



Registering Realities, Parasiting Networks: An Interview with Antoni Abad

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Wi: Journal of Mobile Media, Spring 2008

The online version of this article can be found at:

<https://doi.org/10.65968/XFTI5327>

Sawchuk, Kim. "Registering Realities, Parasiting Networks: An Interview with Antoni Abad". *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media*. Spring (2008). Web. <https://doi.org/10.65968/XFTI5327>

Interview conducted by Kim Sawchuk



Antoni Abad is a Catalan artist whose “canal” projects, broadcast on his website <http://www.zexe.net>, are intensive short-term collaborations with various diasporic communities. Cab drivers in Mexico City, moto-boys in Sao Paulo, sex-workers in Madrid, the Roma people (gypsies) in Leida, Catalonia, Nicaraguan immigrants living in Costa Rica and most recently handicapped participants in wheelchairs in Barcelona and Geneva have been given camera-phones to produce alternative images of and for their communities. These images are then transformed into flyers, posters, post cards and most importantly, they are broadcast on the World Wide Web using open source software developed by Abad and his team for the project.

The documentary images produced by these participants act as self-portraits, documents of their communities, visualizations of a city and diagrams of their trajectories through urban space. Although Abad’s participants-turned-broadcasters (or transmitters) are sometimes a well-defined and self-selecting group with already existing bonds, such as the Roma people and the Madrid prostitutes, Abad’s projects also have instigated political and social bonds beyond the time frame of one of his exhibitions. For example, the taxi drivers in Mexico City and the handicapped in Barcelona formed associations to lobby for social change after the exhibition.

In this interview with Abad, conducted in October of 2007 at his home in Barcelona, Catalonia, he discusses the genesis of these projects, the potential of mobile technologies for activist art, and his processes of collaboration with these communities.

Kim: Why did you decide to work with cell phones and the web?

Antoni: In 2003 I had, for the first time, a cell phone with an integrated camera and I discovered that this little device –this little marvel of technology– had two possibilities that until that moment you couldn't find in any other piece of hardware. On the one hand, there was the possibility of registering fragments of reality, via multi-media. Video, audio, photography and text could be used in all of its combinations. On the other hand, it was a machine that could be connected to the Internet. I thought it was the perfect broadcasting machine, something that you can hide and put in your pocket.

K: It is very portable, isn't it.

A: Portable and you can take to any remote place. Well not any, but where you can get a signal. In these places you can register reality and then send this data to the Internet. Immediately I thought that this technology could be used for something other than sending party photos. If one could organize a community with a small number of cell phones, maybe one could give this community the opportunity to express themselves without the necessity of waiting for the opinions given by the media.

K: When did you first decide to collaborate with a particular community?

A: I had this idea in San Paolo but I remember that when we were in Banff, there was a convention of Canadian aboriginal artists who were sent there to learn how to use different media. There was a problem near Montreal, where the municipal council wanted to put a golf course on sacred land.

K: That was the “Oka” crisis of 1990.

A: These artists decided to get into media and to create broadcasts to show their position to the world. So, when I think of this project, I always refer to those people that I met at the Banff Centre and I always remember our talk about what was happening and about this gap between the perception of the community and the perception of those in power.

K: Could you go back to the Sao Paulo project?

A: It was after my second visit to Sao Paolo. I already had a cell phone with a camera. Right away I noticed that there were these motorcycle messengers and they were all over the place. Actually, Sao Paolo is a city of 20 million and they say that there are nearly 260 thousand messengers and 2 die every three days.

In 2004 I was asked to do a project in Sao Paolo and I was impressed with these motorcyclists and that’s where the idea came. So my proposition to the curator was to give cell phones with integrated cameras to a group of moto-boys so they can explain themselves. The answer of the curator was, “That’s great because everybody hates moto-boys.” That was the beginning of the project but it was actually in 2007 when I finally was able to do it. Actually, the project was done 6 or 7 times before I could work with the

moto-boys. So to me, 2007 was a kind of celebration because finally everything was put in place to do it.

In the meantime I worked with other groups, like the taxi drivers in Mexico City. Again, because I am supposed to be an artist and because I come from this art world, I had a proposal from the Centro Multi-media, which is part of the Ministry of Culture in Mexico and also the Centro Culturala which is part of the cultural industry in Spain. I thought that, at least from my first visits to Mexico, that the taxi drivers in Mexico City had a lot in common with the moto-boys in Sao Paolo. For instance, Mexico City is the city with the largest number of taxi drivers in the world. There are 160 thousand taxi drivers in Mexico City and about 25 thousand are illegal. The first thing they tell you when you arrive to Mexico City, if you're a tourist, is not to take a taxi alone because anything can happen. That is the stereotype.

We had 20 taxi drivers in Mexico City with cell phones that met every week during the period of the project, which was about 2 months. They had weekly editorial meetings where they would decide themes and subjects. With this project there wasn't an editor-in-chief. Instead they discussed possible subjects and then they would vote. When a subject was decided, a channel was organized on zexe.net for the taxi drivers.

That was my first experience doing the "canal" projects for zexe.net and I have to say that it was amazing. When I came back from Mexico, people would ask if I met that curator or that artist and I always had to explain that I was hanging out with taxi drivers so I don't know about curators or artists in Mexico.

K: How did you find the taxi drivers? How did you get the 20?

A: As you know, in each project I work with different people: gypsies, prostitutes, taxi drivers, immigrants in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Each time we had different strategies to find the broadcasters or transmitters to participate in the project. In Mexico, which was the first time it was organized, we put ads on paper and we also went to a radio station and had an interview. This radio station is very popular and all of the taxi drivers listen to it. At this interview we gave a phone number to call. With the gypsies I went and negotiated with the patriarchs and their associations.

With the handicapped people, a bigger project, we had three coordinators. The three coordinators and I went to different neighborhoods in Barcelona and looked in the streets. When we recognized an individual with problems of mobility, we went to them and asked. Every time has been different. In Geneva, which I am doing now, we are working with a conglomerate of all the handicapped associations of the city.

I'm used to working with very little money, so every time you do a project you need to improvise. There is a lot of improvisation with these projects. You cannot just say you need this and that. Every place is different so you have to adapt.

K: You started with the taxi drivers and we have heard about the collaboration with the moto-boys. What next?

A: After the taxi drivers I worked with two communities of gypsies. I worked with gypsies in Lleida, which is my hometown, and in Leon. There are very different communities of gypsies and as I said, in this case, the negotiation to find transmitters was through the associations and the patriarchs. After that, I worked with a group of prostitutes in Madrid. This was a small project about the 4th world that was initiated by

a collective that were working a lot with the homeless. They had a lot of information and documentation on the homeless and they asked me to do a project with prostitutes, prostitutes in the street, not like glamour prostitutes, but the people who work in the street.

K: Is it important that you're working with people who live in the streets?

A: It's not exactly that. The common profile is that these are all people who usually appear negatively in the media. The project allows these people to express themselves, and through these meetings create their own thematic channels and to use the technology to change the view society has of them. For instance in Spain, the headlines in the media frequently will say "Young gypsy boy robs house." When it is someone who is not a gypsy it doesn't identify them as not a gypsy. I prefer being in the streets than an opening at a contemporary art museum in Barcelona.

K: How do you participate in these collective meetings?

A: Until now I've been going to the weekly meetings of all these groups, but not to tell them how or what to broadcast. Once they have accepted to participate and we sit at that table, my participation in the project is only about suggesting. They are the ones who decide what it is about. The only thing that I give is my experience because otherwise it would be again, the same relation of power they encounter everywhere else. So, I sit there and I just learn. So, at some point, when they agree to do it, it's their project and I am there only to share my experience with other groups that I've worked with. It's not that they send the images to me and then I put it on the Internet. It's immediate. It's direct. They decide on the thematic channels, they decide and they vote. So when they

find the subjects that have to do with the selected theme, they photograph them or they record them and they send it directly to the site and the database that has been created. It's not that I'm in the middle saying what goes and what does not.

K: Where do you get the phones?

A: I've been asked about it many times. Every time has been different. In Mexico we had the Ministry of Culture and the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was quite easy, like Fudafone Telefonica gave the phones and access and space on the net. That was great, it was the first time and we were able to do it. A couple of times, like with the gypsies and the disabled, Nokia gave the phones.

K: Did you approach Nokia?

A: In Spain I did. In Costa Rica we bought illegal phones from Venezuela. In Brazil, I had 10 phones that were left from the project with Nokia in Barcelona and I smuggled them in Brazil, which is risky because you can be put in jail and fined double the price of the phones. I took ten phones in my luggage. So every time is different. Like I said, the negotiation with the networks, is another parallel story about how the communication industries can sponsor a project like this. Sometimes it's possible. Sometimes it's impossible. It's hard work negotiating to get the technology to people who don't have access to technology. We've negotiated with Nokia in Madrid, we've been negotiation in Costa Rica with a cellular company that gave us the network. We have these meetings and then, in a couple of hours, we're in the middle of a market with a minimum.

In my life there are a lot of contrasts and it has a lot to do with how technology is negotiated within the world. As an artist, I am happy to face these challenges. It gives

me knowledge of our present and it takes me into a whole new spectrum. I'm not saying I'm a prophet; I am only negotiating. I have had questions from Brazil about working with multinationals and the influence of their agendas on my projects. I've been asked if my projects depend on those agendas. I don't know. I'm only parasiting those networks. There's no way that technology stops so we have to try tricks to parasite inside those networks. I can show you shops in Barcelona where you can buy a cell phone with integrated camera for 20 euro.

K: Yes, these devices are now seen as disposable. Those who can afford it continually upgrade and the hardware has become more accessible in a way that they weren't when they first appeared on the market. Even in four years it's changed incredibly. But let's get back to your participants, who you sometimes call broadcasters and at other time transmitters. Did everyone know how to use the phone when you invited them into the project?

A: No. I had to teach them. All the groups that I was working with, they all knew how to call but they don't know how to publish on the Internet.

K: How did you teach them how to publish on the Internet? What software did you use?

A: We actually produced software for the phones. One of the things we've done is create software that makes it easy to publish to the Internet. That is very important, especially with the handicapped people as many of them couldn't use the buttons very well. So that is one of the main directions of the project. I want to try to find and to create interfaces that are very simple to for people to use to broadcast.

K: How long did the project last and did they get to keep the phones?

A: They keep the phones. In Mexico it was the first time we were doing the project and we had sponsorship from the vidafone telefonica and they were only lending the phones. I remember the day that they had to give back the phones. It was one of the saddest of my life. I negotiated with vidafone telefonica but it was impossible. They didn't want the taxi drivers to keep the phones. It was amazing because at the end of those two months, the phones were dirty and had been on the floor. I couldn't understand why they wanted the phones to go back. They just said they had to give them back because that was the agreement. After that every time I negotiated a sponsorship where the transmitters can keep the phones. I found that the hardware is becoming less of the problem. When we went to the moto-boys in Sao Paolo, half of them already had a phone with a camera.

K: You're not just providing them with a phone. You are showing how the phone can be a broadcast medium and giving them a structure to organize data that they collect.

A: Of course, this is what we provide. From the first project with the taxi drivers in Mexico to the project in Barcelona, there has been a constant evolution. Now there are additional on-line interfaces. You can change the order of your images, you can change the colour, you can change the text. You can do whatever you want or whatever you need to make sense of your channels.

K: Do the transmitters do the editing?

A: Of course. I can assure you that all of the people who have done the project, now there are about 100, are all now perfect users of the Internet and mobile technology. Sometimes there were real efforts to show transmitters how to use the technology.

K: The projects have a time frame because they are tied to an exhibition. But when does it end? Does it end for you?

A: That's a good question. To me, the best thing that can happen is that they have the technology. They have the phones and we keep the server up for them so they can continue on. The best thing that can happen is that they organize themselves to continue with the project. To me that is the best thing that can happen. The sponsorship that they get from the world of art is limited to the exhibition. In the end what I am doing is taking resources from the world of art and bringing them to another field that is more social and it looks like art, but it is a trick. Once this process happens, and ends, success for me is that a group continues with the broadcasting and uses the server, which is always three for them. We are, and when I say 'we' I mean the programmers and those who have helped with the projects in a specific location, we're thinking of other possibilities to have (give the transmitters?) more independence but that has to come.

That has happened a few times. When the taxi drivers in Mexico City finished this art period, they decided to organize an association, La Sociazone Latino American del Transportacione Publico. It had pan-America ambition and it wanted to organize all the taxi drivers in Latin America. They got organized and they got broadcasting but their work went more into organizing the community in Mexico City more than broadcasting.

K: But maybe there is more to it?

A: Definitely. For instance, one of the taxi drivers told me that he spent 30 years behind the wheel for 12 hours a day driving a taxi and he said this project allowed him to

remember that imagination exists. When this guy told me that I understood what it was about.

K: Could you speak more about art as the liberation of the imagination?

A: It's about countering routine. Everyday we are in a role in life and we don't always have time to stop and reflect on what we're doing. But suddenly a piece of technology, and an artistic vision, comes to your life and you discover that you can have another view. You discover the power of the image but not of the image in the usual public way. You discover that these art projects can have a lot of press, a lot of television, a lot of radio. And suddenly you discover you can express yourself. Normally what happens with these groups is that in the beginning when they discover that they don't know what to say. That is often the first thing that happens.

Anyway, to go back to your initial question. The prostitutes and the gypsies decided that they didn't want to continue because they already had said what they had to say. I can understand this. The handicapped people of Barcelona organized an association and continued with the project. They are still continuing. The moto-boys of San Paolo, the project was finished two months ago but they are still meeting every week and they are going to create an NGO, not only to continue with the projects but to fight for their rights. It's only that now they do it in another way because they have a tool. In a way the technology is kind of a trick that clicks and makes you think of some parts of your life that you don't normally think about. And this brings me back to the question of liberation from routine. You go to work and then the supermarket and you sleep and you go back to work. But maybe on Saturday or Sunday, you have a meeting. It is like this in these groups. The moto-boys in Sao Paolo, for example, meet every Saturday and they

haven't stopped. They have these meetings about what they're going to say to the rest of the world.

K: So you act as a catalyst.

A: I like this role but there's tension. I talk to the moto-boys in Sao Paolo every week and they have questions. I tell them that "I only started it and now it is yours" because I can't drive a motorcycle in Sao Paolo. Also, when I leave these projects they ask where I'm going and I always have to say that it's sad but now the project is yours, you have the knowledge and I gave you everything that I had.

K: How long usually?

A: A couple of months. To do it in the right way, a couple of months is alright. This is the limit for me unless I decide to live there.

K: It's intense and you're working with intensity.

A: It's non-stop. I remember in Mexico I was called at 7:30 in the morning when the taxi drivers called in to report for work.

K: You talked about your relationship to the art world in these projects. How would you describe the aesthetics of the project?

A: I'm not concerned about aesthetics. To talk about aesthetics I would have to define what aesthetics is for me and at this moment in my life I have no idea. The web or the whole site is organized at a minimum. The site is accessible and it detects the resolution of the user, so that it can be seen by as many people as possible. It's simple. Some people tell me that it's ugly but I don't mind. It's just a list of video, audio and text. If there is an

aesthetic it is given by the transmitters. I like what they send. The prostitutes were incredible photographers. It was poetry in the channels, even though my primary concern is not aesthetics.

K: Well, you give that over because you let them decide what they're going to put on the site.

A: There is a structure. There's a structure in the web that shows the images in a certain size. There is a structure that tries to be as simple as possible, that's it. The structure of the web at the end, I cannot say that it is not influenced by my experiences and all of my years of being a sculptor. But it tries to get the maximum of the minimum.