Another Roadmap School

A multivocal glossary of arts education
Un-doing Institutions

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Contemporary Image Collective (CiC) was founded it 2004 by a collective of photographers, artists, journalists and film-makers in Cairo, Egypt. Until today it is an independent cultural organisation in the sense that it is not supported by or formally connected to governmental entities. CiC changed its legal status several times over the nearly 15 years of its existence and since several years is registered as a company. This is due to restrictions and repression against organisations that operate with other registrations, like for example as NGO's. CiC is at the same time comparatively established and fragile. Within Egypt and the city of Cairo it is one of the older independent structures for arts, in the past it had the privilege of continuous structural funding as did a handful of other cultural organisations in the city. In recent years funding policies in Egypt (and to some degree in the region) changed, which resulted in the loss of the structural funding for CiC and some other institutions. Also in 2016 the authorities in Egypt reopened and extended an older court case called Case #173 (commonly referred to as the "Foreign Funding Case") to include over 90 organisations. Next to hearings and investigations, many of the defendants in Case #173 had their assets frozen and travel bans issued against them. Last year a new, very restrictive law on foreign funding was put into place.
Roughly since 2015 several raids took place in NGO's, newspapers and in a few cultural organisations, including CiC. In the raid a coworker was temporarily arrested and most of CiC's computers and internet equipment confiscated. In the following court case CiC was accused of operating with pirated software, running an unauthorised editing unit and to distribute content that destabilize the country. Retrospectively speaking the raid marked the beginning of a period of challenges that continues until today and is partially described above here. Additionally, in the end of 2016, following the conditions attached to an IMF credit for Egypt, the national bank "floated" the Egyptian Pound, resulting in the loss of value of the local currency and a financial crisis. Two years ago CiC gave up part of its space and in just over a month's time it will have to leave its current spaces for a currently unknown new location.

How to write about the potential to "undo" an institution when the institution is permanently under threat of being undone by external circumstances? Maybe in these circumstances the reflection and practice of undoing the institution is more necessary than ever. Not only because it might give a sense of agency to those who work in an organisation in a situation where things seem to be decided for us rather than by us but also because it might help us point to possibly different futures. It might also help to take decisions as to what alternatives are worth considering and which ones are "a trap".

In light of the current crisis there is much talk about the need of more local support, either through the introduction of tickets to enter institutions, or through finding support from the wealthy, local estate companies or through services that generate income. Yet rarely this discussion is linked to a reflection about the dangers of commercialisation and the question what

positions institutions need to/can occupy and who they should belong to. I wish for more discussion about the structures, hierarchies and ways of working that have been written into institutions throughout their history and that continue to write themselves. Maybe working in an institution is a perpetual work of trying to keep the institution as small as possible.

Between 10 and 13 people work at CiC, with the exception of 5 of us all part-time. Only lawyers, auditors and specific technicians are external, all other tasks from accounting to maintenance, communication, running the library and labs, educational and curatorial programming and administration are done by people who are employed by the institution/company and who all work in two apartments in a Downtown house. The same two apartments also contain a library and assembly space, exhibition space, darkroom, digital lab, offices and storage spaces. CiC's structure grew from a collective into what might be called a more or less classical art institution structure. Coming from a very small, self-organised space in Europe in which two people did pretty much everything, I remember feeling estranged by the job titles, divisions of responsibilities and administrative procedures I found when I joined CiC as Artistic Director a bit over three years ago. A feeling I somehow seem to share with other people working here. As much as possible we try to consider it part of our work to try to dismantle some of these structures that literally range from the use of a specific accounting program to internal hierarchy structures and established form of how we communicate, invite, discuss. It is probably important to note that this work is taking place in a situation that is somewhat frantic, something like a permanent emergency. I fear that in this moment some of the necessary critical questions are not being asked because it is already not sure if the structure will survive.

I would hope for any attempt to undo institutions to be a practice that tries to critically reflect the structures, habits and blind spots inherent to each institution. Undoing institutional structures is an everyday practice, something that starts from the very small and somethings that needs to constantly continue to be done precisely because it is inherent (structural) to institutions that they write themselves in ways that are not horizontal, popular or participatory. Thinking of examples, it is small shifts in how we work together in an institution, the ways we write and try to connect to each other and to people and groups around us that come to my mind. Working closely together with Ahmed Refaat and Nawara Belal over the course of 3 years, for example, we tried to modify some of the mechanisms we found around us. (In institutions these mechanism "come" to you seemingly "naturally" and if left unquestioned perpetuate themselves). Initially between the three of us and gradually towards and with people and groups we worked with. As a group of three people working together we tried to identify and discuss the hierarchies and differences of each of our positions whilst also trying to find ways to work collectively in the most meaningful sense of the word. It is important to note here that different levels of learning from each other played a key role in this. Each of us wanted and needed to learn from the others to work together, so that to some extend each of us occupied the role of a learner at least at some moments. This allowed us to at least temporarily shift the formal hierarchies between us (whilst still being aware of them) and to try to identify areas and practices that could amplify such shifts. Another example is our interest in working differently with our working languages (local Arabic dialect, standard Arabic and English), and our attempts to try shift the dominant role of the English language in contemporary art institutions such as CiC and to find writing, speaking and listening practices that are more rooted in Arabic.

The example I would like to share with you is a festival for still and moving image called PhotoCairo. CiC "inherited" the festival after it co-organised its 3rd edition in 2006 and continues

to run it until today. Though each edition in the past was quite different, they all relied on the presentation of more or less established local and international (predominantly European) artists. For the last edition of the festival, taking place in 2016/17 and co-organised in collaboration with Nour El Safoury, we tried to shift the idea of the festival from exhibiting works of artists that are already somehow considered "professional" or "established" to a focus on education and knowledge exchange. As a most immediate effect this stretched the time frame of the festival from a short and concise moment to an ongoing yearlong process. Over the year different workshops took place and out of those workshops a large part of the content of the exhibitions, performances, discussions etc was developed. The workshops themselves were announced through open calls and everybody who was part of the workshops was also an artist showing their work in the festival (unless they didn't want to, of course).

The reactions to this changed conception of the festival were mixed. Whilst particularly most of the artists taking part in the workshops and the public exhibitions and events considered the process very enriching to them, some people in the more established cultural scene felt the festival should have focused on "outstanding" work and be a space where a local public can see and engage with the latest "cutting edge" still and moving image works. Thinking back from today, I feel it was a very small step into a direction that would need much deeper reflection and considerations. I like the idea to blow the established format of the festival "out of its proportions" and opt for a more local and popular form of participations that for example disregards devisions between established artists and people who have not made art before (since both were part of the same workshop groups). But I also feel that what and how the sometimes intense discussions and processes of making things (or not making things) each group shared in their closed meetings became visible would have needed more careful thought. Also, amongst the different groups only one was self-organised. The others more or less followed the idea of a "facilitator" working on a topic and writing an open call in collaboration with the organisers. Last but not least, I feel a "festival" concerned with education would need to find more meaningful ways to challenge the obligation to represent and to create things to be shown and exhibited. Should it continue in the future more reflection should go into alternative ways of sharing knowledge and artistic practices with a larger public.