

# Preservation of Material and Immaterial Heritage through Interactive and Collaborative Artistic Interventions

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## Abstract

The present article elaborates on the preservation of material and immaterial heritage through the production of community-based artistic propositions in Media Art in order to activate the discursive and enunciative potential of blighted urban neighbourhoods rendered invisible. We consider the media art project *Rede\_em\_Rede 2015/2016* (*Network\_in\_Network 2015/2016*) based on the concepts of the territory in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and the actor network theory developed by Bruno Latour. This project builds upon and continues the work of previous community media art interventions, *Aircity:arte#ocupSM 2012* and *Aircity:arte#ocupSM 2013*. The three projects were developed in the Vila Belga cultural and historical heritage neighbourhood of Santa Maria/RS, Brazil.

## Keywords

Media Art, Heritage, Territory, Network, Interactive, Collaborative, Intervention, Narratives, Actant.

## Introduction

The *Rede\_em\_Rede 2015/2016* (*Network\_in\_Network 2015/2016*) project builds and continues the work of *Aircity: arte#ocupSM 2012* and *Aircity:arte#ocupSM 2013*. These projects involve the Vila Belga<sup>1</sup> community in Santa Maria/Brazil and seek to problematise the notion of territory in order to open debate on its social, political, artistic and technological implications, as well as the notion of network in a collaborative social media proposal.

Thus, we question how relations occupy and participate within each other to become established and how networks become woven from informational and urban territories and immanent technological territorializations and the role of social, political and economic dynamics as complex actors in the production of these vital networks—both in the sense of

indispensable and living. Subjectile entities arise from the territory but they do so in ways that are not usually considered subjectile, such as in the timbre of sounds, in visual textures, in affective smells, in tactile images and the adaptation of our steps to the terrain as the active creation of spaces and temporalities as the familiar of the common. And these traces and trails left behind constitute the nomadic net-work of memorial pathways through the landscape of an experiential cartography.

So that is produced in a territory are not isolated subjects, but creative assemblages of human and non-human bodies, of collective discourses, of techniques and gestures which extend, expand and extrapolate subjectile constitutions and which, in accordance with Deleuze, “proceed by intersections, crossings of lines, points of encounter in the middle: there is no subject, but instead collective assemblages of enunciation” (Deleuze & Parnet, 2007, p. 28). In this way, agency is seen as collective, as an expression of the common, since it is not determined by the particular needs or intentions of individuals, but by an interdependent, co-aris-ing social system that involves the participation of human and non-human becomings.

The work of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) develops the conceptual apparatus where the subjectile is considered as an effect of individuation, rather than as a cause. They develop a means of thought that allows one to work with transitory elements, with the unexpected dynamics of flux, as well as postulate the concretized workings of the interactive functional dynamic of the relation between fields of activity. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the relations which constitute the linkages between fields are not static or permanent: they are dynamic beings, machinic assemblages, which create expanses of operational fields they call territories. “The spatial, material and psychological components that constitute or deconsti-

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<sup>1</sup> Vila Belga is a cultural and historical heritage of Santa Maria/RS, Brazil (lei municipal n°2983/88, de 6 de janeiro de 1988).

tute a society, group, or individual” seen as territories are of key importance to our project because they are the “apparatuses that comprise history as a lived, experiential assemblage of events and circumstances” (Message in Parr, 2005,280).

Technology defines an active and vital realm of potential not as a means but as enabling ecology which interlinks aesthetic and ethical concerns (Brunner 2013). From the stand-points elaborated by Gilbert Simondon (1989) and Felix Guattari (1992) as to the participation of technics within human and non-human assemblages within associated milieus and post-media ecologies, digital technologies provide popular access to the means of production of professional quality content whereas web-based social media provide unprecedented possibilities for dissemination and distribution of cultural production. And to harness their full potential, we need to see them as the intersection of social, mental and environmental ecologies expressive of praxis which “will lead to a reframing and a re-composition of the goals of the emancipatory struggles” (Guattari, 2000) through differential media (Murphie, 2003).

### **Vila Belga, Santa Maria, RS, Brazil**

Vila Belga<sup>2</sup> is a neighbourhood of the city of Santa Maria, in Rio Grande do Sul, the southernmost state of Brazil. The city currently has 270,000 inhabitants and its economy is based on services, light industry, government, military, education and agriculture. In 1874, the first section of railroad in the State of Rio Grande do Sul was inaugurated, linking the capital of Porto Alegre and the City of São Leopoldo, and expanded from there (Figure 3). In order to realise these works, foreign investment was necessary to finance the construction and machinery, as demonstrated by the Belgian funding which occasioned the construction of Vila Belga in the city of Santa Maria, RS.

The Vila Belga neighbourhood was built between 1901 and 1903 along European architectural lines as a railroad community to house and accommodate Belgian immigrants destined to work in the offices and workshops of the Belgian “Compagnie Auxiliaire de Chemins de Fer au Brésil”. In creating Vila Belga, the concern of all parties involved was not one of simply producing housing for the workers but of genuinely induce the emergence of a community (Oliveira, Hildebrand & Efrain, 2013, p.1).

In the statements made by members of the community, we frequently encounter the assertion that the train was the catalyst at the heart of the community, giving it significance and investing it with a certain importance and dignity: so that the affirming and empowering common emerges from the collective machinic assemblage arising between, within and through the community enmeshed with the railway, the human society and the machinery of rail, as a coherent, functional entity.

Through the railway cooperative and the railway workers’ union, the Vila Belga rail community took care of its own. The railway cooperative saw to the general needs of the community, such as food, clothing, furniture etc. And together with the rail company, they set up technical schools for men and schools for women, built a hospital to serve the community, created a recreational social club, etc so that a sustainable ecology with a beneficent quality of life was in place. The railroad and the trains set the pace to the lives of the residents, determined the rhythm of the community’s activities in accordance to the timetable of the trains’ constant steam whistles, and kept active the productive energies of the community as an extension of the workings of the railway as an engine itself. According to Deleuze and Guattari, “machines are always singular keys that opens or closes an assemblage, a territory” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 334). However, after the dissolution of the railroad in 1997, Santa Maria was sidelined and as a result the station and work-shops lost their raison d’être, and were thus progressively abandoned. (Oliveira, Hildebrand & Efrain, 2013, p.1). Most studies and research on the railroad in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, and in Brazil in general, focus on the crisis and the dismantling of the railway network. Nonetheless, our research aims to give voice and visibility to other voices and actors that are part of this network. We emphasise other developments that emerge from these potentials, actions that occur at a smaller scale but that transform and produce the commons within these communities.

### **Aircity: arte#ocupaSM 2012/2013**

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<sup>3</sup> research/creation event for 5 days of intense artistic coexistence to better understand

<sup>2</sup> [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vila\\_Belga](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vila_Belga)

<sup>3</sup> <http://arteocupasm.wordpress.com>

the process of urban decay as memorial disintegration (Oliveira, Hildebrand & Efrain, 2013, p.1). As part of the occupation, an interactive immersive installation *Aircity:arte#ocupaSM 2012* was created which occupied the now abandoned main administration building of the Vila Belga Railway. The drive of the project was to activate the “invisible space” as intangible heritage or, in other words, to awaken and activate the virtual aspect of physical location as memorial reconstruction by combining social, political and artistic research/creation methods with digital devices (Oliveira, Hildebrand & Efrain, 2013, p.1). And to this effect, a group of artists and interdisciplinary researchers, namely, Renato Hermes Hildebrand, Andréia Machado Oliveira, and Daniel Paz from Brazil and Efrain Foglia and Jordi Sala from Spain, proposed new possibilities of deriving meaning from the analysis and interpretation of interstitial relations arising between narratives, spatiality, temporality, and urban territorialities by exploring the possibilities of narratives created by media art interventions in virtual and physical space.

Researchers conducted on-site video and audio sampling, recorded ambient sounds and collected digital images to composite with video interviews of former railway employees and residents of the neighbourhood. (Oliveira, Hildebrand & Efrain, 2013, p. 2). But at odds with common sense expectations, the rescue of heritage was not to be solely articulated on the preservation of physical structures. The movement behind heritage conservation in a place such as the City of Santa Maria is not to be restricted to physical spaces or to buildings. When one tries to conserve a site, we must go beyond the architecture and the floor-plans in order to visualise the celerity and slowness of movements, the flow of humours, of luminosity, of the trailings of steps, of memories and recollections, of the imaginary inhabiting that location.

A territory does not consolidate itself according to a physical delimitation, but according to propositions of occupation and engagement, of encounters and separations that take place, of the assemblages between bodies, to rhythms, affective attunements, attractions and repulsions that circulate on, through and within a particular process of territorialization. To discern the various elements which compose on that territory is not sufficient to understand it. The modes of composition and machinic assemblages between constituents must be recognized and the various linkages and bridgings which

communicate and inform them as bodies which compose relation must be comprehended. As Deleuze and Guattari posit, “...we are not interested in characteristics; what interests us are modes of expansion, propagation, occupation, contagion, peopling” (1994, p.239).

The second phase of the artwork project consisted in the gathering of data on-site which could be made to work with software, technologies and techniques developed for other *AirCity*<sup>4</sup> projects in Sao Paolo and Barcelona. This involved the use of mobile devices, wireless networking, audio re-cording and mapping—all integrated through *PureData* (Oliveira, Hildebrand & Efrain, 2013, p. 2).

The *aircity: #ocupaSM – 2013* project was developed by the artists Hermes Renato Hildebrand, Daniel Paz and Andreia Oliveira combines augmented reality, digital photography, video and audio and underscores the hybrid character of the sited and situational event. During the event, a collective mapping of the event was proposed to the participants and so QR codes were distributed. Participants recorded audio and video, took photographs and documented in various modalities the surroundings and happenings at a particular site. Subsequently, the QR codes were physically affixed to the actual location where the documentation took place and a copy was also posted to a larger mosaic of QR codes which combined the entire collection of documented sites. This allowed the configuration of the project as site-specific interactive installation and as a centralised exhibition which enabled the visualisation of all the documentation (photos, video, audio, geo-references, and *Photosynth* composites) through any mobile device with a QR reader app.

The media used in projects such as *AirCity* allow us to visualise data on a specific location, augment local information and provide visibility on the the cyberspace which is being mapped, mixing physical space and electronic data. Propositions such as this one facilitate the production of informational territories which we are emphasising in this research which aggregate in cyberspace aesthetic experiences and another perspective on the city.

### **Rede em Rede/2015-2016**

The majority of studies and research carried out on the railway in the State of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil concentrates on the dismantling on the railroad network

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mobilitylab.net/aircity/>.

in the country. A need was felt to grant visibility and provide a voice to other actors meshed within that relational web. And although the various communities were not completely silenced by the dismantling of their physical networks, they were still following their own course albeit without the intensity of the heyday of railway transport. Activities and connections were barely alive, and they required new perspectives and technological outlooks to re-establish their former dynamism. The problem here was to re-establish the network which was broken by the privatisation of the rail-way and the cancellation of passenger service. As such, various questions arose: How can the creation of digital narratives in cyberspace, arising from an artistic poesis, promote the rescue and documentation of histories of transformation within the city? Can a network of communicational empowerment and affirmation which existed with the railway net-work be re-activated through the activation of on-line net-works?

Pressing on with the research of the aircity: arte#ocupaSM/2012 and aircity:arte#ocupaSM/2013 propositions at Vila Belga, Tatiana Guerche, a researcher in Visual Poetics from the Graduate Program in Visual Arts at the Federal University of Santa Maria took on the challenge. Her project

*Rede\_em\_Rede*<sup>5</sup> (*Network in Network*) proposes a social media network project engaging the almost defunct regional networks in order to create narratives through the collaboration of various communities involved with the railway by engaging popularly available social networking apps such as Instagram<sup>6</sup>, Facebook, YouTube, Google Maps<sup>7</sup>, and a website on the Wix.com<sup>8</sup> platform. With the site, it was possible to determine the convergence and ascertain the links between the various networks, as well as facilitating the writing of the blog, structure the image and video gallery and a link to the collaborative Googlemap REDE\_EM\_REDE.

The mapping of the digital narratives traces the local visits and interviews, the online surveys according to social network markers and geolocation tags published by users. The mapping of digital narratives could be accomplished through local visits and interviews, social

network markers from online surveys and through geolocation tags published by users. As such, mobile devices corroborate the principles of cyberculture which assert that anyone can generate data, produce photographic and video images and subsequently make them available online. Through the interaction of mobile devices, a network of senders is created, which in turn form communities, political action, and modify social and communicational practices.

Through these proposals, the research was able to reactivate geographic networks—almost stagnant and deactivated—through their re-establishment in cyberspace as informational social networks. The narratives arising from these digital milieus or cyber environments provide a purposed relational nexus around heritage that gives them new life and visibility. What were only dispersed, fragmented and scattered initiatives would now be provided with a rallying focus which fleshes the virtual and embodies the consistence of the common. “The problem of *consistency* concerns the manner in which the components of a territorial assemblage hold together” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 327). The narratives arising from these digital milieus or cyber environments provide a purposed relational nexus around heritage that gives them new life and visibility. What were only dispersed, fragmented and scattered initiatives are now provided with a common rallying focus which fleshes the relations and embodies consistence.

With the goal of reactivating the network of cities tied to railway operations, the cities of Santiago and São Gabriel in the state of Rio Grande do Sul were linked to the Vila Belga/Santa Maria project. In each municipality, we can discern how different styles of city management and community involvement change the attitudes towards the administration, protection and rehabilitation of heritage sites as repositories of social memory. For example, the city administration of Santa Maria effectuates small actions whereas the larger actions are articulated through community mobilisations. Santiago has a coherent policy towards the safe-guarding and promotion of cultural projects and assumes an active role in the dissemination of materials relative to its railway history. In contrast, the city of São Gabriel there’s a total disconnect with its heritage from part of its administration and the community. Within these three municipalities, the project encompasses three distinctly different approaches towards the conservation of the railway stations by the managers

<sup>5</sup> <http://tatiguerche.wixsite.com/redeemrede>

<sup>6</sup> @rede\_em\_rede

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?hl=pt-BR&authuser=0&mid=1Uh\\_GfLnjjKBMuUrRkTA9vMHHIM&ll=-29.677883087055765%2C-53.808009587195215&z=18](https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?hl=pt-BR&authuser=0&mid=1Uh_GfLnjjKBMuUrRkTA9vMHHIM&ll=-29.677883087055765%2C-53.808009587195215&z=18)

<sup>8</sup> <http://tatiguerche.wixsite.com/redeemrede>

responsible for these buildings. Vila Belga relies on the support of the Association of Vila Belga Residents to try to construct a museum as a way to centralise the railway memorial site of the city and since 2015 has been holding a street fair, the Brique da Vila Belga, every second Sunday.

Thus, using digital communication devices and mobile media, the research aggregates the participation of people living in the three separate communities. The use of digitally generated data from various sources and locations can be used to create a new perspective on these spaces, give visibility and a voice to communities, beyond the recording/construction of informational territories which allow the constitution of informational fluxes within cyberspace.

Cities are much more than a projection of streets, buildings, and landmarks onto a flat sheet of paper. And the activities and interactions which occur within the depicted locals are rarely featured once “the action is borrowed, distributed, suggested, influenced, dominated, betrayed, translated” (Latour, 2005, p. 46). Further, these tend to be of a hybrid nature in that they happen between elements of different species, material bases, cultures, languages, modes of knowledge and regimes—human and non-human, technical and organic, analog and digital, etc. Thus, one can not only think of a human-human interaction within a given space but a hybrid interaction.

The project *Rede\_em\_Rede (Network\_in\_Network)* raises questions about the traditional function of maps as a tool or strategy for localization. Whereas traditional land-based cartographies look to make fast the relative positions of physical features in the world as correspondences on striated grids of various scales, the cartographies born from hyper-space and emergent within the fluid territories of virtuality, emphasize and identify relational potentials as a function of proximity. In addition to producing hybrid spatialities which combine actors from different strata of variegated activity, these relational mappings activate potentials differently at each visualisation depending on the actual conditions within a territory. The possibility of reconfiguring mappings also allows the re-articulation and visualisation of relation and relational relevance between systems and networks via the flow of data, affect and intensities.

These dynamic visualisations give rise to new relational configurations relative to the physical

world which articulate subjectivity through the collaboration of individuals within the network as collective assemblages. The collaborative participation in the elaboration of these virtual mappings leads to a movement of flows, of interests, of affirmations and affects not only as social media but as a socialization of media and a common subjectivity. Through these new visualisations the abstract could be made concrete, the virtual, actual and the invisible, visible.

The use of technological devices for the creation of informational territories is indispensable. Such devices have significantly altered modes of relation in many spheres of activity including the economy, politics, and art. According to French digital artist and art theoretician Edmond Couchot (1997), the technical relation between artist and audience allows instant interaction, making it possible for the public to become associated directly with the production of the work, thus accelerating the production of meanings. Still, the author contends that the development of digital technologies now enables a more elaborate and expanded manner of participation. Each one is allowed to associate directly not only with the production of the work but also with its diffusion (Couchot, 1997, p. 137).

### **Actor-Network Theory (ANT)**

In elaborating our research, we used Bruno Latour’s (1994) Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as a sociology of associations focused on the construction of the social mediated by technological innovations. With the ANT, we were able to identify existing networks, mediators operating as a defined association. The intention here being to identify the actors contained in the actions and thus highlighting their characteristics and traces. The common is at the origin of the associations and is that which explains the associations. Actants are everything and anything that generate action over another actant, whether human or non-human, and react to some action. They are constitutive of networks and are networks themselves, simultaneously parts and wholes. Actants are the consequence of aggregations where each association influences the expansions of other actants, as a mediator which transforms and translates meaning within the information or as intermediaries which simply convey or communicate without transformation (Latour, 2005, p. 39). For Latour (2005) it is the attentive description of actants, mediators and networks and their temporary stabilizations, which is the relation between

local and global agency in the social as the focus of ANT. “We have to lay continuous connections leading from one local interaction to the other places, times, and agencies through which a local site is made to do something (Latour, 2005, p. 173).

Bruno Latour, in his Theory-Actor-Network, also runs counter to any substantialist approach which banks on purity and essence by positing that both the individual and society are produced within the relations between human and non-human mediators and establish links between the global and the local by way of the specificity of each association: mediators generate meaning and are not simply intermediaries that only carry meaning. Latour seeks a site-specific *modus operandi* for the mediators in order to examine the controversies that dwell there, even if they are temporarily relegated to black boxes. He introduces technology not as a tool, but as an actant, and proposes an artistic and political being-doing with machines that provoke other ways of relating, or of living. In communities comprised of humans and machines, we are led to inquire into the type of power relations between humans and machines, between humans and humans, and between machines and machines.

This displaces the idea of society to the collective as a continuous process of associations that establishes emerging and micro-narrative connections. These integrate heterogeneous elements such as the social, the political, the artistic, the technological, etc. to the composition of the collective. Such a collective is populated by human and nonhuman act-ants who transform and are transformed by the social plane, resulting in collective intentions and shared responsibilities among the various actants within that network.

These elements of ANT are brought into the media art poesis. Firstly, we need to understand that a network is not the internet or the railway, but the fluxes, circulations, alliances, dislocations. They are the movements carried out by human and non-human actants which are composed through action and at the same time interfere with and which are subjected to action. Actants in this research are the agents involved in the network of activity—in fact, anything human or non-human which can be said to leave a trace and can be followed. Thus, the train, the artists and collaborators, the narratives, the mobile devices, the buildings, the politicians, the policies etc are all actants and the

translation or remapping from a flatland cartography to an Actor Network is configured by the movements established by the association of actions. By choosing the rail network as the theme for this proposal, we seek not only to rescue its memory, but rather seek to (re) collect and update memory as an actor network and define afresh associations in the present through their actant materiality and immateriality and through its various temporalities and spatial configurations.

## Conclusions

Through the research carried out in the production of the AirCity artworks: arte#ocupSM 2012 and 2013 and *Rede\_em\_Rede* 2015 and 2016, we come to understand that the deactivation of the railway system extinguished the social, political and economic lives of various communities leaving only traces of memory as eventual potential for the regeneration of that community. These memories are a vestigial machinic assemblage of an Actor Network whose primary purpose at one time was that of transportation logistics, i.e. carrying passengers, yet became the heart and driving force of an entire community where the reactivation of the existent social networks is a different machinic assemblage which depends on the deactivated train itself.

In interviews conducted for the aircity: arte#ocupSM art-works, Vila Belga community residents spoke of the loss and longing for the community life left behind and emotionally recounted their memories regarding the railway. “We go from final products to production, from ‘cold’ stable objects to ‘warmer’ and unstable ones” (Latour, 1987, p. 21). For the residents, the train still represents a complex, multi-level network of connections, work, dignity, political involvement, sustainability, belonging and more, where living in Santa Maria’s Vila Belga and being a railroad employee defined belonging and contributing to the active and productive life of the community.

In *Rede\_em\_Rede-2015/2016* (Network\_in\_Network-2015/2016) the intent was to provoke the community towards the development of different perspectives on the common and the social in order to foment (re)connections with the urban heritage and the cultural background. From these different points of view, we drew attention to the existence of links between the human and the non-human since most studies only consider the human activity and disregard the imbrication of the human with the non-human and the materiality/immateriality of heritage.

The artistic proposals thus instate an open-access collaborative and cooperative communication which affirms the political role of web-based interactivity to possibly result in the visualisation of individuation through the creation of experiential narratives of data. Where the initial phases of the unfolding of the process, of the relational participation in the practices, of affirmative empathy-building, of ethical involvement in community, of the event-based integration, the last phase requires the construction of the discursive image of the subject of study.

We underscore that the elaboration of this research contributes towards the production of a collective commons, which differs from that which is public and also from that which is private. The collective commons is produced as an assemblage, that not only takes into account the public/private duality, but which considers the collective as produced through different lines and productions—it is composed through diversity. Communities form themselves around something because they are aggregating formations.

The cities of Santa Maria, Santiago and San Gabriel are thus activated in terms of their geographical dimensions for the constitution of their informational territories. The digital images and narratives drive the intuition to instigate the first movements towards the relinking of these places and to provide the constitution of a connected community. Such movements are not only tracings but triggers which invoke flow within the network and interaction within the community since these flows course between city and cyberspace without dissociating them. These are the productions of the collaborators that offer another aspect onto the existing narratives linked to the rail network, in the REDE\_EM\_REDE research the city connected in cyberspace is delineated from the multiple gazes and collective and collaborative productions.

Our studies were modelled on a machinic system that goes beyond the mechanics of a railway system, even if the railway is a system that works mechanically in the quotidian. Our research is based on transdisciplinarity via machinic assemblages of collective knowledge and practices as product and producer of multiple subjectivities where being actualizes the virtual in experience to allow the invention of practices in the actual. Assemblages that cannot be reduced to the relations between subjects—to the human—but to everything that happens in and through a territory and as the territory itself.

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