Meaning Slide? Dispatch 3
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What does the word network mean anyway? In Dispatch #2, I mention big institutions starting networks - e.g. CreativeAfricaNetwork and other regionally-focused initiatives (Puma), SustainArt (Illy), and Rhiz.eu (European Cultural Foundation). Similarly, the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development has its Network Partnership and the Arts Collaboratory network was started by Hivos, Mondriaan Stichting and Doen Stichting.

Without delving into theories pertaining to intermediary (civil society) organizations or Social Network Theory, I contend that the network is situated on a continuum somewhere between the social movement and the non-governmental organization (NGO). And without assuming a human rights or social justice sectoral perspective, I contend that the network is self-organizing (sometimes organic, unplanned or accidental) with a goal and seeks to affect social change at some level. So, if the social movement is the lifespan as well as the initial moment of coming together by people and groups around a common idea; and the NGO (or social movement organization) is the maturation of that process; then the network is a liminal phase of the organizing or coming together process. For me, this is inherently a grassroots or bottom-up process; therefore, I draw a distinction between the network and the act of networking. When big institutions deploy capital (by way of grantmaking, underwriting meetings and mobility, branding and cross-marketing) to the benefit of select constituents who rely on those same institutions (wholly or in part) for their operational funding and/or programmatic support, I would argue that a disparity in social agency (even while there may be agreement on a common idea) means that the process is necessarily one of top-down networking rather than network-building.

And if institutional form wasn't already complicated enough, the phrase social network has come unhinged from its recent meaning, which I hint at above. Now, social network is synonymous with the online community and social networking conflated with interaction on virtual platforms ranging from generalist ones
(e.g. facebook, twitter, orkut, myspace) to art world-specific ones
(e.g. rhiz.eu, CreativeAfricaNetwork, SustainArt, ArtsRightsJustice). And within the art world-specific online communities, there are examples of both grassroots networks such as the International Coalition for Arts, Human Rights & Social Justice's ArtsRightsJustice and the virtual extensions of networking processes undertaken by big institutions, e.g. the European Cultural Foundation (rhiz.eu), Puma (CreativeAfricaNetwork) and Illy (SustainArt). Therefore, an interactive, online community (a.k.a social network) can be the virtual extension of either a grassroots network or a top-down networking endeavor, both of which may serve the purpose of sharing information with the difference being most apparent when the big institution uses the online platform to deploy capital e.g. grantmaking, underwriting meetings and mobility, branding and cross-marketing.

My ideas are informed by many different sources, including a paper on Understanding Networks written by Fulco van Deventer as well as interaction with the Institute of Network Cultures.