Cyber attractions of WagonNet: modes of activist engagement for reclaiming the public space.

Vanessa Santos, Gastão Frota

Pompeu Fabra University, Federal University of Uberlândia

Barcelona, Spain; Uberlândia, Brazil

santosvaness@gmail.com, artesmidia.projeto@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper investigates modes of activist engagement on a performance in public space. The discussion anchors on the case study analysis of the project WagonNet (Brazil, 2011-2014). The artistic practice combines a processual and relational aesthetic to presuppose the other in the city context. It imbricates human and non-human agents in a wagon converted into a "cyber machine", which works as a mobile digital station connecting the material and the virtual world and audiences. The performance evidences some dialogic aspects of culture, such as the relations between local and global, archaic and modern, backwardness and progress. The authors focus on this artistic experience to discuss two main topics: how to potentialize the urban environment as a place of encounters, and how the exploration of the city suburbs can be turned into an activist act.

Keywords

performance, public space, cyborg, cyberspace, mobile media, locative media, technological misuse, activism, relational aesthetics, participatory cartography.

Introduction

Cybernetic mediation by ubiquitous and mobile media became a major deal to contemporary life. These communication systems are reshaping the way people interact among them, and with the public space. A broad network infrastructure allows all kinds of data analyze, also in real-time, and promotes fast connectivity between individuals and institutions. With a variety of urban processes being optimized by technological innovation, the smart city promises us more efficiency, sustainability, openness, transparency, and new modes of participation in government decisions (Kitchin, 2014). The architectural environment of metropolitan areas crossed by the digital communication flows is challenging urbanism, the comprehension of urban public life, and the historical idea of the city. On this context, vindication for public digital literacy and access became a major demand as "at stake is not only setting the terms for public access to the vast databases of open source information but constructing the sustaining architecture to do so" (Tuters, 2004, p.5).

Citizenship in these "augmented public spaces", in which the built environment coexists with layers of information and media content (Manovich, 2006; Allen, 2008), should so presuppose not only easy access to the Internet. It should include the very means of enabling people to create, use and exchange a diversity of local and global content.

In this scenario, artistic practices play a vital role in laying the ground for both: technological innovation and citizenship. Providing opportunities to build particular forms of interactions between people, place and digital systems, artists working with computers and the Internet make direct and indirect contributions to the development and implementation of cutting-edge tools in the digital cities. By one hand their creative technological innovations reinsure a fundamental guideline for social acting in contemporary society, associating aesthetic experimental production and scientific reflection. On the other hand, as vital social agents, these artists can even take off the ideological wrapper of a medium and reveal twisted values underneath their modus operandi. When it happens, a third essential ingredient – for those who value Democracy and diversity - is added to this guideline: critical thinking.

The first artists working with locative media, for instance, often pointed out the risks of a society of control with invasive surveillance tools (Tuters & Varnelis, 2006). More then ten years later, the movement keeps its propose of using location data and spatial context to create a new meaning to this awareness of the place, by social and participatory interactions with socio-political activism (Aceti, 2016; Southern, 2016). Artistic practices that have the city as a locus so usually operates on such attempt to approximate art and live through diverse modes of engagement within the public space, constructing a common (Negri, 2016) ground for the occupation of the cities and the city life itself.

As Ippolito (2012) argues, innovation itself is not art:

> what sets art apart from other technological endeavors is not the innovative use of technology, but a creative misuse of it. Today's technological innovation may be tomorrow's cliché, but the creative misuse of technology still feels fresh even if the medium might be stale (Ippolito, 2012, p.487).

The creative misuse of technology can be seen as a form of resistance, as it might evoke different and creative modes of interaction and engagement, instigating people to re-imagine their relations with place (Farman, 2014) and with digital machines. While the new generation of technological systems has reconfigured the geographic, cultural and perceptual space, artistic practices with locative and mobile media come to evidence specific issues on a political basis. Spatially located and contextualized works of art look for composing particular resonances related to geography, cartography, and sometimes politics. They integrate connotative and denotative meanings of the urban life and address questions that embrace demographic changes, borders, gentrification issues, preservation concerns (Hight, 2006). Some geolocated and site-specific projects invite people then to rediscover and experiment the territory by navigating and getting in touch with places never visited, or visited but not properly experienced, usually due to the rush that characterizes everyday life in postmodern cities. The artistic practice with locative media creates new connections between digital culture and physical places by generating particular narratives of space that proposes a different manner of seeing, act and claim the city.

Regarding these issues, this paper takes as a case study the project WagonNet cyberAtractions[1], a collaborative proposition using mobile and locative media as means for a participatory cartographic practice (Sotelo-Castro, 2010). The artistic project approaches the city as a sensible territory (Rauscher, 2013) and acts valorizing the agency of artist's self-mapping as it travels through the cities during four consecutive days. In a relational aesthetics (Bourriaud et al., 2002) the premise of the project is to promote encounters with the others of the smart city above described. The unusual "cyber machine" registers local culture and share it globally on cyberspace. The title of the artistic proposition uses neologisms associating animal traction vehicles and the Internet, implying a possible dialogue and imbrication between humans, animals, and machines – and bringing up the essence of ambiguities that goes through all the artwork. In a misuse of digital and mobile technology, it links the local to the global in an inclusive mobilization that celebrates a common.

WagonNet – a cyber machine

The project WagonNet cyberAttractions[2], or *ciberAtrações CharreteNet* as it is called in Portuguese , started in 2011 in Uberlândia as an activist urban art project, with the aim to strengthen social bonds between cultural initiatives (including independent media), and peripheral communities, empowering both. Most of these communities are of low-income people and in areas of social risk. With a prize of Funarte, in 2014 the performance traveled across the peripheries of Belo Horizonte's metropolitan area, and after that on the Federal District, around Brasília.

The artwork concept got inspiration on the "Cyborg Manifesto", written by Donna Haraway. The project plays with the transgressed borders between the technological machine, the human and the animal by giving a wagon, transmuted into a mobile station, a central role in the performance. The WagonNet points to a pleasurably coupling rather than on a barrier between people and other living and non-living beings. On her writings, Haraway (2000) argues about the human animality to reduce a possible line separating both entities, and mention the late twenty-century machines to highlights how they have made ambiguous the distinction between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed. Following her approach, such differences commonly applied to differentiate organisms and machines seem to be blurred. "Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert" (Haraway, 2000, p.294).

Thinking about who conducts the wagoNet, the triad, coachman, horse, and cabin, seems imbricated as an extension of the same symbiotic body. In the same pattern, hybridism comes to mind when looking at the relations established between the invited artists and the mobile devices they carry along. The "Cyborg Manifesto" claims that there is no fundamental and ontological separation in the formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic. Recalling to an imagined organic body, Haraway (2000) draws a myth of a cyborg society, in which people are not afraid of their joint with animals and machines. Identities have artificial components and contradictory standpoints, what this complex hybridization with other communication devices and species come to evidence that. Informed by such post-modernist feminist-materialistic approach, the project WagonNet sees on the imbrication and confusion between human, animal and machines, a potential source. The performance embraces Haraway's myth of resistance to pursuing the task of:

> reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts (...) Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves (...) It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories (Haraway, 2000, p.316).

The performance centers on such universe of thought by transforming a traditional cargo structure into a cyborg machine. Technological and ludic, it promotes encounters in public space. Encounters with the horse and the invited artists. Encounter with the digital media coupled on this

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cyborg machine. Encounters with nostalgic memories of an ancient city and modes of sociability, as well as with forgotten parts of the city, its residents, and cultures that are looked down on by mainstream visibility. The wagon transmuted into a mobile digital station takes a performative navigation through the urban space. Where it goes, it means an opportunity for a cultural and artistic experience and production, which have the collaboration of several fundamental actors. The involved agents have a crucial role in the political-cultural efficacy of the artwork. Such re-appropriation of an animal traction vehicle comes to highlight the dualism of categories such as archaic-modern; overpass-progress; local-global; individual-collective; public-private; memory-forgetting; work-leisure; objectivity-subjectivity.

Brazilian Cultural and Technological Context

Uberlândia, like other cities in Brazil, has been the object of individual initiatives by artists and activist groups to emphasize the weak or even non-existent cultural policy of the municipality. The MUDI collective, for instance, arose from the need of urgent resistance of civil society. They gathered artists and activist when the city councilmen tried to approve a law that requires a license to carry out any events in the street, demanding prior authorizations and even payments. The MUDI movement, articulated through e-mails and face-to-face meetings, with open participation and without moderation, came as a response to this government attempt to infringe on the rights of street performers and on free and spontaneous uses of public space by citizens.

The WagonNet cyberAttractions, as an activist art, inserts in such desire to reflect upon the Brazilian cultural institutional program[3]. The project brings Bauman's (2009, p.35) ideas about the city as a place in which the human experience takes form, is accumulated, and shared; a place in which we elaborate, assimilate and negotiate the cities' meaning. The performance operates on the principle of digital free culture, using the ideas of participatory art and multilocal actions. In this propositional context, the project devotes to an investigation characterized by collaborative thinking, mediation, open source softwares and technical hybridism.

These are crucial assemblages to the collaborative formation that underpins this project, which in the broader context is instigated by the consolidation of municipal councils and telluric engagements in the implementation of the National Plan of Culture[4]. In its struggle to empower new channels of dialogue between workers and local culture lovers, via social networks, WagonNet cyberAttractions promotes a confrontation between

"globalized powers and the tenacious local senses" (Bauman, 2009, p.35) - in two-way relationships, based on networking with independent artists, cultural promoters and activists. It is a processual artistic project based on propositions.

Mobile Infrastructure

The "cyborg machine" of WagonNet project is made of a wagon equipped with a mobile phone enabled to connect to 3G networks and send GPS data, a portable computer, cameras HD and a megaphone. Processual, the performance started by encountering a coachman - that wanted to change the business from cargo to entertainment -, and getting a wagon, called "charrete" in Portuguese, that is itself made from recycled materials.

The artwork involves the process of decorating the wagon with objects traded during the journey, in a solidarity economy mode. A flag fixed to the back of the wagon flies like a dancing paraglide to the rhythm of the horse's walk. When it stops, the barter-happenings take place, and people are invited to trade all kinds of stuff, actions, and objects, provisions, and even rules. The incorporation of several objects results in a colorful and festive ensemble.

Figure 1: The colorful and festive ensemble of the wagon.

The WagonNet gets empowered by easy, accessible, "cost-free", open source tools. Precarious wifi connection gives support to the given structure. Characterized by the slow pace of its displacements and with a popular appeal, these "cyber station" can instigate improvisations, host, capture and transmit contents in real time. "Creative, ironic and revolutionary", as described by Rauscher (2013, p.21), it connects the local and the global, the virtual and the physical domains.

The performance has its course and existence from a set of collaborations and relationships built on directly and through social media environments. Open calls on mailing

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[3] In 2013, the X Funarte Prize, from Brazilian government, selected the project together with other initiatives that had a marked activist character.

[4] ttp://pnc.cultura.gov.br/

lists of activist groups in the city gathered a group of collaborators and entities to the project. This process shapes the dynamic, setting up the stop points that together with the limitations of the vehicle, defines the routes for the navigation. Moved by Barter-Happenings, each tour starts with the choice of the horse and coachman, following ecological criteria of animal care, and the social representativeness of the coachman among the local communities. The definition of the itinerary is an online and direct networking negotiation. It depends on the response of those who, identifying with the political aspects of the project, agree to host the WagonNet at their offices, houses, communities centers, etc.
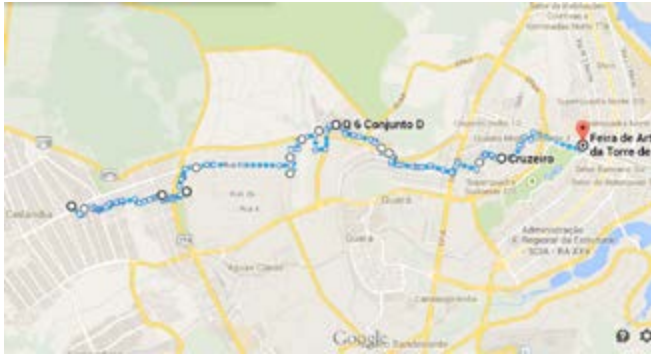

Figure 2: One of the routes taken by the WagonNet.

The journey is sustained by the barter-happenings, in which people can trade all kinds of stuff, actions, and objects, provisions and rules. Hosting the horse, the wagon and the artists, an establishment may get advertising. Giving their art product, they can choose a cd, a painting or a book from other barters. Dancing, singing, reciting, they may get even another live performance from the guest artists. Local artists could, for instance, get HD recordings of their performances in exchange for allowing the live stream on the Internet of their participation.

In a "Do-It-Yourself" style and based on networking with independent artists and cultural promoters (such as Fora-do-Eixo and Estilingue), the wagonNet represents itself a cyber attraction for both: the bystanders on the streets, and an online audience. Each event means an opportunity for planned and no-planned encounters. Some people who came across got a ride on the "cyber machine", some sang, others played instruments, did political claiming, told old stories, read poems, drew the scene, danced. All sort of expressions went online in real-time on Social Media. This material, generated while the wagon is on the move or parked, travel through 3G networks to reach an online audience. The artwork extends site-specific notions with a locative practice that interrelates the virtual and the material spheres by sharing exploratory experiences of the urban space through posts on Youtube, Qik, TwitCasting, Twitter and Facebook.

Artists and those who collaborated with the project shared the operations of recording images and sounds using portable, professional and non-professional equipment. Following the principle of free digital culture and participative art, the project experimented with aspects such as double-cameras and rotating rules of interviewed/ interviewer, photographer/ photographed. The community residents themselves also captured the images, some of them becoming quickly familiar with all the process. They organize themselves for carrying out cultural presentations (dance, percussion, hip-hop music), as they want to be filmed. They also make themselves available to photograph and film, to reproduce and transmit the content to the cyberspace. They want to do-it-themselves.

Discussion

The urban as a place of encounters

WagonNet cyberAttractions proposes to minimize the condition of unfamiliarity and isolation, that some Brazilian artists and citizens have in relation to the experience of the diversity of local and cultural agents. The project foresaw in its conception the contact and visit to cultural institutions, and entities on neighborhoods neglected by cultural policies. Many times the WagonNet got on unplanned routes that would lead to aleatory encounters, mobilizing all sort of citizens and emotions. On its exploration of the urban space, the mobile station crossed, mixed, infiltrated and blurred the borders of the compartmentalized city.

The trip of the "cyber machine" into the peripheral districts represented an encounter with the opportunity of access to the Internet and digital media. That was the first opportunity for many individuals and populations. During the trips, the spaces mapped by these visits turned into a producer of cyber attractions. The project was moved by such desire of empowering the Art & Culture sector of Brazilian cities. In this sense, the horse-wagon worked as an affirmative symbol and agglutinating agent among those interested in the democratization of the artistic and cultural circuit.

As Rancière argues (2013), the sharing of the sensible involves the distribution of spaces, times and forms of activity, something in common that leads to participation. The ability or inability of various individuals to participate in this distribution by their own desires and singularities is what ties aesthetics to politics. This politics is inherent in the logic of representation and includes sensorial appeals behind the political redistribution of shared experience. "The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed" (Rancière, 2013, p.12). The politics appear as a form of experience, "revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see

and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time" (Rancière, 2013, p.13). The artistic practice proposed by the project is a transgressive appearance of unauthorized speakers on the public stage.

As Art and life approximates, the ciberAtractions centers on the invention of relations between subjects, configuring a situation to recreate models of sociality in open public environments. (Bourriaud et al., 2002). The creative process gets on the relational and processual aspects as principles. The artwork takes form from intersubjective relations established between a place, its residents, and the invited artists. Intersubjectivity became then the main element that give shape to the artistic action, that is improvised and performative rather than planned and pre-scripted. The complicity of sharing a given place and moment, the idea of building a shared memory between those involved in the encounter strength a relationship that is artistic, affective, and also politically effective.

Artistic projects like this one open space for the participants to establish differentiated relationships with the practice, and to assume, at least in part, responsibility for the mutations in course. Processual, the creative act here depends not only on interaction, but on the exchange of experiences. The dialogue and also the ephemerality appear as major features that characterize this public urban art production. Bourriaud et al. (2002) considers the encounters as the central aspect of a relational aesthetics in art, which valorizes the human interactions and its social context, rather than relegate art to a private and autonomous symbolic space. When such encounter, unexpected or casual, happens in the public space, it opens room to an all-embracing dialogue.

Figure 3: The performative casual encounters in public space.

The invention of a proposition welcomes and connects different cultural productions opening room to creativeness in diverse experimental practices. The project has its existence affirmed through relationships and collaboration that can be extended and spread out. The drift appears as

desire, prevailing the possibility of meetings and bases of welcome (Rauscher, 2013). During four consecutive days, the local community gets mobilized and attracted by the technology, but also by the artists's interventions and the wagon itself. The "cyber machine" attracted, for instance, a great number of children. In the time they spent together and immersed in that artistic experience, the digital station showed and registered part of that diverse local culture in a non-hierarchic mode. The artistic practices affirm itself as forms of art that inscribe a sense of community.

"Performances are 'involved in politics', whatever may otherwise be the guiding intentions, artists' social modes of integration, or the manner in which artistic forms reflect social structures or movements" (Rancière, 2013, p.13). As a political aesthetics, it destroys the hierarchies of representation and creates a community formed only by the random circulation of the artwork.

In WagonNet, the representation of the cultural diversity of peripheral areas results from the collaboration and interaction between local people and artist, between seeing, doing, and speaking in these improvised rites. The WagonNet, by offering, even temporarily, the experience of cohabiting the square, the streets, and the network, allows us to think about the public spaces and questioning the origin of the speeches. The face-to-face meetings are decisive in the project proposal. The interactive aspects of the performance are absolutely dependent on the participation that precedes it. Hence, this make-and-share of the sensitive happen through the context of encounters between theory and practice, digital inclusion and empowerment of local networks, animal and machine (Gastão & Rauscher, 2013).

The cyber wagon ride as an activist act of reclaiming the public space

Considering the effects of the "informatics revolution" of digital media, as Bauman (2003) observes, some analysts have radically proclaimed the prognosis of an imminent disappearance of the "city as we know it", or even its replacement for a new spatial form of human cohabitation. The metropolitan regions worldwide do have been experiencing an accelerating pace of transformations. The "postmetropolis", as Soja (2000) defines it in opposition to the modern metropolis consolidated in the middle decades of the twentieth century, can take specific forms in specific places. With different degrees of change all over the world, such urban restructuring results in profound changes that in some cases turned almost unrecognizable what existed or was familiar few years ago (Bauman, 2003, p.4).

That is the case, for instance, of the polemics about vehicles of animal traction in urban areas. Though some people may think they are obsolete, the fact is that horse-wagons are still circulating in many Brazilian cities. In Belo Horizonte, the fourth biggest city in Brazil, for instance, there are at least 2.500 of them registered at city

council. In most cases, coachmen utilize these animals to transport objects and rubble, as a source of income. Those who have the wagon as a mean of survival are representatives of a model of the informal economy, whose confidence relies on their own wits and individual initiatives and even in a passion for autonomy – could an artist identify with that?

In the name of progress, many debates have been carried out by politicians trying to get rid of animal-drawn vehicles. Under the discourse of protecting the horses from a supposed slavery condition, there are also strong interests of recycling industries on getting the monopoly of trash management, no manner how many families would get miserable by that. Behind the idea that cities are not healthy for horses, one may ask whether this environment is for humans health, including in its mental and psychological aspects. Does the majority of people really want to live apart from non-human beings? The presence of wagons in the streets of (post) modern Brazilian cities represents this kind of tension.

The WagonNet underscores such contradictory logic in Brazilian contemporary urban spaces, as the wandering of coachmen contrasts significantly with the imperatives of post-modern urban traffics. In this context, wagons represent both: a nostalgic memory of that same territory - now generalized in a mercantile space, and a reminder of the backwardness, poverty, and slowness that cohabit with the city taken by modern automobile logic. In tis context, the paradoxical WagonNet became a plastic and critical object (Frota & Rauscher, 2013).

Whether the wagon is determinant to shape the critical meaning of the artwork, its navigation through the urban space also has an activist vein of reclaiming that territory to who has its circulation restricted and their existence rejected. It comes calmly but not unnoticed, as it links that moments experimented in the outskirts of the city to a broad audience following online. Many who came across the WagonNet also took that moment to protest and make visible what in general remains invisible, and by doing so they brought to an online audience a self-mapping of urban areas that are generally neglected by broadcasting media. The empowering potential of the proposed artistic practice seems to reside on a self-positioning enabling agency; or as Sotelo-Castro (2010) defines it, on "the act of sharing the spatial autobiographical narratives that result out of the participation process that the participants may be enabled to position and map the self" (p.593).

As De Certeau (1984) points out, by navigating the city, the ordinary men not only experience location but also create an infinity of stories that lives under the visibility. During the tours with the WagonNet, participants became the protagonists of displacements that give visibility to stories other than those of violence and stupidity, what usually characterize the space of poor communities on media.

Analyzing the project, Nardin & Boel (2013) observes that when the WagonNet visits and registers images and sounds taking place in the city, it is building a network on the urban cartesian map. The project does it by connecting the peripheral points trough unexpected routes, which function as modifiers of the use of space and consequently become shared paths. As Bourriaud et al. (2002) observes, such kind of artistic-relational practices creates modest connections, opening some obstructed passages, putting in contact levels of reality set apart. The digital station, for instance, streamed the moment in which a community was evicted from an irregular urban area. Being expelled by police forces, they used the opportunity to protest against the Major, the policy of the municipality, and to the difficulties of access to cultural, social, health and leisure spaces, and even water.

Under this *modus operanti,* the project can be characterized as a biopotent aesthetic resistance, as Rena, Berquót & Chagas (2014) articulates the concept in the reversal of the term biopolitics. While the latter regards the power *over* life, the former signalizes to the power of life. In WagonNet, the biopotent resistence is against the rush for gentrification and hygienist politics under neoliberal urbanism.

Conclusion

As we have discussed, the WagonNet performances created spaces of flow for the distribution of sensory experiences, using the own globalization resources and augmented space of postmodern cities to put in evidence local meanings and discourses. The cognitive, artistic and cultural map traced by the performance gave visibility to a peripheral city, through the materialism of encounters with local agents.

One mode of activism engagement then concerns the valorization of a diversity of human life styles, the affirmative inclusion of the forgotten or silenced voices in the political arena. That is the case of coachman families surviving upon the garbage of consumer society, and other groups excluded from shared visibility and voice on media and cyberspace by globalization process of postmodern cities.

The other activism mode includes an even bigger challenge that is related to how western civilization deals with nature and its diversity of species. In opposition to the utilitarian view, by which all things on earth exists to serve man, WagonNet cyborg character points out to the possibility of a more symbiotic relation between non-human animals, machines and humans. A symbiotic hybridism instead a parasitic mode of relation upon nature. As we lodge our body into the gallop of these walks, our humanity copulates with the animal, activating rhythmic memories that echo the frictions from sex to laughter – crossed by an infinite synergy of common affections that gives weigh to being, thought to body and life experience to technology – a sense of frontier of the ecological

challenges.

The modes of activism engagement that characterize WagonNet cyber attractions should be understood so as an attempt to valorize the diversity of life, in a broad sense, against the standards of the "postmetropolis" and the immaterial values of cognitive capitalism.

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Authors Biographies

Vanessa Santos is a digital media artist and researcher. She holds a Ph.D. in Social Communication (2017), from Pompeu Fabra University. Her expertise is in audiovisual production, digital storytelling, interactive systems, locative and mobile media. She has collaborated with research groups involved in the study of the following topics: technology inclusion, socio-tech networks, open source software for multimedia production, virtual and augmented reality based systems to experience complex data sets. The artist is interested in the creative use of technology and in the stimulus that it entails in the formulation of new narrative genres. In 2014, she integrated the research line on Locative Media of *Hangar Center for Visual Arts*. Her last work is "Chronica Mobilis", an interactive and geolocated performance with gameplay, which happens in public space. Currently, she investigates the audience experience in response to different modes of engagement.

Gastão Frota works with public Art propositions, performances and intermedia related to open source tools and activist context. He teaches Visual Arts at the *Instituto de Artes* of *Universidade Federal de Uberlândia* Currently, he is a researcher at *Universidade de Lisboa, Faculdade de Belas Artes, Centro de Investigação e de Estudos em Belas-Artes*, where he is PhD candidate on Multimedia. He holds a master degree in Visual Arts from the Pratt Institute (NY-USA). Lives between Lisbon, Belo Horizonte and Uberlândia.