

The Complete Jessy Cohen Museum

The Complete Jessy Cohen Museum is an ongoing project established by artists Effi & Amir together with Igal Ophir, Yaakov Erlich, Haviva Barkol, Pnina Barkol, Dvora Harel, Malka Cohen, Ruti Mizrahi, Tikva Sedes, Rachel Polet, Mimi Rosenberg, Ada Rahamim, and many more of the Jessy Cohen neighborhood residents.

The project's first phase, which is currently showing, comprises two main parts. The first is a timeline of the Jessy Cohen neighborhood describing the main events that took place in the neighborhood as remembered by the residents, from the 1950s to the present. This part is presented on the ground floor of the Israeli Center for Digital Art (CDA), and is expected to remain as a permanent exhibition.

The second part proposes a spatial reference, central to which is a map of the Jessy Cohen neighborhood as perceived by its residents; in other words, it is not congruent with the neighborhood's official boundaries. This part presents various materials pertaining to specific areas in the neighborhood, and is a temporary exhibition that will remain open for a few months.

The role of an art institution operating in a community or neighborhood is substantively different from that of other institutions operating in the same place. This difference stems from a number of factors, and does not mean that the art institution cannot operate in collaboration with other disciplines.

In contrast with other institutions, it does not have a clearly defined role or evaluation tools, and thus its activity is more fluid, flexible, and given to change. On the one hand this makes it a less understood institution, but on the other it also constitutes an advantage with regard to activity in the community. This pronounced characteristic creates a different definition of time – the time of all who are involved in it, the artists, the staff of the art institution, and the community that uses and

visits it – since when it comes to working with the community the principal asset of art is time: for experimenting, for creating, for pointless activity, or, in short, for everything beyond the rules of the consumer and market culture in which we live. The art institution offers the community the possibility for leisure, imagination, and even boredom in order to enable it to reformulate itself. As such it plays a unique community role – it is the place where the community can get to know itself, recreate identity and belonging, and make time for creativity.

A central part of the community's possibility of being rebuilt is also associated with time and how time is translated into the community's history. In many immigrant neighborhoods, where there is a high rate of population turnover, there is no sense of community, and consequently there is no continuous community narrative. In other words, they have no history but rather an experience of a fragmented, arbitrary present. In this context, art plays an important role since it facilitates practices of documentation, collection, and archiving alongside learning and presentation of local knowledge and memory. This knowledge enables the community to build new memory, process the knowledge, and shape its own story in order to enable the existence of local history and sense of belonging.

The first act undertaken by the Complete Jessy Cohen Museum is to expropriate the term “museum” from official bodies, national or private, which are permitted by law to establish a museum, and grant the Jessy Cohen community the possibility of establishing a museum itself. This is a significant act given that museums constitute a tool for shaping history by means of museal practices of accumulating, reading, and classifying objects; practices that are always grounded in structured power relations.

The Museum provides the neighborhood with the possibility of telling its story and controlling how it is represented. It is a story that represents the multiple voices, at times the contradictions, the blurring of boundaries, and everything that an official story cannot contain and preserve. Consequently, this is a unique museum, one

whose diversity and absence of museal order faithfully express the community it represents.

Although today museums can be found in virtually every context and location, from country cottages to ships and shopping malls, the museum is still, in many cases, a tool controlled by the regime and people of power, a means for creating history and a uniform narrative. However, museums were shaped by the different contexts and basic premises that dominated different periods and places. Consequently, it cannot be argued that a museum is a permanent entity. A museum is more a means for creating history whose identity and aims change in accordance with the needs of the hegemony at a particular time in a particular place.

In this respect, the Complete Jessy Cohen Museum proposes a course of action not only in the context of the Jessy Cohen neighborhood's history, but also in the context of the history of museums. It proposes transforming the museum from a tool that in the main serves the state, the hegemony, or the market, into a tool of resistance, a tool of civil society. This action positions the Complete Jessy Cohen Museum project within a long tradition of museal criticism that began with the emergence of the modern museum and developed concurrently with it. The Museum can therefore be understood as a reference to "Institutional Critique" [1] in which artists and curators address the relationship between the work of art, the artist, and the institution.

In *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Eileen Hooper Greenhill describes museums as a tool for creating and presenting knowledge, and employs the concept of "episteme" coined by Michel Foucault to describe changes in perceptions of creating and representing knowledge in museums over three periods – the Renaissance, the Classical, and the Modern [2]. As Hooper Greenhill shows, although in all three periods the role of museums is to create and represent knowledge, the very question of what is knowledge changes from period to period, and these changes are reflected in how the museums function. Museums looked

completely different during each of these periods and, of course, from the museum we are familiar with today. The customary practices in museums for research, collection, and presentation have changed, and what seemed like rational observation of the world in one period became irrelevant and illogical in another. Based on the historical role of the museum as a tool for creating knowledge, *the Complete Jessy Cohen Museum* is a hybrid entity that enables the concurrent existence of multiple perceptions of knowledge. In some respects it resembles the non-hierarchical museal perceptions of the Renaissance, and enables presentation of a virtually infinite range of materials from different fields of knowledge, and at the same time it also enables the hierarchical organizational structure customary in contemporary museums to be broken by opening up its curatorial processes to diverse voices and opinions. It offers an experience resembling a visit to “cabinets of curiosities” or “wonder rooms” in that it proposes its exhibitions as a way for remembering and creating memory of place by viewing and reading different exhibits [3].

Its sources of information do not rely solely on the official archives of the city or state; it recognizes that in the Jessy Cohen neighborhood history is mainly to be found in family albums, 8mm films, and home videos, and especially in memories and stories, as well as legends and rumors. It recognizes that a community museum is a changing, flexible, infinite entity, especially since it not only participates in representing the community and its story, but also in building that story, and hence also in building the community itself.

The Complete Jessy Cohen Museum is now opening its first exhibition. Part of it will remain as a permanent exhibition on the ground floor of the CDA. Additionally, the Museum will continue to function as a framework for ongoing research and exhibition in the coming years from a desire to continue telling the story of the Jessy Cohen neighborhood in conjunction with its residents.

Eyal Danon

[1] Institutional Critique is the systematic inquiry into the workings of art institutions. It was mainly active from the mid-1990s, and is identified with the activities of curators such as *Charles Esche* or *Maria Lind*, and artists such as *Marcel Broodthaers*, *Andrea Fraser*, *Hans Haacke*, and others.

[2] The historical transition between periods created a rupture and a disconnection, and in effect a rewriting of the meaning of knowledge. *Hooper Greenhill* describes the transition from museums in the Renaissance in which legend, story, rumor, and physical object all constituted a language, and the role of knowledge was to decipher it, without hierarchy and without boundaries. Up to the seventeenth century, measurement and hierarchical order were positioned as the basis for knowledge of the Classical Period, and thus the classification table emerged as the basic structure of knowledge. Knowledge that had previously seemed infinite now seemed finite, something that can be surmounted by means of order. However, in the late eighteenth century this order collapsed once again, and the classification table was replaced with a three-dimensional space in which knowledge did not focus on similarity and difference, but was an organic structure of internal connections between elements that together create function. The Modern episteme seeks to know why objects look the way they look. The invisible structure is no longer perceived as a language to be deciphered as it was in the sixteenth century, but the product of a coherent organic structure.

[3] Cabinets of curiosities or wonder rooms were encyclopedic collections of objects whose categorical boundaries were, in Renaissance Europe, yet to be defined. Modern terminology would categorize the objects included in them as belonging to the worlds.