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## **Making Change. A Report from Bogotá**

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SARA MORAIS DOS SANTOS BRUSS

## **MAKING CHANGE – A REPORT FROM BOGOTÁ**

*Making Change*<sup>1</sup> is a research project that questions traditional understandings of change – where change is employed in the name of power, reduced to a ‘spectacle’ by global media and goes largely unquestioned in the public discourse. Making Change aims to build more adequate frameworks to address the idea of change in the context of common knowledge, networked media and information societies. It calls for a critical understanding of change that allows us to recognize new forms, functions and methods of change practices, with an emphasis on multi-modal applications of media and strategic digital technology interventions in public spaces. To collect these experiences, short, intensive “production sprints” were conducted to instigate conversations, interviews and on-the-ground action with different groups and communities in emerging network societies. The purpose of the project is to identify these processes as part of the Global South discourse, and create prototypes for a knowledge commons that facilitates the creation, exchange and integration of knowledge that affects and initiates processes of social and political change in the region.

Following the first production sprint in 2014 in Bangalore, India, the second Making Change production sprint took place in Bogotá, Colombia in February 2015. The explorative approach of the sprint raised many questions – for some, possibly too many. However, the knowledge produced at the sprint might be exactly that: facing ones own knowledge structure as a network, and recognising the limits within that structure. To clarify, it might help to think of the production sprint as a post-media event. Post-media, a term developed by Felix

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1 See: <http://cdc.leuphana.com/structure/common-media-lab/making-change/>.

Guattari to envision subversive and interconnected media channels, helps to grasp the events at the sprint in a truly productive way. Through this terminology, Guattari attempts to grasp the altered modalities of technological development and how their usage impacts on social structure. Post-mediality implies collective knowledge production through new relationships with technology<sup>2</sup>. Applying this thought to the production sprint means acknowledging that the technologies that allow us to overcome long distances by e.g. meeting online are also actively shaping the way these processes take place. With that in mind, the production sprint itself becomes a technological event, made possible through different levels of engagement with technology, culture, society and individuals, which are all part of a variety of machinic assemblages – different actors within social fields, and not mere tools.

The whole process of the sprint was ethnographically documented by four local students who were immersed in the groups, some becoming part of it more than others, but of course all had an impact on the actual happenings, as well as the recollection and narratives produced from the events. On the first day, the participants created visual narratives of what, in their opinion, ‘making change’ should look like. One of the groups found the exercise extremely frustrating, which is reflected in the documentation. Interestingly enough, inspired by a spontaneous brainstorm, the group began to draw, so as to “perderle el miedo a la cartulina” (“stop being afraid of the carton board”<sup>3</sup>). The drawings provoked discussions and the discussions led to the invention of *Operación Borojó*, the development of a fictional group that had been thought of the night before. That day, some participants had discussed the *metodología del relajajo* (methodology of relaxing), a theory developed at a *Karisma* workshop preceding the production sprint, which some of the participants had also participated in. It develops from the “death of the author”<sup>4</sup> and asks questions about the origin and genesis of species. The

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2 Cp. Felix Guattari, “Towards a Post-Media Era”, in *Mute Magazine*, 2012. Available at: <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/lab/towards-post-media-era> [accessed December 14, 2015].

3 The participants were provided with material to visualize and build their narratives; apparently the group that is being focused upon in this narrative felt that the material needed to be engaged with, although that was never a requirement. This seems noteworthy in context with the way the form produces the matter. Although the group did use the cardboard, it was in no way necessary to bring their idea across, but did in the end support and shape the content.

4 The *metodología* refers to Roland Barthes (*The Rustle of Language*, Oxford, B. Blackwell, 1986), but also the Italian author Primo Levi (*Cuentos completos*, Editorial El Aleph, 2009) and William Ospina (*La lámpara maravillosa*, Editorial Random House Mondadori, 2013) and was conceptualized as a foundation for theory around free and open culture, and what the death of the author means in the age of internet ubiquity. See <http://floksoctety.org/2014/04/27/la-muerte-del-autor-como-fundamento-de-una-cultura-libre/> [accessed March 19, 2015].

methodology builds upon the chaos of being and serves as a methodology of enunciation, which has no program and no programmatic moderator, but can simply proliferate through free association and connections between actors without succumbing to an economic model. The methodology of relaxing has four main conceptions through which it creates bodily existence sites and subversive modalities of production of self.

1. Enunciation and recognition is only possible amongst equals. You command inferiors, you can only plead to superiors. Convincing someone (of yourself) is recognition between equals.
2. The most important collaborators are artists. Art is what drives enunciation and becoming an artist means receiving allegiance in the battle for recognition through the multimedia forms that allow for expression.
3. Affectivity and dialogue, without which recognition cannot take place. The recognition of relation is recognition of oneself.
4. Belonging to a community, which teaches values and ethics. In the end, the recognition of the other is a question of allowing others to exist, at least to a certain extent. The methodology of relaxing means understanding that singularities (as opposed to individuals) will only serve the means of neoliberalism.<sup>5</sup>

These four points make up the precursor that led to *Operación Borojó*. The point is here that sleeping and relaxing are practices conceptualized to encompass all these things within the body. Relaxation means that one is open to listen and be affected by surroundings and allow for ones own contexts to proliferate outside of the capitalist mandate to always do, make and produce.

The fictional and mythological tendencies of the *metodología* were implicitly carried forward within the *Operación Borojó*, starting with the choice of the name. Borojó is a fruit, which grows in the tropical rainforest of Latin America. Its name translates to something like fruit-head or head-shaped fruit, and it does look like a little head, which, when opened, reveals brain-like flesh. Borojó is used in indigenous cultures against hypertension, bronchial diseases and malnutrition, and is said to have aphrodisiac effects, as well as the potential to increase brainpower. According to the participants' presentation, it is a real superfruit, said to revitalise body and mind. The juice is referred to as *jugo de amor* (love juice), and is considered to be so rich in minerals and

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5 Derived from Maria Juliana Soto, "Apuntes Sobre El Autor en Tiempos de Relajo", in *i.letrada – revista de capital cultural*. Available at: <http://i.letrada.co/n24/articulo/santa-nerda/219/apuntes-sobre-el-autor-en-tiempos-del-relajo> [accessed December 14, 2015].

vitamins that no other fruit can compare to it. It is not ripe until it hits the ground and in fact picking it from a tree can cause rashes and swelling of the tongue. The implied ideas about temporality, patience and nature are of course tropes which one might view with scrutiny, however, the metaphor of the superfruit which has mythological connection to the land in which it grows and serves as an energizer and all-round medicine, is without a doubt a strong one to employ when creating a political manifesto.

Using this utopian and mythological object as a symbolic narrative, the group created the fictional operation, which functioned exactly as intended by the post-media operation and actually took on a dynamic of its own for the remainder of the production sprint. Once the name had been found, the previously scattered and unsorted drawings and paintings were theoretically connected to the *Operación*. The four participants who created *Operación Borojó* presented it as a multimedia manifesto, in which the actual participants stepped back and focused on the presentation of goals and intended actions. *Operación Borojó's* intention is both sovereign and vague – the only directions the participants gave the operation were: The operation should operate in Bogotá and be situated in the local Bogotan context

1. It should have a logo in order for people to show non-verbal solidarity.
2. It should be implementable and the implementations should have positive impacts on the community.
3. It should always consider the notion that it does not have one single line of conception but is created out of the multitude.

Equipped with these ground rules, *Operación Borojó* suddenly seemed to develop on its own account with logos, visuals and sound installations<sup>6</sup>. During the presentation the group played an audio clip, in which the manifesto was proclaimed in a singing tone, reminiscent of tribal chants. It might be banal, but is noteworthy that *Operación Borojó* was not conceptualized as a group, but as an operation. The operators within the operation all wore masks resembling the superfruit, obscuring individual subjectivity and representing equality. What mattered to *Operación Borojó* in the presentation was not an institution, a group or a certain subjectivity, but the notion of equality amongst one

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6 The student that had been assigned to the documentation of that particular group describes in her notes how she became completely immersed within the group and only realized it once she had already taken on the responsibility of presenting a part of the work. This illustrates the dynamic of the *Operación*, which seemed to take on a life of its own. A dynamic, which was echoed several times by other participants, as they proceeded over the course of the event to commit to the *Operación* in playful and serious manner.

another and connectedness to our earth and the soil from which humanity comes, which feeds it, and to which it will return. During the presentation, the founders of *Operación Borojó* invited all participants to join them at the herb market of Bogotá on the night before the public exhibition and final production sprint presentations. Their presentation connected the sprint to real live action (which, agreed, was not directly political, but as it was established, the political effects of an action may not always be completely clear and also may come to be with some delay) and the herb market was something that was mentioned several times in the final discussion round of the production sprint. *Operación Borojó* illustrated how a spontaneous performance not only sprouted action, but connected the participants to each other and wove its narrative into the whole sprint up to the final presentation. Using a plant not only connected the people to ecological movements and ideas of animism, micropolitical communities and a certain type of spirituality, it also played with the notion of being rooted and uprooted. The fruit that looks like a brain is something which vitalizes to a point where one could imagine its agency being its own, at the same time it is subject to human destruction of the planet and capitalized upon as energy drinks as health trends flood the global markets.

The dynamics of *Operación Borojó* continuously developed throughout the sprint. While it began with merely four participants, at several points, when someone said something, which met other peoples approval, participation widened. *Operación Borojó* became the disclaimer for that approval. It was a placeholder for agreement but also a commentary on political action and tagged individual political statements to the operation rather than dividing the participants. *Operación Borojó* had become a synonym for an open movement, where, in theory, everybody could join and there was a general idea of connectedness, which did not remain within the networks of those who had created it, but opened itself and the group up for connections. It is an attempt to formulate an identity, which one can grasp when it seems useful, but automatically discard before it settles as something one is directly associated with.

The four-day event concluded with a final presentation, in which the work flows and productivity of the week were summarized in multimedia form and presented to a small public audience. It was not the final round table that conveyed the learnings and new knowledges best. Rather, affectivity and learning was most portrayed within the non-verbal and even the non-human activity. The participants staged a human strike, in which only objects had a voice. Inanimate bodies were carried into an auditorium, where various objects vibrated with noise

coming from hidden speakers. A video installation showed images and short clips of devastation and crisis to an apocalyptic soundtrack made up mostly of noise and interruptions. The audience was led to sit in between the objects and without further instructions, freely interacted with their human and non-human neighbours.

The objects placed within the auditorium were of course artificially filled with life, and not independent agents, however, this artificiality becomes irrelevant when we can no longer separate between artificial and natural bodies, because the questions of natural and original are beyond our reach. Relevant to this “artificial” constellation is the realization that connectedness to things can be painful. It deems us eternally responsible, rather than freeing us from responsibility. The interaction happens even in times of *relajo*, ‘doing’ is not something we can turn on or off and in fact, *Operacion Borojó* obscures who or what is doing the doing. We don’t measure or analyse the event itself, we measure its effects. While the human bodies in the scenario are relieved of any capitalistic modes of production, to a certain extent it also relieves them of their agency. The collective assemblage of enunciation is visible only and exactly through its effects. The presentation had levelled human agency with the ones of the objects within the room; just like the inanimate things, the humans did not move, but needed to *be* moved. The video display, which is published with this report, underlined the performance by showing a dystopian future – our actions of today resulted in the complete destruction of all urban and rural life, with only ruins left on earth. An interpretation of the situation would be that only when we learn to retrieve agency for all, shall we overcome the dystopian future we are currently facing. In fact, all performances had a rather pessimistic tone, in which one can read the *Bilderverbot* that has become a sort of consensus throughout critical theory and practice alike. It is impossible to imagine utopia, as any picturing of it is intrinsically flawed and reproduces the repressive logic of capitalism. Therefore, the visions of the future show only destruction, so as to point out what needs to be changed. The video’s pessimistic narrative calls upon Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek when it states: “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism”<sup>7</sup>. It points to imaginative worlds and suggests the necessity for an opening of thought, to divert the certainty of apocalypse.

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7 Frederic Jameson, “Future City”, *New Left Review*, 2003(21). Available at: <http://newleftreview.org/II/21/fredric-jameson-future-city> [accessed December 14, 2015].

The effects of the performance were micropolitical and may only have led to knowledge within a limited space. Or, to some, they may not have been relevant at all, for the final roundtable ended with a discussion about who is to blame for the empty bottle of liquor instead of how to maintain the network after the sprint. But, as Mauricio Lazzarato writes, the only hope for subversion lies within the achievement to “suspend time for a brief moment and create other possibilities from which, if they take on consistency, other subjectivations and existential crystallizations might proliferate”<sup>8</sup>. The point is that these existences that are brought forth through enunciation are *felt* or *experienced* rather than said. *Operación Borojó* brought a certain direction of thought to the table, a fiction of things to be, which surely would not be considered activism, but could be seen as an operation deconstructing hierarchy and possibly even in subverting the (very loose) programmatic scheme of the sprint itself. It was an exercise in autonomy just as it was participation in the production sprint.

While this is, of course, an artistic installation in a safe space on many levels – firstly, the closed group, secondly the freedom to express yourself in artistic format, and thirdly, the situation was the closing event of four days, after which all would return to their home countries – it reflects different notions of the future and displayed a form of both utopia and dystopia. In addition, through the theoretical positions mentioned above, we can understand artistic practice in a “post-media condition”<sup>9</sup> as interconnected with all other cultural practice; there is no separation of politics and non-political enunciation, as all of these practices impact our lives. The arts can be seen as a complex mirror of society, both reproducing and impacting on it.

The safe space of the entire production sprint allowed for experimentation in a way that is not possible within the restraints of our normal lives. However, it was an experiment to experience what would happen, when changemakers reflect on their own practices in an environment which relieves them of the financial, temporal and special restraints of their everyday lives. Seeing the sprint as a post-media event allows for the interconnection of things to grow more as a rhizome than a network. We are invited to look at what falls through the net, instead of the connecting nodes and lines; which ideas proliferate, and

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8 Mauricio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines. Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, New York, Semiotext(e), 2014.

9 Peter Weibel, “Die Postmediale Kondition”, in Elisabeth Fiedler, Christa Steinle, Peter Weibel (eds.), *Exh. Catalogue*, Graz, Neue Galerie Graz am Landesmuseum Joanneum, 2005, pp. 6–13. Weibel describes the arts to be a complex mirror of society, which not only shows but also impacts its conditions.



which do not find expression within our logic. The post-media production sprint is an attempt to translate the expression of the arts into real political practice. Only when this is achieved, will such experiments be able to even attempt an aversion of the crisis we all envision in our future.