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is a program manager at BOOST Amsterdam where she enjoys bringing people with different ideas together to co-create projects that really matter, and is passionate about community-driven work. BOOST is a home base for newcomers with a refugee background and local volunteers.

Thaniel Owusu Agyemang

is a versatile artist who invites you into his own distinct realm through his work as an artist, curator, director, photographer, and DJ. Among other things he works as a Future Teller at De Kazerne, a cultural centre and incubator in the Reigersbos district of Amsterdam Zuidooost.

A Polylogue on Co-creating Community

In this roundtable, our guest editors come together with practitioners from community spaces to discuss the complexities of co-creation, power dynamics, and impact in their work. Drawing from their diverse experiences, the participants reflect on how ownership, trust, and equity shape collaborative spaces, and how roles and responsibilities can be navigated transparently. They examine the tension between ideal horizontal collaboration and the realities of creating space and distributing resources. In the conversation, Imogen Mills (editor of the Polylogue) and Jari Lemmers (editorial support) invited the speakers to explore a broad range of themes: alternative ways of researching impact, centering personal growth, the processes of co-creation, and the connections between people, makers, and institutions while challenging models that prioritize visitor numbers and the bottom line. Their conversation highlights how community co-creation can foster autonomy, build relationships, and offer new ways of valuing collective work.

Defining Community

VVN: Before we can start to understand the processes of co-creating with communities, we need to define what we understand communities to be. From an anthropological viewpoint I think the word 'community' is often used too loosely within the cultural sector. The danger is that it reduces people to one aspect of their identity, such as living in a certain neighborhood or having a migrant background.

LL: Yes, Vanessa, I think it is crucial to recognize that people often belong to multiple communities simultaneously. Depending on the context, different aspects of their identity may come to the forefront, while others might be downplayed—either consciously or subconsciously—to connect, to be accepted, or to maintain harmony within a group. This highlights how fluid and situational identity can be, and how important it is that we hold space for that complexity when we talk about 'community'.

TOA: Picking up on what Vanessa raised, I also have a difficult relationship with the word community. As a cultural center and creative breeding ground, Kazerne Reigersbos (Kazerne) is open to anyone who wants to co-create with us. Of course, we engage closely with our immediate neighborhood, but it is not

a predefined or fixed community. We welcome people of all ages and backgrounds. In my view, community is something that comes out of what we do at Kazerne.

What makes it especially valuable is how it brings together diverse perspectives. Over the years, we have facilitated international exchanges, connecting people who might share the same demographic or neighborhood, but hold very different worldviews. It is powerful to offer a space where they can share ideas, engage in dialogue, exchange knowledge, and gain mutual respect.

For me, that is what community is: welcoming people into a shared space, offering common ground, and creating together.

LL: For me too, the strength of a community comes from its diversity and the ability to challenge your own assumptions. Welcoming different ideas and beliefs is especially important when building a community together. At BOOST we focus on people with a refugee background. But, as Vanessa says, that is already such a diverse community. The people we meet here speak a large variety of languages, have diverging ideas about the world, and different skillsets.

Everyone brings their own perspective on the world and how they want to live in it.

Like Thaniel said, that is where community comes in. The people here at BOOST connect to people who are similar in the language they speak or their experiences, but they also meet people who have grown up in vastly different places or might be at a different place in their life. We see how this allows people to expand their network and build their community in the ways that best suit them.

GLH: So, hearing from all you, I think we can agree community can be understood as a collective interested in a particular goal. For me, community is about an active process—it is not simply enough to identify with a community (though identification can be an active process). I think identity needs to be manifested through action.

Defining Co-creation

VVN: As GL notes, community is an active process. And so is co-creation. Building relationships is the starting point of the co-creation method we developed with in the Amsterdam Museum.

So, what does that look like? Our first step is inviting people in. We then proceed by asking our co-creation partners: what do you need? That seems like such a simple question, but it helps promote awareness of having predefined ideas of how the process and the outcome of a project 'should' be, from a museum point of view. We do not want to start from the institute, because often the institute needs a product or some form of output. Rather we start with the needs of the partner. What does this process look like for you?

GLH: Communities can form naturally, and co-creation often plays a role in strengthening or defining them. The act of working together toward shared goals can solidify bonds and foster a sense of belonging. As Vanessa says, for me, community is an active process—it is not simply enough to identify with a community. I think identity needs to be manifested through action. And the platforms like the ones we are talking about today make communities more visible or structured.

LL: While co-creation holds value across a wide range of contexts, I believe it is particularly vital in spaces marked by diversity, so like GL says, it relates in part to identity and community. It has the potential to bring so much more richness to the ways we can connect to others, what we can learn from each other, how we can support people, and hold space for different perspectives, ideas, and possibilities. This is especially important in public or community spaces where individuals are navigating questions of belonging, identity, or access. In fields such as migration, education, public health, and housing—domains that tend to be top-down systems—co-creation provides a way to center lived experience and local knowledge. By inviting co-creation, these sectors can become more responsive, inclusive and effective.

FG: This resonates with me because at Genius Loci Performance we constantly work with different people and in different locations. Because we reach people through an open call, we never know who we are working with. It always attracts a diverse cast, which is very engaging. Then all our performances are co-created with the participants over a period of eight months.

“[Co-creation] is especially important in public or community spaces where individuals are navigating questions of belonging, identity, or access.”



Linde Lamboo

LL: So, in that sense, and this is something that I relate to from my own context as well, would you say that co-creation in your case is about working and co-creating with different communities? And very often not just with one community alone? Because you are working with people who are performing, the audience and institutions. At BOOST we have a similar work process. We work with people with a refugee background, the neighborhood, volunteers, the municipality, and different partner organizations.

FG: Absolutely. It is quite the same. We have no specific target audience, but the people must be willing to do it. They must be committed. Another integral part of our performances are the locations. The performances are held in public spaces. In a sense, the work we do is for the citizens in these public spaces. The goal is to create a mirror of society, in society.

So, there are two distinct processes: co-creation with the cast and engagement with society. Because we work this way we are always dealing with different experiences and perspectives on life. The community grows from there.

TOA: I have a question for you, Francesco. You work with people of all ages. Do you experience any complications when working with different generations? How do you ensure they connect?

FG: Good question! We work a lot with our bodies. So, we use a very universal means. Everyone can do body movement on his or her own level, so it is not performative per se. You do not have to match a standard. The body, the music, the pre-expressive methods of acting, create a field for healthy relationships.

We do not talk a lot during the workshops, that comes afterwards. I am a bit suspicious of language. So, the focus is on the body and the music.

Balancing Voices

GLH: Language, like Francesco says, can raise differences. We have discussed how community and co-creation center around interactions between people. And how we are all looking to create room for diverse voices. But interaction can lead to differences, and when differences occur, there is also the potential for conflict. It makes me wonder how others reconcile differences in people's perspectives of how to live life.

LL: When there is conflict, sitting down together is the starting point for me. Realistically, we will encounter conflict and friction. We see that on a national level, in the way certain groups are spoken about, and we see it on a personal level, in the way people treat each other. People will approach conflict in various ways, for all the same reasons we spoke about how differences have the potential to create a community. When this occurs, we respond in the moment and open up dialogue. Where is everyone coming from? Where can we find common ground?

We can facilitate this by opening the space we have for people to find each other in a very humane way. A low threshold and suspending our expectations allow us to open up these conver-

sations. In a very practical way, we do this by inviting people to sit next to each other and speak. It really comes down to being curious about the other person.

TOA: I agree with Linde. The most helpful thing we can do is to open our doors and retain a low threshold for entering. For us, this means every Wednesday we host a market. You can come into our space for a cup of coffee or tea, visit the market, and meet people from the neighborhood. By now everyone in the neighborhood knows you can come to Kazerne every Wednesday. This makes it easier for us to invite people in on other days, because they are familiar with us. Once you have reached that point, you can start building relationships. It starts with opening the space up.

GLH: I believe it also helps to remember that a perfect conversation is never going to happen. The idea is to move forward. The invitation or the low threshold being the first step and then developing as a heuristic process, a process that is imperfect but nevertheless worth the effort. Sometimes it works and sometimes it does not. But there is also something to be said for setting this intention, putting this energy out there, and doing the kind of work that is necessary.

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GL Hernandez

Balancing Power

GLH: I want to take a look at another dynamic at play here. Because when we talk about balancing voices we are also talking about balancing power. I am thinking about organizations and various stakeholder engagements. How we can think of, for example, core stakeholders, people who are very much involved in institutions, versus periphery stakeholders, who are affected by the process of organization but are impartial to the organization. So, I am wondering when we have stakeholders with potentially contentious relationships: how do we reconcile those relationships? How do we move forward in a compassionate way when that is not the way of all stakeholders involved?

LL: This is an interesting point, GL. In my own work, I still see a clear power imbalance. For example, when someone approaches me wanting to get involved, maybe by organizing a class or an activity or a workshop, my role is to support them. I help them get started, and from there, they take ownership of the activity.

But even then, they still rely on the organization for certain things: we buy the materials needed and help promote the activity. If there is another event happening and the space is needed, we might ask them to move their activity. I am also

the one who decides that their class needs to be moved.

So, in the end, we still hold the reins. And sometimes I struggle with that power imbalance. Because while I genuinely want to create a space of equity, in reality that can be a lot harder to achieve.

FG: I think, Linde, that what you are highlighting is a contradiction inherent to co-creation. Because when working with institutions, municipalities, and individuals there is always a power imbalance. Even if the discourse is around egalitarianism. I see the contradiction and I consider it useful.

For example, working in public spaces, for us, it is essential to have the support of institutions, so that we can operate legally. Our very existence is a sign that we still live in a democracy, because we can freely engage with and critique the society we live in. That said, we have never done anything opportunistically, to support the parties in power or to respond to external requests to obtain funding. For our latest performance, we asked the mayor of Lucignano, a town in Tuscany, to allow us to use the entire town as the stage for the performance. Without her support, our work would not even be conceivable.

“Excessive lack of power means the whole process will struggle. Whereas a power imbalance means there is at least power to begin with.”



Francesco Gori

Excessive lack of power means the whole process will struggle. Whereas a power imbalance means there is at least power to begin with. I believe community work involves working with the real world, not the ideal world. And this friction allows for empowerment.

GLH: There is a lot to explore around power, especially in this context. Some positive aspects of power imbalance include resources and responsibilities being allocated to those deemed appropriate. However, it is crucial to question how those people came to be considered appropriate—what qualifications they have, which communities they belong to, and how they conceptualize their role. Responsibility is key in power dynamics. Leadership should not be about having power over others but being responsible for those with less experience or overview. The negative aspects are evident in global political spheres—many difficulties arise when those in power lack a sense of responsibility toward those they lead.

VVN: I agree, and that is also a reason why starting from the perspective of the needs of all the stakeholders in a co-creation project can be helpful. Different stakeholders have different needs. From a museum point of view, we usually need something we can share with our visitors in a public program or exhibition. We do not expect other parties in a co-creation process to have similar expertise, but we do work on it together. One of the core values of our co-creation projects is equity, meaning we want everyone to feel valued, heard, and seen, but we are not expecting everyone to contribute exactly the same.

LL: In the end, it comes down to the fact that not everyone involved can contribute the same amount of time, talents, experiences, and levels of commitment are distributed differently. From that perspective, I fully agree that we cannot expect people to give and receive in the same ways.

TOA: I want to add something to that. I have experienced both aspects of this at Kazerne. I first came to Kazerne because I had an idea and was looking for a place to work on it. I met the then program manager who encouraged me to pursue my idea. More than that, he worked with me as a partner. This collaboration gave me more than a space to work in, it also gave me a structure to work in. This structure is important because when you have that initial idea you are filled with energy, and that needs to be channeled into something fruitful. In an ideal world, everything would be fully horizontal, but real empowerment and growth often require someone to use their power to help you build your own.

Building Community

VVN: Empowerment is one of the four core values of co-creation that we work with at the Amsterdam Museum. And as Thaniel says, it is an intended output of co-creation. Before that, we focus first on equity, then reciprocity, and finally empowerment and belonging. We choose equity over equality precisely because of the power imbalances we have discussed. From experience, I would now say it is important to be explicit about roles. When roles are left unspoken, they can create false expectations. So, it is best to clarify them at the start of any co-creation process. Equity matters: it means working together as partners, while recognizing that we hold different positions and responsibilities. The second value is reciprocity: understanding that what we exchange will not always be the same, since we each bring different talents and resources. Empowerment and belonging are the outcomes that hopefully follow from centering equity and reciprocity.

TOA: At Kazerne we work similarly. Community co-creation means creating from lived experiences. Whether it is an exhibition, a public talk, or a workshop, we always need to ask: who is shaping this and who feels seen in the result? That is what co-creation means in terms of communi-

ty. Everyone is coming to this from their own experiences, and while we share a mission in co-creating, we also need to honor both the mission of those we are creating with and our own. It is a balance between creating it and living through it.

LL: Something you said really resonates with me, that the essence of co-creation is creating with people, not for them. You engage in conversation from the very start. It is about honestly listening to people's needs, seeing how they envision those needs being fulfilled, and understanding where they want to step into the process. Not everyone has the capacity or energy to be involved in every step, so it is about recognizing when and where people want to contribute.

FG: For us too, it is about working with people and not making assumptions about what people are looking for. What comes after is interesting. The audience consists of citizens and people known to the participants. So, the project spreads outward, sometimes into the city, sometimes into nature. While we co-create with participants, the ultimate aim is to share the work with a wider public. What often emerges are new communities that evolve beyond our involvement. More people join, others move on and

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Thaniel Owusu Agyemang

start their own projects, staying connected in different ways. They go on to build something of their own.

We have been doing this for six years now, hosting these workshops annually, and over time, the broader community has continued to grow.

LL: Yes, this is an important aspect of building a community: the way it empowers people outside of the community boundaries. At BOOST we feel this when people move on from this space. We go through this process with them, and while we are continually building this community it changes and evolves. This means people are leaving too. But hopefully this is a sign it has had its intended effect. People have had the chance to try something out, to contribute to something, and now they will continue doing this in other communities, as Francesco says.

Understanding Impact

GLH: The communities that develop because of the work we do brings up another point, and that is impact. This question of impact is so integral. I am curious about examples from the field, especially in relation to how we define the field itself. Is there a way to redefine the capitalist, neoliberal structures we operate within to emphasize other forms of impact? I am thinking of the kinds of impact you have observed in your work, like meaningful connections or alternative ways of conceptualizing impact. I am interested in this because, while talking the talk is one thing, we are all striving for tangible, material outcomes. We are all trying to make the world a better place. What might help facilitate that?

FG: It is interesting that you bring up the impact we have in relation to bigger societal structures. We have the political choice to not simply rely on numbers, counting participants, for example. Instead, we intentionally move away from the dictatorship of the algorithm that always pushes us to quantify everything. Rather, we choose to recognize and give value to personal growth. By doing this we honor that the work we do is very personal because it operates on an individual level. When we assess impact, we focus on valuing the growth of each

person involved. Practically, this means we conduct interviews and maintain an archive of these conversations with individual participants. We also interview the audience.

LL: This is something we think about as well, and in recent years we have taken steps to measure our impact. For us, this means looking at indicators of integration as a framework. But often the impact we have is so soft and individual, a very personal process. We can see the impact we have in our own spaces; we can feel it in the fabric of our community. But it is hard to translate that to a report or to invite the municipality in every time we see it occur. So, we come back to the question: how do we understand the impact we have?

VVN: For us, researching impact has meant developing a method that matches the flexibility and unpredictability of the co-creation process. In open-ended processes, the act of creating together is often equally or even more important than the outcome. So how do you assess whether impact has been achieved? To make this both researchable and manageable, over the past few years we have developed a mixed methods approach which focusses on

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productive interaction in light of our four core values for co-creation projects — equity, reciprocity, empowerment, and belonging. Through individual and group interviews, through an online survey tool we developed with DoDiversity, and by having many informal observations and conversations at various stages of the process, we try to assess before, during, and after the co-creation process whether these values were indeed realized. Did participants learn something new or discover a talent? Did they meet new people? Did they feel respected, seen, and heard? Was their input reflected in the outcome? Did they gain something they can carry into the future? Has their engagement enhanced their self-esteem? With such questions, and, importantly, by inviting critical feedback, we aim to capture insights about the impact of co-creation projects on various stakeholders. It is still a work in progress, but this is the framework we have been working on to be able to approach the question of the impact of our efforts.

TOA: The way we measure impact has also evolved over the past year. We organized a small festival in Amsterdam, working across different locations and co-creating with local residents to understand what the neighborhood needed and what people were willing to contribute. We collaborated with the municipality, and although the innovation team we worked with is no longer active, it was a valuable partnership. They were deeply focused on measuring and gathering data.

In contrast, we focus more on stories as a measure of impact. Through workshops, we help people explore new opportunities and spaces. They return to share their stories, which we then

incorporate into our programs. As a creative space, we witness people doing incredible things; many of them start making art or engaging in other creative projects through us. Right now, we are working on breaking down the barrier between older and younger generations. We ask: how do we reach and connect these groups? Once we engage them, we can begin to assess the impact.

We also aim to meet people where they are. For example, we have noticed older residents like to share their life stories, so we have started offering a biography-writing workshop. This allows us to preserve and archive those stories for future generations and future impact. So, again, we invite people in and create from lived experiences. This is what community co-creation is all about.

Endnotes

- 1 Pre-expressive acting, a term coined by Eugenio Barba, refers to the actor's training and preparation before engaging with the specific script or performance. For more information see: tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10486809708568443
- 2 The Amsterdam Museum has developed a toolkit for co-creation. The toolkit is accessible through: amsterdammuseum.nl/en/publications/publi/5195
- 3 DoDiversity is a Dutch company that helps companies implement and follow through on diversity, inclusion, and impact. For more information visit: dodiversity.com/