

Aventar historias

An artistic action from the collective memory of a community
engaging in an a/r/tographic perspective

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Abstract

With *Aventar historias* I present a collaborative artistic action as a method of a/r/tographic inquiry. Within this article I research ways of representing the collective memory of a community that lives in a particular place. Therefore, I present this action as artistic research based on the stories collected with the intention of reviving the place from the memories of the community. The action originates from a neighborhood that is interested in recovering a space called "era," a social place of meeting and celebration in the past. This action is designed from collaborative work created by the members of a community who participated in the intervention. For this, I show the investigation based on the artistic action focused in the body as narrative, a key to investigating the performative experience from an a/r/tographic perspective in order to link what is said with how it is said. Finally, I show the visual essay as a reflection of the collaborative artistic action in the last paragraph.

Keywords: memory, community, a/r/tography, collaborative artistic action

Bio

María Martínez Morales earned her PhD in Art Education in 2015 from the University of Jaén, Spain. Her research pertains to the area of Musical, Plastic, and Body Expression Didactics. She is a member of the research group PAI Hum 862- "Studies in Society, Arts and Cultural Affair," where she investigates artistic action as a collective cultural practice from an a/r/tographic perspective in the field of collaborative artistic practices. Some of these efforts include *The body as narrative*, University of Lisbon (2015); *Interwoven lives. Body, memory, and place*. University of Porto, "Walking ..." *How to Write and Defend an Artistic Thesis?* Society for Artistic Research (SAR) in The Netherlands (2016), etc.

Introduction



Figure 1. *Aventar historias*, 2016. Photograph by the author.



Figure 2. Photoessay organized from two photographs of community members engaged in the neighborhood project.

In the article, I show an experience developed within a community of collaborative artistic practice from an a/r/tographic perspective. According to Springgay and Irwin (2005) “To be engaged in the practice of a/r/tography means to inquire in the world through a process of art making and writing. It

is a process of double imaging that includes the creation of art and words that are not separate or illustrative of each other but instead, are interconnected and woven through each other to create additional meanings” (Springgay & Irwin, 20–99). For this, the action begins from life histories of my neighbors as a way to resignify our space through their interests. Thus, I met with them in the neighborhood association to design an intervention by the people desiring to participate in the action. Thus, this action is developed in the field of collective practices, in order to incorporate and permanently share the questions or disagreements about the processes and methodologies in addition to ideas for further work, with the intention of integrating and generating agency from different gazes. Along these lines, the neighbors proposed the idea of recovering the “era.” This neighborhood is living a situation of displacement and aging because of people who have left this area over the passage of time, generating a scenario of loss. This situation gives rise to the idea of creating an action such as exchanging experiences associated with this space. For this, we proposed a meeting in which the neighbors would bring an object related to their memories of particular places while sharing experiences of those places. One result was the use of the “aventar,” as it signifies throwing something to the wind to separate grain from a stalk. We chose this metaphor as the title of the action. The fruit or grain is made up of the stories that build the identity of the neighborhood through the experiences that they narrate, and are collected as a way of recovering these memories while the stalk is the thing forgotten, carried by the wind. The intervention arises from the combination of photographs that have grown in number over time. The action invited people to participate in the symbolic collection of memories. In this sense, the action functions as a symbolic representation of the migration that was used to talk about a return to the situation of being abandoned.

A/r/tography is the way of investigation that I chose because, on one hand, it allows inquiring from several viewpoints at the same time (as an artist, teacher, and researcher) and the artistic practice becomes the method I use in the inquiry process. The arts, after all, offer a unique form of inquiry and are a specific form of knowledge and understanding (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Diamond & Mullen, 2000; Eisner, 1991). On the other hand, the relational character of a/r/tography favors the creation of new routes based on the connection of artistic practice with the community, being fundamental and part of the inquiry process issues and interests of the participants, who are

recognized as artists, researchers, and teachers or a/r/tographers. According to Irwin (2004) a/r/tographic communities are defined “by their condition of relatedness and how they put the difference at the center of the pedagogical relationship” (p. 72). So, in a/r/tographic communities artistic creation generates interstitial spaces, where we can reinterpret meanings (Irwin & Cosson, 2004). Therefore, the community is key in the creative approach, where the intervention arises from the speech generated by the interests of the association of neighbors. According to Irwin, the practice of a/r/ tography is relational and moving. The experience of a practice is necessarily always with others; it is dynamic, and it is from the singularities and differences (Triggs, Irwin, & O’Donoghue, 2012).

Therefore, the collaborative artistic practice and the a/r/tographic approach allow for a discourse generated from conversations by participants as relational processes take place in a continuous exchange of experiences. That way, we suggest the artistic action as catalyst for movements, exchange, reflection, questioning or as a way to give visibility to the experience of people that are living in this place.

Making visible the memory of the community: maps of life.

“I like speaking of our lives, of our job, telling where we are from, who we are..., we want that people know how our lives were before”

(Chari, personal communication, 10/03/2016)



Figure 3. Photograph made by a neighbor participant.

The action in the neighborhood arose from the intention of creating through artistic practice new forms of relationships and how to articulate the intervention with the community. For this, I started to develop a mapping of conversations with people living in the neighborhood with the intention of performing an action with the community through life maps. It arose with the idea of developing an intervention that adapts to the social context in which they are living and that is related to the concept of memory, which gives meaning to the routes and connections that are generated around it. A community of practice emerges as a creative option in the construction of collective memory, to enhance what in the words of theorist and French curator Bourriaud (2006) described as any production, when reaches the circuit exchanges, takes a social form that has nothing to do with its original use: acquires an exchange value that covers and hides in part its nature first.

Thus, artistic action in the neighborhood is part of the development of testimonial cartographies from objects as containers of experiences that community members choose to represent their life stories. The action works as a center of relations between the community and the intervention as a space of transfer of memory. It is a territory where the life stories of its inhabitants, forgotten in the current context or lost by disuse of the activities associate to this place, were recovered. Symbolically, the action of counting on our memory extends to the cultivation of relationships and stories that happened with action. The action as process gives way to a new space to the extent that it seeks to recover the stories of life through artistic practice. One of the premises I chose when doing this artistic action was that the action of representation takes into account the experience of each subject, and at the same time, as common experience. In this case, through artistic practice, the stories of the neighborhood become visible, creating a space for exchange of individual and collective experience, and a way of encouraging dynamic construction of cultural identities, questioning assumptions and social empowerment. The community acts as a key player in the creative approach, through conversations with neighborhood residents and from the collaborative action that emerged during the project. Therefore, we negotiate the possible routes as relational processes that take place in the continuous exchange of experiences with the community. In this sense, the artistic action works as a catalyst of movement, exchange, reflection, and questioning as a form of visibility in the neighborhood. Therefore, Gergen (2007) found “we not only have our lives

as stories, there is also a significant sense in which our relations with others live in narrative form” (p. 154).

The first meeting focused on the idea of travel in time and generated situations based on the experiences of each subject and led us to lose ourselves and rebuild our own history of the place. From this conversation appeared places and traditions that had disappeared. The next meeting took place with the intention of creating an artistic action as a way of making their stories visible, while also designing an action where all participants engaged in constant negotiation, where we chose to recapture the “era.” We began to design an intervention from artistic practice, as exploration and research from our interests as relational place, seeking ways of approaching the artistic sphere that Bourriaud (2006) called relational art, based on the “social space” as a place to operate, a space for human relations, where new micro-politics of art reveal the possible. For that, we decided that each person would bring a significant object and relate why it was chosen. We met in the *Pilar de las cuevas*, an important meeting place of the neighborhood, and we invited everybody to participate in the action.



Figure 4. Photograph made by the author.

The *San Anton Association* organized a lunch meeting inviting more people to participate. The informal situation generated a relaxing atmosphere that worked as motivation to social empowerment. The meeting converted into in a space for social interaction about the neighborhood situation. They showed interest to recovering their experienced “era” as a form of expression in their stories of resistance against positions of domineering power.



Figure 5. Photo collage created from seven photographs by the community.

Resistance to the forgotten

The experience gives room to a series of reflections from the collective social intervention. From my point of view as a/r/tographer, the collaborative process caused me to rethink or question approaches to the artistic action as a space of exchange where all participants are a/r/tographers. In this sense, the knowledge encouraged collective creation. The collaborative learning, as a result, favored openness to new perspectives and approaches drawn by relating paths from an interstitial gaze. Moreover, a/r/tography became a pedagogical agent as a result of its relationship with the community. The experience enabled a series of positions from the collective creation: each one was a form of social interaction related to building participation and transformation, where the questioning of the role of the teacher as facilitator emerged from stressing the importance of processes within learning experience. Furthermore, the artistic products became catalysts for action and ultimately opened up questioning derived from the process of inquiry and reflection, generating narratives and discussions arising from the configuration of a collaborative a/r/tographic environment. Creating possibilities in the interstices encouraged highly pro-

ductive tensions through the connections created between form and content within the creative practices and transdisciplinary features of the a/r/tography sites: each were emerging yet critical forms of relational knowledge (Irwin & Springgay, 2008).



Figure 6. *Resistance*, 2016. Visual metaphor organized from three photographs by community.

In addition, the action provoked questions about the possibilities and limitations of developing a practice in conjunction with communities in different social contexts and whether these practices could represent the communities. These discussions lead to political concerns. The resulting actions explored the relationship between the community art practice and art as experience. Another important question focused on the production of artifacts that could create experiences with the intention of improving their lives and how these might be perceived in the community. The resulting actions worked as a form of community practice that connected the place with the lives of its inhabitants. In the end, individuals were transformed from the experiences of exchange among the community members. According to Delgado (1999), a sense of community is “the extraordinary use which receives the street or

the square. It is an expression of how a community socializes space to make it support creation and evocation of meanings” (p. 49).



Figure 7. Photo collage created from three photographs by the author.

The actions derived from the artistic intervention as educational research worked as a bearer of stories, operating as a form of inquiry from within the collective artistic practice. In doing so, participants are able to rethink community-based aspects that remained hidden, thus questioning the meaning of community artistic practices. As a result, the present experience delves into the community as a producer of knowledge and as an activator of relationship dynamics that show cultural issues associated with a particular place, as community members worked to recover shared meanings from collective imaginary. The result was a place to explore the personal and collective memories created from relationships, processes, exchanges, reflections, and ideas generated from the installation that favors new areas of production and socialization. As a performative inquiry, a story is well situated in what Denzin (1997) defined as ethnographic poetics wanting to touch the viewer, evoking emotions and providing alternative perspectives to see the world.

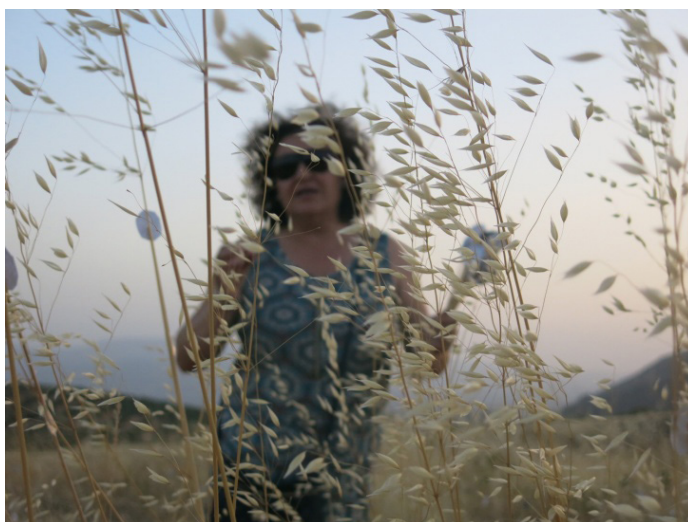


Figure 8. *In between*, 2016. Photoessay from a photograph of the community.

Finally, the action generated files and records of the life histories of the local inhabitants, who have configured the collective memory from the shared process, as well as the transmission of resistance stories in local contexts. This shared memory constitutes, therefore, a material to be reinterpreted from different perspectives. The idea of telling stories of life as a testimonial mapping lead us to use processes of self-narration among those who participated in the action: stories that intertwine from the personal to the collective, and resist hegemonic representations or single speech, which are recovered as historical subjects, making visible the stories that have been silenced in time. Thus, the research, as well as being a way of producing knowledge, is conceived as a human, heuristic, dynamic, and configurational process for what Moreno Montoro, Valladares González, and Martínez Morales (2017) argued is an invitation to promote creative spaces, that are participatory, reflexive, self-referential, both in science and art, spaces to diversity and the intertwining of experiences (Moreno Montoro, Valladares González, & Martínez Morales, 2017). In this form, the installation made from memories, reconstructed a fragmented history in an act of coming together as community members desiring to form a new whole, in order to create action of resistance to anonymity and the forgotten.



Figure 9. Photograph made by the author.

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