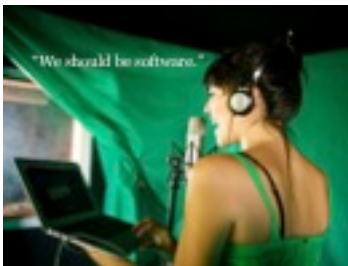*We should be software*:
Recoding cultural action through networked formations and open technologies in Latin America
By Mauricio Delfin

"*We* should be software".

"We *should* be software", says Carol Tokuyo, in Spanish, with a distinct Brazilian accent. Carol is a member of Fora a do Eixo, or "Outside the Axis" a Brazilian network of cultural activists.

There are about a dozen of us sitting around a table in one of the rooms of the Casa Fora do Eixo in Sao Paulo. We are all members of very different cultural organizations from Latin America, having a weeklong meeting to initiate a regional project that aims to strengthen our organizational, communicative and collaborative capacities as cultural networks.

The project — called "Juntos" (or Together) — includes nothing less than the creation of a "bank" of resources for cultural networks in Latin America, a free "university of cultures", a continental information and communications "post-agency", and a fund for travel and exchange at a regional and international scale.

"We should *be* software" Carol insists and interrupts.

"*Free* software" she clarifies, and I am surprised we all nod in agreement.

"*We need to work as software applications do, be a platform that permits communicating, connecting through difference, we need to be software that works across platforms, that mediates difference, so that the flow is possible.*"

Some of us have heard this before. It is a phase that you hear often at the Casa Fora do Eixo.

But:
What does "being software" really mean?
Why software?
Why do we all agree?

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Across the table from me, and below the window, is Adriana from Cultura Senda, and organization interested in collaborative practices and *open processes* under the logics of "Cultura de Red" (or Network Culture), which I will describe in detail in a few minutes.

To my right is Haydé from the Red Suramericana de Danza (RSD) or the South American Network of Dance, an organization with more than a decade of experience strengthening the organization of dance collectives across the region.

Close to the wall is Fernando from Martadero, an innovative cultural center in Cochabamba, Bolivia.

The person taking notes is Soledad, who works in La Usina, an organization in Argentina, currently working towards opening up cultural policies at the local level.

Juan, a representative of Hivos, the foundation that funds part of our project, takes notes while Sebastian from Guanared in Costa Rica types into the Googledoc we just opened.

At the other side of the room is Eduardo from Plataforma Puente Cultura Viva Comunitaria or Platform-Bridge Community Live Culture, an umbrella organization that gathers thousands of community-centered cultural associations in Latin America.

Next to him is Doryan from Caja Lúdica, an organization in Guatemala, probably one of the oldest and most respected in the Central American region.

Paulo and Clayton, also from Fora do Eixo, accompany the process.

My own organization, Culturaperu.org has been part of this group's formation and transformation since 2010.

Simultaneously, I have been researching and documenting the dynamics, politics and logics of these cultural organizations and networks, as they relate to the use and experience of digital technologies.

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Arts and cultural organizations?
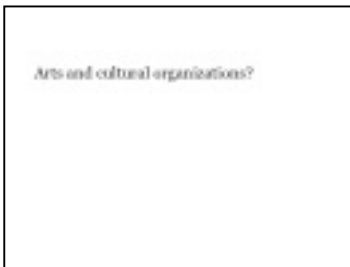
Perhaps, I should say "*arts* and cultural organizations", yet while these groups are involved in various artistic and expressive forms (music, dance, theater, film and video, digital art, etc.) — the term "art", as such, does not surface often during our conversations.

I believe this particular and relative absence signals part of what I will argue constitutes the emergence of a new political ontology of culture in Latin America, today.

This emerging ontology rises at the intersection of culture, power and technology.

I want to propose that this political ontology is being actively produced by what I would describe as a controlled collision, leading to the assembly of four main cultural and political agendas.

These agendas should also be understood both as epistemological trajectories and as specific flows of information and — perhaps much more importantly — desire.

These trajectories or flows are:

- Cultura Viva, or Live Culture
- Cultura Libre, or Free/Libre Culture
- Cultura Abierta or Open Culture
- Cultura de Red, or Network Culture

I use the word "trajectories" and the term "controlled collision" deliberately and in their physical sense, because I am interested in addressing and expanding ideas about political impact and social movements.

I want to address the political action of cultural organizations, proposing new ideas on the socio-political construction of cultural futures.

I want to conceive of the future not as something neutral, but as Arjun Appadurai (2013) suggests, something "*shot through* with affect and sensation".

To do so, I want to present the work of three cultural networks, very briefly.

Time will only allow me to scratch the surface of each network's experience and action logics, but I hope it may be enough to draw a clear picture of the research area I am concerned with.

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PLATAFORMA PUENTE

Plataforma Puente Cultura Viva Comunitaria is best understood as a kind of "umbrella organization"; conceived simultaneously as a platform *and* a bridge.

Plataforma Puente was "officially" born in 2010, at a meeting in Medellin, Colombia where over a hundred cultural organizations came together to "think continental cultural policies", aiming to consolidate "a network for public and private action" to secure, among other things, State support for "Cultura Viva Comunitaria" (in English "live community culture")[1].

This initiative was inspired by the experience of Brazil, a country where the Ministry of Culture launched the Pontos de Cultura[2] or Points of Culture program in an attempt to strengthen "cultural citizenship".

The program funds and supports thousands of grassroots cultural organizations working in the country. Today, Brazil counts with more than 3,000 Points of Culture; eleven hundred (1,100) cities served by the program and 8.5 million people as beneficiaries. In other words, a nation-wide publicly sponsored network of Points of Culture, which includes Puntos, Pontones and Puntinhos.

The program emphasizes the roles of digital culture in the sustainability of the network, and provides cameras, computers and an Internet connection to all Pontos, in order to link all the Pontos together, through media, into a national "*teia*" or network.

The Points of Culture allow for the collision of different national trajectories. Thanks to the program, thee powerful free software movement in the country may interact with indigenous communities as well as with alternative media activists.

"Cultural citizenship" in this case has to do with autonomy and participation, with the protagonism of people in a process of change and social transformation in their local communities.

Territory is key. This is why Plataforma Puente expands the notion of Cultura Viva, and works with *Cultura Viva Comunitaria*. The approach is decidedly territorial.

Today, Plataforma Puente is working towards the replication of the program in other countries [3] . Argentina[4], Colombia and Peru are starting to advance in this direction, as well as the cities of Lima and Buenos Aires.

The project has been adopted by the Parliament of the MERCOSUR[5] (Mercado Común del Sur, or Common Market of the South) and will be advanced as a potential regional program in its member-countries, which include Paraguay, Uruguay, Venezuela and Bolivia.

Plataforma Puente employs digital technologies, in various ways. Not only to communicate its agenda but also to train others on the power of Cultura Viva Comunitaria.

Today, Cultura Viva and Cultura Viva Comunitaria, constitute one of the most powerful agendas for cultural action, and its stands as a process of vindication for the "site" of culture, generally conceived as the exclusive concern of museums, art galleries, theaters and fine art schools.

The power of Cultura Viva lies in its recognition of culture as something that all people "do", that everyone carries and that can be employed for the betterment of social life. Not only functionally, but in terms of the work of imagination and aspiration (Appadurai, 2013) that can transform locality directly.

This year the first International Congress on Cultura Viva Comunitaria will take place in La Paz. This will be an opportunity for the movement to strengthen its regional impact.

5,000 people are expected.

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FORA DO EIXO

Fora do Eixo or "Outside the Axis" began in 2005 in Cuiaba, a city in the state of Matto Grosso, Brazil.

There is a lot to say about this group's experience and work in recent years, but I will only concentrate on certain aspects.

Fora do Eixo defines itself as a "circuit", "Outside the Axis" of cities like Sao Paulo and Rio which have historically defined Brazilian identity and patterns of cultural circulation in the nation.

As a reaction to this centralization, Fora do Eixo's work began with the constitution of an alternative circuit for music production and distribution, with Festivals extending to many other cities in the region.

Today, Fora do Eixo counts with 18 "Houses" in different regions of Brazil, completely self-sustained and autonomous.

As we will see, each house is a testament to local alternative processes, examples of the construction the "*lifeworlds*" Biella Coleman (2012) recognizes in her study of hackers — The "never completely constituted" that Merleau Ponty (1962) describes.
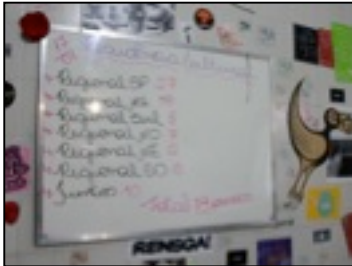

They are also powerful sites for a kind of work that Appadurai (2013) would surely consider that of imagination.

Take the house in Sao Paulo for example:

In any given day, the house will accommodate the lives of at least 18 residents, and sustain the work of more than 50 people, engaged with the different projects that FDE promotes.

During the days I spent there, the house sustained almost 80 people working all day, in different projects, as part of national gathering of representatives from each "House".

We were all fed in the same kitchen, at the same time, four times a day.

People that live in the houses share the food, money and even clothes. Cars are communal, so are walls and spaces.

Each house, acquires a particular personality as it forms part of this circuit, generating and receiving rich flows of information.

Every house engaged in a construction of a local narrative that feeds into the larger one FDE advances through social media everyday.

Indeed, Fora do Eixo is an expert in managing "narratives" and this is the precise term they use to define and structure their communication strategies.

These also permeate every event and space they generate, in a logic of "*vivencia*"; of experiencing and <u>living</u> a connection,

A lifeworld.

Perhaps the most powerful characteristic of Fora do Eixo as a collective immersed in digital cultural is their ability to construct different social and informational infrastructures to support their growth and future.

These infrastructures are referred to as "*simulacros*[6]", yet they are not inspired *only or directly* by Baudrillard or Deleuze's work (although these are important references). The simulacros have been crafted primarily from direct, empirical experience. They are indeed "representations", but more importantly, they constitute concrete devices for collective and open construction.

What yesterday, Stephen Ducombe referred to as an "act of pre-figuration"; performing, enacting the world

you want, into being. However, in this case it is much more that pre-figuration. It is figuration, as such.

Working a form into the future.

Fora do Eixo's Free University, the Fora do Eixo Bank (with an actual currency, called the "Cubo[7]"), the Fora do Eixo Party and a set of media devices to advances their initiatives have been built over the past few years[8]. They constitute a powerful productive, political and symbolic ecosystem that — together with the Houses around the country, the various events that Fora do Eixo promotes and the innumerable alliances or *parcerias* they establish people and organizations— stands as an incredible counter-apparatus, against mainstream politics and media.

The other key issue for me, is how much time and effort Fora do Eixo invests in generating information about itself, and compiling data and knowledge[9] about their processes. Their informational base constitutes quite the data dream for a media scholar like myself.

Like these PowerPoint slides for example,

These graphs...

or these statistics and metrics.

But its not only images — Take this *Googledocs* for example, which contains a database of all the essays and articles published on their work, indexed and commented.

CULTURA DE RED

The last example I want to mention does not constitute a network as such, but it is better understood as a process.

So, what is Cultura de Red?

"It's like Wi-Fi: It connects a lot of people, but you can't see the cables. Want to connect?"

But it's also "like a bicycle: Its sustainable, and you are the one that gives it energy. Want to ride?"

Cultura de Red is described as an initiative concerned with human ecology, "a particle and possibility accelerator".

For its promoters Cultura en Red (Networked Culture) is not the same as Cultura de Red (Network Culture). For them, Cultura de Red is the act of building a new "relational architecture", a new culture for collaboration.

Cultura de Red is a distributed, de-territorialized process.
Its objective is to generating a platform for articulation, promotion and education for those interested in promoting network processes at the local, regional and global scale.

In July of 2012, Cultura de Red held it Second Ibero-American Forum.

The event counted with 500 participants, 100 of which came from outside Brazil.

It was an opportunity to generate links between projects interested in free education, alternative economics, Peer-to-Peer processes, Free Culture, civic hackers, etc.

Perhaps the most eloquent way of portraying Cultura de Red's approach to new relational architectures is to focus on the information you can see, as soon as you enter their website: culturadered.com

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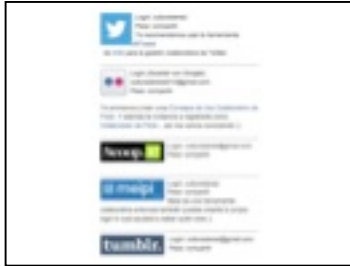
These are the user names and passwords, for all their social networking sites. So anyone can use them, whenever they want to.
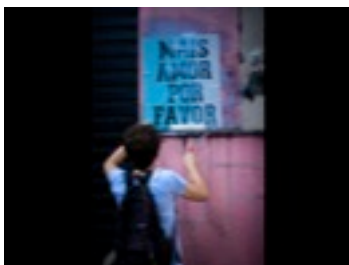
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I would like to conclude by proposing two main arguments:

FIRST:

I believe the trajectories I have described — as represented by these groups and networks; all of them present at our meeting in Sao Paulo — point to what Arjun Appadurai (2013) refers to as "the future as cultural fact" (2013) and an *ethics of possibility* (295);

In other words, "those ways of thinking, feeling and acting that increase the horizons of hope, that expand the field of imagination, that produce greater equity in what Appadurai calls "the capacity to aspire";

Those actions than widen the field of informed, creative and critical citizenship."

An ethics of possibility, for a politics of hope.

Indeed, an "ethics of possibility" stands against the "ethics of probability" that Appadurai identifies as "those ways of thinking, feeling and acting that flow out of modern regimes of diagnosis, counting and accounting, tied with amoral forms of global capital and corrupt states" (295).

What I mean to say is that *this* — what these networks are building — is not politics as usual.

SECOND:

The networks I have described could be understood as engaged in a "politics of fluids" and not in "a politics of solids", as conceptualized by David Savat (2013).

While I do not have time to address these notions in full, I want to provoke a discussion on this tension.

A politics of solids, implies a politics where "solid bodies act upon other solid bodies". A solid body has a specific shape, is always structured and it can be broken. It is not the same for fluids.

Political ideas about the "body politic", the State and even the individual generally refer to "solid forms of action". Rights, for example, could be understood as mechanisms to protect a political entity from being acted upon in a manner that threatens its status as a solid object.

Fluids are very different. They mix and they have no shape. More importantly for our purposes, fluids are defined by virtue of their flow.
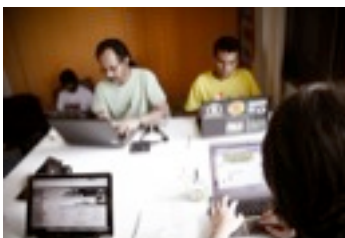
According to Savat (2013), a politics of solids cannot truly exist in the network (and this of course, is debatable, as we saw with the case of underwater sea cables, presented yesterday).

I believe that in the analysis of cultural networks, we must turn to fluids and flows to find alternative conceptualizations. We have concentrated too much on nodes and edges swarms, edges, even connectivity, but not so much in flow.

Indeed, political action as seen in these groups requires a new vocabulary that accounts not only for connections and articulations, but an understanding of "political actions as the constitution of flow, the participation in flows and the ability to alter already existing flows".


According to Savat, (2013: 191). Anything that affects flow is in fact political action. The possibility of constituting flows of code, literally of images, audios, texts and other media formats, which in turn trigger social, cultural and economic action, constitutes a completely new scenario for the construction of political agendas, and their analysis.

Flow of information. Flow of code. Flow of desires.

Examples (Emails and flows):
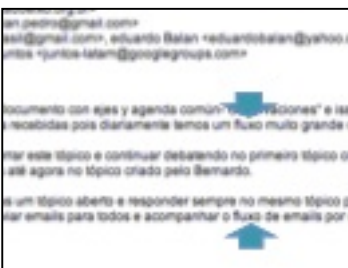
Example: (Chat y Caravana)

Now, the LAST THING to say is that political action in the context of digital technologies will indeed require adopting both a solid politics and fluid politics, without forgetting their relation.

My experience with cultural networks shows that we are not immersed in fluidity al the time, and that indeed we also need to act as solids, in a world of solids.


Cultural networks know this. The emergence of all kinds of devices, strategies and mechanisms to harness this duality can be seen all over the region.

This is why the meetings, the *encuentros*, the *vivencias.*

This is also why large-scale actions in public space are still important to get a message across, not of politics as usual, but of what harnessing the network means: *What coinciding flows can create.*
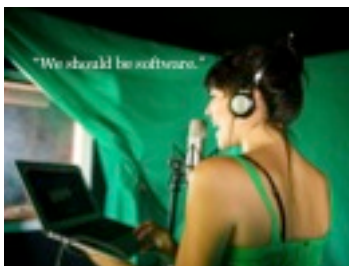
So what did Carol mean?

Well, Software is fluid. As media, free software has lesser viscosity than paper, for example, and in terms of its social life, it is determined by flow.
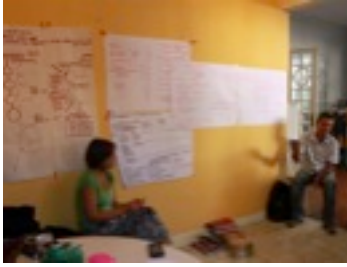
The network, as a form, favors fluids. Our connections to digital machines today, grant us the possibility of constituting important flows of information, code and desires.

What we are now witnessing in Latin America is the increased constitution and harnessing of flows, through digital technologies, the work of imagination, and an ethics of possibility to design a possible future for cultural life, collaboratively.

This is done under a new conception of culture, one that Lury, Parisi and Terranova (2012) describe as "the becoming topological of culture", the idea that culture is increasingly organized in terms of its capacities for change.

For these networks, culture appears as a field of connectedness, of ordering by means of continuity and not as a structure based on essential properties, such as archetypes, values or norms, or regional location (5).

The meeting in Sao Paulo constituted a collision of flows, the constitution of a larger flow which some are calling "the social movements of cultures", a force that requires to be sustained, together.

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THANK YOU

This paper was first presented at the [2013 Neil Postman Graduate Center](), on February 22nd, 2013 in New York University.

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