Rules of Thumb - Omnibus 2011,
text by Todd Lester

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Cross-pollination is normal - if not essential - for networks, especially in the culture sector where the broader (more formal) networks learn from the horizontal structure of (less formal) artist collectives and community art projects that artists create and enjoin intuitively. While this is often an organic process, I have seen different experiments intended to instigate cross-pollination among and across networks. In March 2009 the Institute of Network Cultures convened Winter Camp, which brought 12 networks (including freeDimensional) to Amsterdam for a week to connect the virtual with the real in order to find out how distributed social networks can collaborate more effectively. Modeled after that experience, freeDimensional convened a meeting on Creative Resistance – An Intersecting Networks Approach in 2010 on Wasan Island for arts networks, mobility operators, and human rights groups from Latin America, Africa, Asia, North America and Europe. One of the results of this meeting is the International Coalition of Arts, Human Rights and Social Justice, which is essentially a network of networks.

In terms of network growth, change and diversification, it is important to acknowledge watershed events. For example, the Spanish cultural support of residencias_en_red [iberoamérica] helped what was already a burgeoning regional sector to get together at meetings and through subsidized collaboration to the extent that the next iteration is better prepared to stand on its own as Spanish support tapers off. Here, I am linking to the two consecutive websites that have been used to organize information and provide external relations ... often a new website is indicative of next steps and new seasons of collaboration and organization within networks as is the case with residencias_en_red. It can even be argued that the web presence is typically one of the largest expenditures for a horizontal network. Where this becomes tricky is that funding bodies sometimes want to see other indicators of growth - e.g. dedicated office space and staff growth - before investing in online systems of representation. For all the energy and attention that freeDimensional gives to presenting itself as a network, we are still asked how big is our staff and if we have an office. While I understand these questions (and their utility for brick-and-mortar non-profits), and know how to interpret and respond to them, it is necessary for foundations to understand (and encourage) the nature of horizontal networks, which can - if encouraged and allowed to flourish - satisfy (and even replace some of) the need for full-time professional staff with qualified segments of time from a range of personnel in organizations across the network membership. For freeDimensional, we've maintained the practice of having our office within a member art space until very recently. residencias_en_red is doing something similar by having its new coordinator situated at a member residency in Colombia for a six-month period before moving to another site for the remainder of the year. This model provides low-cost rent options and/or modes of technical exchange that are both cost-efficient and allow the network staff to get to know the staff and founders of member organizations (and vice versa) as well as the different countries and regions that the network covers. In freeDimensional's case, we added new staff from places where the office was hosted - e.g. Cairo - who continued working for the network even after

the office had moved on to a new location [office rotations lasted 1-2 years]. If a network is purposefully engaging in this practice of office rotation in order to get to know its members and lower its costs, it is important to approximate the value of such hosting in order to mention it as a footnote to budgets. It is very important to have these resources understood as - and translated to - funds raised since many funding bodies want to track the incremental growth of an organization's fiscal capacity in terms of grants and resources received and managed.

While I won't take the time here to tease out its relevance, I recently read From Precarity to Precariousness and Back Again: Labour, Life and Unstable Networks that touches on how by not responding to new patterns of knowledge work and labor practices with new modes of compensation and valorization of social capital that funding bodies may contribute to the precarious financial states of knowledge and culture workers who stretch themselves thin in the service of creativity. I also touch on this issue in Dispatch #4: Occasional Pitfalls, and articles in e-flux journal #24 allude to it as well.

The Latin American network I mention above is an example of the proliferation of regional networks (with the watershed event being a funding intervention). Regional networks grow at different paces and with different catalysts. Sometimes new networks replace the old ones or replace the perceived need (by members) of representation in larger (global) networks, which often become more hierarchical with age... and are often located in the west or places of economic acceleration (for lack of a better word). I think that this is all very useful and can even act as a deterrent for larger, older networks atrophying into rigid institutional forms. What I mean is that an older, larger, western-based network such as Res Artis must find new modes of engagement for working with regional networks that are more innovative and mutually beneficial than the dues paying membership approach that might work with a single member from a region. There will likely be a dip in membership from a given region for a larger network right after the regional network has its watershed moment or catalyzing event. The shifting, evolving terrain, which goes hand-in-hand with sectoral growth, can produce a variety of results in the field. For example, a larger, older network may organically fragment or purposely use the opportunity to share an area of its work with a new regional or topical network. Another scenario is one of diversification whereby the more established network develops new capacities (i.e. information hub) and services which can replace lost dues through strategic grant seeking and/or fee-for-service. These services may even include knowledge about the new growth in a particular region, such as Res Artis recently writing a desk study on Latin American residencies for the Fonds BKVB, something that was mutually beneficial for the old network, the new network and the funder. IETM provides examples of both the fragmentation and diversification scenarios in its relations with the Roberto Cimetta Fund regional mobility fund and the On The Move mobility information hub, which serve as archetypical examples of the temporal capacities/roles a network may grow to fill - or incubate - only to spin-off as by-products at subsequent watershed moments.

Some more reading:
Network Evaluation: Cultivating Healthy Networks for Social Change
HOW NETWORKING WORKS | IETM Study on the Effects of Networking
Mobility and cultural co-operation in the age of digital spaces