A conversation with Eyal Danon
by Dina Yakerson

Dina: Please tell me about your activity in Jessy Cohen? How did the Jessy Cohen project begin and how did your physical transition into the neighbourhood occur?

Eyal: Everything started as a project which is no longer defined as a project now. In 2009, we offered the municipality of Holon an outdoor project, as part of the seventy-year celebration of the city, which was about to take place in 2010. We thought it was a good idea to use the budget for the celebrations, and we offered a one-year residency for artists to work in the city and create a big outdoor event. Apparently, the budget we requested was much bigger than the whole budget of the celebrations, so there was no money left for us. However, they said if we were going to focus on the neighbourhood of Jessy Cohen - there was a budget for that. The immediate reason for that was a big new wave of immigrants from Ethiopia—you know, the *Falash Mura*[1] immigration—who settled in the neighbourhood. It wasn't a result of city policy; it was a result of state policy. But the city had to deal with it, so they had a specific budget for that. But it's interesting that the city saw us as one of the relevant tools it had to deal with what was happening in Jessy Cohen. And what is happening in Jessy Cohen is a phenomenon that repeats itself throughout the last decades: in recent years, it's been the *Falash Mura* immigration, during the 90s it was immigration from the former Soviet Union, in the 80's Ethiopians again, in the 70's…

Dina: In fact, in every decade this was an immigrant neighbourhood?

Eyal: Yes, in every decade.
The idea was that we would do a project for two years, throughout 2010 and 2011. We received a budget of 400,000 nis from the municipality, and we committed ourselves to raise the same amount. That's how we began the Jessy Cohen project, and nothing we thought would happen happened. Currently, it is not a project anymore, because since we physically moved the whole Center into the neighbourhood it ceased to be a project. This transition is influencing everything the Center is currently doing.

Dina: When did you move? Was it your decision to stop the "project" and to actually move and become an integral part of the neighbourhood? Or was this a decision of the municipality?

Eyal: We moved on July 1st in 2012, into a building of an old school, a day after the school had closed. After about a year of working in the neighbourhood we understood that the two-year time frame is irrelevant. It took us almost a year—half of the project's time frame—just to meet with people and understand the neighbourhood. We made our own decision that, regardless of the city's funding, we would continue to work with the neighbourhood in the following years. We began contemplating the idea of actually moving the Center there. Then, we had a meeting with the CEO of the mayor and we told her we heard rumours that the school in Jessy Cohen was about to close, and if it did – we wanted to move in. At first she said she didn't think it would. But then, about a month before the school year ended, they made a decision to close the school, and the municipality gave us the option to move in.
And I have to say it is very interesting that our former location was also an old school which we

renovated and adapted into an art centre. In parallel, the municipality was about to open a new high school in the city, and they could have used the old school which had closed for that purpose, but they decided to give us the choice. Ultimately, our decision cost them more money.

Dina: Is this due to the fact that during those two years that you worked in the framework of a "project," they believed your work was valuable and that it had a good influence on the neighbourhood?

Eyal: The correct structure is that they nominate a head of a cultural institution and from that moment onwards they do not intervene in his decision-making. And that's how it worked with us from the very beginning. So I wouldn't say that they knew or currently know all the details of our activity and therefore that they cannot really evaluate the effect of our actions. I think there was a general consensus that having us inside the neighbourhood was the right thing to do, even if it's not based on real data. We also don't have the real data; our decision was not based on a clear evaluation of the effect our transition into the neighbourhood would have. This decision was mainly based on gut feeling.

Dina: How did this transition affect the activity of the Center?

Eyal: Our activity has changed – it is still in the process of changing. In the midst of the Jessy Cohen project, we began to re-evaluate and rethink the Center's activity. The Jessy Cohen project was a very direct, clear continuation of the Center's activity for years. But, at the same time, it was perceived by the outside as a U-turn, as a shift in direction. People were saying, "You used to be a political art space and now you're a social art space." It was very important for us to create linkage—a curatorial linkage between our previous projects, such as *Liminal Spaces* (a collaboration we initiated with the Palestinian Association of Contemporary Art and the Art Academy in Ramallah), and what we are currently doing in Jessy Cohen; to link this political and social aspect—because they cannot really be separated. One cannot separate the occupation, for example, or the policy that creates the occupation, from the policy that creates places like Jessy Cohen. It's the same source of policy that creates Jessy Cohen and the Neve-Shaan-nan neighbourhood in Tel Aviv. It's the same mechanism and the same source of power. So you cannot really make this separation unless you surrender, in advance, to the Israeli national division of Israelis/ Palestinians, Jews/Arabs. According to this dichotomy, collaborations and joint projects are simply impossible.

The Jessy Cohen project has influenced our curatorial work. It was clear, after about a year or so, that we have one program over there—in the previous building of the Center, and another curatorial program in the "shop"—the small gallery space we opened in Jessy Cohen. We had two curatorial programs and two different audiences. Our idea was to have projects that were exhibited in the shop of Jessy Cohen, exhibited also in the Center itself, in order to not create this kind of separation of audiences. The Center was perceived as a more "serious," prestigious (it's funny to use this word, you know what the place looked like) art space, and the shop was a small exhibition space for the community.

Dina: Who are your partners and collaborators inside the neighbourhood?

Eyal: At first, our main and only partner was the neighbourhood's community centre. Today we have what we call the "Jessy forum" —a forum that meets every six weeks. It contains our team from the Center, the people who work in the community centre, social workers, people working with youth at risk, the local youth movement, our FabLab, and the youth club—many representatives.

As long as we were not physically here, the projects were continuously happening—artist after artist. We tried to have longer projects, you know Meir (Tati), for instance, worked here for two years. So we constantly had someone working in the neighbourhood. But once we moved in, we had nothing - no projects. It took us almost a year to restart projects. Because it took us a year to really understand and re-evaluate our activity here. But the only thing that was still going on was that "Jessy forum," and I think for us it's a very important tool of working

within the neighbourhood—creating this kind of alliance.

Dina: Did this forum already exist or did you guys actually form this alliance?

Eyal: The participants of the forum were working in the neighbourhood way before us, and most of them didn't even know each other. So why was it that the art institution introduced this kind of cooperation? I think that we are the only partner in this alliance of disciplines that has no clear methodology. Everyone else who works in the neighbourhood in different fields comes to the neighbourhood with a very specific time frame, and they know what they are supposed to be doing. We know nothing. It is a weakness of course, because we have to really learn as we go along and make a lot of mistakes in the process. But at the same time, it gives us a lot of freedom. We have much more "free time," which is something that is lacking here. We have free time to offer all of the other partners to meet, a place for all of them to meet and so on.

Dina: However, you continue to curate and host exhibitions as you did before this transition. So how does your regular activity integrate within the activity in the neighbourhood?

Eyal: First of all, since we are physically here we are undergoing a process. We became another institution in the neighbourhood that is available for the residents of the neighbourhood. This doesn't mean that all of the exhibitions here have to do with the neighbourhood, as did the various socially engaged projects that we conducted here. We are a contemporary art institution and we have to do very good, professional, international contemporary art exhibitions. This is essential for us, and what we have to do now is to think how we reach out to our new public. In the previous place, we were completely alien, of course due to the fact that we didn't really make any effort to connect to our surroundings. But the fact remained that we were only communicating with an art audience. Since we moved here, we are communicating with another audience. It doesn't mean that we have to necessarily change our exhibition program. I think since we are dealing with social-political issues (the Center is always dealing with social-political issues) all the exhibitions are relevant to the people in the neighbourhood. The question is, first of all, how do we make them come? When they come, who meets them? Who speaks with them? And so on.

Dina: So how does this work now? What are the ways that you communicate the Center's projects and exhibitions that do not necessarily take place in the neighbourhood or deal with the neighbourhood to your new public in Jessy Cohen?

Eyal: We have a growing number of residents that we know personally from different activities that we have conducted. Before every exhibition, they receive a phone call from us, inviting them personally to the opening. We try to arrange guided tours in the exhibitions for the different groups registered in the community center. So, if you are going to an aerobics class in the community center, for instance, you are offered an opportunity to come on a specific date and time for a guided tour in the Center. Free of charge, of course.

Dina: It sounds promising, but do the residents of the neighbourhood actually come to your exhibitions?

Eyal: They come, I mean we're not talking about huge amounts, but they come. A lot of people still come around because they knew the school, and they don't really know what we are doing here, so they are curious. In general, our goal is that every guest will at least have a proper introduction to the exhibition and our activity. If there is time—usually during the week there is—the person working at the entrance takes visitors upstairs and talks to them about specific works.

Dina: As part of the attempt to connect with your new audience, do you have a new educational program that you are working on?

Eyal: I won't call it an educational program anymore. For example, since we moved here we hired another staff member whose role is defined as: "community outreach." What was defined before as

the Education Department has become this role, which is responsible for the connection to the local community. Everything that involves residents from the neighbourhood goes through this person. The idea is that he will know the residents, he will know our partners from the other institutions; he is a kind of moderator between us and the neighbourhood.

I'm jumping now to another subject, when we visited Cluster in London, we met a person who was titled a "walker-talker," and he was not an employee of the art organization. He was an employee of the council. His job is to walk the street, to know everybody, to see that everything is okay. Everyone knows him, and the art organization works a lot with this guy. So, the idea was to have this kind of "walker-talker" here, in Jessy Cohen. He is employed by us, but at the same he can be used by other people; they should know him, they can communicate through him.

Dina: Apart from really connecting the exhibitions to the residents, are you still continuing to initiate socially engaged projects as you have done before?

Eyal: Yes, after a year adjustment to the new situation, there are new projects. But in a way, they are longer than they used to be; the processes are longer, the implementation process is longer, because there is no deadline or time frame of two years. We are here to stay, and therefore we can allow this kind of long-term implementation. For example, we have the *Squeaking Symphony* project by Amnon Wolman and Dan Weinstein. They both work with a group of residents. It is not an original idea. There was an English composer who had the idea that anyone without a professional background can make music. So, this is a group of residents who play on anything, but they have to write their own scores, so it's not just improvisation. They started it before as a short-term project with a small group, and it concluded with a small concert. Many people who were interested in the project from the neighbourhood came to the concert and this is how the project grew. Now we are working on it for another year. It's a beautiful project, very simple but very meaningful for its participants.

Another example is the *Ford Fiesta* project. This is a different example, because the idea was that through a limited time frame one can touch on a lot of topics. The participating group works a little bit in the Fab-Lab, a little bit in computing—they touch on a lot of fields. The idea behind this is that it can evolve into long-term, specific activities in the future.

Dina: Whom do these mentioned groups include? Are they all residents of the neighbourhood? Do they have a certain age groups or similar backgrounds?

Eyal: The groups consist of residents. Only residents. Different ages, different backgrounds—mixed groups, of course. One of the things I learned here is that most of the activities in the neighbourhood are divided between Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians, which is something that we are trying to break. This division is not made solely by the municipality; it is also created by the Ethiopian community itself and by the neighbourhood's residents. But I think it leaves a very easy way out for the institutions. It is much easier to have two separate senior clubs, youth movements, and so on.

Dina: Can you describe other changes that the Center is undergoing during its transition into the neighbourhood?

Eyal: One of the most important changes that happened is a change of our self-perception. We are still, first of all, a contemporary art center, and we must be. We want to continue to be a professional, international, important contemporary art center, not because this is our goal, but because this is our tool; because our priorities have changed a bit since we began working in Jessy Cohen.

When we're talking about a neighbourhood alliance with other professionals and institutions working in Jessy Cohen, our unifying factor is that we all wish to influence the neighbourhood and continue to be relevant in the neighbourhood's life, as well as to Israeli society in general. In order to be relevant, each of the partners has their own tools. Our tool is very good programming and very good exhibitions; so that we don't lose our position within the art field, so that we won't become this kind of "community center," irrelevant art space. And The Israeli Center for Digital Art has this position, it has a good position within the Israeli art field and internationally. But we have to keep it this way because this relevance enables us the privilege of working in the neighbourhood from within the art field. Therefore, maintaining a good program is not our goal—it is our tool.

Dina: Can you elaborate more on your "glocal" perspective? What are you doing in practice, in order to maintain this broad overview of your practice, as well as connecting to similar worldwide practices?

Eyal: We talked a bit about the partnership in the neighbourhood, and I think we knew from the very beginning that we are looking for worldwide places with similarities. That was the reason we began working with Cluster, for example. With Cluster we formed a network consisting of eight art institutions, working in similar neighbourhoods. The logic behind this was that the work is similar, since the reasons why neighbourhoods like Jessy Cohen exist all over the world are not accidental—they are a result of policies. The goal is to develop an ability not to learn chronologically from the history of the same place, but to learn from what other, similar institutions are doing now. Not historically, but now. This enables us to bring into the neighbourhood a broad perspective. I think this also a privilege of being an art institution, unlike all the professionals working in the neighbourhood: we travel, we exchange ideas, residencies—we have this broad perspective. If you talk with a community worker or a social worker here, they don't have it. They are trapped in the local. So the main agenda is to develop this "local-global" outlook and to use it within our local activities.

We never view Jessy Cohen as an independent case. There are more neighbourhoods like that in Israel and all over the world. I think that one of our missions is to create this kind of connection between the neighbourhoods—again, to connect the social and the political as mentioned before. We strive to create another space in which Jessy Cohen and maybe some neighbourhoods in Bat-Yam and Neve-Shaanan in Tel Aviv can come together and overcome municipal borders. In this theoretical "space" we can create a connection between different populations that naturally do not communicate but have a lot in common. We do that on the global level with Cluster or the *Glocal Neighbors* project, and on a local level it should be done with the West Bank, with other neighbourhoods in Tel Aviv, and so on.

Dina: Is this your future goal–to instil this kind of collaboration between similar places, which are currently disconnected in Israel and worldwide?

Eyal: Yes. That's a goal that has to be set, because if you see Jessy Cohen as an isolated problem, you don't bring in your broad perspective and you don't make your actions political.

Dina: I agree with this theoretical part, but in practice, what does this mean? How can you actually create these connections?

Eyal: The "how" is very complicated, and it relies on the assumption that we are here for a long time. Because nothing of what I mentioned can be achieved in the short term. And then, for example, the kids that Mai (Omer) is working with now are teens between ages of thirteen and fourteen, and most of them are Ethiopians. If we are going to work with them in a long-term process—a year, let's say, gradually they will be able to meet with groups of refugee kids from Neve Shaanan and start working together. But this is a very slow, gradual process.

Another thing is that we have an information center within the public library of the community center, in which all the other neighbourhoods are represented as well. As part of this archive we are setting inside the public library, we are going to invite other projects from other neighbourhoods. This archive is going to be very active, in terms of having meetings there, screenings, presentations; it is going to be a part of the library system—everything will be researchable and accessible. It is important specifically because when you think of neighbourhood histories, such as Jessy Cohen, their histories are absolutely absent from the official library. If you go into Holon's public library and you search for Jessy Cohen, you will find a small box for a few letters. The history of this neighbourhood, as in other similar cases, is completely absent from the public domain. It exists solely in the private domain. Therefore, exposing this history, putting it in the public library, having it searchable in the library's catalogue, giving it a presence—is highly important for us.

Dina: How can you bridge the gap between an actual socially involved project in the "here and now" and its later representation in your art space in the form of an exhibition? Does this kind of representation have any value?

Eyal: I cannot give a general answer; there are no rules. I think that representation solutions are

completely linked to the projects. I can give an answer with an example of an exhibition we did last year, entitled *We Are Not Alone*. What we tried to do in that exhibition, which didn't always work, we tried to undergo a process with the participants in order to create a model and see if their models can be re-implemented here. The exhibition was in a way, slicing the project, showing just one stage of it. There was an initial project, which was implemented some-where in the world, and our exhibition showed a representation/documentation of that project, but also explained how it is going to be implemented here, in the neighbourhood. With some projects, the exhibition showed the stages before the local imple-mentation in Jessy Cohen, and in some cases, the exhibition was held during the implementation pro-cess. For example, Fritz Haeg showed his project *Edible Estates, the way it was done in Budapest and here.* The project here. That is one example of a solution to the representational issue.

I do agree it is very problematic to have these kinds of projects moving into the gallery, but I think we have to remember that an exhibition is still a powerful tool. Even if it is a very dull representation of a very good project, it is still valuable. I'm con-stantly repeating this, but I think working from the art field is a very good position to do things from. An exhibition is a tool we are working with. For exam-ple, I asked Fritz (Haeg), why were all the *Edible Estates* in the world initiated by an art festival or an exhibition? I mean, if you get funding for this project from somewhere else, the municipality, for instance—why do you need an art institution to launch the project? My own answer is that it is because this is a valid and important tool. First of all, it gives visibility to the project, enables the project in many cases, and because art budgets are much more flexible than others.

You know, artists are the biggest charlatans—we do biology, we do anthropology, we do science, and we do social practice. We do everything without learning any of it. So, it is a very flexible field, and this flexibility is important because it creates the conditions to work outside the art field.

Dina: But you are also expected to create this kind of visibility within the art field?

Eyal: You need to reflect it back into the art field, for legitimacy, for various reasons. But I agree that the form of an exhibition is a challenge. For example, in the project Mai is working on now, the question of what will be presented is a huge question. What we are considering now is converting the art

space into a workshop space, so that the exhibition will be almost a continuation of the process itself. But still, it will be an exhibition; it will be around for a limited amount of time, there will be a schedule, there will be an opening.

Dina: Is the municipal funding and the repre-sentation of these projects related? Meaning, is the need for an exhibition-type of representation also influenced by the fact that you need to produce something and to show "results" to the authorities that funded the projects? And if you make these projects visible in this manner, this increases your chance to receive further funding?

Eyal: It depends what the source of the money is.

Dina: Municipal funding, for instance?

Eyal: Of course, especially in the case of the Ministry of Culture. They really measure: How many exhibitions? What's their duration? How many publi-cations? That's their criteria. Of course, the challenge in finding resources that are not coming only from the art world–this is where it all becomes more com-plicated. We are constantly trying to reach other resources of funding from different fields, and it's more complicated because our institution is an art institution. First of all, they examine who we are, and if we declare ourselves an art institution, then they ask, for example, "Why are you asking for money in order to help new immigrants?"

Dina: This is why there has to be a visible link-age to art?

Eyal: It is linked. It is one of the reasons for having exhibitions, but it's not the main reason. There are also some other ways to create representa-tions: events, publications, etc. There should be something to conclude a project, something that shows that you spent the money and on what.

Dina: Does or can municipal funding influence the content of the projects?

Eyal: We don't have any interference in the contents. But obviously you can say that once the city gave us money to do a project in Jessy Cohen, they already influenced what we did. But at the same time, we could have said no.

Dina: Last but not least, what is the role of a curator in such socially engaged projects as you described?

Eyal: I cannot separate my role as curator, director, producer, moderator—it's all mixed. In a way, it's not just about curating an exhibition. In everything that we do here, we have to deal with a huge spectrum of practices. I find myself, for example, sitting in meetings in the municipality regarding a new construction plan for Jessy Cohen along with architects. So, I don't think I can limit my and our activity to this term. My role is to work with artists, with supporters, with different municipal departments, and with residents, and to create links between all of these different departments, fields, and people.

Captions
1 Glocal Neighbors project, 2013–2015
2 Fragment from Ford Fiesta exhibition by Miri Mendel (made during Tzzazit workshop), 2013
2 Fragment from Ford Fiesta workshop by Tzzazit, 2013
3 Scratch Orchestra project, by Amnon Wolman & Dan Weinstein, 2013-2015
4 Meir Tati, Little Big Brother project, 2011
5 Meir Tati, from exhibition Your Boy will Amount to Nothing, 2012–2013

Courtesy of The Israeli Center for Digital Art

Notes
1 Falash Mura is the name given to those of the Beta Israel community in Ethiopia who converted to Christianity under pressure, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since 2003 there have been waves of Falash Mura immigration, which have caused many public disputes between their supporters and opponents. In 2013, the operation to bring the Falash Mura community to Israel was completed. About 5,000 people have immigrated to Israel.

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