

# Collaborative Artistic Practices within Indigenous Communities

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## Abstract

This article addresses community collaborative artistic practices in general, and, specifically, it reviews two projects within indigenous communities in Brazil and Mexico: "Affective DNA: *kamê* and *kanhru*", a collaborative project developed with the Kaingang indigenous culture of southern Brazil; and "*La lengua del diablo*" (The Devil's Language/Tongue), an audio project aimed at the devalued Nahuatl language of the Cuauhtotoatla community in Mexico. In these projects, theory and practice intertwine to delineate discourses concerning these experiences which constitute collaborative artistic practices of aboriginal peoples, and involve political and cultural issues activated by contemporary artistic and technological processes.

## Keywords

Art, Collaboration, Indigenous Communities, Kaingang, Cuauhtotoatla.

## Introduction

Artistic practices directed at specific sites and its demands are experiencing a period of great involvement and participation, of ubiquitousness and visibility. There is now a great openness in the artistic productions established between artists and communities. Modes of human interaction often become the main focus of these projects which at different levels entertain direct links with social, cultural and political issues.

According to Bishop (2006), the expanded domain of these "relational" practices is now known by many names such as socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, participatory, interventionist, collaborative, research-based or collaborative art. Still, these terms are derived from the elaboration of "relational aesthetics" proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud (2009). In this article, we are interested in thinking about these relational practices as collaborative art, since the term collaboration, as used in the artistic sphere, derives from the semantic meaning of the term "co-labor", that is, to work together in terms of co-production (Kester, 2011, p. 112).

Collective and collaborative artistic practices emerge as part of the 60's and 70's art scene together with the actions

of situationist, activist and feminist groups. However, it is during the 80's and 90's that a generation of emerging collectives in the arts intensify issues of collective authorship, collaborative agency and multiple interlocutors arising from shared, rather than singularised, expression given that the main focus of these artists' work was linked to the use of public spaces to site artistic gestures of a political nature (Kester, 2011, p. 114). Thus, this allowed an important bridging of the traditions of conceptual art, public art and activism. Bishop (2012), in turn, maintains that artists of the 1990s willingly tied their work to social and political issues—dovetailing art to a social conscience—even if their productions varied greatly in purpose and proposals. There was a widespread contemporary stance which saw in the creativity of collective action and in shared ideas a form of appropriation of power by artists as social empowerment (Bishop, 2012).

The collaborative artistic practices of the last three decades reveal a set of common specificities, such as: effective exchanges with the community and/or specific groups, engagement with local social issues, intertwining with other areas of knowledge, and collective authorship. And importantly, in addition to being social processual propositions detached from a resultant aesthetic object, the relational interactive exchange becomes the creative praxis itself (Kester, 2006). Over time, more and more methodologies have gained legitimacy which enable artists to work together in a variety of collaborative modalities and artistic projects—such as video collectives, maker labs, workshops, public meetings, group performance protests, etc— which a generation ago would have been offhandedly dismissed as community art (Kester, 2011, p. 9).

Within this creative collaborative dynamic, Kester (2005, 2004) emphasises the essential necessity of dialogue to the extent of elaborating a dialogic aesthetic inspired by Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin who argued that the work of art can be viewed as a kind of conversation. The dialog as dialectic exchange between the participants of a collaborative artistic project becomes the key element in the outlay of a levelling practice between artists and community. The essential quality of this dialogic is an horizontal equalising of the voices of all the members thus enabling a non-hierarchical attunement towards a more effective collaboration (Kester, 2011).

In observing collaborative community propositions in the arts, we realise that it is not an individual artist working

alone who enters an already substantiated community, intending to define and rescue identities/memories/unity of a certain community. Instead, collaborative proposals develop methodologies in which artists simultaneously constitute themselves and constitute their role in the collective in which they are agent. These methodologies bear within themselves a reciprocal process between the individual (artist) and the community (society), which manifests itself through the sharing of knowledge, desires, habits, looks, gestures, experiences that traverse the body and become its flesh, an aggregation with the collective, a collective agency activated and mapped. We speak not of hierarchy, segregation and exclusion, but of empowerment for the respect of difference and for the power of the collective (Oliveira, 2017).

As such, we look to review two collaborative projects with indigenous communities in Brazil and Mexico: the collaborative project "Affective DNA: *kamê* and *kanhru*", a collaborative project developed with the Kaingang indigenous culture of southern Brazil; and "*La lengua del diablo*" (The Devil's Language), an audio project aimed at the devalued Nahuatl language of the Cuauhtotoatla community in Mexico. In these projects, theory and practice intertwine to delineate discourses concerning these experiences which constitute collaborative artistic practices of aboriginal peoples, and involve political and cultural issues activated by contemporary artistic and technological processes.

### ***La lengua del diablo* (The Devil's Language)**

This proposition revolves around certain reflections and conclusions based on the development of the sound project called *La lengua del diablo*, as a possibility of experiences of artistic practices and (re)generation of community. This proposal sought to address, using the metaphor of the "devil" within, the loss and devaluation of the Nahuatl language in the northern part of the community of Cuauhtotoatla (specifically in the Nahuatl neighborhoods of San Isidro Buen Suceso and San Nicolás), in the state of Tlaxcala, east of Mexico City and north of Puebla (Figure 1).

Nahuatl was the language of the Aztecs and their predecessors, the Toltecs, and is one of the first literary traditions in ancient America. It provided the rich cultural backbone to the Mexicas peoples of mesoamerica for oral and written expression through its sophisticated ideographic, glyph writing system which included included some syllabic phonetic glyphs. This language was not only used for the creation of literary texts in prose and poetry but also served for religious ceremonies, political and administrative missives, speeches and for the transmission of popular culture in everyday life (Leander, 2005).

Thus, a cosmic vision of the Nahuas is interpreted through Tlacatecolotl, a deity associated with the notions of Good and Evil and integrates these tensional attributes within ambivalent rites with religious overtones characteristic of the pre-hispanic observances (Baez-Jorge and Go-

mez-Martinez, 1998). Here, "evil" serves as a threshold concept to question the vitality of the language in this location, to determine if in fact there is a certain negative perception of the Nahuatl in regards to its gradual loss.



Figure 1. *La lengua del diablo*, Community of Cuauhtotoatla, 2018.

*La lengua del diablo* came to be in 2017 as a result of various audio recordings of interviews and conversations conducted with residents of those neighbourhoods, recordings the outdoors environment as well of space and everyday life. The audio pieces obtained were reproduced through, in the case of San Isidro, the community system of mobile megaphones in which they "dedicate" a variety of announcements and events; while in San Nicolás various the sound pieces were broadcast from fixed points also, using megaphones. The sound activations produced a rupture of the rhythms and daily spatial practices of the community. The project which unfolded over a year, allowed participants to gauge the state of the language by identifying its acceptance and assessing its reception within the general population as well as the identification of active (or potential) agents interested in doing a little more about the recovery of Nahuatl culture and language.

And here identification is not used as a "pointing out" or "indication" but in the sense of affirming members of the community who identify with and wish to participate and share in the initiatives of the project. But "identifying with" was not sought in using the language as identity but in serving as the affordance around which community happens and integrates the work of artists, participants and community.

Thus, this is an initiative of reappropriation of public space by way of audio interventions by the sonic overwhelming and expulsion of the official linguistic spatial occupation of a colonial past. By "drowning out" the ubiquitousness of the official language of domination, *La lengua del diablo* immerses the population in the experience

of an alternative linguistic environment, of producing a new commons, for coexistence using a different means of creating extension: it offers a palpable aesthetic continuity to the virtual and physical space defined by the social and socialising nature of language and its sonic manifestations. By sonically imprinting the Nahuatl language on the community with its own endangered oral traditions and home-spun texts, the virtual of a Nahua past actualises the possibility of a future based on the linguistic past for the indigenous population as a people to come.

### **Affective DNA: *kamê* and *kanhru***

The collaborative artistic project *Affective DNA: kamê and kanhru* is a proposition by Brazilian artist Kalinka Mallmann and *Kaingang* history student Joceli Sales linked to Labinter interdisciplinary collaborative art research projects and the Graduate Program in Visual Arts, at the Federal University of Santa Maria in Brazil. This practice is based on actions that encourage active non-forgetting of the specific modes of social organization of the *Kaingang* indigenous culture, activated by inventive and creative practices with children art and technology.

Presently, there are *Kaingang* people in the Brazilian states of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, Paraná and south of São Paulo. It is estimated that a total population of approximately 34,000 *Kaingang* are spread throughout various communities or Indigenous Territories ([www.portalKaingang.org](http://www.portalKaingang.org)). The project *Affective DNA: Kamê and Kanhru* was conceived collectively through encounters and meetings between Mallman, Sales and the *Kaingang* community of Terra do Guarita, located in the northwest part of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, the third largest *Kaingang* community with a population of 5,300 inhabitants.

Specifically, the *Affective DNA: kamê and kanhru* project looks to create a collaborative community project within the the *Kaingang* Indigenous Territory at Terra do Guarita that would develop some actions with the children of the community in order to foment, inspire, and solidify a greater appreciation of *kamê* and *kanhru* values within the community and perpetuate the culture. *Affective DNA: kamê and kanhru* was the name suggested for the project because the marks originate from cosmological and not biological kinship and encompassed the existence of a broad spectrum of connectivity among individuals within an inclusive system of transmission, of information, of collaboration. The project seeks to bring together 'genetic' material from multiple sources in order to create innovative sequences that would otherwise not exist. This concept also resonates with the purpose of the project: to jointly create a connected and collaborative cartography of relationships, exchanges and affects within the community.

The specific actions that were decided collectively in community meetings was to first dialog with the children as to what *kamê* and *kanhru* meant for them in the commu-

nity. The children then made drawings on digital tablets around this theme and were taught how to use the tablets to take photographs and videos in order to document daily life in the community and tie them to geotags. By means of these geotags, users will then be able to access the audio-visual material produced by the children of the community and others. This material will then be integrated as a cartography on an online interactive platform which can be accessed by members of the community to identify *kamê* and *kanhru* families by using *kamê* and *kanhru* symbology. These actions would incorporate the participation of the children, the parents, the elderly of the community in order to produce a sense of what it means to be *kamê* or *kanhru* within the *Kaingang* indigenous community.

It was in the initial meetings, that the community was able to determine the overriding theme of the project as the use of the *Kamê* and *Kanhru* markings (*Rá*) which represent the duality of *Kaingang* society. According to Jacodsen (2013), the dualism refers to a dual perception of the universe which reflects the presence and influence of the Sun and the Moon: the Sun principle is *Kamê*, whereas the Moon principle is *Kanhru*. *Kamê* expresses the symbolism of the Moon—cold colours and an open geometry; *Kanhru* expresses that of the Sun—warm colours, and a closed geometry. These cosmic principles are also reflected in their leadership system in terms of a social whole composed of two halves, of "opposites and complementaries". Thus, the *Kaingang* are differentiated between these by the *Kamê* and *Kanhru* markings, which are portrayed principally on body paintings used in ceremonies, rituals, festivals, and especially in handicrafts (Jacodsen, 2013). Two parallel lines define the *Kamês*, and a filled circle defines the *Kanhrus*. These distinguishing marks are featured not only in body painting, but are also expressed through the geometry of handicrafts, and in their colours, among other applications.

In terms of kinship, marriage codes also subscribe to this understanding of the cosmos. For the *Kaingang*, these marks are relevant in order to understand the cultural, social and cosmological conception of the *Kaingang* people and how they relate to the world. When marriage is performed according to this conception, *Kamê* types should marry only *Kanhru* types and vice versa, and the children will receive only the paternal mark (Jacodsen, 2013); those with the same markings are brothers, and those with different markings are in-laws. The adoption of names and surnames was forced upon them in order to acquire official documentation or to register property, since notaries did not accept *Kaingang*—many saw this as abject colonisation and subjection and as destruction of their heritage, history and kinship lineages. The population of the Guarita Indigenous Territory has long suffered the process of white man's colonisation, and the practice of *kamê* and *kanhru* markings ended up being almost extinguished by the use of names and surnames imposed by the institutions of the white man. The empowerment implied by the use of the

renewed use of the markings in the Kaingang community is enormous as this becomes a recognition of a Kaingang past and an affirmation of their history as the basis for social organisation. In addition, the practice has bolstered a sense of identity and belonging, as well as perdurance amidst the pressure to assimilate into mainstream Brazilian culture. The Guarita Territory is surrounded by urban development, so direct contact with these urban environments has been changing the cultural customs and traditions of the Kaingáng communities who are struggling to maintain "their way of life" in spite of this constantly increasing external pressure (Sales, 2017).

To widen interest in the project and to raise awareness for the work being carried out, several other initiatives were realised. In November 2016, an animation/installation was presented at the exhibition "Art, Topology, Technology—LabInter 2016", at the Carriconde Gallery in UFSM, Brazil. The public exhibit showed a conceptual record of the project itself, which unfolded into other distinct artistic proposals, most markedly through social media.



Figure 2. *Affective DNA: eu sou kamê e eu sou kanhru*, Facebook page, 2017.

One of the actions of the project was to use social media such as Facebook and Twibbon to discuss identity issues within the Kaingang culture and to allow other communities besides the local site of the project to participate in the conversation via online networks with the purpose of cultural activation through art and technology.

The *Affective DNA: kamê and kanhru* Facebook page worked well as a common platform for meeting and communication between individuals belonging to different Kaingang communities. Facebook's online telematic dialogues provided an instant sense of collective belonging. Besides being a form of appropriation of the technology coming from the culture of the white man, the social media gave a collective voice to the communities and enhanced

recognition for the indigenous culture. Two graphic templates were created on the Twibbon platform that characterised profile picture of each user as Kaingang *kaméangs* or as Kaingang *kanhrus*: cool colors, open geometry and parallel markings and the title "I am kamê"; warm colors, closed geometry and circular markings and the title "I am kanhru".

As the comments in the Facebook postings were written in Kaingang, something subjective and potent emerged: an aura of belonging and of resistance—belonging emerged with the exhibition of pride in their markings, and resistance from being able to foster a dialog around native and local Kaingang issues in the midst of the ephemeral globalized network.



Figure 3. *Affective DNA: kamê and kanhru*, collaborative cartography, 2018.

In July 2017, we began the process of developing a collaborative mapping in the community of Terra do Guarita by the Kaingang children of the village. This marks the final phase of the project through the production of a collaborative cartography and transferring it to an online map linked to the community school's website. This action is developed with the children as an expanded reality which incorporates simultaneous temporalities and specialities

within the community by populating it with interviews of relatives, photographs, videos, and oral histories as digital narratives adapted to this map. Following the suggestions of Grant Kester (2011), the actual carrying out of the project with the Kaingang in the indigenous territory becomes a performative artistic gesture where meetings, audiovisual workshop creation, participating in community events, conversation with the members of the community, etc become important means of creative facilitation within collaborative art projects in communities.

### Final Considerations

These two projects seek to engage with indigenous communities in order to shelter and preserve their cultural values. *La lengua del diablo* joins the rise of world-wide, language safeguarding initiatives that are now experiencing a resurgence as part of an awakening to the need of preserving and revitalising endangered languages of indigenous peoples (Leander, 2005). This independent project offers guidelines to bring closer the production, artistic practices and the community of the northern zone of Cuauhtotoatla around the Nahuatl language; and the various manifestations and the respective world configured from that language.

In all the actions of the *Affective DNA: kamê and kanhrú* project, the focus is on the shared doing and not on the individual propositions of an artist. The propositions originate from a collaborative conception, to the extent that the actions are planned between the artist and the Kaingang history student Joceli Sales, who also assumed the role of representative of the Kaingang community and liaison duties. At each step, there is a greater involvement by individuals who wish to collaborate and participate to produce a certain autonomy to the project as a whole. Because the teachers of the local school were also involved in the project, they incorporated some of the project's practices into the curriculum.

Emerging technologies can now be said to expand collaborative processes and, in this sense, Ana Mélia Bulhões adds that "with the advancement of technological society and communicational possibilities comes the prospect of creating new collaborative actions" (Bulhões, 2011, p. 140). And in the midst of this heightening of collaborative possibility, the artist stands beyond "traditional positions" to simultaneously assume "a lateral position in the mediation process" (Cirillo, Kinceller, Oliveira, 2015, p. 7).

In conclusion, the *Affective DNA: kamê and kanhrú* project reveals itself as fomenting indigenous subjectivity. By enabling indigenous people to be the narrators of their own history and activating their own potentials and safeguarding their subjectivity in the midst of today's globalisation processes, such as online networks and social media. In this sense, the artist-researcher becomes a facilitator in this collaborative process. Understanding the project as a collaborative and affective system that transcends the limita-

tions of traditional art practices, art and technology can come to potentialise human relations.

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