Narratives of Locative Technologies as Memory Assemblages

Andreia Machado Oliveira, UFSM/RS, Brazil
E-mail: andreiaoliveira.br@gmail.com
Felix Rebolledo, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada
E-mail: rebfel@gmail.com
Hermes Renato Hildebrand, UNICAMP, Sao Paolo, Brazil
E-mail: hrenatoh@gmail.com
Efrain Foglia, Universitat de Vic, Spain
E-mail: efrain.foglia@uvic.cat

Abstract
This article considers the virtual (re)construction of the Vila Belga neighborhood in Santa Maria, Brazil in terms of memory and the role of place as integrative of experience. Our paper poses the question "What constitutes the memory of community as a collective process of (re)collection?" and seeks answers in the locative technologies used by the participants to (re)activate and (re)purpose the spacetime of experience through an artwork entitled airCity:arte#ocupaSM. Using a research/creation methodology the researchers sought to produce mappings of relation which constitute the "groundwork" of memory, by integrating information derived from sensing and geolocation devices and traditional audiovisual technologies.

Keywords: memory, locative technologies, narrative, experience, territorialization.

Our paper poses the question "What constitutes the memory of community as a collective process of (re)collection?" and provides answers derived from the results of an artistic research/creation project based on collaborative participation and locative technologies. The focus of our project is airCity:arte#ocupaSM, an artwork project which brought together a team of artists, academics and students to better understand the process of memorial disintegration within urban decay. The object of our collaborative research/creation artwork project was to produce mappings of relation which constitute the "groundwork" of memory, by integrating data derived from sensing and geolocation devices. This cartography pegged the continuity of experience to an ecology of being as occupation. To this end, the participants used a variety of techniques to (re)activate and (re)purpose the space and duration of experience towards a novel (re)alignment of actualization as event.

In this paper we are concerned with two aspects of the art project: on the one hand, the insights garnered from our research/creation methodology and on the other, theoretical considerations pertinent to memory evoked by the activation of invisible spaces through locative media. Using a conceptual landscape indebted largely to Deleuze and Guattari and to Gilbert Simondon, we discuss the significance of foregrounding nodes of intensification as indicative of the processual transformation of territory to reveal political, social and technological implications resulting from changes to urban texture. The use of locative technologies to render visible the invisible is of paramount importance: They allow one to visually consider deterritorialization/territorialization in terms of mappings of processual expanses of intensification. This in turn allows us to imagine these diagrammatic mappings of urban, artistic, cultural and social territories not in terms of pictorial images, but in terms of relational entities which constitute expanses of extensive consistency as bodies [1]. And it is the integration of these zones of operational coherence as assemblages from which memory arises.

Vila Belga: the collective process of (re)collection

Vila Belga is a neighbourhood of the city of Santa Maria, in the southernmost province of Brazil, Rio Grande do Sul. The city currently has 270,000 inhabitants and its economy is based on services, light industry, government, education and agriculture. The Vila Belga neighbourhood was built between 1901 and 1903 along European architectural lines as a railroad community to accommodate Belgian immigrants destined to work in the offices and workshops of the Belgian *Compagnie Auxiliaire de Chemins de Fer au Brésil*. The railway placed the city of Santa Maria on the map, so to speak, by connecting it with the rest of the Brazilian Empire through the Sao Paolo—Uruguiana rail line. In creating Vila Belga, the concern of all parties involved was not one of simply producing housing for the workers but of genuinely causing the emergence of a community.

After the dissolution of the railroad in 1997, Santa Maria was sidelined, the station and workshops lost their raison d'être and were progressively abandoned. Since then, with the demise of rail in Brazil and its replacement by bus and truck transport, the latest generation of the Belgian immigrant residents have dispersed and the neighborhood has lost all sense of meaning except for its historical significance. Its collective memory is expressed as a nostalgia for the halcyon days when the railway and the yards were active. Thus, in May 2012, various buildings of the now defunct Vila Belga railroad station were occupied by artists, academics and multi-disciplinary researchers taking part in the arte#ocupaSM [2] research/creation event for 5 days of intense artistic coexistence. As part of the occupation, an interactive immersive installation AirCity: # ocupaSM was created which occupied the now abandoned main administration building of the Vila Belga Railway. The objective of the project was to activate the "invisible space" as intangible herit-

Fig. 1. Row Houses: Vila Belga, Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul, BR (photo © Andrea Oliveira).

age. That is, it aimed to awaken the virtual aspect of physical location as a memorial reconstruction by combining social, political and artistic research/creation methods with digital devices. Among the artists and researchers who participated in arte#ocupaSM were Renato Hermes Hildebrand, Andreia Machado Oliveira, and Daniel Paz from Brazil and Efraín Foglia and Jordi Sala from Spain. These practitioners worked together to propose new ways of deriving meaning from the analysis of relationships that arose between/exist between narratives, spatiality, temporality, and urban territorialities. Specifically, they were interested in exploring the kinds of narratives that would emerge from technological interventions in virtual and physical space. [3]

The planning and pre-production of the project was entirely web-based as the various participants hailed from two continents, and those from South America were separated by its vastness. Two groups emerged: a Brazilian on-location team and an off-site AirCity group. From the invitation to hold an "occupation" in Vila Belga, the Brazilian on-location team began pre-production by collecting and assembling bits of data that were expressive of the disposition of traces of being in the urban landscape. Researchers carried out on-site video and audio sampling, recording ambient sounds and collecting images to compose and composite with video interviews of former railway employees and residents of the neighbourhood, inviting them to reflect on the changes brought on by changes to the urban texture.

The second phase of the artwork project consisted in the gathering and pulling together of data on site which could be made to work with software, technologies and techniques developed in other AirCity projects in Sao Paolo and Barcelona. This involved the use of mobile devices, wireless networking, mapping and sound—all articulated through PureData. In the Santa Maria AirCity project, mobile phones were used to activate audio files to recount a location's intangible reality as the affective disposition of the character of location [4].

Once the audio-visual materials had been collected, we proceeded with the interactive installation in the Railway Administration Building and the programming of AirCity and its mobile devices. The inner core of the project consisted of a WiFi environment with fixed and mobile computing devices. In the main hall, we set up three computers
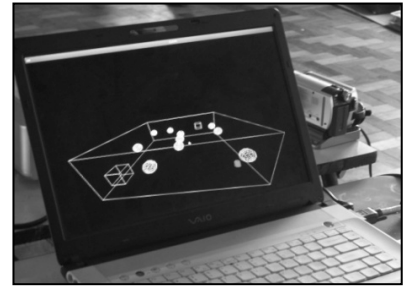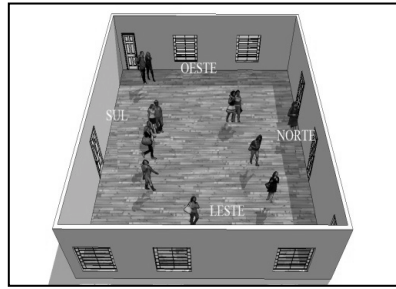

Fig. 2. AirCity virtual environment developed for the airCity:arte#ocupaSM installation. (photos © Andrea Oliveira).

loaded with verbal and audio narratives made with the help of the Vila Belga community which conveyed the goings-on of the Railway Station: one computer received processed audio files in real time from Spain from the capture performed by Jordi Sordi; another drove the sound files and activated the locative media; and two cel phones allowed the public to interact with the emitted audio and the physical space.

The project had been set up as a research/creation project where the artwork itself was not the object of the endeavour. The project was more of a collaborative happening-as-discovery than an onsite re-assemblage of the technical devices and their functional demonstration—if all the creative details had been fully thought out and predetermined, the creative aspects of the get-together would have been stifled. As such, the participative working-together as research inherent in our open-ended process allowed for the emergence of creation as occupational happening. This emergence of participative creativity would not have happened with a pre-established protocollary assemblage. In this respect, the event exceeded expectations: a creative ecology of sundry participants worked together to generate on-site an improvised multidisciplinary research/creation methodology as a foundation for future collaboration.

Memory: the integration of experience

As mentioned earlier, the goal of the project was to better understand the process of memorial disintegration as urban decay—while the AirCity group worked with the technical problem of activating the space and programming the software, the Santa Maria group was working on coming to terms with the past. The on-location video recordings of the interviews were parsed to expose fragments of modalities of being as performative gestures constitutive of bodies within

that urban territory. These bodies are not to be seen as subjugated human bodies simply responding to prescribed rules of conduct or as simple predetermined actualizations of virtualities but rather as assemblages or expanses of operational coherence and extensive consistency. The operational consistency produces and extends the horizons of regulation, as expressions of a technicity of association [5] which allow us to conceive of Vila Belga as an associated milieu [6] encompassing the railway, the location, the human and the technological. These expanses of operational consistency as bodies, of a participative relational enmeshment [7] with the railworks expressive of territorializations, are made up of gestures which constitute an on-going performative meta-stability as the mode of being of the community as a machinic assemblage [8]. The values implied in the technical realities of the assemblage constitute an ethics, not in terms of a normative prescription for being, but as an account of the mode of relation between human participants and the associated milieu of the railway and its community as an assemblage.

The objective of both groups was to find ways of revitalizing the community by understanding how the actual results from processual advance by considering memory as integrative. As it turned out, despite the fact that the two groups were working on the identification and foregrounding of ecologies of being, the two were on divergent paths. The researchers carrying out the field-work in Santa Maria were figuring out how Vila Belga as a territorializing machinic assemblage worked as an associated milieu and the second group was working out ways to activate the space with locative media to call attention experientially to the presence of process and its operational unfolding as memory. Thus, on the one hand, we have the expression of memory as a reconstitutive impulse of the past through performative, gestural narratives

and, on the other hand, the (re)collection of that which is being associated, concretized in actuality and being integrated as experience.

We emphasize the point that what is at stake in both approaches is the consideration of the integration of experience into the general unfolding of actuality as memorial process. To think of memory in terms of integration is an odd premise in that nowadays memory is almost exclusively thought of in terms of the stockpiling of information as images and not in terms of how experience as information is concretized into a coherent whole. Memory as an integrative process, as expressive of the consolidation of experience, (re)contextualizes the discourse on memory and (re)members it to the historical tradition from which speculative thought emerges. Memory guides the (re)constitution of the relational as the eventual coming together, which (re)constitutes the event through its (re)petitioned becoming by not only (re)calling itself into being, but by (re)collecting the elements and (re)membering them as the unfolding of the actuality as event.

With the on-site video and audio sampling and interviews, the researchers were (re)calling into being and identifying the habituated conditioned movements and gestures created by occupation and (re)member these relational conditionings to the experiencing of the location as territorializations, as event taking form. Through the (re)calling and (re)collection of all the constituent relations conditioned by the human and environmental participants as an ecology, we end up with an operational solidarity as a navigational familiarity constitutive of a cartography of memory as a recurrent, reciprocal causal dynamic. In the words of Brian Massumi, that which we eventually end up with is "not the result of a simple step-by-step accumulation, or of a piecemeal adding together of elements. It is non-decomposable. It is holistic. It's not a structure... It does not add elements together to form a structural unity. Rather, it is a holism effect that adds a whole new dimension of existence to the elements' diversity" [9]. As such, occupation—the taking up of space through relational, participative activity [10]—has become the event as the consummation of the relational possibilities proffered by the *agencement* of the conditionings in place as memorial integration—here *agencement* is understood simultaneously as agency and infor-

mation immanently arising from the relational conditioning as causal determinant resulting from the disposition of the participants as an assemblage. The research group was moving collectively towards understanding their memorial reconstitution of occupation not as a spatial, volumetric construction but as the location that houses the repeatable expression of the conditionings of relation in terms of gestural performance as process, i.e. occupation as the activation of the location of memory. The locus of occupation as activity taking place where it is taking up space is easy to conceive as the body of the event as activity. Similarly, its shape can be conceived as the manifestation of the event itself at the location where it takes place in its unfolding.

Thus, the body of the event as occupation integrates space and time as the expression of memory. Composed of an infinite recursivity of extremely complex junctions of inter-penetrated territorialities, which Simondon would call concretizations [11], these enfoldings of relations and potentials are integrated into vast expanses of relational operational coherence, which in turn are capable of enmeshing associatively as part and parcel of other subjectivizing individuations. Within the dynamic at play, and with the use of locative media—in their convergence and their hybridization—concepts which characterize relation take on a different hue: interactivity, ubiquity, the liquidity of spaces of representation and the processual advance of serial deterritorialization/territorialization of real and virtual urban spaces are aligned within a different ontological discourse. As used in AirCity: # ocupaSM, locative media draws attention to the presence of process and its operational unfolding—if we see information as the "very operation of taking on form" [12], the artwork informs participants as territorializing experience, able to activate an abstract cartography of intensities while rendering them more aware of their information as participants in becoming as they perambulate through the location. The airCity technology sought to imagistically identify, foreground and demonstrate the affectual elusiveness of relational process while revealing the indiscernible 'hidden' to the stratified plateaus, understanding experience by heightening our awareness of occupation as integrated spatial goings-on.

References and Notes

1. Oliveira, A. Corpos Associados: interatividade e tecnicidade nas paisagens da arte. Porto Alegre: PPGIE/UFRGS, 2010. Tese (Doutorado em Informática na Educação).

2. http://arteocupasm.wordpress.com

3. Hildebrand, H.R.; Oliveira, A.; Foglia, E. "Mídias Locativas e Cartografia Urbana no Projeto Mediacity". In: *11 Encontro internacional de arte e tecnologia (#11.ART): homo aestheticus na era digital*, Brasília, 2012.

4. More information on the AirCity projects can be found at http://www.mobilitylab.net/aircity/.

5. Combes, M. *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual*. Translated by Thomas LaMarre. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012. p. 92

6. The concept of the associated milieu was originally proposed by French philosopher Gilbert Simondon in *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*. (Paris: Aubier, 1958). See Oliveira, A. and Rebolledo, F. "The Associated Milieu: A Machinic Assemblage between Artwork and Viewer". In: *The International Journal of the Arts in Society*, Volume 5, Number 5, 2011, http://www.arts-journal.com, ISSN 1833-1866

7. Rebolledo, F. "Putting the Event in its Place: Territories, Bodies, Thresholds. In*: Informática na Educação: teoria & prática*, Porto Alegre, v. 15, n. 1, p. 31-43, jan./jun. 2012.

8. Simondon, G. *L'individuation psychique et collective: à la lumière des notions de forme, information, potentiel et métastabilité*. Paris: Aubier, 1989.

9. Massumi, B. ""Technical Mentality" Revisited: Brian Massumi on Gilbert Simondon. With Arne De Boever, Alex Murray and Jon Roffe". In: *Parrhesia* Number 7, 2009. p. 36–45. Accessed on 2013.02.10 from: http://parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia07/parrhesia07_massumi.pdf

10. Rebolledo (2012)

11. Simondon, Gilbert. *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*. (Paris: Aubier, 1958).

12. Combes (2012) p. 9