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Instituting from archives: Asociación de Arte Útil and TEOR/ética in conversation

by Gemma Medina Estupiñán and Alessandra Saviotti

Since 2013 the *Arte Útil* archive has functioned as an activator for conversations, workshops, exhibitions and projects carried on around the world, questioning the idea of art as a tool to be used in everyday life.

Following its conception, the *Arte Útil* archive has been playing with the modernist idea of naming a movement (Bruguera, 2015) in order to be legitimized into the art world, advocating for the recognition of a certain kind of practices that would never be considered as being part of the canon, for example socially engaged art.

Útil and *Arte* in the same sentence sounded like a deep contradiction to many, even an anathema to some. However, thanks to the commitment of the members of the Asociación de Arte Útil, such as curators, directors of museums and independent institutions, students, academics and activists, the principles of *Arte Útil* as well as its archive, gained traction at institutional level triggering in some cases a new vision for the so-called Museum 3.0 (Wright, 2014) derived from usership (MIMA, 2015).

Archiving the “not-yet” (van Heeswijk, 2016), as these practices suggest, seems to carry a burden that is necessary to share. Therefore, the selection process behind the inclusion of case studies was shared with a plethora of institutions and their networks to build an open committee which is in charge of researching, suggesting and archiving case studies.

As a result of this collective process, in 2015 the *Asociación de Arte Útil* was founded, seeking to promote and implement *Arte Útil* as a practice, mainly through its archive.

The preservation of an artist’s archive is also one of the research lines of *TEOR/ética*, a non-profit, independent and private art organization founded in 1999 in San José, Costa Rica, by artist, curator and researcher Virginia Pérez-Ratton (1950–2010), in collaboration with artists, academics and cultural agents from Latin America and the Caribbean.

Since January 2018, *TEOR/ética* has been collectively directed by Miguel A. López, M. Paola Malavasi Lachner, Daniela Morales Lisac, Paula Piedra and Dominique Ratton Pérez [1], who, through a collective and horizontal directorship, have been rethinking their institutional model moving toward a shared way of approaching cultural management and the development of artistic practices.

We met the team in the cloud in May 2018, only 5 months since the beginning of the process of collectivization. We discussed how starting from an archival practice, intended as the way to preserve history as well as creating a new one, could influence “instituting otherwise”.



“TEOR/ética’s co-directors in 2018”. From left to right: Miguel A. López, Paula Piedra, Daniela Morales Lisac, M. Paola Malvasi Lachner, Dominique Ratton Pérez. Photo: Esteban Chinchilla

The mission of *TEOR/ética* in the words of Miguel A. López «is very basic and important. It has changed since the beginning and today it is basically to contribute to the research, the contemporary culture and art practices from Central America and the Caribbean in dialogue with global realities». In order to achieve its mission, the team has been developing different activities over the years, which were added to the exhibitions and the editorial programme such as workshops, collective debates, educational and experimental programmes. Furthermore, the organization hosts a library open to the public and whose catalogue is available online^[2] as well as an archive devoted to artistic practices of the region, and lastly the Virginia Pérez-Ratton Collection. In addition, as a reaction to the lack of support to independent art spaces and other artistic initiatives in the region, *TEOR/ética* operates through a grant and support scheme to allow specific research to arise. For example, Paula Piedra manages a research and study project about the relationship of the organization with Barrio Amón (San José, Costa Rica), the neighborhood where they are located.

Piedra explained that in the area «there is a neighborhood association, a public university and other cultural organizations. They asked *TEOR/ética* which was its role in the neighborhood. It was a difficult question to answer for us». In order to find an answer to that question, in 2017 they decided to launch *UPE!* a study group in collaboration with *Semillas: arquitectura en comunidad* (Seeds: Community Architecture), an interdisciplinary group that promotes community social architecture, and together they started a process of community building. The focus group which was formed to investigate the organization’s function within its context resulted in a podcast.

Those activities that were developed collectively are some examples which highlight how the team has been constantly listening to their surroundings, opening up the possibility to activate a process of mutual exchange with the area resulting in a broad range of initiatives. As Dominique Ratton-Pérez highlighted during our conversation, «the way in which our mission is accomplished shifts constantly according to where we put more energy and which programme we develop. This is part of *TEOR/ética* itself: the mission is quite broad, and it allows shifts to happen».

Therefore, deciding to instituting their collective directorship did not happen out of the blue. In fact, the decision was not taken in 2017, at the time they decided to go public with it, but it was a sort of natural process that also implied a reaction to the team itself. During our conversation it was mentioned several times how a personal urgency and interest helped in shaping the mission of the organization. As M. Paola Malvasi Lachner affirmed: «several things happened to make us realize we wanted to work in a more collective matter and to be able to propose and to discuss things as a group instead of having just two people proposing something and the rest of us merely producing. We all

wanted to think about all these things and start developing projects. [...] I think this process started even a little bit before Miguel came, around 2014, and then it started to become something that was being practiced more and more until suddenly we realize, well, let's think about this and start to be more intentional about it».



Workshop “Pienso luego ladrillo” (2016), facilitated by Wayzatta Fernández, Diego Teo and Rodrigo Treviño, members of Cooperativa Cráter Invertido (Mexico). Photo: Daniela Morales Lisac.

When Inti Guerrero, the previous artistic director and curator, left (October 2014) there was a temporal gap before Miguel A. López joined the team (May 2015), and as Daniela Morales Lisac highlighted, this situation was fundamental for them to understand their agency: «we were taking on tasks that maybe we were not doing before and then we realized we were a multipurpose team. That opened the possibility of thinking of what we were doing in different ways and realizing that hey! Maybe we can do things differently, why not?».

This new chapter of TEOR/ética certainly did not come without any challenges. It was mentioned many times, during our chat, how decentralizing things around the production of exhibitions, for instance, has been quite difficult because not everyone is used to doing budgets or working with a certain fixed structure. The reconfiguration of responsibilities slowed down the production process a bit, however it allowed the team to accomplish tasks more gradually, to learn from mistakes and adapt the process to their way of working and not the other way around.

When the idea of a collective directorship was not already formalized, they developed a programmer called *Organizations in Residence*, where they invited other initiatives and independent art spaces to go to San José and develop a specific program, as well as engaging with the team in a sort of self-learning exchange between practices. Furthermore, the collectivization attempt was practiced already as part of Arts Collaboratory (<http://www.artscollaboratory.org/>) during a *banga*. Bangas are nomadic meetings organized every year and hosted by different organizations who are part of the network, where to share working methodologies, skills, to support each other and so on.

In the words of Dominique Ratton Pérez: «all of these steps gave us a lot of material to work with in this process. It is important to mention that there are a lot of people and ideas that are part of this process for many years».

Therefore, Miguel A. López joined the team organically; as he remarked «it was quite natural not to feel that *TEOR/ética* needed just one single person to lead the whole organization and I think that is an important aspect of what we are doing now. We are trying to question the way contemporary art and art industries usually organize around the idea

that the power has to be concentrated in one person: the director, the chief curator, and so on. *TEOR/ética* was already trying to imagine other ways to be co-responsible for these decisions. When I came to *TEOR/ética* I felt that I had to follow the program that was already structured before me, but also to try to negotiating with this new moment when *TEOR/ética* was unknowingly initiating a transition. It was a different way of thinking about the organization. It was quite difficult to envision how to start working, how to make this change in the governance model happen in a more formal way. We were already working collectively without even naming it as such [...]. So the challenge was to ask ourselves: should we name it? And also, should we invent some kind of methodology of working together?» As López he narrated, he previously had been part of various art collectives and it allowed him to understand their political potential. This case was especially related to his experience as a founding member of Red Conceptualismos del Sur[3], a collective initiative bringing together researchers and artists who share a concern about the need to act politically in the «neutralization process of critical potential of a set of ‘conceptual practices’ that took place in Latin America since the early sixties» (redcsur.net, 2007).

Back in 2007, and together with a group of 5-6 people working in different countries in Latin America, they created a platform to think about the political horizon of artistic practice in the 60's and 70's based on different artists' archives. «We had to invent that totally new platform for encounter and working together, collaborating with institutions, and helping artists that had their archives at risk. And the idea of inventing a shared-management model is also very present here in *TEOR/ética*. We are inventing tools, we are inventing ways of organizing and a vocabulary for our own meetings and projects». However, being part of this collective process and experimenting with other ways to work has risks, because it implies a critical approach and rejection to the conventional systems. «If we really want to do significant change, we need first to acknowledge the limitations of the accustomed frameworks and tools that we used, or at least to accept that most of them didn't work well».



From the series "Local Writings: Critical perspectives from Central America, the Caribbean and their diasporas", Vol. 2: Divorcio a la panameña. Saltos y rupturas en el arte de Panamá: 1990-2015 by Adrienne Samos (Panama). Photo: Daniela Morales Lisac.

These reflections were analogous to some of the questions that the Asociación of Arte Útil faces regularly in terms of defining horizontal organizational effective methodologies and of implementing other possible ways of instituting inside and outside cultural organizations. In that sense, the Asociación added another layer into the discussion. Since it is not constituted as a formal organization, but as an independent platform initiated by a group of like-minded

people that are working together, not regularly, upon a shared idea that has generated the *Arte Útil* archive. Both organizations are creating a specialized archive as the core of their operations while dealing with the challenge of using it to tell other histories related to a specific context. We wonder how the shape of the archive, its mediation and accessibility can foster new narratives to be created by the users.

In the case of *TEOR/ética*, the Virginia Pérez-Ratton collection, the archive, the library and their publications are intertwined. During the conversation the team stated how they consider the Virginia Pérez-Ratton collection as an archive in itself, that connects both to the history and the archive of *TEOR/ética*. M. Paola Malavasi explained that «it's a complex thing because it does contain the history and the legacy of a place, a person, and an institution, and a lot of artists are connected to this project». Additionally, the archive of *TEOR/ética* shares a similar complex nature because it has been constructed for even a longer period than the existence of the organization.

Another central feature of *TEOR/ética* and the archive since its establishment has been the condition of its foundation, a clear need for an archive to preserve, research and reflect critically about the past and the present of the region. M. Paola Malavasi explained:

«Because there was this history of not having any information, not a memory or any idea on how to preserve what had happened in the region. I think that's crucial to consider how the archive became a place for collecting that memory. But then eventually, there is the problem of how you put that memory in dialogue with the present and how do you make it more than just a repository for stuff, actually making it come alive».

Similar questions arise in relation to the editorial program of publications that has a strong connection with the archive and the library. As Miguel A. López highlighted, «there are two key concepts when I think about the archive and publications. One of them is access and the other one is use». In relation to the access, *TEOR/ética* launched in 2016 *Local Writings: Critical Perspectives from Central America, the Caribbean and their Diasporas*, a series of bilingual books that collect manifestos, essays, articles, testimonials and interviews with a diverse group of curators, theorists, thinkers and artists of the region, trying to collect key texts that were written during the last two or three decades; «texts that were important in terms of informing and intervening in their own specific context, creating critical reflection about what was happening regarding art and culture. The idea is putting all these documents accessible for everybody. One can actually return to these materials to re-think the present». He continued explaining that in the same way, the archive and the library were receiving requests to get access to the materials and they were pondering ways to make this possible «in terms that people can actually reflect and address aspects or senses that are part of our collective memory, encouraging new research or critical developments. So I think the next step is use. [...] How to create programs to reactivate these materials. How to make them public».



"Library located in Lado V: Center for Study and Documentation". Photo: Laura Escobar Pérez.

To face that challenge, TEOR/ética reorganised a second house owned by the organization to develop Lado V – as a Center for study and documentation, expanding the library and relocating the archive there. As Dominique Ratton Pérez expressed, internally there was an interest in linking the library to the collection and the archive within this center for history and documentation because: «in a way these three aspects and the present can talk together and can create new narratives based on what the collection and the archive have». At the moment of the conversation, the question was if they should aim to enlarge the library inviting other people to donate some specific materials about the history of the area like newspapers, etc, or do partnerships with other institutions in order to move in that direction.

Lado V hosts a new program as well, which was initiated in 2017, called *Cuarto de Estudio* (Study Room), which goes beyond the conventional access and research around the archive. The program is based on the idea of working with a specific class of art students from the Universidad de Costa Rica and Universidad Nacional, which changes every year. It has also a sort of exhibition component, because the room is open during the process, so everyone can observe how the connections start to happen. As M. Paola Malavasi remarked: «They do research and set up different materials that work with them and how it relates to their practice. It happened just by opening the archive and the archive's team [...] It's a very small and modest thing, to think about how this archive can be put into practice in a more direct and experimental way and not just being accessible to researchers that is all probably the most traditional way that you conceive an archive».

In fact, as Miguel A. López pointed out TEOR/ética is probably one of the few institutions that is doing this in a serious and rigorous way in Central America, a region that is constantly facing political conflicts, namely the Nicaraguan protests against Daniel Ortega's authoritarian regime that had started in April 2018.

«We feel interpellated by political reality all the time. How can we actually respond to that situation? How can we as cultural agents, the infrastructure that we have, the resources that we have, can help to protect, to preserve this society's documentary memory of the risk of being lost? We are now facing those questions. We couldn't actually have asked ourselves something like this four years ago, because the archive project was starting to be conceived, but I think now we are closer to a new phase of thinking how to keep preserving cultural memory and art archives at a regional scale».

This thought underlines a fundamental aspect in relation to the generation of an archive that is continuously evolving at the same time as the organization: it reveals its implicit relatedness to the present and to the past, the desire to

facilitate tools for the future, and the attempt to define its form; all aspects that cannot be anticipated. It is a question that we consider often as the *Asociación de Arte Útil* advances. As M. Paola Malavasi expressed: «It is continuously growing and changing and it's very much alive. So it's difficult to work with something that continues to evolve but you also have to understand it from certain perspectives from the past, from the present, from the future. The archive is one of the most flexible things that we have. And we always believe that this is one of the biggest legacies that *TEOR/ética* will leave so it's also something that we really want to build as solid as possible for the future».

During the conversation we tried to envision that future and made an exercise to imagine *TEOR/ética* in 10 years. They all agreed that in the long term the archive has the priority within the organization and probably the efforts will be focused on generating new ways of direct participation; moreover, they will try to act upon education and other matters that go beyond the arts, expanding to other areas.

To walk in that direction, as Paula Piedra mentioned, they had already started some initiatives to broaden networks of collaboration between different formal and informal organizations and communities in the region. For example, the "catalyst" grant. A grant for other organizations or projects in the region that lack administrative and legal structure to receive certain kinds of funds. The principle is to allow smaller and collective based initiatives to use the legal structure of *TEOR/ética* to support themselves. «Or initiatives that are dealing with community issues but they don't necessarily have a legal constitution, or accomplish administrative structure» explained Dominique Ratton Pérez.



"Cuarto de Estudio", 2017. A project developed by Lado V - Center for Study and Documentation Archive. Photo: Daniela Morales Lisac.

In 10 years ahead, both *TEOR/ética* and the *Asociación de Arte Útil* hopefully will have answered some of the questions that are fostering our current debate, starting from: how to reach that point? «Sustainability is our biggest challenge, so we have to really think about that. How to be sustainable in this context» emphasized Paula Piedra.

«In terms of the collective direction, we were thinking that the team that is constituted now, should work together for at least 3-4 years. [...] And maybe we have to invent a certain way to rotate and leave, but always trying to implement principles that could help to guarantee shared-management. We don't know how, but probably it will happen in a very organic way, as the way it has happened so far. We have a lot of questions regarding the continuation of the collective model, how to survive, how to invite people to join, how to embed this practice in the institutional structure itself», added Miguel A. López.

The last interrogation, enunciated by Dominique Ratton Pérez, problematized the very idea of an organization that is trying to build itself, build its programs and its archive started from a team, a particular group of people that set up their own methodologies.

«Trying to think about long term projects, long term decisions, then it's a challenge. Because it's either the case the team is going to change for the next 10 years (that is probably what will naturally happen), then we also have to consider that the new team that could actually embody the organization, will also have certain ways of doing things. And this is maybe the complex side of having an organization that is organically built by a team. When the team shifts, the organization does it as well. [...] Maybe we can trust the organicity of the organization to sort of taking care of itself in the process. But certain given things will probably stay like the archive for example».

Certainly, it involves a reflection and a series of questions about both organisations, *TEOR/ética* and the *Asociación de Arte Útil*, that we are not yet ready to answer What does it mean instituting from the archives? As Miguel A. López concluded «We don't know yet, but we are asking the questions».

Note

[1] Dominique Ratton Pérez was part of the codirection until December 2018.

[2] *TEOR/ética* (2013) *Biblioteca de TEOR/ética* [online]

Available HERE (<http://consulta.bibliotecateoretica.org/>) [Accessed 8th July 2020].

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TEOR/ÉTICA. arte + pensamiento LINK (<http://teoretica.org/>)

Arts Collaboratory LINK (<http://www.artscollaboratory.org/>)

Biblioteca Lado V – TEOR/ética catalog LINK (<http://consulta.bibliotecateoretica.org/>)

Red Conceptualismos del Sur LINK (<https://redcsur.net/en/>)

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