effective: helping artists who are in danger by finding vacant apartments and bedrooms available in artist's residencies.

"It is difficult to collaborate unless we understand the social, political, economic (implications), as well as working conditions and the contexts in which people are working. We must also ensure that working conditions for artists can be more equal, so there is a conscience there and a sense of mutual support." - Todd Lester and Mary Ann DeVlieg on art for social justice.

"Half of (our partners) are art networks such as Asia Art Network, Arterial Network, IETM, and the others are human rights organizations. Even if the working methods are extremely different we could have quite a lot to do together to raise people's awareness

about the art sector and what they can do, provide support, and inform the human rights sector about artist's needs.” – Mary Ann DeVlieg on the International Coalition for Arts, Human Rights, and Social Justice (ICAHS)

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freeDIMENSIONAL critical people critical places critical issues

Hosting activists in art spaces and using cultural resources to strengthen their work.

freeDimensional (fD) is an international network that supports art spaces hosting activism and strengthening community engagement. fD is made up of art spaces in over 60 countries with regional hubs in São Paulo, Cairo, New York City, Berlin, and hosted at two locations in India (Pune/Pondicherry). fD members provide safe haven for oppressed activists in their residency apartments, offer meeting rooms to community organizers who bring important local issues to light, and introduce new ideas to the public through bold exhibitions and inclusive educational programs.

What we do - Programs & Services

Each year, hundreds of activists and culture workers are violently assaulted for pursuing their ideas of social change; as community leaders they lose their jobs, face arbitrary imprisonment, and may ultimately die for speaking truth to power. Sometimes these individuals need to physically move away from their communities in order to escape danger. Therefore, fD developed a system to partner artist residencies with human rights organizations in order to facilitate rapid responses, safe haven, and related services. fD's concept is rooted in the idea that community art spaces are local civil society spaces and therefore effective access points for social action and change. These art spaces can perform urgent interventions such as hosting an individual in distress, but also by working in a networked fashion, they assume a unique level of influence in civil society from which decision-makers and the general public seek advice and input on pressing issues.

fD provides resources and safe haven for oppressed activists and culture workers

Distress Services (Creative Safe Haven + Activist Information & Referral Service)

Membership in the fD network requires that partner centers are willing to be called upon for up to three months of accommodation and related hosting services annually for activists and culture workers in need of assistance. freeDimensional receives placement referrals from human rights organizations to fD short-term living and working spaces that become available throughout the fD network of art spaces.

Since launching the Distress Service program in 2006, fD has come to the aid of nearly 60 activists and culture workers in distress. These individuals were activist artists, journalists, musicians, writers, and community organizers and came from more than 15 countries.

Distress Services in Action:

After a Gambian journalist was charged in connection with a contested newspaper story pertaining to the purported coup attempt, fD was able to place him in an artist residency in Senegal. The journalist was able to use his creative safe haven to put his affairs in order before traveling onward.

fD responded to a visual artist from Israel whose work addressing the plight of women in the Druze community resulted in a violent attack, which led to his economic marginalization and depression. He was offered an artist residency in Bilbao, Spain in partnership with fD and the Festival Against Censorship.

When a poet from the Republic of Georgia received attacks, harassment and a prison sentence after his peaceful protests against human rights abuses, fD was able to find an artist residency for him in Estonia.

Art Spaces Hosting Activists & Timeline

- 2006: **Shakab Israr** (Afghanistan) - hosted a poet in Kabul, Iran
- 2006: **Joelle Khoury** (Lebanon) - hosted a poet in Beirut
- 2006: **Abdel M. Vissel** (Lebanon) - hosted a poet in Beirut
- 2007: **Jamhid Marín** (Afghanistan) - hosted a poet in Kabul, Iran
- 2007: **Sara Dickhans** (Sweden) - hosted a poet in Stockholm, Sweden
- 2007: **Issa Nyaphaga** (Cameroon) - hosted a poet in Yaoundé, Cameroon

freeDimensional supports culture in the service of free expression, social justice, and equality.[/caption]

An art world in transition and the reversing of old tendencies

The rising powers in Asia are in the process of **reversing old tendencies in the field of contemporary art**. While Europe remains an important funding source and expertise for many developing countries, many questions are raised. “Will China ever play a role in saving weakening Western institutions?” was asked by an audience member. The shifting hierarchy among countries and the evolving dynamics between Asia and Europe are shaping new patterns.

While in Europe concerns are focused on future funding sources and the sustainability of its cultural ecosystem during this time of crisis, in Asia it is about **building missing bridges and forming positive perceptions on art**

and culture. The sheer size of this rapidly changing and culturally diverse continent means that there are opportunities yet also challenges to overcome.

*In Asia, artists do not receive much support from their government, except in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan where art is in some way used to build the image of a country and for cultural diplomacy (e.g. soft power.) Asia is a sort of laboratory in which civil society acts as a counter balance to a more political agenda. - Tay Tong of **Arts Network Asia**.*

The conference also gave the audience reminders that **contemporary art remains a luxury in many countries**, as it is not widely accessible, and not yet perceived as a basic need.

*The **Vasl Artists Collective** in Karachi, Pakistan, wants to facilitate processes and support young artists in an environment that does not easily accommodate artists. It has a gallery space, organizes international exchanges and curatorial programmes that promote art from Bangladesh to the world. - Adeela Suleman and Gemma Sharpe, coordinators at Vasl Artists Collective.*

Art remains difficult to access, yet it can also help to achieve principles of sustainability, as a shaper of community life and as a ground for cultural eco-systems. It can also serve as a bridge that connects minority groups who are living in remote areas, enabling links between artists (e.g. from local to global), and enhancing environments.

***Ruangrupa** in Jakarta, Indonesia, sometimes works with villagers in remote areas to re-introduce art in a different context and re-connect it with people who are not necessarily from the art world. Local context is important to consider, and our projects always start with the subject or content, it is about social practices and issues, and we want to make art accessible to many. - Ade Darmawan, Director and co-founder of Ruangrupa*

Looking beyond



The world is in a state of transition, and it is strongly reflected throughout the global art community. The shifting balance within a multi-polar world, the democratization of media and increased access to information technology are affecting the way artists work and collaborate. In parallel, art networks, as informal structures, are the **alternative channels** through which artists produce work around the world: by embracing principles of sustainability, ethical practices, social justice, openness, and shared experiences rather than institutional validation and commercial successes. Their goal is to enable global connections, shape local experiences at a micro-level while involving people from nearby communities, and to use **art practices as a binding tool** that can generate inspiring environments to live and work in.

Lack of funding seems to be a constant issue, and it represents both a threat and an opportunity for change. Ultimately, the added value and assets of art networks should be highlighted concretely and within

multiple contexts, in other words beyond the art world, in order to better demonstrate the role of art toward social and cultural development.

Sali Sasaki is the Asia Editor of culture360.org

Images: Sali Sasaki, Triangle Network, Prince Claus, freeDimensional, and The Hub.

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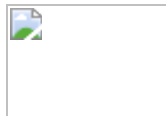


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