

**Arts
Collaboratory**

**REPORTS |
on the Arts Collaboratory
Assembly Senegal 2015**

**Jazael Olguinzapata,
Yollotl Alvarado,
Members of Cooperativa
Cráter Invertido**



Day 0

After some hours of anticipation waiting inside Dakar International Airport—thanks to the great efforts made by the people of Raw Material Company and Kër Thiossane with special thanks to Marie Helene!—we finally arrived at Raw Material Company's headquarters, where independent curator and director, Koyo Kouoh, received us. We were surprised by the collection exhibited in the space, a series of photographs and paintings with a heavy political content. The space included an exhibition hall, a permanent collection, a restaurant, a contemporary art archive and library, and a very beautiful space for residencies.



Later that night we met the staff and also resident, Ayrson Heráclito, a Brazilian artist—friend of Tropicália movement members, including Tom Zé—whose artistic practice is rooted in Afro/Brazilian religions. Ayrson's project involved cleaning a space on Gorée Island, known as the 'Island of No Return' for slaves being transported from Africa to America throughout the slave trading centuries. In Ayrson's space, there was a slogan that read "the path to oblivion" and one of his performances involved a cleansing ritual made with local plants, which he also did in Salvador da Bahia, spinning relationships between the linked histories of Africa and Brazil.

Day 1

The assembly began in the morning, greetings were given, and Gertrude delivered an intro-



duction regarding the form and objectives of the assembly and the present situation facing both Hivos and DOEN. This involved a particularly strong idea about transforming the network into a trans-local alternative school for social innovation through artistic practice. How can we become a program, a network, a community or movement? Are we becoming that already? How can we improve our pedagogical strategies in order to make them more social? Are we a platform, a movement, a temporal occupation, a one-on-one sharing, a friendship, or are we only financiers, a market? Currently everything is still very open and we can drive it in any direction we can possibly imagine.

A question arose amongst the group asking how we could become more independent and interweave our practices? Through this the importance of the term 'commons' appeared, as did thoughts concerning time and organization of the network. A very important issue had to do with sustainability.

In September we will decide in which way we want to continue, participate, help and self-organize?

In June there will be a preparation meeting in Amsterdam where we will plan future scenarios, in which 4–6 organizations will have the opportunity to work on conceptual models that will act as references for this new stage.

Tanja gave a presentation on Hivos, sharing that her organization plans to make some important changes to the budget. Their vision is to continue supporting Arts Collaboratory, but perhaps only focusing on projects that have more to do with the overall vision of Hivos. They want to stop being a classical funder and shift to one that is closer to 'social innovation'. She came in order to understand how the collaborative projects might have an affinity with this shift inside Hivos. As for DOEN, they have less time to dedicate to coordinating the network, so Gertrude and Yu-Lan insisted on asking for ways in which the network could become more self-sustainable and independent, so that we have the capacity of finding new funding partners as well as generating self-managed strategies.

After having a meal at Raw Material Company, we visited Village des Arts de Dakar, a space with a central gallery and more than 50 local artist studios. The space works also as a kind of informal art school where many different practices coexist. Afterwards we visited Les Colombins, a workshop for kids with disabilities, affording the opportunity to work with clay and produce ceramics. This activity forms the kids into a guild utilizing both artistic and functional skills, and has become a community atelier where kids from all backgrounds can work and produce together.

As our final visit for the day, we had a look at the atelier of Mauro Petroni, an Italian ceramist living in Dakar since the 1980s. He showed us his atelier and also an exhibition space that he hosts. For dinner we went to a restaurant where we finally met Farid from Ruangrupa, who also had problems with his Visa. We were also still missing the people from Kunci and Theertha! We got to know more about Ruangrupa and we were astonished by the amount of years they had been working together in an organization based on kinship and friendship.

Day 2

Kër Thiossane is a communitarian hub dedicated to free culture, which includes an external “Fab Lab”, a laboratory exploring free technology situated in a popular building complex. In the middle of this complex, they have nourished a beautiful garden called “the school of the comings”. It was impressive, the communitarian processes of their organization and also their clear political position regarding the praxis of the commons through free art and technology. Inside their Fab Lab they have a hacker space program and a 3D printer open to anyone interested in developing projects. We visited the community school and glimpsed the effervescent flow of people in this small area.

Afterwards we went back to Kër Thiossane, where group sessions took place regarding the collaborative projects: Minga/Exploring Utopia, Lobbying Research Project, South–South Collaborative Video Project and Arts Schoolaboratory. Each project was presented by the participant organizations. In the first session, the groups came to relevant points for developing each project. We also had a public presentation at the Librairie Athéna. The first talk was by the Y'en A Marre [Fed Up] activists, a civic youth movement who employ artistic practice with social unrest as a means for the democratization of the Senegal political system. They had a huge role in denouncing the last president who intended to reelect himself despite the social revolt. Following this talk, the Arts Collaboratory network (DOEN, Casco, Kër Thiossane, PICHA, VANSA



and Cráter Invertido) as well as local academics discussed the notion of the commons in relation to their organizations and work. We had a large crowd and the presentations helped in creating more understanding as to the individual practices of the participants, as well as creating a space for debate regarding our dispute regarding who, what, where and specifically why to insist on the (under)commons?

Day 3

We left Dakar to go to Joal and on the way we went to visit Portes et Passages. This territorial project links the production of art with its immediate community. It is a holistic and integral project where atelier, gallery, kitchen, space for (camping) residencies are shared in a common space—in what used to be a seed storage for the US aid program. Portes et Passages is self-managed by a couple that live in harmony with their environment, trying to link, as a whole, their understanding and practice of Islam, art and good living. They received the land from the local authorities and the project has been built as a communitarian and autonomous space that, thanks to support from DOEN. They contribute to the community by way of sharing techniques such as etching and mural painting in collaboration with local women and also children. They gave a talk about the interconnections they find between earth, spirituality, contemporary art and health.

Arriving in Joal we visited a fishermen's commune, linked to the mainland by a beautiful bridge, where the only real authorities are the mesquite trees and the Catholic church. After that we went to Joal to have dinner and prepare for the next day's intense working rhythm.

Day 4

From early morning we had two intense sessions. The first was dedicated to thinking through the future scenarios of Arts Collaboratory as a network. We divided ourselves into four groups and separately discussed the desires and obstacles surrounding the development of the network. Through this, the groups talked about a common dream of the spaces self-managing Arts Collaboratory. Hivos and DOEN want to re-think their position, is it just a network, assembly or is it more than that?

We talked about the concept of 'shifting reciprocities' meaning the funders leaving behind their traditional roles while the spaces continue to work in their own way, abandoning the pressure to simply please the funders and focus on their own goals, through their already existing projects and work flows. We talked about the notion of a 'Time Strike' as a possibility to change the rhythms from inside our organizations.

The method of making reports was highly questioned and the dream of new ways of accountability came into our minds. Collectively we thought that this could perhaps be achieved through interviews and conversations between the spaces, everyone could then manage a 'report' in a more horizontal way, where the objectives take the same pace as our own possibilities and contexts. It became an open invitation to the spaces to think in their own terms of how we might imagine continuing. How would self-management really work? How can we find new ways of self-financing, understanding the radical realities of each space? What is the difference and specific potency of a non-profit, cooperative model? Overall we want to change the notion that we only ask for money and to instead think that each space also offers resources and capital,

a vision wherein we become more than funded projects and so partners, shifting old funding ethics too. We proposed more exchange between the spaces, fast and concrete, focusing on specific regions without losing the international perspective. We agreed that 'trust' would be the most important aspect to enable this shift.

With all of these hot issues in the air, we made a very necessary stop at Ecole des Sables: International Center of African Dance. This space is also supported by DOEN and has a very important role in the active research of traditional African dance and contemporary practice. After dancing our 'monos' and 'suns', we had our last collaborative project meeting where we continued to cook our collaborative methodologies.

Day 5

The plenary session started with recapitulating the desires and obstacles confronting each of the spaces. Casco made an enormous effort to facilitate this whole organizational experiment in a way that all voices could be heard and participate. The idea of reciprocity was shared. The idea to self-manage the money became clearer for some, while others had more doubts. We discussed how we might introduce 'resources' to the network, even though it might not be equal but perhaps more proportional to what each space does. On one hand of the argument, reports should help us to:

- 1) Better understand our positions within the network
- 2) Help us to understand the qualitative development of our process and results, breaking with the isolation of the spaces, generating a flux of knowledge available for the funding bodies as well as for all the organizations.

While on the other hand, to leave behind the pressure to 'report to the authorities', and to instead begin thinking how to exercise a clearer ethical relationship, where receiving funds does not affect our individual practices or even ethics. We talked a lot about how we could develop a 'Time Strike'.



Afterwards we had another plenary session to see what the differences between the groups actually were, and some radical ideas were discussed. We questioned how we could build a platform together if our internal structures were so very different, between non-profits and cooperatives with foundations organizing the program. An agreement was made to try and understand the importance of this shift, and the importance of this exercise to construct an international entity that self-manages, sharing knowledge and resources. Confidence, mutual aid, tolerance to the perceived differences, acknowledgment of the diversity of rhythms and flows, and how we could still work together with all these aspects. This last idea was for us very important, because both Hivos and DOEN clarified that they are ready for this shift, in the sense that it will be of benefit for the entire network. This paradigm shift will be interesting to experiment with, because we would also have the chance to demand transparency, questioning the ethics behind the sources of funding. Reciprocity comes when organizations are ready to build this

new relationship. Are we ready?

Day 6

The morning plenary session started with Jason and Binna presenting the minutes of the previous sessions, where they basically presented the conclusions for this new phase of the AC network. After that, Michelle said goodbye with a powerful and sentimental intervention where she expressed her confidence in these new paradigm shifts between organizations and their funders. She proposed to continue this shift of roles and empowerment. After that emotional conclusion, we went to a popular theater whose director—a refugee from the Papa Doc regime in Haiti—came to live to Senegal back in 1946.

During the meal some interesting questions arose, such as: is it naive to think there is a horizontal relationship between funders and organizations? Is this model too utopic with too many possibilities that can fail? Is failure a path to success? Will organizations have a tempo-



ral guarantee for the development of this new model?

Coming back to Dakar, we had the chance to experience a play from a local company dedicated to a communitarian exploration of theater of the oppressed, a popular initiative dedicated to denouncing the social and environmental issues of their city.

After dinner, we realized we must take this opportunity to follow through with our conclusions, such as not becoming a monolith in our localities, we must understand this empowerment as an expansive horizontal wave stemming from our local networks. That we do not want to become 'black holes' where resources are drained, but to instead become a network of sharing tools, projects, spaces, means of production or anything we want to share. We understood AC could become two things:

- 1) An international collective of collectives that self-govern resources for the common interest of the network.
- 2) A trans-local platform for the exchange of knowledge and pedagogical processes.

Day 7

The day began early at Raw Material Company, we displayed our archive and the new AC web page was presented. We had a feed back session and talked about the AC Tents and the possibilities of time and space. A very interesting proposal was of having a tent at the climate summit

in Paris next year. AC Tents offer the chance to have gatherings between organizations that share some affinities, and the opportunity to further develop ideas. One idea presented was for the tents to be used in a more 'informal' way, an idea that was well received by all the participants. Afterwards we had a collaborative works session where the projects: Minga/Exploring Utopia, Lobbying Research Project, South-South Collaborative Video Project and Arts Schoolaboratory made important agreements on how to continue and push the projects forward. We all want to see these collaborations as a way of strengthening our internal processes and dialogue; this is where all our desires will crystallize.

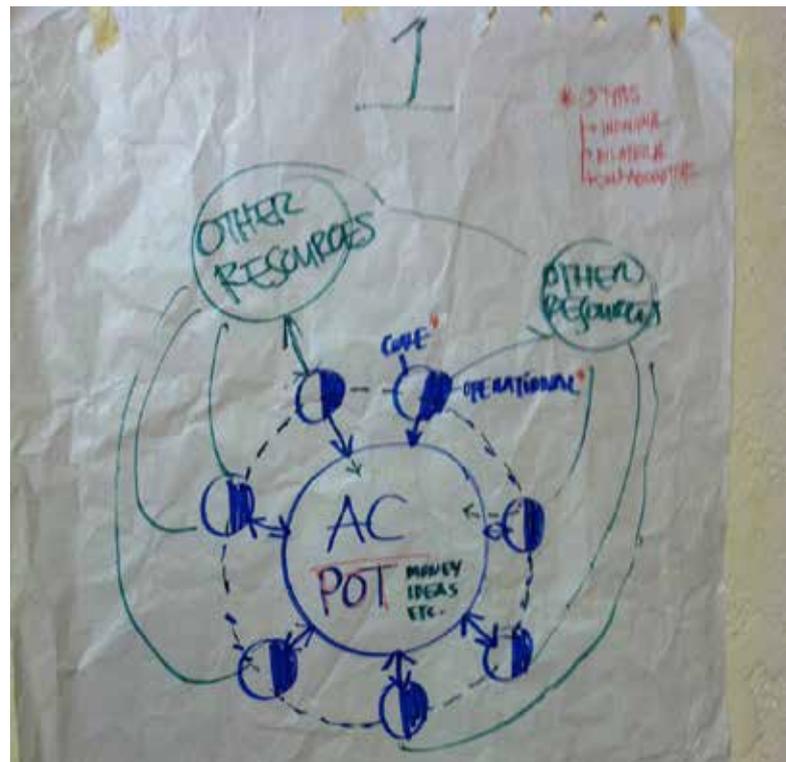
After lunch, we visited Issa Samb's atelier, where he read a poem regarding the problematic of time in relation to colonial trauma in Africa. He also made some strange performances where it was hard to discern between what was art and what was daily life. His work explores the ephemeral and expresses the uselessness of thinking of objects as dead things. Issa's atelier is a live exhibition that he inhabits, activating and merging life with art without any intermediaries.

For the end of the day, Kër Thiossane organized a party in the school of the commons, where we made communal mural painting with local artists. After that, a series of video art interventions and contemporary dances were presented and it was amazing to experience the impact that Kër Thiossane was having on the identity of the local community along with various social issues.

Day 8

The last day was dedicated to Gorée Island, with its infamous 'Door of No Return' where the slave trade was managed. From its strategic position, more than 60 million Africans were enslaved and sent to America.

We once again worked in groups to imagine and elaborate on three models that will help as conceptual diagrams on how to self-manage the network. There were a lot of doubts and open differences of perspectives, but also the energy to find new paths for the common wellbeing of the network. We don't want to pursue a specific model, but rather the possibilities of flexible models that can easily be adjusted to the reality of our processes and also our possible failures. This is a call to reinvent our energy and forms, break with old habits and fears, without losing the critical thought necessary for the common construction of our network.



Working diagram



Trip to Goree Island