ECONOMIES OF COLLABORATION

collaboration
undoing institutions

by Contemporary Image Collective (Cairo Working Group) + Hezkuntza/ Mediation Area of Tabakalera, International Center of Contemporary Culture (San Sebastián / Donosti Working Group)

During the month of October 2018 a written conversation about the practices and frameworks of economies of collaboration took place. The conversation here below was woven together from different documents written in English and Spanish and translated by Fermín Soria and Javier Rodrigo (@transductores). The final structure is an exchange of positions and knowledge around 5 points that we identified as elements of the dialogue: 1. Collaborative relationships 2. Traditions and references in this field 3. Organizational models and structures 4. Limits and tensions 5. Sustainability and resources. . In the final part of the text we offer a constellation of common elements and frames that give account of a small poetry- cartography of the knowledge and crosses of this exchange.

Contemporary Image Collective:
The replies were written by Andrea Thal, Artistic Director, and Rana ElNemr, Board Member. Both are part of the Cairo Working Group of the Another Roadmap School Network. In the text "I" or "we" variably refers to either one of us or both of us or the larger group of people involved with CiC. After receiving the replies from Hezkutnza Tabakalera we underlined the parts in both texts that we identified as specific to each group's practice and locale and added comments in two parts we felt are particularly important and link our practices.

Hezkuntza/ Mediation Area:
The answers were agreed between Leire San Martín and Nerea Hernández (Mediation team of Tabakalera), together with Ana Revuelta (Artaziak). The final writting was carried out by Leire

1. How would you define the different collaborative relationships that you establish in your work? (with the art institution, educational institutions, nearby urban contexts, interest groups, social organisations)?

CIC

Beyond the basic form of a collaboration between the diverse members of the internal & external staff and board members, we do a lot of collaborations with other cultural organisations and educational initiatives. Often this is for the use of space, there is not many spaces here and for example educational initiatives are interested in working with us for the visibility it has, we in turn are interested to collaborate with structures that work for example with young artists that would otherwise not be shown here. Another important form of collaborations that is quite current in our work is the connection to people who work on or have life experiences related to the topics we engage in.

This happened a lot in the context of a long-term project on imprisonment and social exclusion i worked on together with Nawara Belal and Ahmed Refaat. We tried to meet with as many researchers, activists, writers, social historians, various "experts" and very importantly with people who experienced imprisonment and other forms of social exclusion to understand more about it but also to try to connect what we do with the conversations and debates that are already going on in other circles.

With our recent move to a new space 2 months ago, our relationship to our new neighbors is still developing. The activities of our neighbors are quite different than in our previous space. Before, there was a bookstore downstairs. Now, the entrance of our building is in an internal court that has street vendors selling jeans and other things. In such cases, we start our relationship on a personal level, and we take it further to an institutional level if it shows prospects of growing organically into collaborations that are not forced.

Another new relationship that comes with the move is with a new landlord, a real estate company based in Alexandria. This is a challenging collaboration and as a 14 years old institution we have learned a lot through our previous and diverse tenant/renter relationships. This time round, we want to be more active in this situation and discuss the different possibilities, tension and contradictions the situation of being a welcome tenant due to the "coolness" and potential value of being associated with arts and artists. The owners of our space are interested in arts and we are interested in sharing an insight into arts and arts making approaches and methodologies that go beyond what the owners and staff members of the real estate company might expect. Sandra

Edward, who manages communication at CIC, has been communication a lot with the company and we are currently discussing amongst us, board and staff, what and how we can find ways to work in this situation in a meaningful way. And we are very keen on looking at models that have successfully collaborated on that level.

Hezkuntza
We believe that collaborative relationships are established at different levels:
Collaboration relationships within the mediation team: internally, we work collaboratively to design and design the educational program of Tabakalera. In this sense, we must bear in mind that the relationship occurs in a framework where working conditions have their importance and presence. Part of the team works with Artaziak and part of the team works as labor personnel of the institution.

-Collaborative relationships at the interdepartmental level: with other areas to develop programs, including the exhibition area, the Hirikilabs digital culture laboratories, the cinema and audiovisual area, or the public programs area.

-Collaborations with other Tabakalera institutions. The first attempts have been made to collaborate with institutions such as Kutxa Fundazioa. Little developed.
-Networks that we join as another agent: Oinherri, a network that works on collaborative educational practices, putting Basque and popular education at the center, and Egia Hezitzailea, a network linked to the idea of an educating city made up of different agents from the Egia neighborhood to which Tabakalera belongs.

-Educational projects in which we start from collaborative methodologies. Among them, the call addressed to the educational community Eskola Aldiriak or very long-term projects as Archiveras del Humo or Situ-akzioak (06 bizi).

CIC
We feel that the relevance of live experiences if something that resonates in both our practices yet in a somewhat different way: in our practice it is more that we bring life experiences to art whist the work of Tabakalera education department goes more to where this life experience is and tries to develop things from the interests of the people you work with.

2. What are the traditions and / or references (related to collaborative work) that sustain your practices?

CIC

I feel we try to connect to "friends in the past" quite a bit. For example the history of local resistance movements that took place in the 1940s or 1970s and more recently in the context of the different movements active before and during the revolution. We are interested in the connections these movements had to people in other places, the forms of solidarity they practised and the way alternative social, gender, class political and cultural structures were discussed. Particularly figures or smaller groups that were excluded or not so present in both the mainstream ideologies and the dominant organised opposition are interesting to us in this respect.

Another reference that is very important to me and others working here are people and organisations that we got to know over time and whose work we find inspirational. Some of the people and organisations that are part of the extended Another Roadmap School network are very inspirational to me, for example.

Personally, some queer*trans*feminist as well as some anarchist and postcolonial influences and references have been very important and helpful to think through the possibilities and contradictions of working in cultural institutions. This applies to both the ways of working as well as the actual content of the work (in relation to representation, for example). It is also important to say that the urgency and "usefulness" of these "traditions" somewhat shifted when i moved from Zurich to Cairo.

As a larger group we bring a mix of influences and references with us and we do not necessarily share the same. Many of the board members find inspiration and influences from initiatives that were created regionally during the past 20 years in Tunisia, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan. As for the long project I mentioned above we were a group of three working together and we brought different backgrounds with us such as alternative culture, activism, film/cinema, feminisms but also different social and class backgrounds, languages and places of origin, and those would sometimes produce tension or contradictions.

I think it is also important to say that as much as I feel that there is personal or shared references and inspirations that inform my/our work, I also feel that there is other references and traditions that are present even though i do not like that they have an influence. Such influences sometimes come from outside, for example from funders, but they are also present through something like the believe that this is "how things are done", often with reference to a European or Western models of contemporary art institutions. It is ironic because i come from Europe and those were the very models we criticised there. Another "unfriendly" influence or reference that i feel the need to resist is the commercialisation of culture in form of cultural programs that cater exclusively for the wealthy, an increasing presence of the "cultural economy" approach that erases

criticality from for example education projects and favours a purely "skill based" approach.

Hezkuntza
Work practices come from feminisms, popular education, social movements or cultural institutions that in recent years have rethought their educational practices in the framework of the educational turn.

3. What is the organisational models or structures that are used to make a collaborative and community based running of the space possible? (committees, decision making processes, involvement of neighbourhood / community and "specialists" etc)

CIC
We try to find ways of working together more collaboratively in some parts of the organisation and to create and sustain different formats in which collective and community based forms of participation and collaboration are possible but currently we do not aspire a way of working in which the overall organisation is run by the community. In the following examples i try to describe different modes or structures we practice:
In 2017 the latest issue of a still and moving image festival CIC has been organising for several years took place. In conversation with co-workers and other people we realised the necessity to change the mode of participation in the festival. The festival changed in the sense that it almost exclusively consisted of workshops and working groups announced mostly through open calls. Anyone taking part in the workshops was invited to also take part in the festival if they wanted. Each group discussed together and with us if and how they might want to make things visible as part of the festival. This process was interesting for Nour El Safoury and myself, who worked on the festival together, because it changed our roles and communication as we were mostly hosting the workshop groups with their different facilitators and more talking to groups rather than individual artists.

As our organisation is not a self-organised collective in the actual sense but more an institutional structure and one of the few medium sized cultural institutions in our city, I feel it is also very important that we actively contribute to critical discussions and practices around the different economies at work in cultural organisations, their relationship to the violence of the class system in Egyptian society and the pressures that come from more recent influences such as the "branding" of Downtown Cairo as a more exclusive cultural hub or the "creative economies" trend. It is very important to understand better what different kinds of economies we are part of, how the structures

of our work shape our perspectives and how this can be acknowledged and re-worked, if necessary. For example it has been very interesting to discuss some of these questions in the context of two quite extensive peer review processes we did in the last 2 to 3 years.

Hezkuntza
It depends a lot on the type of process / project, what agents are involved, etc. In the case of cigar makers, for example, the ability to participate in decision- making has had all those involved in the group, but has had to pass, say, by different phases. It has been like a couple of years later when the group has assumed that it has that capacity. I think it has gone through a 'feeling heard', that is, not only at the level of listening in the sessions for example, but to see that the proposals that come out of the group materialize, they happen. That is giving I think, certain autonomy to the group, certain power, and they become aware of having that power, and from there to generate more frameworks of possibility for new proposals. The structure itself has been simple: work sessions in which it is true that at the beginning the issues of decision were raised by us, and from there a space for group discussion is opened. But the relationship has been advancing to the point that they believe that nowadays they are proposing actions that are not mediated by us. In that sense, we and she have diffused a bit. With the artist Sahatsa I think it's been a bit like it.

Yes it is true that sometimes I have the feeling that there have been many moments in which 'the last word' we have had or the artist. But hey, little by little we work to turn that around. Now we work for, already having a core group, say, (we and the 7 cigarreras, that is, 9 people), we are working to generate more community around (other ex-workers, people from the neighbourhood or anyone interested in the process) . For this, yesterday we did a first session in which we invited ex-workers to join, it was very good, they came as some 15 more people.

CiC
The point about the possibility for participants or the "audience" to participate in decision making has led us to an interesting discussion between us about the possibility of "giving up" or "opening up" the curatorial position and the possibility of people to "proposing actions". We specifically discussed the example of the festival described in our text and Rana suggested that maybe next time there could be a way for the workshop participants to also choose works that are shown together with their own contributions.

4. What are the limits that you find in the collaborative relationships that you establish? (materials, temporary, power relations, imbalances in decision making, inequality in workloads / obtaining benefits, forms of subsequent circulation of projects, evaluation of processes, etc.)

CIC

We somehow work from a situation of contradictions, which i very much like and consider in accordance with the rest of the world around us but it also produces gaps where it becomes necessary to be aware of the constant labour of "translation" that we do, even in very small things. One very obvious example is that legally we are obliged to work as a company although this is not the structure we would choose if we had other options. Not only does this form of registration demand a lot of bureaucracy but for some of us it also requires a shift in thinking and action that we just assume is "nothing" when actually it is something like a "translation".

Similarly, whilst we did get a better sense of what we would like to spend more time working on and change in our structure and ways of working it is sometimes hard to carve out the space to actual do the more detailed work on a transformation. Something like the gap between what i or we want, the various different personal and collective desires, and what we actually do. Sometimes when we invest our times and efforts in navigating the details of all our different opinions and references and desires, we often fall very drained after long conversations, and we sometimes lose the energy and the momentum of actually doing the thing together. And other times, I guess we dream and talk more than what we can actually do.

Lastly, we keep facing all kinds of smaller and larger emergencies the political and social situation in our context creates for us.

Hezkuntza

We experienced some limits, such as:

Institutional: the educational practices from which we enunciate do not occupy a comfortable place within the institution and that causes us to meet certain limits. Sometimes they are ideological, sometimes they have more to do with the times and ways of doing communication or programming.

Limits that have more to do with the logic of the art system: for example, the roles of artists, the position that the education department occupies over others, the egos and positioning of each one ... A large part has to do with the power relations in this sense. Also with the place you occupy as a mediation department, the impossibility or the

constant negotiation to get out of formats in what a priori you do not fit (want to do for example an exhibition or a public program as an area of mediation).
Power relations in the collaborative process itself: within the groups, in institutional and interdepartmental relations or in the team itself.

The expectations: Always be part of certain desires and expectations that at some point in the process can generate friction.

The search for a common language: It is very common to tend to think that part of a common language and often happens during the process are revealed incompatibilities or misunderstandings in that regard. It is very complicated to unify positions from the beginning.

The limits of one: Internal conflicts, the personal baggage, the ways to make one and the difficulty, sometimes, to put them to collaborate with others.

5. How does the initiative sustain itself? is there collaborative ways of raising and exchanging resources and alternative economies? (different forms of funding, in kind donations or contributions, volunteer work, different forms of exchange value or local commerce etc.)

CIC
Our organisation sustains itself through a patchwork of different sources:
We run a couple of photographic facilities such as a darkroom and digital scanning and printing workshops. We use those facilities for educational activities but they are also run as services to the public. People can rent the darkroom for a small fee to develop and print analogue images or they can bring their films, images or other visual material to us and our technician Emad Antar scans or prints them. for the printing our speciality is high end printing of photographs or other visual material. There is no other place in Egypt hat offers this kind of printing so it is something that is needed in the local context and it allows us to make some money to sustain our organisation. However there is a lot of discussion in how to run those workshops because the costs of running them is also very high but that's another discussion.

Another source are collaborations with other organisations, for example for the use of the space or for programme related things. These are either organisations that do not have a space (or not a big enough space) for some of their activities and they know that

we are open for collaborations and we also to some degree depend on other structures helping us to cover the rent. For example, there is a 5 months workshop for creative documentary filmmaking organised by the Women's Film Festival and we are talking to them now about part of the programme taking place in our space. I see this as a very important form of collaboration as it also allows us to connect more closely to organisations that we like and consider very important.

The short and long-term activities as well as our more thematic work that includes education, workshops, research, exhibitions, talks, screenings, discussions, reading groups etc can only be realised with additional support. In the past years we faced increasing financial difficulties because the main funder stopped supporting spaces with continuous activities. Since this time there is an increasing amount of what could be summed up as "donations". Either that people tell us that they prefer we use the money we would like to pay them for example for giving a talk for something else, so we noticed an increasing awareness for the conditions in which we operate. There have also been more substantial contributions from private people who would like to support the organisation or a specific part of it. Also, some people we work with like for example designers or lawyers, give us special fees, different to what they would charge corporate clients.

Not so often but sometimes we find good ways to work with exchange values. For example we collaborated with the Applied Arts Department of Helwan University, a governmental university here in Cairo. Governmental universities here are very bureaucratic and they only have very limited funds available but it is interesting for us to collaborate with them because they are accessible for a much wider range of students than the private universities. Anyways, Omnia Sabry, who is working with us, was a student there at the time and she realised that the university has a large darkroom that is not used at all because the university doesn't have the materials needed and because of very small missing investments such as buying paint etc. We met a couple of times with the people responsible in that department and realised that we can help each other: we can build their darkroom and share some of a larger donation of paper etc that we got with them and in turn we were interested in working in their film studio for 2 days for a film shoot.

Hezkuntza: As for other resources at the moment, beyond the time of the people involved in the projects, which is the time they dedicate to the project without obtaining economic remuneration, although sometimes there are exceptions in that sense, all the financing is institutional. There are also some dedication projects, let's say militant on our part. This happens in the project with young people, we organize ourselves outside of work to respond to needs that have more to do with their situation of vulnerability.

Constellation of common elements and exchanges

1. Collaborative relationships
Diverse members of the internal & external staff and board members, use of space, there is not many spaces
Part of the team works as labor personnel of the institution Collaborations with other institutions.
Network made up of different agents from the Egia neighborhood to which Tabakalera belongs.
life experiences

2. traditions and / or references
People and organisations that we got to know over time
Initiatives that were created regionally during the past 20 years in Tunisia, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan.
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the ability to participate in decision- making has had all those involved in the group, but has had to pass, say, by different phases. It has been like a couple of years later when the group has assumed that it has that capacity.
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The relationship has been advancing to the point that they believe that nowadays they are proposing actions that are not mediated by us.

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