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Andreia Machado Oliveira
andreiaoliveira.br@gmail.com

Federal University
of Santa Maria/LabInter Brazil

Kalinka Mallmann
kalinkamallmann@gmail.com

Federal University of Santa Maria/
LabInter Brazil

Joceli Sales
djocesales93@gmail.com

Federal University
of Santa Maria/LabInter Brazil

Bruno Gottlieb
brunogottlieb@gmail.com

Federal University
of Santa Maria/LabInter Brazil

Lorenzo Schwertner Kaufmann
lskaufmann@inf.ufsm.br

Federal University
of Santa Maria/LabInter Brazil

Eduardo P. Custodio
p.eduardoc@hotmail.com

Federal University
of Santa Maria/LabInter Brazil

Hermes Renato Hildebrand
hrenatoh@gmail.com

Pontifícia Universidade
Católica de São Paulo Brazil

Collaborative artistic practices in a *Kaingáng* community as a dispositif for cultural development

Our paper offers an account of our experience with a collaborative art and technology project with the *Kaingáng* indigenous community of the village of Terra do Guarita, in the northwest region of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. We present our reflections on the implementation of collaborative artistic practices looking to indigenous culture as context and not as theme. Our project bears witness as to how artistic practice conducted in a collaborative manner shapes and structures itself through the reality of the Other when art becomes a dispositif for social integration and cultural development based on an ethical-aesthetic paradigm. Based on artistic practices related to indigenous cultures, we set up audiovisual creation workshops and produced an affective mapping of the community with indigenous children, and subsequently, undertook the creation of a digital game for Android devices (in progress) based on *Kaingáng* culture and language.

Keywords

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DNA AKK.

1 INTRODUCTION

Collaborative artistic practices that work with communities have become increasingly prevalent in the field of contemporary art including art and technology. In 2018, ISEA Durban, the 24th edition of the International Symposium on Electronic Art, addressed the practices of art and creation of technology in reference to public and collaborative cultural practices of activist. This focus on collaborative approaches to creation can also be seen nowadays in journals, symposia, congresses and artistic events and are enthusiastically related to political, social and cultural local issues. From these initiatives, we can appreciate that artistic practices directed to specific localities and their needs are seeing an increase in development and public awareness (MALLMANN, 2018).

During the last decades, some artists have been performing an effective and affective art related to specific places and their individuals (LIPPARD, 2001). 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's work was linked to the use of public spaces to site artistic gestures of a political nature (KESTER, 2011, p. 114). This allowed an important bridging of the traditions of conceptual art, public art and activism (KESTER, 2011, p. 112). Even if their productions varied greatly in purpose and proposals, Bishop maintains that artists of the 1990s willingly tied their work to social and political issues, dovetailing art to a social conscience. 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, 2006).

The collaborative artistic practices 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). For Pablo Helguera¹ (2011), all art is social insofar as it is created to be communicated or experienced by others. However, to affirm that all art is social does not account for the distinction between an object, a painting, and a social interaction that is proclaimed as art, hence the denomination of “socially engaged art” (2011).

1. Mexican artist, critic and social activist engaged artistic practices.

These artistic projects that involve and evolve in collaboration with communities, require their own methodologies, since they are proposals that seek a direct relation with others' reality. In this sense, we can think of the contrast between ways of "doing art to" versus "doing art with" a specific community. Considering the difference between "to" and "with", the preposition "to" would refer to a patronising or judgmental attitude "to the local culture, forms of knowledge and social patterns". The preposition, "with", refers to the collaborative nature of art practices, as a "non-hierarchical and shared work" (KESTER, 2011).

In his discourse on the socialization of art in the context of Latin America, Néstor Canclini (1980, p. 31) refers to the term "art of liberation" as a way of proposing art that goes beyond a representation of its people and their political, social and cultural aspects. More than reproducing reality, he is interested in imagining the acts that overcome it, thus producing languages capable of participating in the transformations driven by society (CANCLINI, 1980, pp. 31-32). In this sense, it is necessary to understand art as an agent of transformation, as "a focus of creativity and social initiative", seeing art as a place for the possible (CANCLINI, 1980, pp. 32-33).

Currently, there are many artistic references to works that are conceived with communities, and specifically, we are interested in thinking about proposals in art that promote public awareness of ethnic groups and native peoples. These projects mainly aim to promote culture through creative actions in art as an act of political resistance. We can understand these proposals as being activist in nature—in which artists aim to include the community in the process—as a strategy to stimulate the awareness of the individuals and communities involved (FELSHIN, 2001). Lippard (2001) maintains that the recent emergence of interest in native cultures in the North American context is not only due to the production of art but due to the Indians' pride in surviving the colonization process and their indignation at the costs they have incurred for the detriment to their culture, health and land.

2 AFFECTIVE DNA: *KAMÊ* AND *KANHRU*

With the intention of approaching an artistic proposal that engages the community, we present the project "Affective DNA: *Kamê* and *Kanhru*" (DNA AKK), which was developed with an indigenous *Kaingáng* community in Southern Brazil. It is a proposal by Brazilian artist Kalinka Mallmann and an emerging *Kaingáng* historian Joceli Sales, their efforts being brought to bear through LabInter/UFSM. This artistic venture is based on actions that encourage active non-forgetting of the specific modes of social organization of the *Kaingáng* indigenous culture, activated by inventive and creative practices with children through art and technology.

Presently, there are *Kaingáng* 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 *Kaingáng* are spread throughout various communities or Indigenous Territories (www.portalKaingang.org).

The project DNA AKK was conceived collectively through encounters and meetings between Kalinka Mallmann, Joceli Sales and the *Kaingáng* people of Terra do Guarita, located in the northwest part of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil which its 5,300 inhabitants makes it the third largest *Kaingáng* community in the country.

DNA AKK was the name suggested for the project because the project seeks to bring together ‘genetic’ material from multiple sources in order to create innovative sequences that would otherwise not exist: it encompasses the existence of a broad spectrum of connectivity among individuals within an inclusive system of transmission, of information, of collaboration. 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 through marks which originate from cosmological geometries and not biological kinship (MALLMANN, 2018).

In this context, the handicrafts produced by the *Kaingáng* families is still one of the self-determined sources of subsistence for these communities. In the handicrafts, straw baskets stand out, and these illustrate the social divide between *Kamê* and *Kanhru*, through the differentiation of geometrical designs (open geometry for *Kamê* families, and closed geometry for *Kanhru* families) (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Designs on straw baskets illustrate the social division between *Kamê* and *Kanhru*.

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 inherent dualism of *Kaingáng* society. According to Jacodsen (2013), the dualism refers to a binary 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 Sun—warm colours, and a closed geometry; *Kanhru* expresses the symbolism of the Moon—cold colours and an open geometry. These binary cosmic distinctions are also reflected in their leadership system in terms of a social whole composed of two halves, of “opposites and complementaries”. Thus, the *Kaingáng* are differentiated

between themselves 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 *Kamê*, and a filled circle defines the *Kanhru*s. 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 *Kaingáng*, these marks are relevant in order to understand the cultural, social and cosmological conception of the *Kaingáng* 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 by the Government's Fundação Nacional do Índio (Funai) agency in order to be able to acquire official documentation or to register property, since notaries did not accept *Kaingáng* lineages. 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 renewed use of the markings in the *Kaingáng* community is enormous as this becomes a recognition of a *Kaingáng* 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 cultural perdurance amidst the pressure for assimilation by mainstream Brazilian culture. The Guarita Territory is surrounded by urban development, so direct contact with these citified environments has been changing the cultural customs and traditions of the *Kaingáng* communities who are struggling to maintain "their way of life" despite of this constantly increasing external pressure.

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

In July 2017, the first audiovisual creation lab workshop took place at the "EEIEF Gormecindo Jete Tenh Ribeiro" public school with the production of digital drawings (Fig.2). The activity focused on the children's encounter with the *Kamê* and *Kanhru* signs and their symbolic significance within daily life and culture in the village.



Fig. 2.
A *Kaingáng* child producing
a digital drawing

In a second meeting, Joceli Sales and the children walked around the community, taking photographs and shooting videos with tablets (Fig. 3). These actions incorporated the participation of the children, the parents, the elderly of the community in order to heighten subjective assurance and mediatic empowerment, familiarise the community with digital technology, and produce testimonials which would give sense and definition to what it means to be *kamê* or *kanhru* within the *Kaingáng* indigenous community.



Fig. 3.
Kaingáng children taking
photographs and making videos.

This action is developed with the children as an expanded reality which incorporates simultaneous temporalities and spacialities within the community by populating it with interviews of relatives, photographs, videos, and oral histories as digital narratives adapted to their aesthetic vision. Following the suggestions of Grant Kester (2011), the carrying out of the project with the *Kaingáng* in the indigenous territory becomes a performative artistic gesture in itself 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.

The children, together with the teachers of the school, Joceli Sales and some members of the LabInter, were divided into groups and given the mission to interview each village resident and indicating in a map the *Kamê* and the *Kanhru* families. Thus, an analogue map (Figure 4) was constructed, with annotations made by the students, in which it was possible to visualize the prevalence of *Kanhru* families in the village. However, the

major objective was to enable these children to recognize themselves in a “*Kaingáng way*”, in which kinship is defined cosmologically.



Fig. 4. Children of the village of Terra do Guarita participating in the elaboration of an analogue map.

3 DNA AKK DIGITAL GAME

After these actions with the indigenous children, and having established relations of trust and respect, we began discussions with the community towards the possibility of creating a digital game for Android specifically for the *Kaingáng* people based on Kamê and *Kanhru* lore. In November 2018, through meetings, lectures and audiovisual workshops, the children of the village collaborated with the artist/developers from LabInter in the construction of a game for Android. The children fully integrated in the creative effort by drawing the characters, some animals and food, as well as illustrating the activities they performed, such as fishing and hunting. The students were attentively listened to, and these materials (drawings and notes) served as support for the team at LabInter who developed the game, who participated in all the community actions in the village. It is important to note that the association between the LabInter team and the *Kaingáng* children generated an aura of mutual affection and respect. From this perspective, we suggest that in collaborative art projects not only are the tasks and stages of a given action shared, but in a more significant way, subjectivities are inter-linked: there is a process of affective interactivity that emerges as a growth in the capacity to affect and be affected that happens amidst the sense of solidarity and empathy.

The creation of the game is an on-going endeavour. We are using Unity as the real-time engine behind the development of 2D and 3D graphics, where the chosen format being 3D, as the main method of realization. In addition, as an auxiliary methodology within the 3-D environments, we

are using Blender as a modelling software. Together with Unity, Visual Studio software was used for programming the game in the object-oriented language, C#. The focus of the game's design has the children as its main public and banks on the portability and ubiquity of mobile phones. At the end of the project an optimization will be carried out so the game can run smoothly on a wide range of devices.

The game is based on the *Kaingáng* culture through mechanics that refer to the language and culture. In the initial menu, the player has access to one of the biggest forms of personal identification where he/she can choose between being “*Kamê*” or “*Kanhru*” or being “day” or “night”. This choice has the purpose of locating the game in the cultural environment, generating significant impacts on the development of the game, the scripting of the scenario, the main character design and the visual interface using colours corresponding to each of the cultural marks.

The main objective is to communicate *Kaingáng* culture to the users. The game has been fully developed in the *Kaingáng* language— the menus, the mini-games and the dialogues of the characters appear in graphic form or are spoken in the *Kaingáng* language. Additionally, special attention was given to integrating their cultural personages and mythological characters. For example, in some *Kaingáng* tales there are animals that speak, and these can be found throughout the game seeking to teach the players the aboriginal language through writing that will be displayed on the screen and audio recordings that will be played when the player approaches the animals. There will also be pedagogic mini-games to encourage the players to assimilate the language and render the learning experience more dynamic. And because the teachers of the local public school were also involved in the project, some of the project's practices will be incorporated into the curriculum.

The game's narrative is built around missions that the players must complete in order to unlock new territories. In the course of playing the game, a player encounters various cultural aspects on the map, thus also facilitating indirect learning. In keeping with the *Kaingáng* culture of the community, the figure of the cacique, or tribal chief, appears as a role model character who fosters strong social bonds and indicates the course of the game. He appears on the screen at key moments, indicating to the player how to proceed. Other *Kaingáng* personages populate the experience to create a fuller cultural environment for the game.

Among the *Kaingáns*, there is a prescriptive tradition of marrying *Kamé* with *Kanhru*. Aiming at this set of beliefs, the ultimate goal of the game is to find one's partner and make an alliance following the ancestral cultural customs. In this way, the game produces a strong motivation for completion expressing conciliation between *Kamé* and *Kanhru*. To guarantee this involvement, is important that the players feel that the game represents them and that it was made for them. The journey begins in the tribe chosen by the player in the initial menu and unfolds through exploratory missions toward the expansion of territory as determining the player's specific journey in quest of an alliance. The play action throughout the game has been opti-

mized to ensure easy navigation by players of all ages and to further pursue the interaction between *Kamé* and *Kanhru*, a multiplayer mode will be added to the game, requiring cooperation and interaction between both parties.



Fig. 5.
A frame from the DNA AKK game showing the *Kaingáng* village play environment.

Kaingáng indigenous culture is the motivating drive and guiding element in the DNA AKK project in terms of designing proposals that directly speak to *Kaingáng* social binarism and its respective marks. In this way, the *Kaingáng* culture ceases to be artistic theme and content and instead becomes context and experience so that any aesthetic outcome from collaborative practices is a consequence of the experience of shared doings.

In all the activities of the DNA AKK project, the focus was on the shared doing and not on individual propositions. The project proposals that were developed originate from collaborative undertakings which arise from discussion between the community and artist and the *Kaingáng* historian Joceli Sales, who also assumes the role of mediator with the *Kaingáng* community and carries out liaison duties. As the project reaches conclusion, the drive towards autonomy requires greater involvement from the participants and a feeling of trust from the community as all parties move towards the final hand-off.

Opening up *Kaingáng* indigenous culture to its preservation is the main intention motivating and guiding the activities in the DNA AKK project. The collaborative artistic practices that informed our activities look to foment indigenous subjectivity by enabling the *Kaingáng* people to be the narrators of their own history and their own stories. Within these practices, the artist-researcher becomes a facilitator whose creative task is to activate potentials and safeguard subjectivity in the midst of today's globalisation processes, such as online networks and social media. Understanding the project as a collaborative and affective system that goes beyond the limitations of traditional social art projects, we see how digital art and technology can foment subjective empowerment and potentialise human relations. Collaborative modes in art mean provide that any aesthetic result is nothing more than a consequence of the experience of shared endeavours.

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