

## NETWORKED:

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# Membership, Ideology + Network Typologies Dispatch 2, text by Todd Lester



The world of arts-related networks is a fast evolving one. Networks can be either top-down or bottom-up. Whereas big institutions are getting in the game with CreativeAfricaNetwork (Puma), SustainArt (Illy), Rhiz.eu (European Cultural Foundation), I think that the realm of the individual artist's network is also very important. It has occurred to me on several occasions lately that once an artist has already been in residence at a space/site that they typically have the occasion to go back and draw on that institutions resources. For example, a Cameroonian cartoon journalist that we once hosted at the Carlton Arms art hotel in NYC always stays there for free when he passes thru the city; A Druze artist

hosted by Bilbao Arte went back again to Spain with student visa status that they helped him apply for; etc.

While not always the case, top-down networks are usually driven by a larger institution (e.g. funder, business, NGO) and bottom-up networks are driven by individuals or smaller, community-based organizations (e.g. artist-in-residence, culture worker, art space). By using this dichotomy, it is easier to understand modes of affiliation (or network membership) and priorities held by the organizer. For example, foundations, businesses and larger NGOs often prioritize geographic diversity and contract-oriented financial relations. These contracts/financial relations are present with funders and larger NGOs because grants made to network members are usually intended for specific purposes; businesses will have branding objectives; and larger NGOs will typically require dues payment from network members. Individual artists and art spaces tend to care more about individual livelihood, mobility and community conditions.

In my work with [freeDimensional](#), I have seen a further distinction between subscription to a network ideology and casual membership. For example, freeDimensional is a smaller organization, which - due to a smaller overhead - can focus on issue or urgency-based networking without depending on generating dues from network members. This has to do with freeDimensional's goal of helping culture workers in distress by placing them into vacant artist residency apartments. In order to do this practice, it is not necessary that all nodes of the network be active (or activated) at all times. We are an urgency-based network that depends on rapid reaction when we learn of an individual artist/culture worker in distress. This can happen anywhere in the world and at anytime. Our strategy for assuring quick reaction from members is by first getting to know and 'affiliating' with art spaces in a lighter (non-dues paying/non-contractual) form of

engagement than the formal 'recruitment' process that would be necessary before a specific action (e.g. dues payment, putting a logo on a website, etc) could be expected. And at a moment of urgency, we go (back) to the best situated art space to seek their participation (at which time a Memorandum of Understanding, as well as training and orientation are useful). Typically, it is participation in helping us on the case of a culture worker in distress that moves a network subscriber into the range of strong potential network engagement, while simultaneously reverting back to a lighter form of engagement after the particular case of urgency has been resolved.

While freeDimensional's is a specific social practice, I do think that node activation, subscribing to a network ideology, and identifying motives are common considerations for network planning and sustainability.