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*Gemma Medina and Alessandra Saviotti, "Broadcasting the archive", 2015/2016.*

*Workshop. "Sporadic Democracy", curated by James McAnally, 2015. The Luminary, St. Louis (MO). Courtesy of The Luminary. Photo: Brea McAnally.*

# Broadcasting the Archive: Redefining the City Through Socially Engaged Practices, Community Art and Cultural Activism

*A conversation between Gemma Medina and Alessandra Saviotti.*

*Broadcasting the Archive* is a project that arose from the urgency to spread the Arte Útil archive, a project initiated by Tania Bruguera, beyond the institution which hosts the material. Being the initial archive researchers, we started thinking how to make visible the incredible potentiality that the archive (intended as a tool) has. Therefore, our desire is to re-activate and mediate the archive in different geographical, cultural and social contexts in order to test the effectiveness of the strategies we have been investigating so far.

Last September we started with some workshops and informal discussions, which led us to a more structured series of activities we proposed in Liverpool, UK – in collaboration with the Office of Useful Art and in St. Louis, US – in collaboration with The Luminary.

In both cases we spent some time meeting local constituencies, artists, curators, writers, urban planners and users, digging into the history of these places and tried to understand if a common ground could be identified between the two communities.

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**Alessandra Saviotti:** I was in St. Louis for six weeks where I was curator-in-residence at The Luminary. I spent most of my time engaging with the local art community mostly related with Cherokee Street area, as well as other practitioners developing projects all around the city.

The people I met had different backgrounds, but more or less all of them connected via the Community Arts Training (CAT) Institute alumni network. The presence of the CAT program has stimulated the growth of an art scene devoted to socially engaged practices, community art and cultural activism, helping to redefine the city's identity through the arts. When I was there I noticed very clearly that this city is a place where social tension is palpable, especially due to residential segregation and criminalization of the use of public space. St. Louis remains one of the most segregated cities in the US with a visible dividing line between wealthier (mostly white people) and poorer (mostly black people) along Delmar Boulevard, commonly called the 'Delmar divide.' Many conversations were about which role art should have in this kind of context and the word 'gentrification' came up many times. This particular focus on the archive's relationship to projects dealing with gentrification developed naturally in both cities. A recent article by Dan Ancox in The Guardian recognizes how the word 'gentrification' deals with emotions and it has an almost endless potential to arguments, because it speaks to fundamental rights like the right to housing, among others. Ancox continues, stating that in recent years the topic has become mainstream and, as a consequence, opposition to gentrification is rapidly becoming more organized. People living in places torn by gentrification are well aware of what their future could be.

**Gemma Medina:** In my case I was invited to participate in the Office of Useful Art (OUA) for four

days. The OUA was a collaboration between Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU), Tate Liverpool and Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) to expand the understanding of Arte Útil and socially engaged art practices as bridges to connect institutions and community projects. The Office was located at the Exhibition Research Centre (ERC) within the John Lennon Art and Design Building. Recovering the local tradition and the history of the school as a 'Mechanics Institute,' the Office included a range of tools to be used freely by the participants like a 3D printer, serigraph, laser cutter, etc. This fact largely defined the people involved with the program of activities and the ones who came to use the equipment. The majority of visitors were composed by art students or groups involved with technological and experimental projects related to the University in some way.

Even in my limited time in Liverpool, I had the opportunity to visit some community projects, being part of the open public jury discussion of The Visible Award and attend the community arts conference organized by the Liverpool Biennial.

"Gentrification" was an important issue to be discussed in Liverpool as well. As Ancox remarked the problem of housing in U.K is huge. Liverpool has a high average of social housing and it makes the city a playground for gentrification and driven politics of housing.

After visiting some projects, I saw that there is a clash between two levels of development within the city: a private propelled operation for economical blooming of certain sectors strategically located in the center and the steady decline of some old neighborhoods in the outskirts. The housing abandonment is the most visible consequence of a series of failed government policies and stalled regeneration plans like the Housing Market Renewal program for the areas that suffered from the decline of traditional industries like manufacturing. Of course, different groups of residents have been opposed to these plans for decades. In this context, community arts and socially engaged practices are spreading out alternative strategies based on community involvement and self-organization. The last panel of the conference was specifically focused on housing and art. During the discussion, it was clear that the best way to face current challenges is through common "organization."

**AS:** It is curious to notice how naturally we decided to activate the project in both locations implementing the idea of the 'open office.' We sought to place focus on the question of hospitality and openness adopting the same approach and process, starting from one to one meetings and then opening the floor to occasional visitors for conversations. However, in St. Louis I didn't focus on the 'making' but more on conversations and tours around the city to understand the context, which is very different from ours in Europe.

Yet, I can affirm that some analogies exist between Liverpool and St. Louis. Both of them saw a fast rise and then a huge crisis between the 60's and the 70's whose effects are still visible. The infamous Pruitt-Igoe area in St. Louis, for instance, is such a visual admonishment to a certain modernist political plan that is still hard to digest.

Local artists like Juan William Chávez, Ilene Berman [NODhouse], the coordinators of The Pink House [formerly connected to the Rebuild Foundation] and many others I met, activated their projects in either marginal or difficult neighborhoods, but they did it with the community living there, as a form of resistance; especially taking the city as an inspiration to react to the current situation.

**GM:** Exactly. In Liverpool socially engaged art practices have a strong legacy since the Blackie (now Black-e) was founded in 1968 by Peter Moores, Wendy and Bill Harpe, becoming the UK's first community art project. The idea behind the project was to combine a contemporary art center with a community center, involving a diverse community from different ethnic groups and artists in a process of collective creation, sharing, doing, learning and unlearning to define a common ground, towards a common language. Socially engaged art has always implied a critical position and a kind of political action. As Bill Harpe stated during the conference: "you can't have a democracy without a common language."

Projects like Homebaked or Granby Four Streets are based on a similar concept of co-ownership and working together: neighbors, designers, architects and artists, on the same level. But in fact, as many Arte Útil projects, they are directly reacting to the current state. As you mentioned, it is distinctly an act of resistance to the market and neoliberalism.

In the case of Granby Four Streets, the project started with the activism of a small group of residents, a core group of older ladies, firmly opposed to leaving their houses. They stayed and initiated a guerrilla gardening campaign to green the streets, improving the aesthetics of the urban environment and recovering the sense of community. As soon as the interdisciplinary group Assemble got the assignment, they moved into one of the houses that they should rehabilitate. They listened to the community and made decisions together, designing an affordable model and refurbishing the buildings side by side with the neighbors from the very first moment. As Lewis Jones and Fran Edgerley (members of Assemble) told me, their practice is based on rethinking the way in which the cities are made, conventionally in a very transitional top-down way, determined by the market. They propose to turn it around, looking for alternative ways, empowering people during the process of building their own neighborhood. Granby Four Streets like many other Arte Útil projects, demonstrates that another reality is possible and it shouldn't be defined just by the dictates of the market and political agendas. They are opening up our imagination, providing us with effective strategies.

As we have discussed several times, it is paradoxical that after winning the Turner Prize, as part of the controversy arisen, they have been described as "acritical," accusing the project of being an almost completely depoliticized response to a highly politicized social situation and even some jurors were accused to be promoting a "new conservatism." For us, it was disappointing to see this orthodox reaction from those who clearly didn't experience the context of the project.

**AS:** We both came across different cases that are currently in the spotlight: the collective Assemble winning the Turner Prize in the UK and "The Mirror Casket," an artwork created by a

group of artists and activists to support the #Blacklivesmatter's protest in St. Louis, being acquired by the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. I met some of the artists and activists who created the piece (De Nichols, Mallory R. Nezam, Marcis Curtis from Citizen Carpentry, among others) and I asked them how they felt about it. Of course, the very first reaction was excitement, then fear of the work being instrumentalized, and finally the awareness of a possibility to use the power of an institution like the Smithsonian to actually maintain autonomy toward the project. Eventually, the work was sold for thousands of dollars after ten months of negotiation and the profit was put back into the activities of the movement. I mention this case because I believe that the transdisciplinarity of this action – like the majority of the projects we have in the archive – came from a sort of shift happening in education. Key to St. Louis's art scene is the CAT program, a transdisciplinary institute that matches people with very different backgrounds under the same roof of the art. The most interesting fact is that during the program students are really working in cooperation. The effect of it is that most of them stay in the city, perhaps start non-profits or other organizations and remain connected through a real network of solidarity. The initial investment they are putting in the city is paid back from the response of the city itself, in a way.

The issue of being instrumentalized by the government is present, but due to the different system in the United States, is not perceived as a real danger. However, the relationship with art institutions is relevant and helpful in some cases.

**GM:** I agree. The collective Assemble went through a similar process with the Turner nomination. Finally, they decided to use the institution and the visibility of the prize to gain incomes for the community of Granby. They transformed the Granby Workshop into a social enterprise, manufacturing handmade products used to refurbish the houses where every product can be bought online. The risk of instrumentalization is always there, but there is a fascinating question around many Arte Util projects: *who instrumentalizes who?*

In the Office of Useful Art, we had some interesting discussions about the relation with art institutions. There exists a huge gap between cultural institutions and local communities in Liverpool. In that sense, socially engaged art projects are bridging this gap clearly and building long-term process of dialogue and mutual trust. In some conversations with the participants of the projects there was not a real confrontation or counter-movement against cultural institutions, but the feeling that they are invariably in a power position and they don't offer enough support or agency to independent local initiatives dealing with culture and society. In this respect, the Arte Útil archive is a platform to build up relations with the institutions and provides a network with other projects and practitioners around the world. It is a tool in many different levels not just for the researcher, but also for the institutions, for the practitioners and the projects.

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In both cases *Broadcasting the Archive* has functioned as a device to investigate the local contexts and to understand the relationships between different actors working in the cities.



The fact that many artists are using the same strategies in such different environments reinforced the idea that Arte Útil could be defined as a transnational movement. Having an archive, which can be considered as a hub, where people can finally understand that these practices happen on a global scale, could function as a sort of ‘shelter’ for the artists.

*Broadcasting the Archive* also served as a tool for analyzing failures especially when an artist tried to replicate a successful project. Despite the fact that many case studies have been successfully implemented in different places, we need to take into account that every context has its own history, urgencies and practitioners. Sometimes it is simply wrong trying to push for a new implementation of the same successful case study in a different location from where it originated. The risk is to appear as a sort of franchise that pretends to activate something *for* the community, instead of *with* it. And it simply doesn’t work.

Finally, the archive ended up as an important pedagogical resource for students and schools. Through the workshops we organized, we met some artists who are teaching in different art schools who decided to include the archive as an important resource for their classes, in Liverpool and in St. Louis as well.

Gemma Medina Estupinan (Spain, 1975) and Alessandra Saviotti (Italy, 1982) are both working as independent curators and researchers internationally. Since 2012 they have been working in close collaboration with the Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven (NL), the Asociación de Arte Útil and the artist Tania Bruguera, to build the Arte Útil Archive that was the core of the exhibition “The Museum of Arte Útil” where they curated the public program together. Currently, they co-curate *Broadcasting the Archive*, an independent project supported by the Mondriaan Fund and The Art of Impact, to emancipate the usership around the Arte Útil archive.

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