

**NEIGHBORHOOD
as A GLOBAL ARENA**

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**Collaboration and
Self-Organization**

NEIGHBORHOOD

ARTIST: LEAH ABIR

INTERVIEWING Meir Tati

I met Meir Tati to talk about “neighborhood”. We both considered this term, not just as a prism through which to view his artistic activities – in Jessy Cohen as part of the Center for Digital Art’s ongoing project, and as head of the Community and Education Department in MoBY (Museums of Bat Yam) – but also as a basic structural unit in the broad field of social practice, where the most significant events occur. In this sense the “neighborhood”, with all its relevant meanings and associations, served as an excellent starting point to discuss “Glocal Neighbors”.

Leah Abir: I suggest that we try to separate, albeit somewhat artificially, between your role in MoBY and your own art practice,

and then later consider how they connect. So I'll begin by asking you how you perceive the term "neighborhood" in relation to your art?

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Meir Tati: For me the "neighborhood" is first of all the place I grew up in. This fact, I think, this is what makes me capable of working in Jessy Cohen, because I grew up in a similar neighborhood in Bat Yam, and also because my family lives there. I think this has given me a good measure of maneuverability in this neighborhood. "Neighborhood" is also a quality – a lack of mediation, which I demonstrate in the most fundamental level, in the way I live. This has allowed me to establish better interactions in Jessy Cohen, because it gave the impression that I am part of the place, rather than a stranger trying to enter.

L: You think there are people who live in cities, but aren't part of a neighborhood?

M: Yes, I think there are. On the other hand, a building can also serve as a neighborhood.

L: I am truly trying to understand what this term means. Some say that neighborhoods are territories suddenly infused with a "center".

M: I think that a neighborhood is defined by residents far more than a term coined by the city or the geopolitical center. True, borders are determined by the city, but such borders are always breached, with the residents themselves deciding where the actual borders lie. In the case of Jessy Cohen, it is really an urban neighborhood which comprises an area much bigger than that which actively functions as Jessy Cohen. But in reality, in my opinion, Jessy includes the commercial center and the area around it. In fact, Jessy is made of three key components – the community center, the commercial center, and the Center for Digital Art. These create the three vertices of a triangle. Anything

that occurs within and around this triangle constitutes the neighborhood.

- L: You describe the neighborhood as a small, focused place, but I ask myself whether it's possible to view this particular neighborhood as a generic unit that may be replicated? Do you think that observing one neighborhood allows for drawing conclusions relevant to other neighborhoods?
- M: I think there are common denominators among different neighborhoods. For example, familiarity. A neighborhood is a familiar place. It's the everyday "hello" you exchange on the street. This process of familiarity also what happened to me in Jessy Cohen: When I reached the "hello" stage, and was recognized as someone who lives in the neighborhood, someone who is part of its landscape, it became much easier to work there. I think that when you succeed in establishing familiar ties with the kids, for example, and when other residents get to know you, you get the go-ahead or authorization to act within the neighborhood. The neighborhood is not particularly tolerant of external agents that arrive there to tell it what it needs. I think neighborhoods are defined by the relationships created within them. Here also, in my apartment in Jaffa, I feel part of a neighborhood because of the relationships I have managed to establish in the grocery store, with my neighbors, with the people on my street and others.
- L: In Hebrew the word "neighborhood" also has a negative meaning when used as an adjective. When you use it to describe a place or person, you mean something low, vulgar, uncivilized, uneducated. I'm sure there are exceptions to this, but generally it seems that in our language "neighborhood", even when used only as a noun, is an indication of low socioeconomic areas, with more immigrants, or non-native population. This is true of Jessy Cohen, as it is of the Bat Yam Museum's neighborhood. What do you think?

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- M: I'll answer that through a personal experience that has, over time, become my perspective. As a child, I grew up in the Amidar neighborhood of Bat Yam. The neighborhood closest to it was Jaffa D – the HaMachrozet neighborhood. And there's a scene in the movie "Sallah Shabati" depicting the 'dream' to move to social housing. That's how it was. People dreamt of moving from houses with yards to high-rise blocks, because there was something different about them. As a kid, I was very impressed by people who lived in tall buildings that had an entrance door, for example. Today the conditions in HaMachrozet neighborhood are just as bad as those of the Amidar neighborhood, despite the differences in the architectures that residents categorize as low versus high.
- L: In English, when I think of it, this marker also exists. For example, when you say someone is "from the hood".
- M: In English, "neighborhood" is also associated with "ghetto". And here we have another matter. Neighborhoods are defined by ethnic or socioeconomic similarities, a place where people are ostensibly equal. But then you get out. On one hand, the convenience of neighborhood living disintegrates, and on the other hand – it is only then that it is truly defined as a neighborhood. Only when you leave it.
- L: This point of yours is interesting. First, the neighborhood is defined by its residents, and second – by those who leave it.
- M: Yes, it's complicated. The neighborhood is also a place for a child's fantasy to leave it, to move on. The goal is to leave and become better than your neighborhood. The neighborhood, for me, is an engine. It's the place where I got my tools to manage in the world employing the neighborhood spirit – less polite, more intimate, more energetic – also outside the neighborhood, anywhere. There's a running gag in the Center for Digital Art, where they call me a "neighborhood curator". It's a hard term to translate to another language. You are a "neighborhood curator"

in the sense that you are a curator of a neighborhood, but also because you exhibit neighborhood traits. Meaning, someone who processes things faster and does not get stuck on things. In this, the neighborhood is also a practice, or strategy, of reaching a level of familiarity with the people you work with or with the themes you deal with.

L: I want us to talk a bit about Bat Yam. Let's say that instead of three things here, there are actually two and a half – your official role in Bat Yam as education and community director, your art practice in Jessy Cohen, and your art practice outside both Jessy Cohen and Bat Yam. I don't want to compare between them, but I do think it's important to distinguish between these three areas. In Bat Yam, you took on an official position, you have an office and an institutional identity that you employ when facing various other functions in the city, something you do not have in Jessy Cohen. The position in Bat Yam interests me, also because I worked there as a museum curator, and I am familiar with the place. True, the Bat Yam Museum functions within a neighborhood, but it is very different from Jessy Cohen. There is none of the familiarity or the communal identity you're talking about. I also viewed neighborhoods, like the one I grew up in, as a place defined by its residents, such as through a collaborative struggle against outside influences. In the Bat Yam neighborhood, I felt the place had none of those characteristics. It was actually quite alienated.

M: What makes the difference, I feel, is the Jessy Cohen community center – a model that addresses a lot of the community's needs. The neighborhood of the Bat Yam Museum has additional culture institutions, like the Hall of Culture (Heikhal Hatarbut), and also a commercial center, but there was a great detachment between the museum itself and the neighborhood. Detachment in respect to the museum building itself, looking like some spacecraft that landed there, and also in its openness. This is a very fundamental detachment, which does not stem from the exhibitions or kind of art displayed there. I think the

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art exhibited in the museum is irrelevant to the connection between the museum and its environment. I don't think the important question is whether the displayed art brings in more or less residents or viewers. The more significant questions are what kind of activities does the institution produce to bring people in? Or what is the museum's function in relation to its audience? I don't view the museum as an exhibition space, but as a space of action, in which many things may occur, from providing an electrical outlet to light a birthday party in the garden to holding an academic seminar. When referring to residents, I don't only mean those people who actually live in the neighborhood, but everyone who uses municipal services – whether they are social workers, teachers, students, or parents. The city includes a lot of functions, and putting these functions together is what makes up the neighborhood. This question can also be linked to art practices: what function can you, the artist, fulfill for the people you work with? How can I transform my function as an artist to make it part of the neighborhoods infrastructure, and that of the city?

L: And what's your agenda in Bat Yam?

M: The main thing is not to work alone, understand that you don't know anything, and that you must change the way you think about your actions as you go along, while being active. Even when meeting people I'd like to work with, or who want to work with me, I am attentive to the needs being addressed – needs of the museum, of an instructor, a resident, whoever. There are a lot of people involved in a project like this, and listening encourages the development of the project, so that residents feel the project is important to them, that art is important to them.

L: Basically you're saying that it's not what's displayed in the museum that's important, but how the museum operates. I'd like to ponder on this, so let me take it one step further – there are people who believe that museums should not exhibit

anything specifically designed for a particular audience, or even consider audiences as a factor, as these are populist considerations.

- M: I think curators have the autonomy to try and create whatever they want to, just as I have the complete freedom to act within my territories. Everyone should have the liberty to function within their own domain.
- L: But have there been cases when you could tell that the elements on display were good or bad in relation to what you were aiming to achieve?
- M: Yes. But exhibitions are a limitation, just as neighborhoods are a limitation. It's like building an installation – either you fight the space, or you are willing to understand it, work with it. Even in more intense, political exhibitions in MoBY I insist on the freedom to provide my own perspective on the artistic act. Even when exhibitions cannot be mediated, that's alright. I take on the duty of mediation. I try to be “site sensitive”, much like “site specific”. Meaning, being sensitive to the limitations of choice of the curator and the audience alike. For example, choosing for myself which art works to use (in the education program).
- L: I think if you could point out a key difference between the two art institutions, Bat Yam and Holon, both dealing in some way with community engagement, it would be that Bat Yam maintains a more classical division between the education and community departments, and that of curating, which produces more traditionally-structured exhibitions that display artifacts, i.e. quite classical.
- M: Very classical, obviously.
- L: On the other hand, it feels that Holon is engaged in a debate on the relevance or validity of the exhibition format, and there are curatorial activities in different forms that are not exhibitions.

And perhaps in that sense there is less separation between the departments. What do you think?

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M: I think that in the Holon Center this division is still maintained between exhibitions and projects. I actually think the classical approach isn't bad. I think art provides the legitimacy to also do other things, and I wouldn't want to give up the museum name, which provides the institutional legitimacy of not being a community center. You see, it's the aura around the word "museum", which people respect, which allows you to bend the institution and make it part of something greater.

L: In that case, what is the difference between a museum and community center, if both provide cultural services to residents?

M: I think art can accomplish things that other fields cannot. Artists don't have fixed working hours, they can travel the grey areas that the system doesn't know how to navigate. The museum is much "grayer" in its function in the world, its real role is to provide a space for art, not for the neighborhood. But when you create a place for the neighborhood within the museum, you have a far more varied range of possible actions, and a certain flexibility. As an artist, I like practices that shift between fields, and work through collaborations. This is possible both in my museum job, and in my art work. And the good thing about working in an institution is I feel I have the power to direct budgets or funding I manage to raise, to make those things I believe are important to society, or things I want art to be part of, to happen.

L: So let's extend this principle to socially engaged art. Is establishing discussion and critique of art actions of this nature even possible? I don't mean judgmental criticism, but rather analysis and interpretation. Can such artistic activity truly be summarized, or its characteristics considered, when critics don't always have access to the act itself? And maybe only the participants themselves can critique such work?

M: Good question, and I'm not sure I have an answer for it. All I know is, one of my conclusions from the Jessy Cohen project was that socially engaged art as it is executed today is problematic, and this conclusion has personal repercussions. I want to do socially engaged activities like that of the Bat Yam Museum education department, but I also feel this activity, framed as an artistic act, has a representational problem I have not yet resolved. It may be that I can't solve it, and as a viewer I remain very critical: who profits from this, who doesn't, or similar thoughts. The solution, I believe, is first of all to continue working in Bat Yam and avoid this disturbing representation issue. And second, as far as my future art practice is concerned, my current focus is knowledge sharing between groups working together, creating an art project that includes some element of visual representation. Work or thought groups, like forums that are comprised of people from different areas, including residents, artists, architects, and others, exchanging knowledge and creating art together.

L: And then what would your role be?

M: I only provide the knowledge I draw from my specific experiences. For example, I am interested in creating a curriculum with teachers. Working with a teacher training college. But this, for example I don't want to represent. Representation is the sickness eating away at this format, because artists, truth be told, never manage to give it up.

L: But don't you think that retreating from the image is also a retreat from a politically influential tool of enormous power in our current day culture? Meaning, that you are taking a step back from active participation in this arena?

M: Maybe, for now, I am leaving that arena for others, but I am not abandoning it entirely. Exchanging knowledge or tools that in visual form, not necessarily produced by you, has as much

validity as graphic design.

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L: We're almost done, so let's take a moment and go back to the term "neighborhood". I want to share with you my impression of the conference, and the activities of the Center in Holon regarding this term, to place you within a contemporary phenomenon I have identified. I think there is a tendency to increasingly minimize the unit being examined, perhaps one could call it the "end-point unit". It's very difficult these days to define something big, some overview concept about the world or even a country, and this results in people focusing on smaller and smaller units, such as groups or neighborhoods. I would question to what degree is the neighborhood, for you, not just a physical reality but also a metaphorical one? Meaning, throughout your work in Jessy Cohen, how often did the question of neighborhood come up, say in comparison to your work in Russia, where obviously it arose in a larger context?

M: In Jessy Cohen the question never came up, at least for me. I went where events led me, moved from one point to the next. Over time, I understood that the model is not the neighborhood, but the way you manage things. The basic honesty and trustworthiness when working with others.

L: But it's not like you lack political awareness or have no views about what's happening in Israeli society. I wonder how these elements can be completely lacking in your work in the community.

M: Work in Jessy Cohen may not have critical in that sense. I didn't have a predetermined critique, and wasn't looking for something to criticize. I didn't even know what I was looking for until I found it.

L: And looking back on it now?

M: Probably not. I have great appreciation for critical thinking, but

during a social project I don't feel there is not room for it. I prefer to focus on producing something. In these situations, a critical perspective seems the easy choice. I wonder – what alternative would you offer to the situation you are criticizing?

L: And what about critique in the sense of pointing to context, meaning thinking about why the residents of Jessy Cohen ended in that neighborhood, who creates this neighborhood – who, as you termed it - “profits”?

M: This is something sociologists do all the time, you know, and it's something bigger than just the people in the neighborhood, including me. Those researching the issue are certainly interested in understanding how this came about. To me it seems simple: there are a lot of unoccupied Amidar houses, so the Mizrahi Jews were initially moved there, then the immigrants from the Soviet Union, then the Ethiopians. The critical representation of the neighborhood, as you describe it, is the most basic and common representation of the neighborhood – the snotty boy photographed endless times, or the unemployed man holding a liquor bottle, for example. I once saw an article about a murder committed in the neighborhood, and noticed the imagery included – everyone in the dark, blackened images, a dangerous looking place, broken bottle shard of glass on the floor. And Orel Galina, the Jessy Cohen youth at-risk coordinator working with the Center for Digital Art, tells me: “You can work in the neighborhood for over three years, and yet one article with such generalized images drags you right back to square one”. I consciously avoid using this critical and research-oriented imagery that perpetuates this representation. In fact, the neighborhood is more than that. It has different people, different histories.

L: I have to ask. Have you ever used the word “periphery”?

M: No.

L: Who uses that word? Isn't it true that only people not from the periphery use that word? Or people who benefit from using it?

M: I don't use the word "periphery".

L: But consider how many people do. Miri Regev, for instance.

M: How can a periphery exist in country that is periphery in itself?

*Thanks to Sharon Elbaz for the Hebrew transcription of this conversation.

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THE PICNIC PRINCIPLE OF PARTICIPATIO

Liv Proenneke

Usually, in a neighbourhood participation takes place when social, religious or cultural associations provide a place, a program and an infrastructure and then invite people. The participants have to have a certain interest or topic, sometimes even a distinctive mind-set. A lot of projects are not pursued if there are not enough participants or money runs out. In other words, typical participation happens when an inviting top-down structure exists to which people of a neighbourhood have easy access to.

The Picnic Principle of Participation follows a different approach. A good picnic thrives if every participant offers something different. Someone has a backyard, some bring food and drinks, and some others

have ideas for interesting games and conversations, the skills to build a bonfire or to play the guitar.

This is a bottom-up approach because everything happening comes from within the group. The following ideas help to install the Picnic Principle in a participation project:

Each contribution is appreciated for its inner value; the group trusts in its potential and ideas. Wherever the project starts, everything needed is already there.

The group size is irrelevant; the project works with two people or with fifty. Whoever comes is just the person who was missing.

Every outcome of the project is welcome. Whatever happens is the best way to end the project.

The glocal neighbours are a great space to try the Picnic Principle. Our group includes social workers, artists and residents from two very different and diverse neighbourhoods with a huge variety of cultures, languages, experiences, priorities and abilities. Even after two years, the group is discovering its full potential and it is a lot of fun to see colorful participation projects, which are globally inspired and locally performed (or the other way around), come to life.

*The Picnic
Principle of
Participatio*

THE ARTIST WILL HAVE TO DECIDE WHOM TO SERVE

Jeanne Van Heeswijk

When I was invited to speak at the symposium Social Housing—Housing the Social I was quite delighted because the topic is very close to my heart. However, when I read that I was part of the session “Autonomous or instrumentalized,” I became slightly irritated. Why do we have to talk again about this binary position when, in my opinion, autonomy and instrumentalization are no longer oppositional strategies.

The title presumed that an autonomous outside position is still possible and that working together with different partners such as local governments, councils, or social housing organizations invariably

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means that the artist is going to be instrumentalized. My concern has more to do with how, working with my skills as an artist within the complexity of our cities, I can put myself to work in areas that are undergoing rapid change and that are under huge pressure from the forces of globalization. As Martha Rosier has suggested, we need to take into account ways in which people reclaim the right to their city, both politically and socially.¹ As such, we have to look at our own artistic position as to whom we serve. How can I be an instrument that makes the right to produce our daily environment a possibility? I like being an instrument that works on self-organization, collective ownership, and new forms of sociability. I like being an instrument that enables all of us to occupy, the place in which we live.

Housing social change:
learning collectively to take responsibility²

The current economic crisis, as well as the shifting of geopolitical boundaries and socio-cultural demographics, as a result of global urbanization, has generated numerous local zones of conflict. Many neighborhoods have become sites of contestation, into which different conditions of power are inscribed, where everything seems to be locked up by overregulation, and where populist images prevail. People are increasingly becoming disinvested and excluded from their own environment. There is a serious disconnection between ordinary people and their government. The development of a city, however, is a collective process. In this regard, and despite the growth of disconnection, the city can always be transformed, and there is a growing faith, by the various parties that deal with developing the city, in the potential for developing models and instruments that enable communities to participate in building their city. Yet this faith ignores the fact that their idea of transformation is being based rather naively on a harmonious concept of togetherness.

The public domain is made through the meeting, but more so through the confrontation, between people, cultures, and ideas. It is exactly in that confrontation that new ideas and social transformations originate. Public life is, but for a small part, oriented by the physical environment. Social, economic, and cultural processes are usually quite

exclusive. Yet at the center of these processes, and especially at sites of contestation, cultural interventions are often the only way through which public engagement in these processes can be generated.

Enabling the individual or the community to participate in building the city means more than presenting them with a few choices. For this would mean that we could still only participate within the already established conditions, such as public comment channels or classical forms of protest, including demonstrations and standard complaint procedures. Offering only a range of choices is one last convulsion of the urban marketing idea that still views the citizen as a consumer. In fact it is precisely these conditions, the notions of how we wish and are able to live together, that we should be able to question again and again within this process.

Housing is not a product but a process! Yet, how can we make it an inclusive process? What kind of interventionist strategies and micro-political tactics do we need to make this process more inhabitable?

The question is whether we are capable of creating a place, and associated capacities, for public engagement—a public domain—where we could research, debate, and face up to confrontation and address one another as co-producers of the city? Can we make this arena of tension visible and create models that allow people to become participants in the process of visualizing the dynamics, complexity, and diversity of the city they live in and to collectively develop a narrative about the city in which everyone has a place? “Can alliances between politics and art, be imagined, tested, and based in practices that establish ... narratives for a democratic, post-national ... inclusive society ... ?”³ How can we re-engage and witness the invisible vectors of power that shape the territory, reorganize systems of urban development, and challenge the political and economic frameworks it produces?

It is exactly here that we have to learn collectively to take responsibility for the place we live in. We have to occupy these places and deepen, sharpen, or question their narrative, not as consumers but as creators. So that we can become players in our own surroundings, are able to act up, are active citizens. Cultural interventions are a form of urban acupuncture (hit and run tactics) that will allow the sensitive places in our society to emerge and the

1 Martha Rosier, “The Artistic Mode of Revolution: From Gentrification to Occupation,” *e-flux Journal*, no. 33 (2012).

2 The text for this essay was partly taken from my acceptance speech for the Leonore Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change 2011 (New York, September 25, 2011).

3 Gottfried Wagner, *The Art of Difference: From Europe as a Cultural Project to EU Policies for Culture* written with the cooperation of the European Cultural Foundation and Fritt Ord Foundation (London: Alliance Publishing Trust, 2011), 78.

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blocked relational energies flow again. It is therefore important to ask how an engaged practice will not only address issues through debates but can at the same time mobilize existing local, physical, and socio-cultural capital, and use it as the “performative” basis for a city under development. Here, the performative should be understood as a way to try to decolonize space, as a gesture or intervention that tries to create a space in which a diversity of individual projections might confront each other versus the projection of “the perfect life/good” by project/real estate developers and local governments, who are each time trying to abstract and colonize space in order to create a different image of the city. In other words, we have to find a different way to use existing and new cultural capital.

Engaging communities

An engaged practice should provide a platform for artist and non-artist exchange, for participation, and real/honest communication, that underpins a broadly supported, inclusive, and integral idea about living together in the community, as a condition or possibility for bringing about changes, and preferably improvements, in social structures.⁴ To intervene in such a way that the people who are participating can increase the number and intensity of their ties, may seem a simple act to perform. However, during the course of my practice, I have learned how difficult it can be to create in collaboration with a community and to depend upon that community’s continued involvement for sustainability. It also involved all of us learning together how to take collective responsibility in order to make the information gathered operate significantly in the social and political context. These processes are always long and sometimes painful, as we have to learn about each other’s ideas and different viewpoints.

For my practice, becoming part of the community and being part of the whole process of neighborhood change is key. We have to understand how, at a deeper level, we can face today’s broken circuitry between people, culture, and the political process. Then the energy generated through people acting-out in their own environment will lead to a network of support, a critical reading of one’s own surroundings, and an involvement in the changes that take place. This is a process of

collective learning—about how to unleash the potential of people to engage with different creative energies for collective action in order to become a shaping force in our immediate environment.

We do this in order to actively encourage people to create an environment in their own territory in which they can “create, produce, disseminate, distribute, and have access to their own cultural expressions.”⁵ We want to establish a place where people teach each other what it takes to become active citizens and where they take collective responsibility to produce change in order to make the processes work in a larger social-political context. For this to occur, it is important to not just offer a platform for good intentions, but to find ways to re-set the public value of urbanism as a contributor to greater solidarity, one that acts as a real public faculty that co-produces an alternative. For this we have to go back again and again to create an understanding of the public domain as a shared space, a space that everyone can contribute to and can change. This concept of the public domain means that we all have the right to an environment that creates opportunities to work and to live well.

4 My own lesson from practices about the contemporary state of the public domain is that it will require nothing less than making private public during this state of exception.

5 See “Article 7—Measures to promote cultural expressions,” *United Nations: Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions 2005* (Paris, October 20, 2005).

Neighborhood as a Global Arena

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