

# **Youth weaving networks beyond community borders**

## **Lessons learned from Caja Lúdica, a community arts process and networking initiative in Guatemala**

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## List of Abbreviations

ACJ	Asociación Cristiana de Jóvenes
ADESCA	Aporte para la Descentralización Cultural
AIDPI	Acuerdo sobre Identidad y Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas
AVANSCO	Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales en Guatemala
CALDH	Centro para la Acción Legal en Derechos Humanos
CEH	Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico.
CONJUVE	Consejo Nacional de la Juventud
CJG	Coordinadora de Juventud Guatemala
CIDJ	Convención Iberoamericana de Derechos de los jóvenes
GAM	Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo
GTZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit
HIVOS	Humanistisch Instituut voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking
INE	Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas
MARACA	Movimiento de Arte Comunitario de Centroamérica
MINEDUC	Ministerio de Educación
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PNUD	Programa para las Naciones Unidas y el Desarrollo
PROJOVEN	Programa de Capacitación Laboral para Jóvenes
OAC	Ontario Arts Council
OIJ	Organización Iberoamericana de Juventud
OIT	Oficina Internacional de Trabajo
PSJ	Programa de Seguridad Juvenil
RGDAC	Red Guatemalteca de Arte Comunitario
RLATS	Red Latinoamericana de Arte para la Transformación Social
SEFCA	Servicios Ecuménicos de Formación Cristiana en Centro América
SEGEPLAN	Secretaría de Planificación y Programación de la Presidencia

UNAMG	Unión Nacional de Mujeres Guatemaltecas
UNDP	United Nation Development Programme
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
URNG	Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFP	United Nations World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organisation
YMCA	Youth Men's Christian Association

## Abstract

This thesis examines a youth community arts network and Caja Lúdica, one of its founder organisations, in post-conflict Guatemala, and argues that they not only temporarily create spaces of encounter and community but through their networking and exchange strategies have established a *rhizomatic assemblage of practice* characterised by its perseverance and its dispersed agency in different part of the country. As such, the thesis asks the following main three questions: What are the practices of Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network in Guatemala; what are youth protagonists' experiences; and what contribution can their practices make to debates on community arts in challenging environments but also in other parts of the world? By using Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory it highlights notions of networking, local protagonism and collectivity as key for more sustainable practice with youth and by introducing these terms into performance and community arts scholarship, where they are scarcely explored, it makes a critical contribution to these fields.

A methodological approach based on rhizomatic notions has fostered the connection of a wide range of methods such as semi-structured interviews, participant observation, 'following' as a research method as well as photography, the latter two of which have been developed for researching this particular networking practice in Guatemala. By using a selected set of case studies, this investigation aims to grasp the diversity and dynamics of this practice, in particular its movement and expansion across community borders through its youth protagonists. These case studies include the exploration of a local youth group and their exchange activities as well as the observation of the Network's collective rituals and public interventions.

By doing so this thesis aims to emphasise the potential of youth as creative protagonists in challenging contexts and stresses the importance to further examine their potential and ability to resist marginalisation and contribute to the reconstruction of the social fabric in war-affected communities and beyond. It further proposes that a networking and more holistic approach to practice can foster more sustainable community arts processes, not just in terms of decreasing external funding dependency and determination, but also to establish a practice culture in and between initiatives based on collectivity, exchange and support, which becomes more important in times of austerity.

## Declaration

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Dedicated to with love, hope and appreciation  
to my family;  
to Victor Leiva (El Mono) (1988-2011),  
who was a close friend, great artist, stilt acrobat and performer;  
and  
to all the people who are resisting violence and creating alternative spaces in  
Guatemala and elsewhere.



## Acknowledgements

The thesis that follows is the reflection of a journey that I have undertaken with a great number of people, and I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge and thank them for their inputs here.

Firstly, I thank Caja Lúdica and the young people, who have been the inspiration and main source of this PhD and without them this piece of writing would never exist. They have not only shown me that there is always hope and the possibility of change in life but also that community is indeed real. They were key companions for my own growth on an emotional, professional as well as spiritual level at an important time in my life, which made me believe more in my capacities and abilities to make things possible. Thank you for being my ludic family and second home. Thanks also to the photographers, organisations, groups and individuals that gave permission and consent for using their images in this thesis.

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## **Prologue: Research background and reflections as a researcher-fan**

If you don't admire something, if you don't love it, you have no reason to write a word about it.

(Deleuze 2004, 144)

Maybe stories are just data with a soul.

(Brown, 2012)

This thesis tells a story, a story about a youth community arts network and Caja Lúdica, one of its founder organisations, which since 2000 have been developing community arts processes in post-conflict Guatemala with the objective to strengthen inter- and intra-communal relationships of urban and rural communities. It aims to link multiple histories, voices and especially the experiences of different generations of young people, who have been and are still the protagonists of this initiative in Guatemala. This particular story, however, has its beginning with my own personal experience with Caja Lúdica as a volunteer between 2007 and 2010. During that time I got immersed in their dynamics and engaged as a participant, workshop facilitator as well as project coordinator. Hence, I not only got an insight into their methodological approach and struggle for social change but also became emotionally attached to the networking practice and people involved. I strongly believed in the work we did.

Back in Europe in 2010, I was hoping to find similar initiatives and to continue with my journey of trying to understand Caja Lúdica's community arts practices in Guatemala, as well as reflect on and further develop what I had experienced. This turned out to be challenging, in particular the search for cultural initiatives which are process-based, mainly youth-led and embedded in local as well as wider collective struggles. Many of the community arts projects I encountered in Europe seemed to contrast with Caja Lúdica's approach to youth

engagement.<sup>3</sup> While the former were led by professional artists and often aimed at the development of a theatre piece or performance, the latter were undertaken by young people, most of whom were not professional artists, and their practices focused on elements such as networking, relational encounters and the collective rather than a final artistic product as a result and representation. Additionally, while many of the projects I encountered in Europe were short-term and often struggling to continue once the funding had ended, Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network seemed to represent one of the few examples that have sustained their practices for more than a decade often with minimal or no financial resources and despite the challenges of a post-conflict setting. In response to this, I was inspired to understand *how* these initiatives were successful in their longevity and perseverance. Although Guatemala represents a very different context to Britain on an economic, social and cultural level, I identified many elements in Caja Lúdica's and the Network's<sup>4</sup> practices that I considered as potentially useful for other organisations working with young people.

Hence, I am writing this thesis from the perspective of a Manchester-based researcher who grew up in Europe, however it emerges from my own process of learning, practicing and growing, which I lived and embodied in Guatemala. It is this reflexive process that I would like to share with a broader audience through my investigation. The aim is to explore these networking practices from the South and how some of their approaches may push forward debates in the field of youth, performance and community arts studies in the global North and other parts of the world. Caja Lúdica and their arts processes have been one of

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<sup>3</sup> Although some of these characteristics I encountered in the work of other organisations and initiatives, one example is Contact Theatre in Manchester, they seemed to lack this notion of a shared practice and collective struggle for change, which I had experienced with the Community Arts Network in Guatemala (see Contact's webpage <http://contactmcr.com/>; accessed 13 December 2014).

<sup>4</sup> In this thesis I use Network with capital 'N' as a short expression for the Community Arts Network.

the main motivations for continuing my studies in order to better understand their dynamics in the context of Guatemala as well as to locate them within wider debates on arts-based community practices in the world. The questions I am asking, my values and beliefs, as well as the ways in which I approach my research are the result of my experience with Caja Lúdica (amongst others). Moreover, the many years of living and working in Guatemala previous to this research enabled me to gain a high level of Spanish language skills, which were key for my ethnographic fieldwork, as they allowed me to get fully immersed in the everyday dynamics of this initiative and directly communicate with the research participants.

This is not an autobiography. However, this thesis emerges from a personal experience and journey of learning and growing. Following Freire's understanding of how we exercise our capacity of learning I see myself as a "researcher subject" (1998, 58), which is constituted by the processes in which I am or was engaged. My position in this research has to be considered in the light of this journey and I had to acknowledge and value my close relationships with the participants as well as with the groups involved. This tension determined the way in which fieldwork was undertaken and has affected how I position myself within this piece of writing as well as the way in which this story develops. The following account has to be understood as an attempt to face these challenges in a constructive way, to playfully engage with my emotional attachment, acknowledge it and transform it into a particular characteristic of this thesis, which has impacted its overall tone and writing style.

I am a fan of Caja Lúdica. I am a fan of Caja Lúdica because I admire their community arts practices, which they develop in a complex setting such as Guatemala as much as I am now able to critically engage with them. I am a fan because I have seen where their processes do and do not succeed or struggle. I am a fan because I have lived their practice; I have grown with them and grown out of them at the same time. I am aware that being a fan, as Grant stresses in her

account on fandom in feminism, may indicate an “over-attachment, an excessive engagement that goes beyond the intellectual” (2011, 267). However, within fan studies fandom has also been acknowledged as a “creative, productive space of engagement” (Ibid., 269) where the boundaries between fan and scholar temporarily blur. I position myself within that in-between space oscillating between an enthusiastic fan and a more critical perspective. By doing so, I seek to acknowledge, incorporate and play with my emotional attachment as well as my critical distance while giving an account of the complex dynamics of this case study. The following two images visually support this debate on my positionality as a researcher.

Figure 1 is a ‘researcher-selfie’<sup>5</sup>, which I took during the first week of my fieldwork on a bus trip to one of the yearly encounters of the Community Arts Network in August 2013.



Figure 1: Researcher-selfie, Guatemala City (2013).

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<sup>5</sup> I am using the word ‘selfie’ here in order to describe my attempt to self-portray myself as a researcher *in* the field.

I have captured myself at the beginning of the fieldtrip, which I consider as an important moment during my PhD journey. The image is representative of the debate about fandom and enthusiasm as it portrays me as a 'fan-researcher' behind the camera in a constant search for fascinating moments, which are relevant to my research. This also directly relates to one of my research methods of using photographic images as moments and starting points for the development of my analysis (see chapter 2).

Figure 2 was taken at the end of my fieldwork in November 2013 during a cultural festival, which took place in Ciudad Peronia, a suburb of Guatemala City (see chapter 4). The image shows myself behind a web, which was part of a photo exhibition during this event.



Figure 2: Researcher self-portrait, Guatemala City (2013).

In comparison to figure 1, my gaze here is directed away from the camera. I am looking into the distance. It visually represents a more critical position of me as a researcher-fan, which I have been gradually developing during this journey. I have started to change my position, or my position has changed me and my relationship with this networking initiative in Guatemala. I strongly felt this turn

during my fieldwork, which on the one hand was necessary to be able to undertake the research process but on the other hand posed a challenge in particular on a relational level with the participants (see chapter 2). The images above represent two extremes of my position as a researcher and they open up a creative in-between space.

Throughout the thesis I seek to write between those two positions and ideally maintain their balance. I am, however, aware that at times one may dominate the other. When reaching a balance between them, I am hoping to be the kind of fan-researcher that Fiske (1992, 46) has defined as an “excessive reader”, who is able to move beyond simple fascination or adoration, and to develop a critical and in depth account despite emerging criticisms, frustrations and antagonisms. Therefore, I use my fascination as a starting point and motivation to write this thesis and tell a story, which is coloured by my personal enthusiasm as well as the critical analysis of a researcher-fan aiming to contribute to broader debates on community arts processes by and with young people over the globe.



## PART ONE

### CHAPTER 1

#### INTRODUCTION

##### **Introduction to the study**

As a reader of this thesis you are invited to become part of this story and exploration of Caja Lúdica<sup>6</sup> and the Community Arts Network, which in 2016 link around twenty youth groups and organisations located in different parts of the country. Caja Lúdica and their<sup>7</sup> youth groups have been one of the first cultural networking initiatives in Guatemala emerging after the signing of the peace accords in 1996, which ended thirty-six years of civil war. Since then they have established themselves as “one of the most important artistic and social projects” in the region (Acevedo 2011, 495). For over a decade they have been developing public art events such as festivals and street performances in different parts of the country. They have also fostered artistic workshop processes and encounters with youth groups from Guatemala City’s marginal areas, and from some of the most war-torn communities in the rural highlands.

This thesis examines how Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network through their cultural processes have created a platform for young people to encounter, learn and exchange not only on an individual but also on a communal level, which at the same time has fostered a sense of belonging and collective identity. I particularly draw attention to the individual and collective experiences of the Network’s youth protagonists during their arts processes. By doing so, I aim to explore how these experiences transcend arts interventions and instead

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<sup>6</sup> Caja Lúdica translated into English means ‘Ludic Box’.

<sup>7</sup> In this thesis I am suggesting a networking approach to understanding cultural organisations and therefore I have chosen to apply plural when I refer to Caja Lúdica (see also chapter 7). I also refer to the Community Arts Network as plural as it consists of different groups, networks and practices.

permeate the young people's everyday practices and actions. The overall aim of this thesis is to argue that Caja Lúdica's methodology and *networking approach to practice* has enabled them to develop, spread, and maintain themselves as a cultural initiative for over a decade, this despite the rather challenging conditions of a post-conflict context. Hence, through their interventions they not only open up spaces of encounter and community, but instead have established a *rhizomatic assemblage*, which consists of multiple practices emerging in different communities. This assemblage is characterised by its diversity of expressions and its perseverance, which is fostered through a common belief and struggle for social change that the different groups share.<sup>8</sup> Caja Lúdica's and the Community Arts Network's dispersed agency expressed in different parts of the country represents their potential to be resistant as a practice in this particular setting. Through my research I seek to provide an example of how young people through their cultural practices and public interventions not only undermine the constraints of a post-conflict context but also, in a long-term sense, contribute to the reconstruction of the social fabric in Guatemala. Hence, my exploration aims to draw attention to the potential of youth as cultural agents in war-affected communities but also in other parts of the world.

In order to articulate my argument I use Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory (1987) as a tool from which I develop my analytical framework for each chapter. These authors suggest the rhizome, which in botany describes a multiple root system without centre and unlimited growth, as an image of thought for new and more dynamic ways of thinking. Their ideas stood in contrast to the dominant model of reasoning present in Western philosophy during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a metaphor, by using it with regard to the exploration of Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network, the rhizome helps me to develop a better

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<sup>8</sup> Rhizomatic assemblage will be further elaborated as a concept for understanding practices in chapter 7.

understanding of the complex dynamics and movements as well as the resistant potential of this particular practice to persevere in post-conflict Guatemala.<sup>9</sup>

My study is informed by existing Deleuzian scholarship emerging from cultural studies (Grossberg 2014, Colebrook 2002), film studies (Del Rio 2008, Jones 2006), music education (Jorgensen et al. 2013), and more recently from the field of theatre and performance studies (see Cull 2009; Bottoms and Goulis 2007; Perry 2010, 2011). For Laura Cull (2009) Deleuze and Guattari's theories clearly intersect with performance studies and an increased appreciation of their philosophical approach can be observed in the field. According to her, the interest of performance studies coincides with the mentioned theories as they "both emphasise the 'movement' and the 'liveness' immanent to even the most apparently stable phenomena" (Ibid., 3). By referring to Richard Schechner she traces a parallel between both performance studies and Deleuze and Guattari's body of thought indicating a "shared concern to shift the focus of thinking in terms of discrete objects and subjects, towards a concern with processes, relations and happenings" (Schechner 2002, 1-2 quoted in Cull 2009, 3).

For the purpose of this study, I focus on the description and interpretation of concepts emerging from Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory that help me to explore three of the Network's key practices through which I aim to develop my argument. They include the youth group's community arts and exchange processes on a local and national level, collective encounters as identity creating spaces, and their *comparsas*<sup>10</sup>, which represent collective action and manifestations of youth providing the connectivity between the otherwise territorially distanced youth groups. Based on my research outcomes I suggest that the Network's youth protagonists and their experiences differ from young people participating in other applied theatre, performance and community arts

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<sup>9</sup> The rhizome metaphor will be further discussed in chapter 4.

<sup>10</sup> The *comparsa* is a carnivalesque street performance, which consists of several elements such as a brass band, dancers, stilt walkers, circus characters and acrobats amongst others (García 2011).

practices. This is reflected in the active roles they play in their local communities as well as their experiences and perspectives of the Network as a place of belonging and community space. Hence, their networking approach to community arts - which, as I argue, gives emphasis to youth protagonism, relational encounter and collective struggle - does not fit into more traditional ways of analysing community arts practices such as, for example, debates on impact measurement or participation amongst others (see literature review). Therefore, new vocabulary needs to be developed to understand their work.

My study addresses these gaps and asks the following research questions: What are the practices of Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network in Guatemala; what are the experiences and roles of their youth protagonists; and what contribution can their practices make to debates on community arts in challenging environments but also in other parts of the world?

The thesis is divided into two main parts. The first part articulates how Caja Lúdica's networking practices as well as their collective identity and common struggle as a youth initiative has enabled them to expand and sustain themselves for over a decade. It situates their development and sustenance in the literature and main debates of the field, and outlines the research background and context of the study. In the first chapter, I provide an introduction to the research, discuss some of the main concepts and literature of the study, and outline its contribution to the academic field. The second chapter then emphasises the research methodology. In the third chapter, I set up the context of the investigation by providing an insight into historical, social and political aspects of Guatemala, the geographical context of the investigation as well as present Caja Lúdica and their networking strategies in some detail.

The second part of the thesis (chapters 4 to 7), explores different dimensions of the Community Arts Network's and the youth group's relationships with Caja Lúdica. Chapter 4 emphasises how the Network's practices link and expand into different spaces, organisations and institutions, and how they have, as an

initiative, established a rhizomatic repertoire and platform of learning, practice and exchange. The fifth chapter discusses the Network's most intense and intimate encounters or 'plateaux events', as they are termed in this thesis, and how they foster collective identity creation processes on an individual as well as collective level. The sixth chapter is looking at the role of the *comparsa*, the Network's collective action as a smooth space and form of resistance against the social and spatial constraints of post-conflict Guatemala. The conclusion (chapter 7) then draws the main themes of the research together, highlighting its implications for other community arts practices with young people as well as providing questions for further research.

This study faces a number of challenges. First, it is written from the perspective of a 'researcher-fan' (see prologue), which means that emotional attachment to the research subjects is a main characteristic of the thesis, but this perspective is rarely articulated, acknowledged and accepted in research. Secondly, it brings experiences of practices emerging from the global South<sup>11</sup> into current debates and developments on community arts in the North, with a particular emphasis on Britain. This raises ethical questions and issues of Western academics observing, collecting, naming and claiming knowledge about the indigenous 'other' (Smith 1999). Therefore, I adopt an ethnographical approach; its aim is to carefully articulate narratives 'from the ground' to wider audiences and public debates (see chapter 2). Thirdly, this study explores the practices and interactions of a constantly changing network of different youth organisations and people, which take place in different parts of the country and are therefore difficult to grasp or follow. Moreover, Caja Lúdica's and the

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<sup>11</sup> I am aware that using a North-South binary here is a simplification of much more complex dynamics and can be problematic as it raises a range of ethical issues and questions about power relations between researchers and researched (see methodology chapter; also see Henry and Thapar-Björkert 2004; Henry, Higate and Sanghera 2009). These terms do, however, help me to emphasise the aim of the thesis in a more understandable way.

Community Arts Network's practices have not been the focus of analysis in performance and community arts studies. Fourthly, the Network's approaches to practice cannot be entirely explained through terminology emerging from these fields and therefore require theories from other areas such as, for example, youth, social movements and network studies.

The significance of this research, and Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network as case studies, for European audiences may also be raised as a challenge underscoring the work. In spite of the differences in context, though, the significance can be highlighted in a number of ways. First, they are an example of an initiative, through which, despite rather challenging conditions (including contextual as well as financial), young people have developed working strategies to spread, evolve and adapt their practices. By doing so, they have established a continuity of practices, which responded to the lack of resources and increased dependency on external funders. These strategies may be particularly relevant for cultural organisations in European countries. Many initiatives are struggling to survive because of recently increased funding cuts for cultural projects, which has made many organisations disappear and forced them to reduce their activities and interventions. Through *networking their practices* Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network have not only engaged with different communities and youth organisations, but in particular have accompanied and brought together many generations of young people from diverse backgrounds, social status and ethnicity. By doing so, they cross the often existing boundaries between different practices and social struggles. They also link areas of youth engagement, community development and performance practices with an approach to community arts emphasising human relationships, collectivity and protagonism. Most of the young people do not have a career as arts practitioners, and instead have learned their skillsets from peers, which suggests an amateur rather than professional approach to practice. Hence, Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network challenge predominant binaries of

professional artists and 'non-professionals', the participants of community arts practices. I argue that some of their principles, emerging from the challenges of a troublesome context, can provide a model for other cultural organisations and networks, which, in order to survive as such, need to respond and adapt to the economic, social and political changes in their countries.

In this sense, their model can provide inspiration for initiatives working with young people to go beyond participation and move towards protagonism, which I argue implies the *activation* of young people's potential for change and providing the conditions for this to further develop. Secondly, by using skill sharing and cross-sectional networking as a strategy for survival, Caja Lúdica and the Network are pioneers of contemporary community arts processes with young people in the region and other parts of the world. Their approach to practice is based on Theatre of the Oppressed, theatre for education and other community-based theatre practices, which in this particular region have evolved in the last 50 years.

According to some authors (Delfin 2012, Girona Fibla 2012, Durán 2010), they can also be seen as forerunners of the recently emerging "regional ecology" of cultural networks in Latin America, which has shown a particular diverse and rich context of collaborations between cultural organisations and groups. Similarly, Friedler (2010) highlights that, despite the decline of international cooperation, which has financially supported many cultural organisations in Latin America, arts initiatives have developed strategies such as, for example, networking to resist ruptures of social links between organisations often caused by increased competition for funding. Therefore, it is key to explore these developments of cultural networks in the global South as they can provide a rich reservoir of knowledge for a broader community of performance and arts practices.

Finally, several organisations in Guatemala - amongst them, Caja Lúdica - are in the process of pushing forward a law that officially ensures youths' rights

to cultural expression and the arts amongst others. Although cultural rights for young people in Guatemala are protected by the *Iberoamerican Convention of Youth Rights*, to date there is no law which officially ensures these rights in the country (OIJ- CIDJ 2014, 23). The convention emphasises culture, arts and free expression, which are closely linked to young people's integral education, as a right for youth and obliges the state as an important institution to promote, respect and protect these rights (Ibid.). Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network are amongst the few initiatives in Guatemala, which develop their practices based on this convention and therefore an in-depth exploration of their experience can be useful for other youth organisations and networks engaging in similar struggles.

My study is situated in the field of performance studies and community arts, and aims to draw particular attention to practices by and with young people. 'Community arts' as an expression is used less frequently in current literature, which may be due to its "redundancy as a historic term" only aligned with particular practices and politics of local arts development, and according to some authors this turn has been described as "permanent and unlikely to be rescinded" (Gilmore et al. 2015, 7). More common terms than 'community arts' have been 'participatory arts', particularly following changes in economic and social policies throughout the late 1980s and 1990s in Britain and other parts of Europe (Matarasso 2007) as well as 'socially engaged arts practices' or 'collaborative arts' amongst many others.<sup>12</sup> In this thesis, I use 'community arts' as a main term to

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<sup>12</sup> Although 'community arts' has been applied as a common concept in Britain and most other Anglophone countries, terms such as 'socio cultural animation' (Ander-Egg 1997; Kurki 2000), 'community-based arts' (Cohen-Cruz 2005), 'art based community development' (Cleveland 2002) or 'community cultural development' (Adams and Goldbard 2001; Kasat 2013; Sonn and Quaile 2014) can also be found as alternative expressions. Despite the fact that each of them has a slightly different meaning they all emphasise an impact beyond the aesthetic achievement, which benefits social conditions of people and fosters collaboration and participation in the accomplishment of this practice (Palacios 2009). Moreover, the site-specific, contextual and social notion of these practices, according to Palacios (2009), allows connections with 'dialogical arts' (Kester 2004) or 'relational aesthetics' (Bourriard et al. 2002, Bishop 2004), 'contextual



describe Caja Lúdica's practices for three different reasons: 1) In Latin American accounts and practices, 'community arts' (*arte comunitario*) remains popular to describe collective arts practices that imply creative processes as well as elements of community development and networking (see literature review); 2) Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network use it to describe their work; 3) Throughout my research process, I realised, that a small but persistent group of practitioners and scholars in the UK and elsewhere, are still applying the term to describe and position their work (Matarasso 2011, Crehan 2011; Barndt 2011, De Bryne and Gielen 2011, Jeffers 2010, Van Erven 2014). Different attempts have been made to develop new perspectives on a community arts practice, which was once based on an understanding of communities that include not only "geographical places, but also groups of people identified with historical or ethnic traditions, or dedicated to a particular belief or spirit" (DeNobriga and Schwarzman 1999, 1). Through the exploration of Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network, this thesis aims: to contribute new perspectives to these recent debates on community arts mentioned above; to emphasise the need for a re-evaluation and validation of the role of arts practices *in* communities and vice versa; and to draw attention to youth protagonism within that.

### **Literature review**

In the following section I outline literature relevant for this thesis. It is divided into three parts: Firstly, I focus on literature on the development of community arts in Britain as a point of comparison and contrast to Guatemala, which productively reveals the political and practical resonances that are missing in the British context. In addition, I draw on terms and literature from other contexts. Moreover, I highlight key debates relating to arts as collaborative and

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art' (Ardenne 2006), and 'public art' (Lacy 2004; Jackson 2011), which can often be found under the term 'socially engaged arts practices'.

networking practices, which emerge from accounts on cultural networks in Latin America. Due to their informal form of organisation, however, such networking initiatives, which also emerge in other parts of the world, often remain invisible for researchers and are therefore neglected in research. Thus, I turn to non-academic literature (see Matarasso) and use reports from organisations on the ground later in the thesis, which represent valuable data to fill these gaps. In the second part of this review, I focus on peacebuilding and the arts literature with a particular emphasis on relational approaches that resonate with my study. Moreover, I highlight debates on young people as thriving motors and protagonists of grassroots initiatives in post-conflict contexts, not only in Latin America but also in other parts of the world. By bringing these areas of literature together in a dialogue, I am hoping to fill significant gaps in the research, including the lack of analysis of grassroots initiatives and the absence of youth-led perspectives within that, as well as advance debates on more sustainable community arts practices.

### *Part 1: Understanding community arts - global perspectives*

Community arts has different meanings depending on the historical moment as well as its respective context. Debates on its meaning also depend on the definition and limitations of the two constituent terms 'arts' and 'community', which within community arts literature are rarely defined as separate (Kwon 2001; Kester 2004). The juxtaposition of these two words, however requires a constant interrogation and reflection of how 'arts' and 'community' are understood in different contexts. By using the term 'community arts', I recognise its multiple connotations and the controversies about its diverse expressions and definitions.

In this thesis, I understand community arts as being embedded in the everyday of individuals as well as communities. Their different expressions

(performance, visual, writing, crafts amongst others) can often be found outside traditional institutions and rather in informal spaces such as parks, streets or neighbourhood centres. They often prioritise the social and relational aspect over the aesthetic product. I am building my definition on North American Aboriginal understandings of the arts as integral to life, which rather than representing an individual identity was reflecting a community (Barndt 2011, 14). Gregory Cajete emphasises that in many indigenous communities “art was viewed as an expression of life and was practiced [...] by all the people of a tribe” (1994, 153). Moreover arts was a means of imagination and therefore an important part of community celebrations and ritual ceremonies. This enables people to integrate “myth, dream, art, ecological philosophy, communality and spirit” (Ibid., 145 quoted in Barndt 2011, 14) as essential elements in learning processes. Significantly, this understanding of the arts as closely linked to or even synonymous with community according to Barndt (2011, 14) contrasts ‘Western’ understanding of community arts where ‘arts’ and ‘community’ are often considered as separate. I additionally refer to community arts as not only exclusively bound to the local, but also as a networking process, which can connect and mobilise individuals and groups for collective action across territories. Thereby, I aim to draw attention to the social and relational notion of community as an ongoing process and every day practice.

In the literature, community arts has been used to refer to a great variety of practices, which range from community development programmes for education implemented by local councils, site-specific events and collaborations between groups and artists, street parades with hundreds of people to small-scale theatre, and dance performances in low-income neighbourhoods (Van Erven 2014).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The relationship between art and social practices has created a series of questions in international literature emerging from different disciplines. Various authors have emphasised the potential of the arts in relation to health and well-being (Chambers 1998, Health Development Agency 1999, Putland, 2008; South 2006; Cliff and Camic 2016), community cohesion and conflict resolution (Cohen 2003, Zelizer 2003), youth at

These activities are often facilitated and organised by community artists, cultural associations or institutions. Many of them are recognised by cultural authorities, development agencies and funders all over Europe and in other parts of the world as a way to support and engage with communities in different ways. While working strategies, methodology and quality (amongst other aspects) differ, what most of them share is a collaboration between ‘professional artists’ and a group of people who often have no previous involvement in arts making, the ‘participants’ (Williams 1995; Lowe 2000; Matarasso 1997; Van Erven 2014). Other authors (Goldbard 2006b; Koopman 2007), however may disagree about the labelling and distinction of ‘professional artists’ vs. ‘non-artists’ or ‘participants’, and highlight the informal notion of many community arts processes. Although a large number of such initiatives, which often do not rely on funding or the involvement of professional artists, have been reported, public attention and resources have not acknowledged the merit of this work. As a result, these experiences often remain invisible to those who are not directly involved (Goldbard 2006). Through the exploration of the Community Arts Network I seek to draw attention to such voluntary and amateur processes on the ground, which, in the case of my study, are undertaken by young people who become protagonists in their local communities and beyond.

After this brief introduction to some of the diverse and controversial debates about community arts I aim to now focus on Britain. An extended historical review of the literature on community arts since the 1970s with an emphasis on this particular context was key at the beginning of my research journey. It served as a starting point and provided a stable and firm point of

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risk and social inclusion (Wright et al. 2006, Baker and Cohen 2008); participation and social impact (Williams 1995, Matarasso, 1997, Moriarty 1998; Hill and Moriarty 2001, Merli 2002, Belfiore 2007, Belfiore and Bennet 2010), community cultural development (Goldbard 2006; Koopman 2007; Lowe 2000), social capital (Williams 1997, Putland 2008), participation (Bishop 2006; 2012; Hope 2011), as well as the creation of networks and the cooperation within communities (Jeremyn 2001, Kay and Watt 2000).

reference in contrast to Guatemala at the time. However, due to word limit restrictions, I did not include the entire review in the thesis, and instead focused on some key discussions that are relevant to the argument. By doing so, I aim to highlight their limitations and how my account can contribute to the emerging debates in the field.

My exploration of Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network, which share a common struggle for change, has probably found most resonance with the early debates on community arts in Britain during the 1970s. According to Owen Kelly (1984), this period was characterised by the emergence of an artist movement and the formation of a new kind of political activism that considered creativity as an essential tool for radical struggle by bringing the arts into the streets. It was grounded in the value and importance of social organisation in society, equality of opportunities, and communal self-determination (Ibid., 11; 36). Initiatives such as, for example, Welfare State International<sup>14</sup> drew upon Bakhtin's notions of carnival traditions and processions from the south of Europe as well as puppetry, sculpture, music and dance in order to create highly visible celebrations and performances together with different communities (Shaughnessy 2012, 23).<sup>15</sup>

Also during that time, community arts encountered a significant turn in their expressions as the Arts Councils started to show interest in investigating and funding arts projects and interventions, which some opponents (Kelly 1984) identified as the beginning of a de-politicisation of many community arts practices, and a reinforcement of the state values at the expense of the fight for cultural democracy. Since then, key debates have gradually moved from a formerly activist emphasis towards a much more economic and instrumentalist

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<sup>14</sup> Other initiatives emerging during that time were, for example, Craigmiller Festival Society, Telford Community Arts, Jubilee Arts, Inter Action (Hope 2011, 175).

<sup>15</sup> Other examples were Bread and Puppet Theatre in the United States; Eugenio Barba and Odin Teatret in Denmark; see also Fox (2002), Kershaw (1992), Coult and Kershaw (1983).

one, with emerging themes such as participation or impact measurement amongst others.

From the late 1980s/early 1990s, with the increased trend of artist-led socially engaged art practices, which aimed to contribute to the improvement of the living conditions of marginalised communities in Britain, the role of the artist became more important and changed towards a workshop facilitator (Branden 1978; Kelly 1984; Crummy 1992; Dickson 1995; Harding 1997). This turn was accompanied by a trend mainly emerging in France, Spain, and Latin America that emphasised community artists as socio-cultural animators.<sup>16</sup> With cultural community development as one of the main aims of community arts in the late 1980s, the arts production in itself became marginal. During this period, the quality and aesthetics of community arts projects were highly criticised, and accompanied by emerging debates about favouring the process over the cultural product (Matarasso 2010, 6).

The trends in British economic and social policy throughout the late 1980s and 1990s also impacted on community arts debates and practices, which led to the emergence of participatory arts, where experiences of change often took place on an individual rather than collective level (Ibid. 2007). Although this shift in community arts from its activist roots towards politically less radical activities, and its increased focus on the individual rather than the collective were criticised, it seemed to have evolved into a new political format. Kelly (1984, 115) described this as “the domination of the local state over its subjects” that maintain the status quo rather than challenge it. François Matarasso (2010, 10) takes it even further by questioning the existence of a “critical dimension in participatory arts at all” since the mid-1990s. His assumption arguably describes the character of many participatory arts projects in the UK since the 1990s until now. Although projects may start with a critical perspective, many of them have pre-determined time

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<sup>16</sup> See: Quintana (1992); Trilla (1997); Larrazabal (1997) in Spain; Gillet (2003) in France; Ander-Egg (1997) in Argentina; Freire (1994, 1996) in Brazil.

frames and outcomes and lack the involvement of the participants in decision-making processes, which leaves them on the lower rungs of the “ladder of participation” (Arnstein 1969). There are only few accounts in British community arts literature that describe participant-led processes, as they often take place on an informal level with limited access for researchers, and this remains a significant gap in the literature to date (see also later sections).

This trend was and still is accompanied by an increasing demand to measure the social outcomes of community arts projects (England, A. C. 2004). A series of contradictory studies<sup>17</sup> were undertaken since then with the aim to measure the social impact and benefits of participatory arts programmes on an individual as well as collective level. Impact assessment remains a challenge to date due to the difficulties in finding a common definition (Guetzkow 2002; Reeves 2002) as well as inadequate methodologies and their flaws to measure its complex dynamics (Belfiore 2006). Susan Galloway (2009), for example, points out several challenges in evaluating the social impact of the arts, such as the failure to identify the long-term impacts of arts processes rather than outputs of arts activities including unforeseen or negative impacts (see also Shaw 1999; Coalter 2001; Belfiore 2002;). One of the main criticisms emerging from social impact studies is the failure to successfully prove the interrelationship between arts participation and specific effects (Winner and Hetland 2000; Merli 2002; Reeves 2002; Belfiore 2006).

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<sup>17</sup> Apart from Matarasso’s and Merli’s contradictory studies since the mid-1990s many other authors have explored the transformative potential of the arts (e.g. Shaw 1999; Coalter 2001; Guetzkow 2002; Reeves 2002; Oakley 2004; Ruiz 2004; Belfiore and Bennett 2006, 2007; Ramsey White and Rentschler 2005). This also includes the reviews of various scholars focusing on the evidence of arts impact that are based on literatures in the fields of criminal justice (Hughes 2004), education (Winner and Hetland 2000), health and well-being (White and Angus 2003; England, A. C. 2007b, Malchiochi 2013; Young, Camic and Tischler 2015); youth (Hughes and Wilson 2007; Daykin et al 2008; Wright et al. 2006); social inclusion (Jermyn, 2001; Newman, Curtis, and Stephens, 2003) and regeneration (Evans and Shaw 2004).

My study shares the discomfort of social impact assessment with a group of authors (Balfour 2009; Thompson 2009a; Nicholson 2005), who raise their concerns about accounts that over-state personal or social transformation through arts processes. Helen Nicholson (2005, 16), for example, points out that, although applied theatre and many other community arts practices are “motivated by the desire to make a difference to the lives of others”, challenges emerge when trying to describe their impact as transformational. In her account she stresses the impact of power dynamics, which determine who and what is to be transformed and by whom (Ibid.). Similarly, Thompson (2009, 131) contests an overemphasis on outcomes, impact and the effect of art practices and draws the attention away from assessment towards the moment of the arts encounter itself affecting body, senses and emotions. He identifies this joyful or ‘buzz’ experience as “inseparable from the total impact of the event” (Ibid.). “The sensation” he continues, “is no longer the adjunct, the expendable adjective, but the dynamic texture of the work through which it finds its force” (Ibid.) in other words the participants may benefit from the experiences of the arts encounters themselves.

With my thesis I aim to contribute to these discussions, which emphasise the potential of experience and the emerging feelings of arts encounters, as well as seek to find ways of thinking about arts engagement and its aftermath. Through my study I also hope to further develop these debates by focusing on the networking experiences and relational bonds that emerge from such practices. Hence, my exploration and approach to change, which emerges from this account, challenges theories of change based on the idea of theatre and the arts as one of transportation (Schechner 2002; Nicholson 2005) or the temporary crossing of a threshold into another world. Nicholson (2005, 12) contends that arts and theatre participants are “taken somewhere”, however, “they are returned more or less to their starting places at the end of the drama or performance.” Although the mentioned accounts may underline the changing



and maybe affective experience of the arts encounter, they lack notions of what I call *rhizomatic transcendence*, which I argue represents the continuum of experience in the 'aftermath' of arts engagement that can create conditions for imagining new ideas, imaginaries and possibilities in the everyday.

More recent debates on community arts continue with common themes, as mentioned above, such as, for example, social and economic benefits and outcomes of community arts programmes (England, A. C. 2004, 2007b). At the same time, documents released by the Arts Council England (2013; 2014) suggest a tendency to integrate culture and the arts into the government's political agendas, which particularly in recent years are clearly directed towards economic constructions of change based on productivity and efficiency. A report in 2013 for example affirms that work placements, and trainee schemes in the arts can help to provide the "skilled labour inputs that the UK's creative industries need to flourish" (England, A.C. 2013, 4). Moreover, both accounts highlight the potential of the arts to encourage creative innovation, and to foster creative talents and expertise, social and personal skills, as well as diversity amongst others (Ibid.). Following the general tone of the mentioned reports, a clear turn towards an understanding of the arts and cultural sector based on economic ideals with an orientation towards clear expectations and outcomes can be observed.

These trends, and in particular the need to measure the social impact of the arts, contrast with the, at least in the UK, often forgotten voluntary and amateur arts sector. Amateur or voluntary arts are community-led grassroots initiatives that include only limited professional facilitation. Their activities are largely self-financed, intergenerational and run on a voluntary basis often for social or cultural reasons, as enjoyment and recreation and some have a more political or activist motivation (Ramsden et al. 2011, 7-9). According to Voluntary Arts<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Voluntary Arts: <http://www.voluntaryarts.org/> (Accessed 13 December 2015).

(2014, 1), across the UK and the Republic of Ireland there are approximately 63.000 voluntary arts groups, which embrace a range of art forms including visual arts, crafts, folk, music, theatre amongst others. Many of these groups are characterised by their intergenerational nature (Ramsden et al. 2011).

Only in recent years amateur and voluntary arts have gained an increased interest by researchers in the field (Hutchison and Feist 1991; Jackson 2003, England, A. C. 2008, Ramsden et al. 2011; Ridout 2013, Nicholson et al. 2015; Nicholson 2015). Although Simpson (2010, 4) claims that sustainable amateur arts are currently flourishing in the UK with a strong involvement of young people, there is very little empirical research on the subject. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to grassroots arts initiatives in the UK by funding bodies such as the Arts Councils or other policy makers (Ibid.). Their positive contribution to civil society has been overlooked over the years, their potential to strengthen communities has been underestimated, and these trends are only starting to become recognised (Ibid., 5).

My exploration of Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network in Guatemala aims to draw attention to this gap in the literature and emphasise the importance of such initiatives, in particular for the engagement and *activation* of young people in their communities. My research shows that initiatives *grounded in and led by* the community are more resistant and sustainable to changes, in comparison to community arts projects and organisations that rely solely on external funding and a lead artist. Many of the Community Arts Network's youth groups are not funded and run on a voluntary basis. Indeed, networking based on solidarity, the collective and the sharing of knowledge with other youth groups is one of the main reasons for their sustainability. The relational and networking elements or "webs of significance" (Thompson 1999, 84) emerging from such processes are long-term affects in and of themselves. These elements have not been paid attention to enough in previous research, and I argue that

they need to become more central in performance and community arts research and practices.

Hence, the voluntary and amateur sets out a terrain for a whole new conceptualisation of the relations in which art might take place. In the Latin American context, though, these are infused with an activist and social movement discourse and often rely on networking across disciplines. This does not make them quite comparable with many amateur initiatives in the UK as the latter are often less connected across arts forms or other community groups (Simpson 2010). It does, however, highlight that there are spaces and relations of practice that exist and that have been neglected beyond those documented to date, and beyond those of interest to state bodies like the Arts Council that have to justify themselves as agents of government priorities. These rather invisible practices seem to thrive particularly in times of economic crisis because they build, as Voluntary Arts state on their webpage,<sup>19</sup> on “expertise, experience and relationships of their members, their friends, families and the local community”. Sharing expertise and experience are noted as key elements for sustainability here, and they also represent one key argument of my thesis, which emphasises the Latin American context. This not only fills a significant gap in the literature but also provides an original contribution to emerging debates put forward by *Poor Theatres Research*,<sup>20</sup> a research project that explores relationships between economic issues and theatre by looking at community arts practices in different contexts, one of them being Latin America (see also chapter 7).

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<sup>19</sup> Voluntary Arts: <http://www.voluntaryarts.org/take-part/about-the-voluntary-arts-and-crafts/> (Accessed 19 December 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Poor Theatres Blog: <http://blog.poortheatres.manchester.ac.uk/> (Accessed 19 December 2015).

*Arte comunitario ('community arts') and resistance in Latin America: a networking approach*

In contrast to the European context, in Latin America '*arte comunitario*' ('community arts') as a concept has gained importance at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in particular in relation to the emerging cultural networks in the region. It is, however, a much older practice. Other terms such as *teatro popular* ('popular theatre') (see Weiss 1998) or *teatro comunitario* ('community theatre') (Bidegain 2007; Bidegain, Marianetti and Quain 2008), and *arte para la transformación social* ('art for social transformation') (Johnson 2006; Olaechea and Engeli 2008; Bang and Wajnerman 2010) are also often used interchangeably despite their slightly different emphasis and meanings (RLATS 2009). I acknowledge these differences, but I use 'community arts' as a term in this section, and, in doing so, I aim to draw attention to the networking characteristics specific to practices in this particular region.

For some authors, the community arts initiatives in Latin America form part of emerging new social movements, which together with other civil society initiatives started to develop in the late 1990s (Dubatti and Pansera 2006). They were characterised by elements such as intergenerational participation, collective creation, and the recuperation of local and regional histories through creative means (Ibid.; also see Röttger 1991; DeCosta 1992). However, most of these initiatives have their roots in a tradition of cultural practices emerging in the region such as, for example, the various expressions of the New Popular Theatre Movement which came into being in the 1960s, as well as Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed later. Both have framed and inspired many cultural initiatives to date (Bang 2012; Olaechea and Engeli 2008), amongst them Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network.

According to Weiss (1993, 136), the New Popular Theatre Movement was characterised by its collective processes as well as non-hierarchical ways of organising, which allowed them to develop mutual relationships with different localities. Prentki (2015, 50) adds that it shows a large tradition of festivals and

encounters, during which different initiatives gathered to share their experiences and to collectively engage in debates on emerging political and social issues. By the mid-1990s most of them also started to get involved in educational development, drawing inspiration from Paolo Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996), which was later adapted by Augusto Boal in his theatre work (2002) as well as other popular education initiatives (see Kane 2001).

Hence, similar to their antecedents, most of the current initiatives and cultural networks build on these theories, sharing an understanding of the arts as tools for social transformation, albeit with slightly different interpretations of this goal (Olaechea and Engeli 2008, Friedler 2011). Some view artistic expression as a means to empower the oppressed, excluded, and marginalised (RLATS 2009), while others highlight that the potential in the arts lies in the provision of tools to develop solutions to social and personal issues in the communities (Roitter 2009). Others, in turn, put forward an understanding of creative exploration as a process of personal change, which fosters active participation and young people's local community engagement (Caja Lúdica 2013; Arte Acción 2010). My exploration of the Community Arts Network contributes to these debates through a strong emphasis on youth and the importance of individual and collective agency for processes of transformation and change.

According Tim Prentki (2015, 52), many of the Latin American initiatives are characterised by their roots in the community in which they work. While for Prentki the importance of the local community has characterised the work of "some of the hemisphere's most effective groups", many of these groups have also established links to other organisations or networks on a national and international level (Ibid., 53). My research coincides with Prentki and stresses Caja Lúdica's and the Community Arts Network's embeddedness in the local, yet seeks to highlight their connections with other national and international organisations and initiatives. I argue that this ambiguity enabled these groups to sustain themselves in the Guatemalan context.

My study on this particular practice, however, is embedded within broader debates on cultural networks, which have been defined in many and controversial ways in different fields. While some authors emphasise their characteristics of linking organisations or people for a shared purpose (Van Paschen 2011, Rossiter 2006), others, and my use of the term resonates with them, take a *process-based approach* by using ‘network’ as a verb (Gardner 2011, 205; Gilchrist (1995; 2000). In her account on community development, Alison Gilchrist (1995, 2), for example, defines it as “the process by which relationships and contacts between people and organisations are established, nurtured, and utilized for mutual benefit.” Similarly, in this thesis, I understand networking as an organic and flexible process, which is constituted by and dependent on the interactions of heterogeneous organisations, groups and individuals and held together by their common aim. Or as Annelise Riles (2000, 174) clearly puts it: networks “must be created, sustained, and made to expand, and this need enlists collective interest and commitment to action”. Moreover, as argued in this thesis, networks provide a social and relational space, where knowledge, experiences and practices are developed and stored.

Cultural networking and movements can be traced in different Latin American countries throughout history. Some authors (Wortman 2011, Friedler 2011) link their emergence to the failing and instability of the states including recurrent coups, political and economic crisis, as well as to the vitality of civil society and organisation in different parts of the region. In particular in the last decade different groups and networks dedicated to community arts were formed in Latin America. Their processes and activities, however, remain invisible as very little research about cultural networks has been undertaken in this area. Nevertheless, according to Yudice (2012), cultural networks have significantly changed the cultural sector in the Latin American region. He emphasises that they represent key contemporary expressions of civil society organisations as they interact with different private and public sectors including international

cooperation and donors, which often provide financial resources to emerging networks (Ibid.).

Similarly, in Asian and African contexts, cultural networks are less visible than those emerging in European settings, where they seem to be more institutionalised and have better access to funding (Delfin 2012). While there has been some research on cultural networks in Europe (Minichbauer and Mitterdorfer 2001; Cvjetičanin 2011; McMahon 2013; Innocenti 2015), Latin American practices have been clearly underrepresented. Most accounts on cultural networks in Latin America tend to be mainly descriptive in nature, however, some authors (Savova 2011; Friedler 2011; Delfin 2012; Yudice 2012) provide greater in depth analysis and insights into such grassroots initiatives. Moreover, organisations and protagonists of cultural networks in Latin America express the importance of studying and learning from their own experiences and network interactions so as to improve common difficulties and develop new strategies for better sustainability (Rodriguez 2011; RLATS 2009). However, as Delfin (2012, 241) observes, there seems to be a breach between the attention networks receive in forums on cultural policies, and the expectations they create amongst cultural institutions and organisations, donors, and the research that has been undertaken in this area. Hence most written texts about cultural networks in Latin America mainly emerge from project proposals, web pages or funding reports, some of which are included in this review as well as the thesis.

While international donors, which have started to fund emergent networks in Latin America in the last decade, may have contributed to an increased visibility and documentation of cultural networks, they have also created a variety of dilemmas (Van Paaschen 2011, 164). Examples of these dilemmas include the need for networks to respond to donor priorities, and to deliver impact reports to evidence their development and progress (Ibid.). Moreover, according to Paul Van Paaschen, who has founded HIVOS, a Dutch development organisation, the more a network depends on sustained funding, sudden policy

shifts by donors will impact on its dynamics (Ibid.). In particular in the last few years in the frame of a global economic crisis, donor agencies have gradually withdrawn from the Latin American region. This mainly affected fully funded networks and initiatives rather than those with social movement roots and embedded in local struggles for social justice as they are more tied to notions of membership and solidarity rather than external financial resources. These dynamics become also visible through the development of Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network, which on the one hand have been affected by funding cuts; however, their roots as part of a cultural movement, their embeddedness in the local struggles for social justice as well as their notions of collectivity, as I argue, have enabled them to continue their work despite rather challenging conditions.

The increased need for collaboration due to a decrease in funding from international aid companies and the lack of state support for cultural initiatives in the region has resulted in one of the largest and most recent cultural initiatives in Latin America, the *Cultura Viva Comunitaria*<sup>21</sup> campaign (Plataforma Puente 2010). This campaign has been put forward by *Plataforma Puente*, a platform of different initiatives, which was founded in 2010 (Ibid.). The organisations and networks emerging from different parts of the continent share a common struggle for the organisation and experience of an independent and autonomous community-based culture (Ibid. 2011, op. cit.: 1m 38). Their shared aim is to “foster community organisations in Latin America through the exchange of experiences and at the same time making an impact on the creation of public policies on a continental level” (Ibid. 2010). This struggle requires the joint forces of different initiatives in order to put enough pressure on their governments to

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<sup>21</sup> The *Cultura Viva Comunitaria* (‘Life Community Culture’) campaign was inspired by the *Cultura Viva* Program in Brazil, a government initiative advanced by Luis Ignacio Lula de Silva since 2006, which emphasised the provision of financial support for cultural organisations rooted in different communities running under the concept *Puntos de Cultura* (‘Points of Culture’) (Roldán 2012, 2).



invest 0.1 per cent of their national budget in community-based cultural expressions which are often grounded in solidarity, respect, diversity, creativity and joy (Ibid.).

According to Mauricio Delfin, who is one of the few leading scholars researching cultural networks in Latin America, *Plataforma Puente* has become highly visible and established itself as “one of the most powerful current agendas for grassroots cultural action” (2012, 245). Caja Lúdica as well as the Community Arts Network in Guatemala form part of the mentioned initiatives including the *Cultura Viva Comunitaria* Campaign, and represent youth organisation within these spaces. Despite the fact that young people play a significant and thriving role in many of these spaces, my surveying of the literature unveils that they are hardly mentioned in the written accounts. One explanation for this neglect may be the grassroots nature of their activities, which are often difficult to access for researchers. Moreover, research on highly visible campaigns such as *Cultura Viva Comunitaria* has only started recently (see Turino 2011; Delfin 2012; Roldán 2012; Vila-Viñas 2015). My exploration of the Community Arts Network in Guatemala aims to contribute to the debates on cultural networks in Latin America and, through its emphasis on youth, draw attention to these invisible initiatives happening on the ground.

The few accounts of the Latin American initiatives, as described above, stand in dialogue with social movement studies debates, which have highlighted the social notion of networking between organisations and collective resistance initiatives, which are often territorially distant. Some scholars have developed the rhizome as a concept to explore the openness, movement, and mobility of these initiatives to connect and cross borders (Schlossberg 1999, Chesters and Welsh 2006, Escobar 1995), spaces (Routledge 1997, 2003, Featherstone 2008), and organisations (Della Porta and Diani 2006; Woods et al 2012) through their actions. In Latin America, for example, social movements and networks emerged as nodes of resistance during the years of authoritarian rule and military

dictatorships; however, they had to operate underground as they were targeted and persecuted as threats to the status quo (see for example: Eckstein 2001, Escobar and Alvarez 1992).

This was also the case in Guatemala during its 36 years of civil war. Despite the fact that social movements and networks in Guatemala operate more visibly and openly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, public protests and other expressions of resistance by minority groups are still targeted and oppressed by the state (Mazariegos 2007; CALDH 2009; Brett 2006). Although Caja Lúdica's and the Network's resistance and actions in contrast to other social justice movements in Guatemala are much more subtle and may seem to be less of a threat to the status quo, they have also been victims of the "criminalisation of social protests" (Svampa 2008), and have lost some of their young people through homicide.

While there is very little written about long-term social initiatives in Guatemala, there is no record of ethnographic studies on the role of youth cultural networks in this particular context. My thesis is in line with Delfin's (2012) demand of moving from *what* cultural networks are towards *how* they actually work. It also coincides with his understanding of cultural networks as social spaces and "domains for social action", which especially in developing regions seek to create alternatives to address issues such as social inequality and poverty (Ibid., 242). However, the exploration of the Community Arts Network in Guatemala aims to provide a slightly different perspective by asking what this Network means to the youth groups and individuals, how it is perceived by them, and what experiences emerge from their active involvement. Hence, my study develops an in-depth analysis of a long-term process and youth cultural movement in Guatemala, and therefore represents an original contribution of knowledge to the few debates on networks as forms of cultural youth organisation.

My emphasis on human relationships in Caja Lúdica's community arts and networking processes, and their contribution to the reconstruction of the social

fabric of the war-torn communities in post-conflict Guatemala, also locates this study within debates emerging from the field of peacebuilding and the arts.

### *Part 2: Peacebuilding, arts and youth agency*

Arts-based peacebuilding can be situated within the larger framework of civil society initiatives, ranging from mediation programs on the grassroots to international projects with an economic focus and top-down approach (Zelizer 2003). Many traditional peacebuilding processes emphasise rather linear and rational forms of communication, which often lack the provision of spaces for exploring the creative expression of thoughts and emotions, or other forms of interactions (Zelizer 1997; 2003; Senehi 2000; 2002). Alternatively, several authors (Lederach 1997, Galtung 1996; Schirch 2005) have emphasised the importance of community during peacebuilding processes with a particular focus on relationships. Arts and cultural initiatives have the potential to foster relational processes through different creative means such as theatre, storytelling, dance and music amongst others (Shank and Schirch 2008). However, many of them struggle to sustain themselves over a longer period of time, because they solely rely on external donors and often terminate with the final project outcome. Process-based initiatives according to Zelizer (2003) can mainly (if not exclusively) be found on the ground, follow a bottom-up approach, and are undertaken by local community groups, NGOs or artists. Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network are notable examples of these initiatives.

Many authors from different disciplines such as peacebuilding and theatre and performance studies have explored the connection between peacebuilding and the arts, and have identified the potential of creative practices to prevent, respond to and transform conflict (Lederach 2005; Thompson, Hughes and Balfour 2009; Thompson 2009a; Zelizer 2003, 2005; Cohen 1997; 2003; Van

Tongeren et al. 2005).<sup>22</sup> Although there is an increased interest in research on the link between the arts and peacebuilding, the nexus remains under-theorized as many of the studies mentioned above mainly emphasise the documentation of different projects. One of the most recent contributions to the documentation of cases is *Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict* (Cohen, Gutierrez Varea and Walker 2011a/b), which includes examples from South Africa, Latin America, Sri Lanka, Cambodia amongst others. These studies highlight the potential of cultural interventions to reclaim public spaces, build relationships and foster creative imagination. They mainly document experiences of professional theatre productions undertaken by artists pitched and performed to an audience in the United States or former conflict zones. The different accounts are written by the practitioners and project leaders, which may be one of the reasons why many of them slightly lack critical distance (Van Erven 2014).

Other accounts go beyond notions of documentation as a main aim and instead emphasise the challenges and ethical complexities that practitioners face in conflict settings (Thompson, Hughes and Balfour 2009; Thompson 2009a/b). The authors of *Performance in Place of War* (Thompson, Hughes and Balfour 2009), for example, explore different arts and performance initiatives in Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Beirut and the Democratic Republic of Congo amongst others. They lack, however, the representation of experiences from Latin America and other Spanish speaking countries, with the authors apologising for neglecting

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<sup>22</sup> To date the literature documenting the role of the arts in peacebuilding and conflict embraces studies of a great diversity of creative practices with an emphasis on: ritual in peacebuilding (Schirch 2004, 2005; Senehi 2002; Cohen, Gutierrez Varea and Walker 2011b); applied theatre/drama (Boal 1995; Cohen-Cruz 1998; Rohd 1998; Sternberg 1998; Cohen, Gutierrez Varea and Walker 2011 a/b; Thompson 2009; Van Erven 2014; Barnes and Coetzee 2014); youth (Conte, Brunson and Masar 2002; Hunter 2005; Parry 2014; Kanyako 2015); music (Pruitt 2011; Slachmuisjlder 2005; Urbain 2008; Lederach and Lederach 2010), storytelling (Senehi 2000, 2002; Kyoon 2009) amongst others.

particular regions due to missing language abilities (Ibid.). My study contributes to this representational gap of Latin American practices, and in turn, the authors' emphasis on cultural interventions in public spaces is relevant to the actions of the Community Arts Network and its youth groups.

In contrast to *Acting Together, Performance in Place of War* provides a mix of ethnographic accounts, narratives from practitioners, and critical analysis, which gives an overview of different initiatives using play and imagination as key tools to open up spaces and hopeful interactions in times of crisis (Ibid., 25-35). At the same time, they make the reader aware of the importance of interrogating the value and ethics of cultural interventions in places of war, and ask practitioners to reflect on the impact of their own cultural understandings and involvement in power dynamics and possible consequences. They also indicate that an overemphasis on the potential of the arts in theory, without paying attention to their complex dynamics in practice and their relations to the different contexts on a cultural, social and political level, could undermine their value for the people involved, in this case the protagonists of the Community Arts Network.<sup>23</sup>

Following Thompson, Hughes and Balfour (2009), I consider an understanding of Guatemala's context as key foundation for developing an account on the Network's contribution to more peaceful communities. Although in post-conflict Guatemala, the peace accords have been signed and the fear of violence emerging from a war situation has subsided, high levels of inequality, struggles of land, injustice and divisions of ethnicity still exist and so does violence, which affects the already fractured communities and the well-being of the population. Due to my understanding of community arts practices as closely linked to and embedded in their context, in Guatemala, practice has to emphasise the strengthening and building of relationships, foster trust and hope on a community level and beyond, as well as address structural issues which are the

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<sup>23</sup> A similar comparison between the two mentioned accounts has been made by Van Erven (2014).

cause of many conflicts to date. Creative initiatives and actions as described in this study, I argue, contribute to peacebuilding processes and emerge largely on the ground and in everyday community life.

Hence, this research builds on relationship and process-based understandings of peacebuilding emerging from the ground put forward by different authors (Lederach 2005, Schirch 2005), who also consider creativity as one of the key elements for fostering peace. It is not surprising that Lederach's emphasis on the centrality of relationships in peacebuilding processes, for example, began during his research in Central America. While collaborating with local people, he observed that their understanding of conflict and response to conflict was "embedded in relational spaces, networks and connections" - in other words in their everyday experiences (Lederach 2005, 76).

In his account he explains that the Spanish expressions '*enredo*' ('tangled net') or '*to be enredado*' ('to be tangled or caught in a net') are commonly used to describe everyday conflicts (Ibid., 77). For Lederach (Ibid.) they both refer to notions of relationships and relational spaces in general. The rupture of a net or web of relationships through conflict means that it needs to be carefully crafted together again as a "fabric of lines, connections and knots" (Ibid.). Hence, emerging from my own experience I share this ambiguous meaning of '*enredo*', which on the one hand refers to the conflict itself and on the other hand applies to the way in which to understand response to conflict as a social process embedded in webs of relationships (Ibid.)

Lederach's relational dimension of peacebuilding stresses the effect of conflict on patterns of interaction and communication. This includes elements such as trust building, reconciliation and future imagining, which can be facilitated however not be imposed by outsiders, and therefore needs to be rather driven from internal forces (Ibid.). Hence, according to him, all members of society from those in position of leadership, to community and religious leaders

and those on the grassroots level, such as for example young people, have an equally important role to play in creating lasting peace (Ibid.).

This emphasis on 'peacebuilding from below' (see also Mac Ginty 2008, 2011) and the importance of relationships within that is part of Lederach's wider argument, which stresses the importance of imagination as the essence of peacebuilding processes. He uses "the moral imagination" as a term to describe the ability of individuals or a community to imagine responses and actions that are able to transcend and break everyday cycles of violence, and by doing so, create possibilities for a better world (Ibid., 182). According to him, "we must explore the creative process itself, not as a tangential inquiry, but as the wellspring that feeds the building of peace", which in itself is a process and is characterised by its long-term nature and adaptation to the context (Ibid., 5; 182). Because building peace is a process, Lederach (Ibid., 126; 182) suggests "platforms" as a concept to describe ongoing and relational spaces created by people, the generators of such processes, who in contrast to institutions maintain their flexibility to generate new responses to emerging challenges.

This idea emerging from the peacebuilding field resonates with my exploration of Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network and their role in the context of Guatemala. Rebuilding societies affected by war and fostering bonds within fractured communities, as Lederach suggests, involves rebuilding relationships by providing spaces and opportunities for encounter to bring people together at different levels; to share experiences; to explore new relationships; and to envision an interdependent future (1997, 150). In this sense, peace - even if already 'achieved' - in order to be sustainable has to be practiced and cannot be solely regarded as the final outcome of a peace process. By building on these accounts, peacebuilding in this thesis is understood as a transformative process that includes cultural and socio-political elements. These elements contribute to the re-building of relationships and bring about positive change in conflict-affected as well as post-conflict communities.

### *Youth protagonism and the everyday*

Youth in conflict has been discussed broadly by a variety of scholars and is dominated by two main trends of literature. On one hand, these youths are presented as passive victims (Singer 2005; Posthumus 2006), and on the other hand as perpetrators and destabilising actors in post-conflict scenarios (Urdal 2006, Brett and Specht 2004, Wessels 2002, Sommers 2002). Much less attention has been paid to their potential as positive agents in post-conflict reconstruction processes and an understanding of young people as active contributors to a more sustainable peace (Boyden 2006; Brocklehurst 2006; De Waal and Argenti 2002; Mc Evoy-Levy 2001, Schwartz 2010, Danesh 2008). This study is located within the latter and aims to contribute to this gap in the literature, by exploring a youth networking initiative in Guatemala, which is linked to other organisations and networks in Latin America. By moving away from a victim or perpetrator binary, in this thesis, I aim to draw attention to the potential of young people as agents in their communities.

Youth has been defined in many ways, and most commonly has been described as the time-span between childhood and adulthood, considering both biological processes as well as chronological age. Most international organisations, often for statistical reasons, define youth chronologically according to certain age groups, which vary according to their respective policies and agendas (UNICEF 2009, 11).<sup>24</sup> However, other authors (Kemper 2005, Nayak 2003, Mintz 2008, Honwana 2012) contend that such definitions do not capture the various perceptions of youth in different cultures. In their accounts they emphasise the importance of the socio-political context and its dynamics for a definition of youth. While a chronological definition common in the West often

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<sup>24</sup> While the World Health Organisation (WHO) for example outlines 3 categories of youth: adolescents (10-19 years old), youth (15-24 years old) and young people (10-24 years old), the UN General Assembly defines youth as an age group between 15 and 24, that distinguishes teenagers (13-19 years old) and young adults (20-24 years old) (Schwartz 2010, United Nations 2012).



promotes a more individualistic understanding of youth isolated from the social context, research in Africa unveils that other cultures define youth according to young peoples' roles, responsibilities and status within their communities (DeBoeck and Honwana 2005). Hence, these ideas challenge a generalised age-based definition of youth and claim for a more holistic approach considering political, economic and socio-cultural circumstances of a context and its perceptions of young people.

In Guatemala, youth is defined by the CJG (*Coordinadora de Juventud Guatemala*) as "all adolescents including those between thirteen and eighteen years old and youth adults between eighteen and thirty which are in the process of constant change and individual consolidation due to their social, multicultural, economical, sociological, psychological and biological conditions. Moreover, they hold important qualities such as dynamism, creativity and initiative that can be positively canalised into actions for their development" (CJG quoted in CALDH 2009, 18). Similarly, Honwana (2012) in her study on African youth stresses the transition from childhood to adulthood, or in her words "waithood", as a challenging but also dynamic period, during which young people use their agency and creativity to invent new forms of being and interacting with society (see also De Boeck and Honwana 2005).

This thesis follows CJG's context-specific understanding of youth and, by following Honwana (2012), particularly emphasises youth as a dynamic process of growing, during which young people negotiate and create identities as well as new meanings, ideas and opinions, and search for spaces of belonging and agency. Hence, I move beyond perceptions of youth as victims or potential threats to stability in post-conflict settings towards an understanding of young people as potential protagonists and active agents of their own lives and within their community. The term 'youth protagonism' (*protagonismo juvenil*) emerges from different experiences in Latin America and in particular Brazil, and is used similarly by the Community Arts Network in Guatemala. Da Costa, who is one

of the leading figures in the debates in Brazil defines youth protagonism as follows:

youth protagonism is a form of recognising that the participation of adolescents can generate decisive changes in the social, environmental, cultural and political reality where they are inserted [...] to participate for an adolescent is to involve themselves in processes of discussion, decision, design and execution of actions, aiming, through their involvement in the solution of real problems, to develop their creative potential and their transformative force.

(Da Costa 1997, 65 quoted in Jupp Kina 2012)

According to Jupp Kina (2012), youth protagonism emerged because the concept of participation was considered as insufficient to incorporate the right to citizenship nor the idea of each individual's own active agency in the immediate as well as wider community. Although different notions of participation have been explored and challenged by several authors in recent years (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Percy-Smith 2010; Malone and Hartung 2010), no alternative term has been suggested to embrace its complexity within youth and performance studies. Hence, following Jupp Kina (2012), in this thesis, I use 'youth protagonism' in order to connect participation and notions of civic engagement. By doing so, I aim to move away from pre-defined and 'facilitated participation' approaches towards an understanding of youth engagement as an organic and experiential process of growing and learning as well as a means for action and decision making on an individual and collective level.

Throughout history, in different parts of the world, children and youth have been protagonists of socio-cultural and political movements for change (Costanza-Chock 2012), however most of the cases have not been linked to post-conflict reconstruction processes (De Waal and Argenti 2002, Mc Evoy-Levy 2006). Many case studies illustrate the dynamism and energy of young people engaging in social and political initiatives in different parts of the world (see for

example: Guerra 2002; Larson and Coburn 2014). Others even describe youth as having “the greatest incentive to push for change” (Helsing et al. 2006, 197), an approach which may run the risk to over-idealise young people and their potential for change in contrast to a common perception of youth as not engaged, apathetic or lazy. Moreover, a rather idealised view of youth as positive agents of change bears the risk of overlooking their negative potential to cause instability as potential spoilers of peace. Hence, young people should neither be over-idealised as agents for change nor be perceived as disengaged in social and political processes. Instead, young people’s agency has to be understood in relation to their socio-economic environment (Lopes Cardozo et al. 2015, 36).

In contexts such as Guatemala and Central America, research on youth has mainly focused on the perception of young people as victims of structural and cultural violence, and their roles as perpetrators and destabilising factors through their involvement in gangs (Moser and Rodgers 2005; Rodgers 2004; Levenson 2013a; Huhn, Oerttler and Peetz 2008). However, a collection of work on new social movements in Latin America has highlighted the role of youth as agents of change (Alvarez, Danigno and Escobar 1998; Escobar and Alvarez 1992) joined by other authors from social movement studies (Melucci 1988; 1989). Escobar and Alvarez (1992) for example assert the centrality of cultural expression for collective identity creation processes, and they highlight the importance of cultural practices, which are often neglected in social movement research. Accordingly, they suggest: “Symbolic creativity in everyday life is vibrant, if somewhat invisible; it involves language, the body, performative rituals, work and both individual and collective identities” (Ibid., 71). In other words, “cultural politics” involve “struggles over meanings”, and everyday life has to be seen as the arena in which these struggles emerge (Ibid.).

Moreover, collective identities are created around common ideas that link individuals to movements and to each other (Snow and Benford, 1992). Therefore, collective acts during everyday life represent the space for the creation

of new meanings from which people give shape to their struggle (Tarrow 1998). Due to the fact that the creation of alternatives is often restricted by dominant power structures, a cultural interpretation of collective acts suggests that “the symbolic reach of movements [...] often exceeds their social reach of measurable impact” (Escobar and Alvarez 1992, 328). This view has been challenged by scholars such as Jelin (1987), who highlights collective acts and social relations in everyday life as important sources for the construction of democracy. She locates social movements theoretically in the “intermediate space between individualised, familiar, habitual, micro-climatic daily life, and socio political processes writ large, of the State and the institutions, solemn and superior” (Jelin 1987 cited in Escobar and Alvarez 1992, 70). These accounts emphasise the symbolic impact of collective identity or social movement activities and cultural practices. They also stress the potential of these activities and practices to foster citizenship participation, and to contribute to democratisation processes in challenging contexts. According to Escobar and Alvarez (1992), these cultural practices have to be understood as expressions of resistance to dominant economic, social and cultural policies that affect populations in Latin America on a daily basis. Hence, popular cultures have to be understood as a motor for these contestations, which imply the recognition of social differences, the affirmation of cultural rights, and stress the importance of identity creation processes.

Moreover, another group of mainly Latin America authors (Marín and Muñoz, 2002; Borelli and Filho, 2008; Urteaga, 2011; Oliart and Feixa 2012), particularly interested in youth sub- and countercultures, focus their research on young people’s different ways of engaging in larger social movements, or other forms of organisation fostering collective action and transformation. They have explored how creative expression and culture foster social relations and new meanings amongst youth. Emerging themes are the cultural activities and interventions of young people searching for their place in society as well as living in and creating different worlds for themselves and others (Oliart and Feixa 2012;

see also Nateras 2002; Alvarado and Vommaro 2010). My investigation, which emphasises networks as identity creating processes on an individual, local and national level, contributes to these debates, and aims to link research on Latin American youth and cultural practices with a wider audience.

Similarly, authors from the field of peacebuilding have drawn attention to different aspects and understandings of youth agency. They include socio-cultural aspects such as creative, spiritual and interpersonal interventions joined by socio-political expressions such as demonstrations and protests (Del Felice and Wisler 2007; Leonard 2013; see also Lopes Cardozo et al. 2015), and economic elements such as education, job, and capacity building (Walton 2010; Izzi 2013; UN-YANID 2014). Although my research looking at cultural practices in Guatemala is mainly situated within the first 2, all dimensions described here, however, have to be seen as interlinked to each other. As emerging from the literature (Lopes Cardozo 2015) there is a lack of attention being paid towards young people and youth initiatives, which despite finding themselves living within rather challenging and constraining environments contexts, are searching for and creating alternative ways of living (McLean Hilker and Fraser 2009; McEvoy-Levy 2014).

Such spaces negotiated and created by young people in post-conflict settings often emerge in the local and everyday life, and provide survival strategies that often take the form of cultural or socio-political interventions (Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015). The trend to highlight young people's everyday lives and actions in conflict environments can be observed in the field of international relations literature, which recognises the local and the everyday as key spaces of peace and war processes, resistance, and the production of knowledge (see for example Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Richmond 2008). This focus on the everyday can also be observed as an emerging theme in peacebuilding literature (Roberts 2011; Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015). As Berents et al. (2014, 15) in their account on young people's creation of everyday

peace in Bogota remind us: “notions of everyday peace are located in the routines and practices of the everyday that sustain interaction and participation”.

Such understandings resonate with the exploration of the Community Arts Network in Guatemala, the youth groups’ cultural interventions and networking activities, and the role these young people play in their communities. In the literature (Khoury-Machool 2007, Pruitt 2011, Eskandarpour 2014, Berents 2014) young people have been highlighted as agents of change that, through cultural interventions and everyday actions, can contribute to the reconstruction of the social fabric and more peaceful communities. However, while in the peacebuilding literature on youth and in general the importance of the local for peacebuilding processes has been both emphasised and challenged (see above; see also Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Leonardson and Rudd 2015), youth networking as a global aspect of peacebuilding has received little attention so far (Malone and Martinez 2015). There is, however, research on structured intergroup gatherings, which aim to bring young people together so as to foster processes of reconciliation (Bargal and Bar 1994; Bargal 2004; Ungerleidner 2012; Maoz 2000). Such programs, however also have been criticised for not paying attention to the underlying structural nuisances responsible for the conflict and hindering peaceful relations to emerge as well as young people’s agency to develop (Bekerman and Maoz 2005; Bekerman 2007).

The recognition and emphasis on the everyday of cultural processes as well as trans-local connections draws attention those young people and their local cultures, which are often overlooked by researchers in the field. Through the exploration of the Community Arts Network I aim to contribute to these debates and point towards the challenges and potential of networking as a motor for youth agency.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY: RESEARCHING YOUTH NETWORKS

The analysis in this thesis is based on research material collected between 2012 and 2015, complemented by additional resources from earlier collaborations with Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network between 2006 and 2012. Most of the research emerged from fieldwork undertaken in Guatemala from August 2013 until November 2013. This field research used ethnographic methods such as participant observation in Caja Lúdica's cultural centre as well as in some of the Network's youth groups. It also included two network encounters, several *comparsas*, as well as a community cultural festival. Moreover, I have undertaken semi-structured interviews with Caja Lúdica's protagonists and the coordinators and members of the youth groups, as well as scholars who are experts in this particular context. Fieldwork data was categorised according to repeating themes and patterns, which also provide the structure of the second part of the thesis. The data was analysed through concepts emerging from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) rhizome theory, which has subsequently provided the critical foundation for the argument of the thesis.

The research process was based on a qualitative approach that is rooted in a phenomenological tradition drawing particular attention to the experiences, sensations and practices of the body, which according to the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty can be described as "the vehicle of being in the world" (2002, 160). My research was an embodied experience and the research methods were selected on the basis of my previous engagement with Caja Lúdica, and my background as a visual artist and photographer. In this chapter (and throughout the thesis), my research experience is regarded as one core element amongst others, recognising that the relationship between the researcher and the researched is constituted by "relations of movement" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 261). This requires from the researcher the capacity "to affect and be

affected” (Ibid.) rather than permitting a detached position characterised by disembodied interpretation.

As will become clear, Deleuze and Guattari’s work on rhizomes has allowed me to maintain a rather traditional structure for my written account, but at the same time, I have been able to develop my analytical chapters in a non-linear way by creating “points of intersection, overlaps, convergences, twisting and weaving through infinite folds and surfaces” (Honan and Sellers 2006, 2). Hence, the different chapters can be read as connected to each other and they are moreover linked to many discourses, practices, texts and images. As Deleuze and Guattari highlight: “The rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature” (1987, 21). Furthermore, according to Honan and Sellers (2006), a rhizomatic approach to writing can transcend boundaries and allows the inclusion of the researcher’s voice, and this has enabled me to write and navigate between disciplines and make my own experiences and perceptions an important part of the research process and account.

At the same time, a methodological approach based on the idea of the rhizome is also reflected in the ways in which data was collected and how it was analysed and linked. Here, I am building on Honan and Sellers (Ibid.), who have developed rhizomatic methodologies for use in educational research. They suggest that “data [...] while appearing to be disparate, can be analysed rhizomatically to find connections between writing, artworks, video, interview transcripts, and textual artefacts. This kind of analysis allows (im)plausible readings of connections between and across and within various data” (Ibid., 1). In this sense, this thesis finds connections between a variety of data such as photography, writing, interview transcripts, texts and concepts, and identifies as well as follows the moments and paths where discourses emerge.

In the subsequent sections, I outline the research design and the connections that emerge from it. I then move on to present in detail the different research



methods used, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, ‘following’ as a moving method, as well as photographs as key data for analysis.

### **Research Design**

I chose to adopt an approach based on the principles of a case study, which according to Yin (2003, 13) represents an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.” This allowed me to analyse both the “*particular in context* rather than the common or consistent, and the *holistic* rather than the cross-sectional” (Manson 2002, 165), and to develop my analysis by following paths and emerging stories during fieldwork. Although my research findings are specific to Guatemala and therefore not intended to be directly applied to other environments, with this thesis I aim to explore how elements of my research findings may be transferable to community arts practices with youth in other parts of the world.

The research design was shaped through various discussions with some of Caja Lúdica’s core members at the beginning of my fieldwork. Initially I aimed to focus on a selection of youth groups, which were well known to me and also had been recommended by Caja Lúdica and the Network. However, this changed during my fieldwork period as some of the mentioned groups were not actively involved in the activities any more due to restructuring processes and other challenges. Nevertheless, several groups were agreed as potential research participants together with two key events: a network encounter; and a community festival hosted by one of the youth groups. Yet, due to the political situation in Guatemala (see chapter 3), the high levels of violence and the

negative representation of foreigners in the media during my research period,<sup>25</sup> Caja Lúdica's members insisted on my accompaniment during journeys to the urban and rural youth groups and advised to avoid trips without a local guide. This also affected the decision-making process regarding the overall fieldwork and research, and determined which groups became a key part of this thesis.

The safety of researchers and participants as well as the dangers of research on a physical, emotional and ethical level has been pointed out by different authors (Rodgers 2001; Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000; Nordstrom and Robben 1995), but they are often not mentioned in written accounts. Researchers, particularly those who are exploring historical and archaeological work linked to the armed conflict in Guatemala, have received threats, and cases of murder have additionally been reported (Menchú 1998; Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000). Although my research was only indirectly related to the war and my risks were thoroughly assessed and approved by the University Research Ethics Committee in Manchester, undertaking research in some parts of Guatemala City can be dangerous for a foreign woman, due to high levels of everyday violence and crime. Hence, I avoided public transport into delicate areas, but at the same time I was aware that some potential dangers could not be fully predicted or managed.

Moreover, fear, which Green (1994, 227) describes as a "response to danger", affected my research and myself as a person in a much more subtle and invisible way. On the one hand, I trusted my natural intuitive fear, which prevented me from travelling to dangerous zones and encouraged me not to prioritise research interests over personal safety. At the same time, the constant presence of fear in everyday Guatemala, which I experienced on a personal level and through the research participants' life stories, affected my well-being and had implications on the research process in general. This expressed itself through

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<sup>25</sup> In September 2013 Guatemala's home secretary publicly announced that foreigners who are participating in popular protests or activities will be expelled from the country (La Pagina, 2013).

tensions and a constant state of alertness, nightmares, anger and stress, which were all part of the fieldwork experience and lasted long after my time in Guatemala (also see chapter 7). However, I consider fear and its physical expressions as part of this research process as they impacted on the way in which this thesis developed on a methodological as well as structural level.

### **The research process**

For security and logistical reasons, I chose Caja Lúdica's cultural centre in Guatemala City as a research base, and managed to find an accommodation close-by. The focus of the research was to explore Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network, and to gain an insight into the young people's experiences on an individual as well as collective level. Therefore, I had to choose a rather flexible approach, which enabled me to adapt to the constantly changing dynamics of the Network. Although the main questions as well as potential research participants were selected in advance, I intended to maintain a certain openness to possible changes during fieldwork as the development of the research process was dependent on Caja Lúdica's schedule, their journeys, as well as the Network's activities and interventions.

My previous relationships with this networking initiative were essential during the research process as my skills as a facilitator and artist enabled me to work with the youth groups, which fostered mutual learning and exchange. This meant that while the main subjects of study (Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network) were chosen in advance, the smaller case studies such as the youth groups, encounters and *comparsas* emerged in the course of the fieldwork. Although I had considered using more participative methods, which would actively involve the young people in the research process, due to their tight schedule and the risk of travelling at the time, interviews and participant observation were commonly agreed as most appropriate. Meetings with some of

the participants were key during the process to support and discuss the dynamics and findings of the research, and many debates took place on an informal level outside of working hours.

### **Participant observation**

One of the central methods used in this research was participant observation grounded in a commitment of providing first-hand experiences to explore the dynamics of the Network's practices and how they were experienced by the young people, the protagonists. Goffman (1989, 125) describes participant observation as a method of getting data

by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circles of response to their social situation, or their work situation, or their social situation, or their ethnic situation [...] so that you are close to them while they are responding to what life does to them.

Following Goffman, I was seeking to get 'close to them' through immersing myself deeply into the daily rhythms and activities of Caja Lúdica and the Network, taking part in their rituals, interactions, and events, which enabled me to get an insight into the young people's engagement in the practices. By doing direct observations, I was not only aiming to understand the relationships between Caja Lúdica and the youth groups but also experience the interactions between the young people during their practices. McNay (2004, 188) argues that experience should be understood as a "relational entity" that connects the creations of meanings and debates with the structures they interact with. Hence, the analysis of Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network not only aims to observe the young people's (inter)actions, but also to understand the meanings and interpretations that provide the basis for their interventions and actions.

As a 'first-person' method, participant observation enabled me to get fully immersed in the activities and context of the practices, and to provide an account based on what Varela and Shear (1999, 1) have described as "lived experience". Therefore, it is essential at this point to stress that the observations articulated in the thesis are subjective and interpretive acts. Subjective accounts, however, as these authors point out, should not be used in isolation and are therefore more valuable when combined with other empirically-based research methods (Ibid., 2). While quantitative research is rarely used in performance research, combined research methods are more frequent for researching performance practices and experiences (Parker-Starbuck and Mock 2011, 225). Hence, my research combines participant observation with other methods such as semi-structured interviews, mobile research methods and photography in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of the study.

Moreover, a research diary was essential during the process, and particularly important for documenting my experience in Guatemala. After each day I wrote up my field notes that included fragments of interviews, narratives, sketches and images. The aim was to grasp the entire picture of the day and to create a space for reflexive and emotional accounts, which enabled me to reflect on my role as a researcher as well as on emerging relational dynamics. Thus, my research diary was a "melting pot" (Newbury 2001, 3) of prior experiences, observations, drawings, reflections, feelings and ideas.

Although most of the chapters rely on interview data, I use parts of my field notes and observations to provide a contextual introduction and understanding of the cases I make. By using narratives in each chapter, I am hoping to provide an immediate account of my personal perception of the specific moments or situations I experienced. These descriptions are rather autobiographical in nature and seek to add a very personal note to my analysis. They also serve as connectors which help the reader to feel immersed in the context and stories. My narratives originate from my personal experience during fieldwork, which

according to Hastrup (1992, 117) is situated between “autobiography and anthropology”. Therefore, they have to be understood as “representations” which emerge from participant observation (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2007, 353). They are selective with the researcher writing about “certain things that seem ‘significant’, ignoring and hence ‘leaving out’ other matters that do not seem significant” (Ibid.).

Hence, researchers must actively reflect on the research process, understand their own role and position in the setting they are exploring, and recognise that their background and identity largely shape the whole research process. ‘Reflective practice’ as a term was first introduced by Schön (1987, 1991) and recently developed by Bolton (2014, 7), who distinguishes between reflection as an in-depth review of events on a collective or individual level, and reflexivity. The latter requires the researchers’ ability to question their attitudes, values, and theories, as well as to assess their actions in a responsible and ethical way, and always in relation to others and the context. Therefore, it is key to include the complex relationships between field settings, social actors and the researcher-self in the reflective process (Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont 2003, 109).

The process of being a reflexive researcher at the same time requires the exploration of “the emotional practice of doing research” (Pickering 2001, 491), which is particularly important when the researcher is closely attached to the people being researched. Hence, *in this investigation*, reflexivity enables others, not involved in the research, to understand the process behind my interpretations. Therefore, reflexivity and emotions or “embodied thoughts” (Rosaldo 1984, 143) are considered here as important data and analytical tools, and this connotes similar emphasis by other authors (Beatty 2010, Lumsden 2009). Reflexivity, however, as Madden (2010, 23) highlights, is not about the ethnographer, “it’s still about ‘them, the participants.’” She continues, however, that “the point of getting to know ‘you the ethnographer’ better, getting to know the way you influence your research, is to create a more reliable portrait,

argument or theory about ‘them, the participants’” (Ibid.). Therefore, as pointed out in the prologue, I recognised my emotional attachment and focused on using my own perceptions and experiences during the fieldwork as a means so as to understand the everyday practices of the network protagonists.

In my analytical chapters, I use long interview narratives from the young people in order to make their voices present within the thesis. This, of course, raises representational issues and questions such as: How can I use the data without misleading the reader through my interpretations? Are these young people existent, because I as a researcher consider them as important? Or as Clifford (1983, 118) clearly emphasises: “You are there [...] because I was there.” This thesis emerges from my interpretations of the cultural practices happening in Guatemala based on my ethnographic fieldwork, which are also influenced by my relationship as a researcher subject with Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network (see above). I feel obliged to provide a close and personal account of an experience that I have lived and any other methodological approach would be dishonest and mislead the reader. I am hoping that my perspective on these cultural initiatives provides an inspiring account for practices beyond the Guatemalan context.

To be sure, this research is part of an ongoing exploration and process, which has started long before this thesis and will not terminate with it, because I aim to share and discuss the outcomes with the people that have been involved. Therefore, I intend to translate significant parts of the thesis into Spanish and provide Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network with a copy of the study.

### **'Following' as a mobile research method**

While participant observation proved to be a useful method at the beginning of the fieldwork in Caja Lúdica's cultural centre, in order to grasp the Community Arts Network's more complex dynamics I had to apply a different and more flexible strategy. The trajectories of the different groups and individuals as well as their movements within the Network seemed to be rather chaotic, mostly invisible, and far too numerous to be observed and documented by one single person.

Methodological and representational challenges of researching networks, in particular their social dynamics and development over time, have also been pointed out by several authors (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001a; Edelman 2005; Emmel and Clark 2009). They have been attributed to their tendency to lack durability, to their often ephemeral and fragile nature, as well as their periodic cycles similar to social movements (Castells 1996; Tarrow 1998; Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001a). Riles (2001, 174) takes it a step further and emphasises that a network may be a form that even "supersedes analysis and reality". Through her ethnographic account on transnational networks formed by NGOs working on women's issues in the Pacific region, she provides, however, a qualitative in-depth analysis of their dynamics, which, as she would describe it, turns the network "inside out" (Ibid., 1-2). Similarly, Emmel and Clark (2009) aim to capture the multi-dimensionality of real life experience of networks and communities in their *Connected Life Project*. By using a qualitative<sup>26</sup> mixed-method approach they explore how different methods would support them with getting insights into particular dimensions of lived experiences in networks (Ibid.). In my research, I also used multiple methods, some of which emerged directly from my experience in the field.

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<sup>26</sup> See also: Rositter (2006); Yudice (2001, 2004).



During the initial research period I had not acknowledged yet that, through my being present in Caja Lúdica's space, I had already become part of the Network's natural flow and dynamics. Moreover, I noticed that each time I left my research centre and travelled with one of Caja Lúdica's practitioners, according to the location in which I found myself within the Network, I encountered new narratives, different connections and social relations. Similarly to the young people, I was experiencing the Network. With every youth group I visited, my own perspective changed. I had discovered the importance of the local. This has also been pointed out by Paul Routledge (2003, 618), who emphasises that, in order to understand the dynamics of a network, it is essential to participate in its locality or nodes and freely "flow through the network wherever it leads". This idea is also based on Bruno Latour's (2005) Actor Network Theory, which focuses on how interactions and connections in networks are developed and sustained. My exploration, however, aims to draw attention to the nodes of networks and how they mutually influence each other, which puts forward the importance of the local within network analysis (see chapter 4). As a relational perspective, it focuses on the connections as well as the communication between the actors of networks (see also Massey 1994, 2005).

In order to emphasise the Network's different localities, on a methodological level I chose to explore my role within the Network not only as a participant observer but also as a *network follower*. Here, I am building on Routledge's account of People's Global Networks in which he describes his experiences, positionality and engagement within networks as "*following, threading, embodying*" (2003, 616). According to Routledge, following "connects the singularities it encounters by its own movement between and within them and seeks to draw a flow of connections [...] between these experiences" (Ibid., 619). By developing 'following' as a method I was hoping to become an integral part of the Network's flow as well as experience the interactions between nodes. Through my movement between these interactive nodes, I sought to map their

connections, which would provide me with a much clearer picture of the Community Arts Network overall. I understand following as both moving geographically as well as refer to following in the sense of paying close attention to it. While the first implies geographical movement and a change of perspective, the second is undertaken from an observational perspective of interest, which does not necessarily rely on movement however requires flexibility and the ability to actively observe. Moreover, as mentioned in the prologue, my positionality as a 'researcher-fan' implies following the subjects of interest geographically but also supporting them and observing their actions from a distance (see also chapter 7).

Travelling has been identified as an essential part of fieldwork (Clifford 1997, 67), however it has always been in combination with institutionalised practices. Only in recent years has movement between locations been turned into a site for fieldwork. 'Following' as one of my research methods sits within an emerging scholarship, which emphasises moving between places and sites as naturally inherent to ethnography so as to be able to capture and explore experiences of movement and constantly shifting social, material and spatial relations (Watts and Urry 2008, 867; Urry 2007; Cresswell 2006). Hence, 'following' as mobile ethnography method means travelling with the young people and participating in their "continual shift through time, place and relations with others" (Watts and Urry 2008, 867; see also Lee and Ingold 2006). Thus, I understand *following fieldwork* as "travel encounters" (Clifford 1997, 67), which requires from the researcher a high flexibility and the ability and openness to geographically move as well as experience network trajectories and social interactions as a participant.

Furthermore, during the process of moving geographically, researchers constantly change their perspective and point of view in relation to the networks they explore. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 372), following is ambulant, itinerary and recommended when "one is in search of the

'singularities' of a matter." Following does not imply a permanent fixed point of view and instead allows to be "carried away" by the dynamics of the flow. Therefore 'following' enables the engagement in a "variation of variables instead of extracting constants from them", which allows the researcher to emphasise the different views and change the meaning of the whole through a different perspective (Ibid.). In line with Deleuze and Guattari, through 'following' and through geographically changing my position within the web rather than staying at one place, I was able to focus on the singularities or localities of the Network but also making connections in order to create its meaning as 'a whole'. I was constantly changing perspective, without losing my still point of view as an observational follower.

'Following' has to be understood as an "active, embodied process" (Routledge 2003, 619); as a method it is experienced and performed. Similarly to other body-centred research such as performance ethnography (Jones 2002; Denzin 2003), which can include walking, dancing or even sitting as methods, it considers and "uses the situated body to generate new understandings and research trajectories" (Parker-Starbuck and Mock 2011, 227). The embodied knowledge is gained through the perceptions, encounters and interactions with other people on the move or during the practice (Ibid.). Although my research trajectories synchronised with the Network's actions, following a certain route also meant that I was only ever able to perceive a small detail of its flow. This shows the limitations of 'following' as a research method as well as the need to combine it with other techniques, such as, for example, semi-structured interviews in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of the study.

However, my approach as a *network follower* allowed me to gain a different perspective on this practice. Instead of prioritising Caja Lúdica and their outreach processes as an organisation, I was able to provide a rather diverse picture of this cultural youth networking initiative and its resistant potential as a connecting space in the context of Guatemala. This challenges the two and only other authors

who have explored Caja Lúdica in their accounts (Bedoya and Van Erven 2015; Offereins 2013). Through their main focus on the organisation's practices, they clearly dismiss the importance of the Community Arts Network, and their relationships and dependence.

This does not mean that I discharge Caja Lúdica's key role as one of the first and most important cultural initiatives working with young people, which emerged after the signing of the peace accords in Guatemala. Nor does it mean that this research does not acknowledge them as one of the founders and initiators of the Community Arts Network, within which they probably represent one of the most established groups with comparably more financial and social resources as well as experiences to date. Instead, through this example, I aim to open up new paths of thinking about cultural practices as *performances of connectivity* not only in post-conflict settings but also elsewhere, which means that new methods such as 'following' are needed to understand their complexity and movements.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

One of the most striking elements of the Community Arts Network's multiple practices is the fact that they are mainly led by young people with an average age of 17 years (TE 2013). Throughout my research I have witnessed fourteen year old girls and boys providing workshops and activities for their younger peers or their local communities. Hence, for my research I was particularly interested in the experiences of these youth leaders and practitioners fostering community arts processes in their communities, and semi-structured interviews turned out to be useful means to gain a close view of their perspectives as part of the Network as well as to better understand them. As Bucholtz (2002, 533) emphasises in her account on youth cultural practices and their link to notions of identity: "Youth are cultural actors whose experiences are best understood from their own point

of view.” Despite the fact that most of my interviews had a rough structure they often turned into live story interviews which required more space and time, but at the same time provided the space for the young people to narrate their experiences and their role and relationship with the Network.

The overall interviewing process during fieldwork included three sets of data that were collected over a period of four months: 1) Caja Lúdica; 2) youth groups; 3) ‘experts’ on youth. All interviews were undertaken in Spanish and consent was agreed at the beginning of each interview. The first data set involved 25 interviews with Caja Lúdica including different generations from founders to recent participants, which enabled me to gain a wider picture of their history, organisational dynamics as well as their networking and outreach practices. Apart from the participants’ tight schedule, which made the conduct of interviews challenging, the overall process developed smoothly.

My previous relationships with some of the participants contributed to an atmosphere of trust, which had a huge impact on the quality and depth of the interviews. At the same time, the distance that I had gained by not having lived in Guatemala for three years helped me to balance my insider-role during the interviews because I knew most of the participants well through previous shared work experiences. However, I faced challenges in particular at the beginning of interviews, when I was introducing formalities of consent as well as clarifying my commitment and responsibility as a researcher. It was therefore important to explain my positionality and give enough time for the clarification of questions and insecurities. Garton and Copland (2010, 535) have stressed the difficulties that both researchers and participants face during, what they refer to as, ‘acquaintance interviews’ in ethnographic research. Here, the researcher represents an insider and the interviewer has a prior relationship with the interviewee. This particular form of semi-structured interviews is challenging for both parties involved due to their relationships as well as identities which have to be renegotiated during the process (Ibid., 10: 533; see also Davies 2007 and

Robson 2002). Garton and Copland (2010, 547) highlight that the researcher, while negotiating new relationships, may “feel uncomfortable with an asymmetrical relation, which requires her to control the interaction, at the same time as announcing her ‘institutional’ role as a researcher”. The process of gaining consent at the beginning of each interview as well as asking for the possibility to record the interview helped me to mark this role.

At times, I felt uncomfortable in my position as a researcher, however, after the initial interviews I grew into my new role and acknowledged its particularities, challenges and advantages. Despite the fact that I intended to follow a structured questionnaire, most of the interviews turned into a dialogue, which probably allowed me to access resources that through a more structured interview style may not have been available to me. However, I am aware that my previous relationship may have had an impact on the generation of the data, and I therefore briefly draw the attention back to the importance of researchers on reflexivity. Although “turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference” (Davies 2007, 4) is already part of ethnographic research, the researcher needs to reflect on how data is generated during the interview process when previous relationships exist and in particular how the interviewees’ accounts may affect the researcher’s thoughts and feelings and ultimately the research outcomes (Ellis and Berger 2003).

The second data set, which included interviews with representatives of the youth groups, was slightly less challenging on a relational level as I was unfamiliar with most of them (fifteen interviews). I was introduced as a researcher by one of Caja Lúdica’s practitioners, which had a notable impact on how the conversation developed with the young people, and impacted on how the data was created. In contrast to the interviews mentioned before, I felt that there was clearly less trust towards myself as a person and researcher, which expressed itself in the lack of depth during the interview. This, however, changed significantly when I was actively involved in creative activities on a local level

either as a participant or workshop facilitator. Therefore, the most useful interview data was generated during the Network's encounters, collective journeys and during community visits when I was an active part of the practice.

A third set of data emerged from the interviews with Guatemalan researchers on youth work and cultural practices, who provided a more general and outsider perspective on Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network in this particular context (six interviews). The discussions complemented my knowledge about Guatemala, sometimes challenged my views, and inspired my research process and the questions I was asking. Moreover, on a regular basis, I engaged in AVANSCO,<sup>27</sup> an independent social sciences research institute in Guatemala City, and staff there gave me access to their library and suggested some of their researchers as interviewees.

The collected interview data was transcribed and partly translated from Spanish into English, either during the fieldwork period or upon my return to Manchester.<sup>28</sup> According to qualitative data analysis, themes and patterns were identified and the material was coded and grouped into categories. In order to protect the young people's identity, I use their initials as a reference for their interviews in the text and only provide the full names of Caja Lúdica's directors and of the researchers involved.

A clear understanding of the Guatemalan context and the youth groups, which I had gained through my previous experience, was key for the transcription process and for a better analysis of the interview responses and young people's narratives. The interpretation of data emerging from a setting such as Guatemala would not have been possible without ethnographic methods, or my previously gained contextual knowledge.

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<sup>27</sup> AVANSCO: <http://avancso.org.gt/> (Accessed 31 May 2014).

<sup>28</sup> All other translations from Spanish sources such as books, articles or websites into English have been undertaken by myself and only key terms and projects appear in both languages in the text.

### **Photography as a method: a snapshot approach**

By using photographs in previous research, I had experienced that images were able to communicate and speak to my readers in ways that most academic writing did not. From this prior work, I had developed my artistic skills to create images, which had the aesthetic quality to be used as potential data in my thesis. Moreover, I chose photography because many of the research participants were familiar with my role as visually documenting their practices. In this way, I was less likely to interrupt their activities and draw attention to myself behind a camera, a common challenge which other researchers have also highlighted in their accounts (Holm 2008). I also agreed with Caja Lúdica and the youth groups to provide a selection of my visual data for their online archives, which was in the line with my aims to 'give something back' to the participants and my general understanding of research as a process of mutual learning and exchange. Some of the images in this thesis are used to illustrate the text, while others - and this is key on a methodological level - are used as starting points for my analysis as they grasp key moments which can be seen as representative for a specific phenomenon, tension or dynamic emerging from the Network's activities.

My research method broadly sits within a wide range of visual methods (for example photography, video, drawing), which have been applied as sources of data in ethnographic research (Bateson and Mead 1942; Collier and Collier 1986; Barndt 1997; Denzin 1989; Pink 2001), visual anthropology (Pink 2007a/b; Collier 2001), human geography (Hall 2009; Hall 2015; Garrett 2014; Rose 2008), and performance studies (Ledger, Ellis and Wright 2011; Rye 2000; Anderson 2015; Vanhaesebrouck 2009). Many of these authors were searching for ways in which to understand complex processes and, in particular, experiences that cannot be easily expressed in words. According to Bagnoli for example the use of non-linguistic dimensions in research "may allow us to access and represent different levels of experience" (2009, 547).



In performance studies, visual data and particularly video have been recognised as means of documentation, and have formed part of many research processes, this despite emerging tensions between the quality of a live performance and its recording (Ledger, Ellis and Wright 2011, 163; see also Auslander 1996; 2008). In contrast to video which generates moving images, a photograph only provides a “still-image point of view” (Ledger, Ellis and Wright 2011, 165). While some have emphasised it as a “deadening process” others see in the motionless image a quality and potential to “catch facts and processes that are too fast or too complex for the human eye” (Flick 2009, 241). Similarly Kairschner (2003, 18) stresses photography’s analytic power due to its ability to “fix, freeze and arrest”. My research coincides with those latter accounts, which value the stillness of images as useful means and source for analysis.

One of the essential choices in visual research is whether to use already existing material as primary data, or produce first hand data or images from observation (Pauwels and Margolis 2011, 6). This choice not only depends on the researchers’ accessibility, knowledge and relation to the field but also on their technical skills and background. There are also possible ethical issues to be considered that have an impact on the outcome of the visual data (Ibid.). Hence, I chose to mainly use my own photographs and archive material, a decision which emerged from mutual agreements with the Network to keep the participants’ active involvement at a minimum due to their tight schedule. The step to adapt my methods goes in line with Frith and Gleeson’s (2012, 58) suggestion not to place “unreasonable or unnecessary burdens on research participants”. Hence, despite the fact that I had planned to use photography in a more participative way, I generated first hand visual data with little participant involvement. By following the different network activities through the lens of the camera, I was aiming to grasp moments that I regarded as key and in some ways related to my research questions. At times, in particular when I was not able to use my camera due to logistical reasons, I chose photographs from the youth

groups' archives, which provided complementary data and moments for my analysis. They are marked as such in the List of Figures and were used with the photographers' consent.

Traditionally, visual data such as photographs have been mainly used as a means of documentation (see above), as a supplement to verbal data without recognising them as a resource for analysis, or as illustrations in written accounts (Banks 2000, 11). There is very little written about considering photographs as data (Flick 2009; Ball and Smith 2011) and even less about the analysis of images (Holm 2008). There are, however, authors who emphasise content or semiotic analysis of visual material, or use an analysis based on discourse (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2004; Rose 2005). They often do not go beyond the translation of the image into text or turning "the visual into words" (Wright 1998, 20).

With my research, however, I aim to contribute to an ongoing debate emerging from visual anthropology (see authors such as Pink 2001, 2005) that understands images not only as "the basis for *systematic knowledge*" (Collier and Collier 1986, 170) which have to be translated into text, but acknowledges them in equal ways and as a key data source. Following Pink, I seek to go beyond viewing visual images as solely means of documentation and "explore the relationship between visual and other (including verbal) knowledge" (2005, 96). Thus, I understand the photographs I use in my thesis as a source of knowledge, and through them I aim to draw the attention to aspects which may disappear during a traditional observational practice. Hence, the photographs I chose illustrate particular moments that were key during the research but also represent wider phenomena or patterns emerging from this practice in Guatemala.

My method has been inspired by Lederach's (2005, 66) account in which he emphasises that "the key to complexity is finding the elegant beauty of simplicity". He refers to the traditional Japanese haiku poem writing technique, a place where "simplicity and complexity meet" (Ibid.). Similar to the aim of the

haiku in writing, which must capture in a few words the complex fullness of a moment, a setting or an experience, as a *visual haiku practitioner* I aim to embrace the complexity of a moment through a carefully selected image, that either has been produced by the researcher or found in the archive of the Network's groups. The production and selection of the particular images is based on Lederach's idea that "knowledge, [...] understanding and deep insight are achieved through aesthetics and ways of knowing that see the whole rather than the parts a capacity and pathway that rely on intuition more than cognition" (Lederach 2005, 69). Moreover, it requires the researchers' ability to follow their own intuitions, link it with observations as well as experiences and make the whole picture visible through its different parts.

In this sense, I see this method and my way of using photographs as a performance, through which I seek to create an assemblage of moments and representations of a particular experience. I call these moments, *Augenblicke* ('in the blink of an eye') or *Momentaufnahmen* ('snapshots in time') as they describe particular 'moments in time' that have been captured in a particular context. They are representative for wider phenomena or patterns, which have emerged during fieldwork and have been chosen because they are relevant for the argument of the thesis. Moments aim to synthesise complex experiences on a visual level and give the reader insight into my perspective and what I aim to communicate through my research, whilst also drawing attention to aspects that may otherwise not be visible.

Using visual data such as photographs in research also raises issues of representation that parallel similar concerns in methods with a qualitative approach (Bartram 2003). Bartram (2003, 153) describes the interpretation of visual imagery as "a form of textual analysis". Hence, it is always a subjective approach and closely linked to the individual, who has taken and/or selected the picture. Their representations and interpretations, therefore, might differ

between researcher, spectator/reader, as well as the individuals captured in the image (Pink 2001; Knowles and Sweetman 2004).

Moreover, using photography further presents a set of ethical challenges such as informed consent, which for the purpose of this research has been gained from the participants. In some cases, in particular when taking pictures during public events, I was not able to get consent from the spectators of the performance due to the circumstances of this particular context. When working with photography in Guatemala it is key to be aware of its delicacy as a method on an ethical level, as it can put the researcher as well as the research participants in danger (Packard 2008). Due to the fact that in Guatemala people have been murdered during attacks in bright day light for technological gadgets such as cameras or phones, I had to be particularly cautious about when, where and how frequent I was taking pictures. Although my contextual knowledge helped me to control this risk, I was prepared to lose my equipment any time through unforeseen robberies simply by being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

This chapter has described the research process and design, and has outlined and developed the different methods used in this study. In the following chapter, I firstly give a brief insight in Guatemala's history and the situation of youth before and after the armed conflict. Secondly, in order to provide a basis for the analytical chapters (4-6), I present a rather linear account of Caja Lúdica's history and the emergence of the Community Arts Network.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE GUATEMALAN CONTEXT AND CAJA LÚDICA'S NETWORKING PRACTICES

#### **The Guatemalan context and the situation of youth (pre 1996)**

Guatemala has a long history of political, economic and social challenges, which continue to impact its populations and in particular young people and their development. In this context, structural issues such as inequality, exploitation, and the discrimination and exclusion of the indigenous people during the colonial era as well as decades of military regimes have generated a series of popular and revolutionary uprisings. Concomitantly, and as a response to civil unrest, repressive forces have historically been implemented by the state at different times to maintain the status quo and to control and prevent the development and growth of social movements. These dynamics found their peak in Guatemala's armed conflict, which expanded over a period of thirty-six years (1960-1996) and was one of the most long-lasting and violent wars in the region leaving around 200 000 civilians dead or "disappeared" - amongst them many young people (Jonas 2000, 17).

The rise of the armed conflict and its consequences, which can be observed in current Guatemala, however, have to be analysed in the light of previous political events. After a period of military dictatorships in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 1944 was the beginning of a revolutionary era (1944-1954) towards democracy (Ibid.). In the following decade subsequent governments led by Juan Jose Arévalo (1945-1950) and Jacobo Arbenz (1951-54) introduced a series of reforms so as to bring more equal rights for the working class and the indigenous population. This period has been described as the "golden era" for young people in Guatemala, as it changed the former image of youth, which was based on discipline and obedience emerging from the military regimes, towards an understanding of young people as creative, vital and thriving elements of society

(Levenson 2013b, 31). An important step during that time was the agrarian reform of 1952, which consisted of a redistribution of land for over 100,000 peasant families (Jonas 2000, 18). However, this expropriation of unused land, property of the U.S.-based United Fruit Company, under the current president Arbenz, resulted in a coup by the opposition in 1954, which was supported by the U.S. government (Ibid.). This was the beginning of another extended period of military rule and led to an era of human rights violations of the Guatemalan people.

The beginning of the armed conflict was marked by a revolt in 1960, which included protesters from a variety of backgrounds. They were reacting to the increasingly repressive measures implemented by General Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes (1958-1963); the influence of the U.S. government, in particular the CIA; as well as the corruption in the Guatemalan army (Kurtenbach 2008b). Despite its defeat, in the following years, other guerrilla groups were formed in rural and urban areas, and at the same time thousands of people - mainly students, workers or peasant groups - gathered in Guatemala City to express their resistance against the regime. Hence, the main targets of repression were leaders of social organisations or general oppositional movements, who would endanger the politics of the current civil-military regime (Ibid.). During that time, the situation for young people, in particular the ones that had joined social movements, changed radically as they were seen as a subversive threat to the state and therefore had to be controlled (Jonas 2000). Many of them were persecuted, killed or “disappeared” (Ibid., 154). Later, the Historical Clarification Commission (CEH 1999) revealed that the military implemented “death squadrons” that were based in the security forces and were designed to eliminate civilian opposition leaders.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The CEH was established during the peace accords to clarify human rights violations related to the war. Since the late 60s Guatemala had more than 40 000 civilian disappearances most of which have not been brought to justice (Jonas 2000, 21).

The violence of the conflict reached its peak between 1981 and 1983, and as reported by the CEH, “acts of genocide” had taken place in Guatemala’s Ixil region and other areas under the former General Rios Montt<sup>30</sup> (1982-83) (Manz 2002, 293). Despite the fact that the strength of the guerrillas during the 1980s would have never represented a serious threat to the status quo, the military regime responded to the guerrilla movements with a brutal campaign of “scorched earth”<sup>31</sup>. Entire villages - mainly in the highlands and inhabited by the indigenous population - were destroyed by government forces and replaced by rural resettlement camps, which were under direct military control. Thousands of indigenous groups in rural areas were trained by the military to use weapons and counterinsurgency tactics, and around 1000 men were forced to join “civilian self-defense patrols”<sup>32</sup> - with many young people amongst them (Ibid., 81). During that time entire communities - mostly indigenous - fled into the highlands or sought for exile in neighbouring countries such as, for example, Mexico.

The period from the mid-1980s was characterised by important changes towards a more democratic state with Vinicio Cerezo (1986-1990) being elected as president. Despite the promising start of an emerging democratic era, he continued in the line of previous regimes by accepting the army’s role to maintain the status quo and to control social unrest (Jonas 2000). During spring 1991, with the new elected president Gorge Serrano Elias (1991-1993), the military firstly engaged in peace negotiations with the oppositional party, the URNG. The negotiation process, which lasted almost a decade, involved different internal

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<sup>30</sup> After years of impunity, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May in 2013, Efraim Rios Montt, who was president and commander of the Guatemalan Army during the 1980s, has been convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity. This process has been annulled by the Constitutional Court and in 2016 remains on hold.

<sup>31</sup> Also see Carmack (1988).

<sup>32</sup>The PAC’s were introduced by the army as civilian support in order to ‘protect’ the rural communities from the guerrillas. Although, according to official reports, they were formed voluntarily, in most of the rural communities this service was obligatory for all males between 16 and 60, and any denial resulted in penalty or even death (Dudouet 2007, 61).

and external actors such as civil society organisations, political parties, churches, and was supported by the international community (Jonas 2000). Although the signing of the peace accords in 1996 officially terminated the armed conflict, the country continues its transformational process towards democracy and still struggles with the consequences of many years of violence and oppression.

### **Post war socio-economic context for youth**

Guatemala is the largest country in Central America on a demographic as well as territorial level, sharing its borders with El Salvador, Honduras, Belize and Mexico (INE 2014). In 2014, it had a population of around 15,806,675, with an estimate of 70% less than thirty years old and around 30% between fifteen and twenty-nine years old (Ibid.). At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, being a young person in Guatemala means forming part of a society, which is marked by its recent history of political violence during the armed conflict that left deep wounds in the social fabric of many communities as well as triggered and reinforced some of the already existing political and social challenges.

Guatemala has always been a multi-ethnic country with Ladino, Maya, Garifuna, as well as Xinca people. The first two represent the majority of the population, with an estimate of 60% (statistics vary) having indigenous roots (PNUD 2009). There are twenty-three officially recognised Maya languages, while Spanish remains the official language to date. As mentioned above, indigenous communities were affected most by the counterinsurgency politics of the state in the 1980s (Ramos 2012). Although indigenous people and their cultures have been officially acknowledged by the state since the signing of the peace accords, the ethnic division to date defines the social order of Guatemalan society, and most scholars agree that they mark elements such as educational degree and often economic and social status. According to Smith (1995, 733), class in Guatemala is “extrinsically bound to race and blood” as well as being



connected to social practices and spaces. Most of the Guatemalans see Ladinos as people of European decent, embedded in urban culture and modernity, and the Maya instead as being located in rural areas and representative of Guatemalan traditions (Cook and Offit 2013). In Guatemala, the terms Maya (indigenous) and Ladino are often used in contrast to each other despite the fact that there is no clear line between these groups and each of them defines a rather heterogeneous group of people (Ibid.).

Although Ladinos represent Guatemala's ruling oligarchy and have dominated Guatemala's history to date, around 60% (statistics vary) of its people have indigenous roots. The latter represent the most impoverished part of the population (PNUD 2012, 44). Guatemala continues to be one of the most unequal countries in the world and has one of the highest poverty indexes in Latin America, with an estimate of 53% of the population living below the poverty line and 13% living in extreme poverty (WFP 2014). Young people are amongst the most affected by the precarious conditions of inequality and exclusion (SEGEPLAN-CONJUVE 2012, 3).

Children and young people in Guatemala lack opportunities for education, which despite significant improvements<sup>33</sup> over the last twenty years, leave more than 800,000 young people between thirteen and eighteen outside the school system, and the average rate of youth illiteracy represents 8.9% (PNUD 2012, 207). Even though the expansion of primary education was one of Guatemala's Millennium goals, in 2009 only 77.6% of the students completed primary school which varied according to ethnicity and gender (Ibid.). Rural areas of the country are most affected by this phenomenon because most of the educational institutions are established in the metropolitan centres or the departmental capital towns. That said, what these alarming numbers do not show is that the

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<sup>33</sup> For example the net rate between 1989 and 2010 for primary education rose from 55.5% to 95.8%, in secondary from 19.5% to 42.9%, and in college from 4.8% to 23.3% (PNUD 2012 quoted in Mendízabal 2013, xvii).

current generation, in contrast to their parents, has an easier access to information and knowledge as they grow up with new technologies (Krauskopf 2004a/b).

However, these developments do not change the situation of thousands of young people between fourteen and seventeen, which due to their social and economic circumstances have to leave school early for a job in order to financially support their families. They often work under precarious employment conditions without stability, just income or social benefits (PNUD 2012, 109). Moreover, the lack of adequate education and the few employment opportunities drives thousands of young people into informal economic processes linked to economies of violence, organised crime and drug trafficking (Camus 2012).

In 2016, Guatemala has one of the highest homicide rates<sup>34</sup> in the world (UNODC 2014). The rising levels of violence after the war have been characterised by their urban and social nature and have been closely linked to public insecurity and crime in contrast to the political violence during the conflict (Pearce 2010, 295). Young people and in particular youth gangs, have been made responsible as the main triggers of violence and crime through media and public debates (Rodgers 1999, 2003), which has led to a side-lining of the different causes and perpetrators of these circles of violence.<sup>35</sup> This negative image affects young people's daily lives, their opportunities to freely express themselves, and their possibilities to find, organise, or participate in spaces of encounter and recreation (Ibid.).

Hence, due to increased levels of violence and gangs after the war, particular attention has been paid to immediate violence prevention programmes by targeting young people in diverse activities. Here, the aim is to improve the conditions of those who are most affected by economic and social exclusion, and to increase their opportunities of citizen participation (OIT 2001, 89). Many of

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<sup>34</sup> According to the UNODC, homicide rates in Guatemala vary around 39.9 per 100 000 citizens and are mainly concentrated in the urban centres (UNODC 2014, 126).

<sup>35</sup> A study on homicide rates undertaken by the UNODC in 2006 shows that only 14% of intentional homicides were a result of gang violence (Pearce 2010, 299).

these projects were - and are still - financially supported by international development organisations, which during and after the war collaborated with local partners as well as the state (Kurtenbach 2008a). These dynamics, which started after the peace accords, have led to the development of youth or 'lo juvenil' (Lemus 2008) as an emblem for organisations and programmes working specifically with young people. Moreover, a wide, however highly contested field of interest around youth emerged. For Deborah Levenson (2013, 159) this field is determined by the interactions between different agents such as, for example, organisations by and for young people, international cooperation, investigation centres, and state organisations focusing on youth.

In particular in the last decade, an augmentation of organisations working with young people can be observed accompanied by the development of themes in relation to youth such as violence, sexual education, and health amongst others, which were included in the agendas of different initiatives (Ibid.). Furthermore, an increased institutionalisation of programmes for young people over time resulted in the creation of a National Youth Policy, which would include youth initiatives and organisations in the national policies (SEGEPLAN-CONJUVE 2012). Additionally, since 2005 different organisations have been campaigning for the implementation of a law, which would specifically protect young people's rights; in 2016 this law has still not been approved.

At the same time, the state controversially continues with repressive policies and security forces against young people and youth organisations, which are often even financially supported indirectly through its own programs or funds (Mendízabal 2013, xvii). In 2013, for example, Caja Lúdica and other youth organisations such as ACJ (Asociación Christiana de Jóvenes) and Peronia Adolescente expressed their concerns about the newly elected president Otto Pérez Molina<sup>36</sup> (2012-2015), and how this change may affect their work and the

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<sup>36</sup> Otto Pérez Molina was elected as president in 2012 despite accusations of genocide and human rights violations such as extrajudicial detention, torture and execution during the armed conflict (Frente Popular 2012). In his electoral campaign he promised

situation of the young people involved in their processes (Godoy 2012).<sup>37</sup> In their report they denounce the government's repressive politics and actions against young people and youth organisation in general (Ibid.). These recent developments have also been described and experienced by one of the Community Arts Network's youth coordinators, who reports a military intervention and intimidation which took place in Villa Lobos, one of Guatemala City's suburbs:

Today, one year ago, it was just before seven in the morning when security forces tried to illegally break into the base of our youth group. Elements of the police, the military and the crime investigation unit intimidated us and called us delinquents [...]. Living here is not a crime, it is an opportunity of life. NO MORE MILITARISM, NO MORE REPRESSION. YES MORE ART, YES MORE LIFE.

(JL 2013)<sup>38</sup>

This account gives an example how state repression continues to affect young people and youth initiatives in Guatemala, however, most of the cases remain unreported as they often emerge in a much less direct and subtle form than during the war and take place in rather marginal areas. Despite a series of actions by CALDH<sup>39</sup> and Caja Lúdica against the stigmatisation and repression of youth through state forces, young people continue to be victims of extrajudicial killings

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actions against violence and to improve citizen security through local military patrols. During his government an increased level of re-emerging political violence against civil society organisations, journalists, leaders of social movements and human rights defenders has been observed (Peace Brigades 2013). In 2015, following months of public protest and mobilisations in different parts of the country, he stepped down as a president and was convicted for being involved in a major corruption scandal. In 2016 he is now in jail.

<sup>37</sup> This insecurity continues with Jimmy Morales, a former Guatemalan TV comedian, who has been elected president in 2015.

<sup>38</sup> JL Facebook, 12 March 2013 (Accessed 13 December 2015).

<sup>39</sup> CALDH (Centro para la Acción Legal en Derechos Humanos): [www.caldh.org](http://www.caldh.org) (Accessed 13 December 2014).

and intimidations, most of them without persecution (Flores and Joaquin 2013, 13).

In spite of the mentioned challenges faced by young people and youth organisation in Guatemala, the quotation above also reflects the drive and hope of this grassroots network that change and a better life is possible even in such challenging conditions. This is a new generation of young people, which emerges from cultural youth movements flourishing shortly after the signing of the peace accords in 1996, that opened up opportunities for many organisations and initiatives, amongst them Caja Lúdica.

### **One history of Caja Lúdica**

During my fieldwork in Guatemala I was frequently asked if I could focus part of my research on Caja Lúdica's history, because no one has undertaken this task before. In particular the older generations were suggesting that their story was waiting to be written down, as many young people, who had only recently joined the Network, seemed to have difficulties in understanding core concepts, which continue to underpin the dynamics and working strategies of this practice to date. Doryan Bedoya, one of its founders points out:

In order to understand Caja Lúdica in the context of Guatemala now, you have to know our history as an organisation, including the moment in which it emerged, the people who founded it and their backgrounds, the first young people who joined as well as the main principles of our methodology. They are all integral to our current work as they represent the roots of our struggles.

(DB 2013)

Hence, including a complete history is not only an original contribution to knowledge but also enables me to create something useful for Caja Lúdica, which coincides with my position as a socially engaged researcher (see chapter 2). Therefore, the following history is written from a Caja Lúdica-centred

perspective, which serves as a springboard for the analytical chapters (4-6). Although the linear approach here does not fully capture the rhizomatic qualities of this networking practice as discussed later, it enables me to give an insight into Caja Lúdica's roots in Colombia and the alternative arts movements in Guatemala City. It also highlights Caja Lúdica's development as a networking organisation and their important role for the emergence of the Community Arts Network. At the same time, the history unveils that this particular network, in order to emerge and become sustainable, sometimes has been more centralised than rhizomatic, and funding through Caja Lúdica played a major role mainly in the early years of this process.

### *Cultural movements and the beginning of Caja Lúdica*

After the signing of the peace accords in 1996, as a response to despair and violence, young artists, who had maintained a low profile during the war started to become public again. One example was *Casa Bizarra* ('Bizarre House'), a recreational meeting space based in the city's historical centre, which had been established by a new generation of young artists to provide creative workshops and exhibitions. On the one hand this "exercise of freedom" according to José Osorio<sup>40</sup> (2013), one of its founders, enabled them to take action and to re-organise themselves as a cultural initiative. On the other hand, it developed as a counter-movement to more traditional forms of creative education such as universities and art institutions (Ibid.). Despite the fact that their cultural centre was abandoned after 1 year, the group of artists by then known as the *Collectivo Arte Urbano* ('Urban Arts Collective') continued with their interventions and shared aim to reclaim the city space. As a response to the "culture of violence" which was permeating streets and parks, they organised public performances, music

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<sup>40</sup> José Osorio is also one of Caja Lúdica's founders in 2000.

festivals, rock concerts, experimental arts and mural paintings amongst others (Ibid.).

The *Collectivo Arte Urbano* ('Urban Arts Collective') collaborated during two festivals in 1998 and 1999 which took place in Guatemala's historic centre with the aim to bring people together in a peaceful way (JO 2013). During the second festival, a rock concert at the main square was interrupted by a violent encounter between the police and a group of young people attending the concert. One of the festival organisers, José Osorio recalls:

Police and military attempted to dissolve the concert, justifying it with the argument that there were riots and that a group of young people were potential gang members [...] policemen were arresting young people [...] I remember being beaten in the ribs by one of the operational leaders while I was trying to convince him of the opposite.

(JO 2014)<sup>41</sup>

José's testimony, evidences that the peace process in Guatemala in 1999 remained far from its consolidation. It also portrays the restrictive and oppressive politics towards free expression of young people and youth culture during that time (Acevedo 2011, 493).

Despite these incidents, the event was followed by a series of festivals such as for example *Octubre Azul* ('Blue October') in 2000, a four-week long celebration in Guatemala City's historic centre. This festival was a joint effort of different urban arts initiatives amongst them the *Collectivo Arte Urbano* ('Urban Arts Collective'). Many artists and art organisations emerged from this month of cultural activities (Ibid., 495). *Caja Lúdica*, for example, started as a fusion of two artists, José Osorio (visual artist) and Renato Maselli (musician) from the *Collectivo Arte Urbano* ('Urban Arts Collective') in Guatemala City, and the Columbians Doryan Bedoya (poet and writer) and Julia Escobar (arts educator),

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<sup>41</sup> JO. Facebook. 20 February 2014 (Accessed 13 February 2014).

who offered to share their experience, which they had gained from working with Barrio Comparsa, an arts group they co-founded in Medellín.

According to Julia Escobar, Guatemala at the time was facing similar conditions to Colombia in the 1990s<sup>42</sup> with rising levels of violence affecting the daily lives of many Guatemalans and in particular young people (JE 2013). Moreover, the thirty-six years of civil war had left many communities fractured with mistrust and fear and making social cohesion a difficult task. The *comparsa*, a carnivalesque street performance, which they successfully used as a methodological tool in Medellín to reclaim public spaces and to re-create community as a peaceful response to violence, was suggested by the Colombian artists as a potential opening ceremony for the *Festival Octubre Azul* ('Blue October Festival'). With just twenty days to organise the performance, the Colombians worked with around 200 young people from marginalised urban areas providing creative workshops such as, for example, stilt making, drumming, masks, body expression and face painting. The young people emerged from diverse backgrounds and initiatives such as the PROJOVEN project<sup>43</sup>, as well as youth groups from churches and other social organisations (Ibid.). After participating in the workshops they were prepared to perform in the *comparsa* and became the protagonists of *Octubre Azul* ('Blue October') and its opening ceremony (Ibid.). Mario Castañeda, a Guatemalan historian, recalls:

When Caja Lúdica performed its first *comparsa* it was interesting as an artistic alternative for Guatemala on a political, aesthetical and methodological level [...]. The people were fascinated and attracted to this new cultural expression from Colombia. They were drawn into a different

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<sup>42</sup> During the 1990s Medellín was affected by an internal and escalating drug war and was considered as "the most violent city" in Colombia (Escobar 1996, 6).

<sup>43</sup> PROJOVEN (1994-2003), was a collaborative project between the GTZ (German Development Cooperation) and the MINEDUC (Ministry of Education) in Guatemala with participants from government organisations, NGOs, as well as organisations from the youth sector to improve the conditions of young people that are affected by economic and social exclusion (OIT 2001).



world of imagination and joy after years of oppression and conflict.

(MC 2013)

The *comparsa* was well received in Guatemala City and so were the workshops by the young people, who after the festival requested more creative activities for their youth groups or schools. This gave the impulse for the four artists to start developing Caja Lúdica as a “common dream” (RM 2013). They were hoping to engage in the spaces promised (but never accomplished) by the peace accords by supporting young people from urban and rural areas to “actively contribute to social reconciliation and peace processes in their communities” (Caja Lúdica, 2003, 1).

#### *Creation of the local base group - a permanent space of learning*

Caja Lúdica gained legal entity as a civil cultural organisation in 2001 (Caja Lúdica 2003, 10), which enabled them to continue workshop processes with 4 urban youth groups and some of the young people who had performed during the *comparsa*. Moreover, Caja Lúdica’s founders together with other artists succeeded in opening up a permanent space for cultural activities by occupying and recuperating an abandoned post office building in Guatemala’s city centre. Negotiation processes with the local government enabled the cultural movement to legally transform the space into offices and rehearsal rooms for different organisations, and a small area for Caja Lúdica’s arts workshops (RM 2013). Figures 3 and 4 (below) show some of Caja Lúdica’s first activities. Some of the young people, who can be seen as workshop participants here, are now - in 2016 - leading Caja Lúdica as a cultural organisation and networking practice.



Figure 3 (left): Caja Lúdica's first workshops, Guatemala City (2001).

Figure 4 (right): Caja Lúdica's first public interventions, Guatemala City (2001).

For many young people Caja Lúdica's permanent base meant a radical change in their lives; not only a way out of violence and child labour, but also an informal space of learning and sociality with peers as an addition to the youth groups in their local communities (SO 2013). While some, originating from low-income urban suburbs, were going to school in the afternoon and supporting their family as ambulant vendors on the streets, others came from middle-class Ladino families and were engaging in more traditional forms of arts education or apprenticeships (DF 2013). In order to participate in the workshop activities most of them travelled to Guatemala's city centre, often without their parents' agreement, although in many cases these families later appreciated their children's involvement in Caja Lúdica's informal cultural learning environment (Ibid.). The engagement with young people from different backgrounds has been one of Caja Lúdica's main characteristics since 2000, and is also reflected in the diversity of the groups representing the Community Arts Network to date (see chapter 4).

Most of Caja Lúdica's processes at the beginning were only possible through the founder's own resources, however, financial support from one of

their first donors Christian Aid<sup>44</sup> was key to cover the young people's travel costs, including the journeys into the communities where they provided workshops in communal spaces, parks or schools (DB 2013). While, during that time, the application for funding was rather uncomplicated and allowed free development and decision making for the organisation, later, it required detailed reports and proof of results, which impacted the development of Caja Lúdica's practices, in particular their expansion into other communities (JE 2013).

During Caja Lúdica's early years, the founders in collaboration with some of the young people developed the three-year pilot project *Lúdica Creativa para una Cultura Ciudadana: Jóvenes tejiendo Redes de Convivencia* ('Playful Creativity for a Culture of Citizenship: Youth Weaving Webs of Coexistence'), funded by ADESCA.<sup>45</sup> It was developed as an alternative space and methodology not only to foster young people's creative expressions but more importantly the creation of relationships "with their inner being, with other people as well as the natural environment" (Caja Lúdica 2003, 3). Moreover, it aimed to contribute to "an acknowledgement of the history, the human rights as well as values based on the Guatemalan culture and spirituality" (Ibid.). The project implemented a regular workshop programme from Monday to Saturday in the old post office building with the intention to establish a base group including the four founders and around ten young people mainly from urban marginal areas (Ibid.). However, in this initial period up to thirty young people frequented the space on a regular basis.

This 'permanent workshop' (Ibid., 19-21) consisted of four different components, which are closely interlinked with each other: 1) *Sensibilización y Encuentro con el Ser, el Otro y el Entorno* ('Sensitisation and Encounter with the

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<sup>44</sup> Christian Aid: <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/whatwedo/the-americas/guatemala.aspx> (Accessed 13 December 2015).

<sup>45</sup> ADESCA (Aporte para la Descentralización Cultural) is a public institution with the aim to promote culture as a source for sustainable economic and social development in Guatemala: <http://www.adesca.org.gt/> (Accessed 13 January 2014).

Self, the Other and the environment'), which includes breathing and relaxation techniques as well as movement and games so as to create an atmosphere of trust; 2) *Creatividad* ('Creativity') fosters self-esteem and free expression, which includes workshops such as stilt walking, the creation of accessories such as juggling balls, flags etc., mask development and face-painting, costume design, corporal expression, percussion and music, collective creation amongst others; 3) *Desarrollo Humano* ('Human Development') represents workshops which aim to foster the youth participant's understanding of the Guatemalan history and the current social and political context; 4) *Réplica y Función Social* ('Replication and Social Engagement) keeps the methodology alive, as it is reproduced and applied by the young people in their local practice. Therefore, on the one hand it constitutes a strategy for their practice to be more sustainable and at the same time an empowering element which supports the young people's involvement in their communities.

The mentioned constituents and values provide Caja Lúdica's conceptual basis and illustrate their emphasis on human beings and their development on a relational, creative, socio-political as well as communal level. Over fifteen years these four components have remained key pillars and characteristics of their practice and can also be traced in the rather diverse expressions of the Community Arts Network (see chapters 4-6). Since 2009 they are officially presented under a slightly different name in Caja Lúdica's *Diploma of Socio-cultural Animation and Management*, which has been approved by local universities (see also later section).

Moreover, and this is key, Caja Lúdica's 'permanent workshop' as well as their subsequent community arts processes are grounded in a method named *Metodología Lúdica Acción Participación Transformación* ('Action, Participation and Transformation Methodology'), which Julia Escobar developed in collaboration with other artists from Barrio Comparsa after many years of working with young people in Medellin, Colombia (JE 2013). For her this methodology shares its

concepts and values with the Popular Education Movement in Latin America (Ibid.), which emerged in the 1970s in different countries of the region, particularly Brazil, aiming to support and empower people through education so they were able to liberate themselves from oppression (Kane 2001). One of their fundamental principles was the belief that “education can never be neutral” (Freire 1974, 132), which has been argued by Paulo Freire, one of most significant Latin American scholars and practitioners in this field. He emphasises that in contexts of oppression, education is often used as a means to “domesticate and adjust” and coined the concept of banking education, as a critique of traditional education structures (Ibid., 5).<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the main aim of Caja Lúdica’s methodology to date is to empower young people to challenge their social exclusion and marginalisation in their communities through youth organisation and public interventions (Lopez 2008, 24).

The *Action* part of the methodology represents a public performance or artistic intervention. Often this is a *comparsa*, a colourful and eye-catching event, which aims to attract the attention and participation of young people in future activities and processes (see chapter 6). It is an invitation to the public and mainly young people to join diverse games and workshops such as the elaboration of stilts, masks, juggling skills, face painting amongst others, which they then directly apply during a collectively created public performance in the local community (Caja Lúdica 2003, 33). This active involvement represents the second component of the methodology, *Participation* and engagement in a temporary intervention, which provides a possible impulse and offer to initiate community arts processes with the people involved. Some of them may create a youth group to initiate such a process or may already belong to an established youth organisation, school or group that often later becomes a potential place for the

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<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Gramsci (1971) talks about civil society organizations such as the educational system, the media as well as religious institutions as means to pass on certain modes of social behaviour and ways of thinking, which help to maintain the hegemonic order (see Buttigieg, 1995, 2005).

process to develop (Escobar 1996, 25). *Transformation*, which is the third component, as a “lived experience of change” not only takes place during active participation in the practices but also continues and expands into the young people’s daily lives and impacts others through their actions and practices (Ibid.). Tony Elionor, who is Caja Lúdica’s director since 2010, highlights: “We can work on our personal development, always in relation to others and become active protagonists of democracy and peace processes in our communities” (TE 2013).

These words clearly indicate the change-orientated element of Caja Lúdica’s methodology as *experienced, practiced* and *lived*, which draws the attention to the young people and their transformative potential to contribute to a culture of peace in post-conflict Guatemala. This is essential for the overall argument of the thesis, which emphasises Caja Lúdica’s networking strategies through which, alongside other initiatives, they have created a web of practice and platform of youth organisation. It expands, changes and sustains itself through the local practices and actions of the youth groups and individuals, which represents their potential to be resistant as a cultural movement in this particular context.

### *Outreach practices and networking*

The ten young people forming Caja Lúdica’s base group also were the protagonists of the outreach processes, which took place in marginal urban communities such as Mario Alioto, Villa Nueva, Colonia Guajitos (zona<sup>47</sup> 21), Colonia Mezquital (zona 12), Colonia Kenedy (zona 18), Colonia la Esperanza (zona 19) as well as in Guatemala’s historical centre (Caja Lúdica 2003). Many of them were already youth group leaders in their communities, and this enabled them to practice and share the skills they learned with Caja Lúdica.

While Caja Lúdica’s outreach processes at the beginning mainly focused on urban marginal areas, in November of the same year, in 2001, they received

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<sup>47</sup> *Zona* (‘zone’) describes the different districts of Guatemala City.

funding from the UNDP's *Human Rights and Social Reconciliation Program*.<sup>48</sup> This enabled them to gradually expand into rural areas, which had been highly affected by the armed conflict. Julia Escobar saw the potential of their methodology to contribute to the re-building of trust in particular amongst the young generation (JE 2013). In the following three years Caja Lúdica expanded geographically with more and more youth groups and young people engaging in arts processes. These developments clearly are a result of their methodology, which is based on peer-to-peer learning and knowledge exchange. Hence, young people not only participated in the workshops but also became facilitators for others during and after the processes. While Caja Lúdica started with a core group of four in 2000, in November 2001 the young people engaging in the outreach processes through the youth groups ascended to seventy. In 2002 they doubled their numbers to 150. By the end of 2003, eight artistic youth groups<sup>49</sup> with an average of 420 young people were involved in the community arts processes (Caja Lúdica 2003, 6).

During that time Caja Lúdica also started to build a wide and diverse network with other NGOs and civil society organisations such as GAM, Fundación Rigoberta Menchú, Médicos Descalzos, Casa Alianza, Grupo Ceiba that were working on reconciliation processes in different areas of the country.<sup>50</sup> While the youth protagonists were the connectors to the urban areas, the network

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<sup>48</sup> The UNDP (United Nation Development Programme) in 2001 requested a call for civil society organisations to develop projects to support initiatives that were fostering reconciliation processes after the armed conflict. Caja Lúdica's proposal focused on expanding their practice into rural Mayan communities, which were most affected by the armed conflict. The approval of the long-term project opened up new spaces and links with other NGOs working towards social reconstruction and a culture of peace (Caja Lúdica 2003).

<sup>49</sup> New youth groups had been created in San Pedro Ayampuc; El Mezquital; Ciudad Quetzal; Chinique, Quiché; Rabinal, Baja Verapaz; San Juan Comalapa, Chimaltenango as well as in the historical centre of Guatemala City (Caja Lúdica 2003,6).

<sup>50</sup> GAM (Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo): <http://areadetransparencia.blogspot.co.uk/>; Fundación Rigoberto Menchú: <http://www.frmt.org/en/>; Casa Alianza: <http://www.casa-alianza.org.uk/partner/guatemala>; Grupo Ceiba: <http://grupoceiba.org/gruce/> (Accessed 19 October 2015).

of NGOs opened up opportunities for Caja Lúdica and its young people to transcend the city space and expand their practices into rural indigenous communities as well as exchange methodologies with other organisations. Despite the fact that these initiatives shared a common goal to work towards social reconstruction and to foster reconciliation processes - mainly with indigenous communities -, there was only little collaboration between the different NGOs during that time. Civil society was fractured in the aftermaths of the armed conflict, and this was the result of an increased competition for funding and discrepancies between different organisations on how to build peace in Guatemala (Kurtenbach 2008a). According to Mario Castañeda, Caja Lúdica, albeit in an unusual way for this period, were able “to create important networks between different organisations working with young people as well as youth groups” (MC 2013).

Moreover, during that time, five educational institutions<sup>51</sup> recognised Caja Lúdica’s *Action, Participation, Transformation Methodology* as an alternative and complementary proposal to young people’s formal education by introducing it in their curricula (BO 2013). With the strategic implementation of their modules in different spaces, Caja Lúdica were hoping to contribute to an improvement of Guatemala’s quality of education on a long-term level and build sustainable relationships with different schools and institutions (JE 2013).

Caja Lúdica also managed to create links to different international donors that supported them financially as well as on an organisational level through training. Supporters were: The National Reconciliation Program of the United Nations, The Human Rights and Reconciliation Program of USAID, the Civil Society strengthening program of Soros Foundation, HIVOS foundation’s

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<sup>51</sup> Amongst them were the following educational institutions: Instituto Tecnológico Experimental de Ciudad Quetzal Zona 19; INEBE Rabinal Baja Verapaz; INEBEMEX, Mezquital Zone 12; Centro Experimental para la Paz, Zone 18; Instituto Para Señoritas Belén, Zone 1; Instituto Nacional Chuguexa II “A”, Chichicastenango, Quiché (Caja Lúdica 2003, 3).



cultural program, Christian Aid's cultural program, as well as USAID's dignifying program of war victims (Ibid., 13). They also enabled Caja Lúdica to sustain the youth base group and develop a bursary program to cover transport, facilitators, provide didactical material, food, accommodation, as well as to provide small payments to the young people who were supporting youth groups in other parts of the country. According to one of the base group protagonists, the financial support increased the quality of the young people's lives and their families and gave them the opportunity of "an alternative life full of hope, freedom and solidarity as well as an opportunity for paid work for themselves and their youth groups" (SO 2013). Moreover, it financially supported cultural and artistic encounters between the youth groups, which according to José Osorio (2013) illustrated the results of the base group's outreach processes as well as the expansion of the practice from four to 450 young people in these first three years.

Networking on a national and international level, as described here, has become one of Caja Lúdica's working strategies and a key characteristic of the Community Arts Network to date. This, I argue, has enabled them to sustain themselves as an initiative for more than a decade.

### *Caja Lúdica develops as an organisation and expanding network (2003-2008)*

After three years Caja Lúdica also started to develop and strengthen as an institution; it was financially and strategically supported by international development organisations such as Christian Aid and Oxfam (RM 2013). The founders in collaboration with the youth base group further developed their plan for Caja Lúdica to function as a cultural centre and organisation by installing five different working programs (Caja Lúdica 2003).<sup>52</sup> However, within the

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<sup>52</sup> The five different programs included: *A Centre for Literary Formation*, the "Open Window" Program, responsible for exposition and festivals; the *Program for Artistic Production*, which should sustain the organisation through selling cultural events; the

framework of this thesis, I mainly focus on the Community Arts Network, which I consider to be one of the most important elements and result of their processes. Nevertheless, the different programs enabled the base group to refine their organisational and practical skills, which they could then use in their workshops with the youth groups in the communities. Between 2004 and 2008 Caja Lúdica also started to systematise their processes. They developed a diploma in collaboration with the *Escuela Superior de Arte*<sup>53</sup> ('School of Arts') in Guatemala City (DB 2013), which would profile the youth leaders as socio-cultural animators in order to increase their opportunities for finding potential jobs in the cultural sector and other areas (TE 2013).

Moreover, as a result of these institutionalisation processes in 2004, two young people from the base group joined the coordination team, and between 2006 and 2008, the base group fully committed to initiating and accompanying community arts processes with more youth groups in different communities (Caja Lúdica 2008b, 19). These changes were funded by the UNDP through a project, entitled *Taller Permanente de Education Integral y Sensibilización Artística* ('Permanent Workshop for Integral Education and Artistic Sensitisation') (2004-2006). For Renato Masselli (2013), this project facilitated bursaries for Caja Lúdica's youth protagonists, who at the time started to work full-time for the organisation and networking practice. However, the number and time span of the outreach processes did depend on Caja Lúdica's capacity as an organisation, the necessity of the communities involved, as well as the funding available at the time.

Data emerging from Caja Lúdica's archive reveals that while the number of their outreach processes in the communities continuously increased in the first 3 years, a rather irregular development can be observed between 2005 and 2008

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*Workshop for Artistic Production and Elaboration of Accessories* for the presentations and *comparsas* (Caja Lúdica 2003).

<sup>53</sup> Escuela Superior de Arte: [http://www.usac.edu.gt/principal\\_dua.php?f=escarte](http://www.usac.edu.gt/principal_dua.php?f=escarte) (Accessed 13 December 2015); see appendix 1 for the past programs and their funders.

varying between ten and fifteen youth groups and processes per year.<sup>54</sup> This, according to Renato Masselli on the one hand can be linked to the developments and challenges emerging from the respective communities and youth groups (RM 2013). At the same time, it is related to funds available from international donors, which often covered travel costs and materials as well as financially supported the youth facilitators (Ibid.). This data emerging from their archive clearly proves Caja Lúdica's dependency on external funding, which impacted the dimensions of their outreach processes during that time. Moreover, it unveiled that particular groups, which were newly created in collaboration with Caja Lúdica, often struggled to continue after their involvement in the processes with the organisation. This may be linked to changes within the youth group or personal commitments, but also related to the potential dependency on Caja Lúdica's processes and interventions, which some of the groups developed.

However, and this is key, youth groups that were already established as such, and received support by Caja Lúdica to improve their organisation and public presence, were more likely to continue. Through their involvement in a process with Caja Lúdica many groups reported that they had gained more acceptance in the community, and became more visible and trustworthy through regular community engagement activities and street interventions (MCH 2013). In contrast to Caja Lúdica, most of the activities undertaken by the Network's youth groups do not rely on international donors as they are mostly run by the young people on a volunteer basis (see chapter 4). Some of them do, however, get financial support for some of their activities from their community.

Despite these challenges and dynamics emerging from Caja Lúdica's dependency on international funds, in 2008 they had established an area of impact and collaboration with between twenty-five and thirty-one active youth organisations in different parts of the country (Caja Lúdica 2008b).

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<sup>54</sup> Caja Lúdica's archive for the period between 2001 and 2008; p. 10-11.

*The Community Arts Network - the emergence of a youth-led initiative (2008-to date)*

In order to strengthen the ties of the already emerging Community Arts Network, Caja Lúdica in collaboration with other youth groups developed a project under the name *Participación Creativa de la Juventud en la Consolidación de la Red Guatemalteca de Arte para la Gestión Comunitaria* ('Creative Participation of Youth in the Strengthening of the Guatemalan Art Network for Community Engagement') (Caja Lúdica 2008b, 1) with an initial duration of two years. It was funded by Oxfam<sup>55</sup> which had been collaborating with Caja Lúdica as their 'local partner' for many years (TE 2013).

The idea to develop a project, however, according to one of the youth coordinators, emerged from the shared desire of the different groups "to maintain and improve their articulation, and to learn from each other's experiences and the challenges of their practices on a local level" (CO 2013). 'Articulation' (*Articulación*) is used within the Network as a common term and refers to notions of connecting and assembling different groups and their communities. It also embraces notions of solidarity and organisation for collective action (Ibid.). At the same time, I argue that it can be understood as a strategy for the Network and the groups to sustain themselves as a youth initiative, to create a platform for survival in rather challenging conditions, and to develop more autonomy from external funding through its networking practices.

As a result of this common need for articulation, twenty-five youth leaders and representatives of the different groups signed an agreement in 2008 to collectively develop and structure the Community Arts Network. This important encounter took place in Caja Lúdica's cultural centre in Guatemala City and included discussions as well as social and creative activities (see figures 5 and 6 below).

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<sup>55</sup> Oxfam: <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/> (Accessed 13 December 2015).

I also participated in this key event (see figure 6; left side of the circle) and realised in a meaningful way the dimensions and diversity of this networking practice.



Figure 5 (left): Community Arts Network, Guatemala City (2008).

Figure 6 (right): Circle, Guatemala City (2008).

According to the project report, one of its collective aims was to contribute to a more inclusive and equal society through the implementation of community arts processes by young people for young people, which foster and sustain youth organisation on a communal as well as national level (Caja Lúdica 2008a, 22). During the encounter, the youth coordinators developed their shared goals and values as a Network, which to date continues to form an important part of presentations, in particular when new youth groups join in. During an encounter in 2013, for example, one of the youth coordinators highlighted key elements of the Network's shared purpose:

Our common aims are to exchange experiences and methodologies that foster the ties of coexistence, solidarity, and team work [...] we aim to bring the arts to the people, foster critical reflection and change

imaginaries of fear and mistrust [...]. We the young people of Guatemala can change and be the positive change of our communities.

(AS 2013)

The Community Arts Network's vision and aims have remained the same since 2008. However, youth groups and the Network's protagonists have changed over the years and with it the geographical expansion of this practice. According to one of the Network's reports from 2013, around twenty youth groups are currently involved in regular events; and half of them have been active since 2008 (RGDAC 2013, 1).<sup>56</sup> While some of the youth groups are rather informal with little developed organisational structure, others are well established institutionally, for example church youth groups, schools or other civil society organisations. The young people's ages according to the Network's statistical records range from 5% under twelve, 45% between twelve and seventeen, 30% between eighteen and twenty-four and 20% over twenty-five (Ibid.). Gender distribution between girls and boys is 31% and 69%, which according to representatives of the Network can be linked to expectations from many families for the girls to support their parents in the household (Informal conversation 2013). Moreover, young girls in Guatemala have been victims of sexual crimes, which for many girls means a strict protection from their parents and limited movement outside their home (Ibid.).

71% of the young people are of Ladino or Mestizo ethnic origin, and 29% are Maya (11% Achi, 10% Mum, 6% Queqchi, 2% Q' anob' al)<sup>57</sup> (RGDAC 2013, 1).

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<sup>56</sup> Urban youth groups: Caja Lúdica, Guatemala City (39); Jovi, Villa Lobos (12); Aguja, Peronia (14); EPRODEP, San Juan Sacatepequez (25); Artiiis, Villa Lobos (12); Jovenes Activos, Zona 18 (5);

Rural youth groups: Cero Miedo, Chimaltenango (12); Fanaticos de la Lúdica, CopalAA la Esperanza (25); Caracol, Benque Viejo Guatemala/Belize (15); Zanqueros Copaleros, Ixtahuacan (16); Adesju Chiantla (10); Esquipulas, Aventura Juvenil (14); Azúcar Moreno, San Jerónimo (5); Red Juvenil de Purulhá, Purulhá (n.a); Colectivo Las Luces, San Pablo la Laguna (8).

<sup>57</sup> Mestizo describes a person of European and Amerindian descent. Achi, Mum, Queqchi and Q'anob'al are names of Mayan people as well as languages.

This dominance of Mestizos within the Network, according to one of the coordinators, can be linked to cultural factors, but also to the fact that many indigenous young people, in particular in the rural communities, have to support their parents in agriculture or other small businesses and are therefore not able to participate in other activities (PO 2013). Closely linked to this is the distribution of educational degrees with 4% receiving special education, 6% going to primary school (age 7-13), 35% secondary school (age 13-16), 49% vocational college<sup>58</sup> (age 16-18) and 5% university, which shows a clear prevalence of young people in their twenties, who are often group coordinators (RGDAC 2013, 1).

In recent years the Network has also undergone significant changes on a structural level. These changes have affected the network activities and impacted on its development, growth and decline as well its existence. On the one hand, the financial support and approval of the Network as a project from 2008-2010 enabled Caja Lúdica to start handing over responsibilities to a coordination team, which in 2013 included six youth groups. They also had the opportunity to increase the number of regular activities and methodological exchanges between different groups, beyond the yearly encounters that have been taking place since 2001. On the other hand, during that time many of the Network's activities remained dependent on Caja Lúdica, which took responsibility for funding management as well as the planning, organisation and realisation of collective interventions and exchange activities.<sup>59</sup> In addition, they organised several encounters<sup>60</sup> between the coordinators of the groups during one year so as to discuss the working strategies and collective encounters. In 2009, Caja Lúdica organised the Latin American Community Arts Encounter in Guatemala City

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<sup>58</sup> Post-Secondary education that provides skills required for a particular job.

<sup>59</sup> During various interviews with the network protagonists, Caja Lúdica's has been pointed out as having more experience with logistics as well as the necessary capacity to undertake large scale events such as encounters for example.

<sup>60</sup> The encounters between the coordinators of the youth groups depend on the availability of the individuals and the financial resources to pay transport and food.

with 450 youth participants, including different representatives of cultural organisations from Latin America (PR 2013).

This encounter, however, was followed by other events, which were organised by the local youth groups in their communities, rather than by Caja Lúdica, and this was another step for the Network to gain more independence. According to one of the Network coordinators, this enabled the youth groups to take on more responsibility and make decisions which determined their collective activities (PO 2013). Therefore, financial and logistic support of local actors became more important for the realisation of encounters in the local communities. This increased the Network's autonomy from Caja Lúdica and their international funding, which defined the Network as a project. Similar dynamics can also be observed in the communication flow between the groups. While initially most of their communication went through Caja Lúdica, in 2013 some of the youth groups have overtaken responsibility and communicate via e-mail, Skype or Facebook.<sup>61</sup> They also update the Network's webpage<sup>62</sup> with new information and pictures. Moreover, five youth groups<sup>63</sup> are responsible for organising and coordinating collective encounters as well as the youth groups' exchange processes, which, according to some of the youth leaders, has been a challenging task (MB 2014).

As a result of these difficulties, throughout the years, the Network's coordination team has changed several times, and many attempts have been made to improve the communication between the different groups (PO 2013). These challenges have been repeatedly articulated by the youth protagonists. According to one of the Network coordinators they are linked to the complex

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<sup>61</sup> Red de Arte Comunitario Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/RedGuatemaltecadeArteComunitario?fref=ts> (Accessed 21 May 2014).

<sup>62</sup> Red de Arte Comunitario Blog: <http://redartecomunitario.blogspot.co.uk/> (Accessed 21 May 2014).

<sup>63</sup> In 2013 the responsibilities included general coordination, formation, animation, monitoring, communication and financial management.



relationship between Caja Lúdica and the youth groups who have only recently started to appropriate the Network space for themselves:

The Network is in the process of decentralising itself, Caja Lúdica is not the Network. It is PART OF the Network now. [...]. Our goal is to make ourselves visible as a Network in various spaces, but this is taking time. Therefore MARACA<sup>64</sup> for example is important because there we have the opportunity to represent ourselves as a Network and not as Caja Lúdica or singular groups.

(MB 2013)

The young girl, quoted here, emphasises another element of the Network's structural changes, namely, its institutional representation within regional youth initiatives such as MARACA as well as other cultural organisations and networks on an international level, which before have been only linked to Caja Lúdica.<sup>65</sup> On a regular basis they engage in cultural and methodological exchanges as well as encounters and common activities on a national and international level.

However, despite the fact that the Community Arts Network is in the process of becoming autonomous from Caja Lúdica, the latter continue to play an important role because they coordinate the education team. Thus, many of the groups apply elements of Caja Lúdica's methodology in their work. While the groups, on the one hand, may represent expansions of Caja Lúdica as an

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<sup>64</sup> Movimiento de Arte Comunitario de Centroamérica.

<sup>65</sup> MARACA's founders are Arte Acción (Tegucigalpa, Honduras): <http://www.arte-accion.org/>; Tiempos Nuevos Teatro (Chalatenango, El Salvador): <http://www.tnt.org.sv/>; and Caja Lúdica (Guatemala); others include: Red por la Vida: <http://redporlavida.blogspot.co.uk/>; Red Guatemalteca de Teatro; Movimiento Social por los Derechos de la Niñez y Juventud: <https://www.facebook.com/MOVIMIENTO-SOCIAL-NI%C3%91EZ-ADOLESCENCIA-Y-JUVENTUD-EN-GUATEMALA-209711042402967/>; Red Mesoamericano de Arte CALEIDOSCOPIO: <http://caleidoscopioenelvacio.blogspot.co.uk/>; GuanaRed: <http://www.guanared.org/>; Red Latinoamericano para la Transformación Social: <https://es-la.facebook.com/RedLA.AYTS/>; Corporación Renovación: <http://corporacionrenovacion.blogspot.co.uk/>; Barrio Comparsa: <http://barriocomparsa.blogspot.co.uk/> (RGDAC 2011).

organisation and practice, on the other hand they remain independent nodes that integrate Caja Lúdica's methodology into their local cultural expressions. I argue that through the common practice that the groups share, they collectively have created a platform of exchange, which enables young people to grow, develop and express themselves outside the traditional educational system (see chapter 4).

Different notions of this shared practice can also be observed on a larger scale during the encounters between the different youth groups. Despite the fact that some of the Network's large encounters in 2016 are limited due to Caja Lúdica's financial shortages, an increased activity and exchange between the groups can be observed on a small scale (see chapter 4). Moreover, it seems to be important for the youth groups and individuals to form part of this Network and a shared belief in social change, which is usually reinforced during their large-scale events (see chapters 5). Being part of a larger movement and a collective struggle, however, in geographically separate ways, seems to represent an important motor for young people to actively engage in their communities. Their local practices are embedded in the Network's collective imaginary, which is based on the idea that every young person and individual 'can change' and 'be change' which, I argue, is also articulated through their public spectacle, the *comparsa* (see chapter 6). Drawing these trends together, and significantly for this thesis, I identify this networking practice as being situated between diversity and uniformity, existence and imaginary, convergence and divergence. This suggests that the Network's processes are grounded in a shared struggle for change, which has enabled this practice to persevere in this particular context for over a decade.

## PART TWO

### CHAPTER 4

#### THE NETWORK'S RHIZOMATIC REPERTOIRE OF PRACTICES

Its true life is invisible, hidden in the rhizome. The part that appears above the ground lasts only a single summer. Then it withers away – an ephemeral apparition. [...] I have never lost a sense of something that lives and endures underneath the external flux. What we see is the blossom which passes. The rhizome remains.

(Jung 1963, 4)

In this chapter, I explore the multiple dimensions of the Community Arts Network and particularly focus on the local youth groups. Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory provides a source of analysis, as well as a metaphor, to help me understand the development and expansion of their cultural practices and their role as community creating spaces within the context of Guatemala. I argue that, on the basis of their shared practice, and Caja Lúdica's methodology of replication, the Network's groups on the one hand have developed a repertoire of experience and skills, which enables the young people to grow, learn and develop outside the conventional education system and supports them in their communities. The local youth groups are key as they provide a persistent and regular space of learning and encounter as well as skill sharing and development on an everyday basis. On the other hand, the Network's repertoire is limited and homogeneous due to the fact that it mainly consists of and relies on Caja Lúdica's workshop modules. Therefore, the individual groups' connections and interactions with other social actors on a local level are important so as to create new dynamics for knowledge exchange and autonomy.

This argument contributes to wider debates on the development and sustainability of community arts processes with young people in challenging contexts but also in other parts of the world (see literature review). Neither the

debates on youth participation in community arts nor in development studies are sufficient to explain the specific characteristics of the Network's practices and the role of the young people within that. Therefore, it is key to expand on the existing approaches by introducing elements such as *local embeddedness* and *youth protagonism* on the one hand, and *networking* on the other into these debates. Through my exploration in this chapter, I suggest that for community arts processes to be sustainable they have to be rooted in local culture and networks, and they have to be embedded in the social struggles of the community. At the same time, such processes have to provide the necessary space for young people to share and further develop their skills with peers rather than invite them to participate and then 'move on to the next facilitated workshop', which emphasises the individual as a consumer and not an active agent responsible for the process and its development.

After an introduction of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory as an analytical framework for the chapter, I 'follow' Peronia Adolescente, one of the Network's youth groups, which is located in the outskirts of Guatemala City. I have chosen this case study, because it illustrates the Network's approach and ethos to practice as embedded in the community, and exemplifies how this is expressed on a local level. I aim to highlight this youth group as being one of the Network's local nodes, explore the autonomy and embeddedness of the group's practices and struggles, and examine the role of the young people as networking protagonists in their community. This example can be seen as representative for many other youth groups that actively form part of the Network. I then move on to how the groups' local differences interact with the Network's notion of a common repertoire, which provides a resource for methodological exchange and mutual support between the groups and individuals involved.

## **Rhizomatic connections**

Ginger plants have accompanied me during my fieldwork in Guatemala, where I did not only find them growing in different communities, but also in my garden which they enchanted with their beautiful blossom and smell. In indigenous tradition their roots are particularly valued for their healing potential, their resistance to changing weather conditions and their ability to grow and spread quickly, even in barren soil (personal conversation 2013). At the time, however, I did not know that ginger roots or rhizomes would be the key for exploring and understanding the dynamics and practices of the Community Arts Network.

As a rhizome of multiple interconnected horizontally growing roots, ginger not only continuously reproduces itself but is also able to survive underground in unfavourable conditions as it stores nutrients in its nodes, while its pink flowers fade (Rhizome 2014). Therefore every part of the rhizome, even if has been separated or cut, has the ability to continuously grow within a certain area or even start as a new plant in a different territory. Despite the fact that the blossom or plant above the ground may appear lifeless during colder seasons, the rhizome has sometimes thickened areas where it is able to store nutrients such as starch for example and therefore continues to live, reproduce itself and by doing so grow under the ground (Ibid.).

Deleuze and Guattari introduce the concept of the rhizome from botany and state that “a rhizome as a subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicals. Bulbs and tubers are rhizomes [...] (It) assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers. The rhizome includes the best and the worst: potato and couchgrass, or the weed” (1987, 6-7). When they used the metaphor in their introductory chapter to *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* they did so to suggest a more dynamic and open manner of thinking considering multiple truths and connections, which stood in contrast to the dominant thought process or ‘tree-logic’ present in Western philosophy (Schuh and Cunningham 2004). According

to Deleuze and Guattari, “arborescent systems are hierarchical systems, with centres of significance and subjectification, central automata like organised memories” (1987, 16). The rhizome instead is a “short-term memory or antimemory [...] (an) acentred, non-hierarchical system without a General and without an organising memory or central automaton” (Ibid., 21). Hence, the arborescent ‘tree ontology’, which seems to rather represent hierarchical systems or institutions, implies the reinforcement of notions of authority and control as well as centrality. The rhizome unlike such structures “is made only of lines” and has multiple entryways and connections, which represent notions of variation, expansion and circulation (Ibid.).

It is not surprising that Deleuze and Guattari’s theory emerged in the aftermaths of a continuous series of public demonstrations of students and workers in Paris and other parts of France during May 1968, which many philosophers at the time regarded as a “failed revolt” (Buchanan and Thoburn 2008, 13). One of Deleuze and Guattari’s main theses was that revolution is not necessarily a matter of taking power, in the sense of maintaining the persistent hierarchies and institutions (Ibid., 14). They also stated that revolutions as they emerged in 1968 are counter-revolutionary in aspiration and potential, because they resulted in little or non-essential changes (Ibid.). Instead they suggest that the development and resistance of human beings can only be found in the chaotic spaces and interactions of everyday life (Sutton, D. and Martin-Jones, D. 2008, 9). Despite the fact that everyday activities are often structured by hierarchical organisations and ‘tree-like’ institutions, spaces of resistance and identity emerge at a grassroots level through the interaction between humans, thus in rather dispersed and multiple however connected ways (Ibid.).

Deleuze and Guattari develop their rhizome theory in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as an image of thought to challenge and understand power systems and notions of resistance within that, which in many ways contrasts to post-war Guatemala. However, I consider the organic nature of the rhizome, as well as its subversive

and resistant nature of growing underground as a plant and metaphor useful to opening up new paths for understanding the practices and dynamics of the Community Arts Network in this particular context. Hence, sometimes I use notions of the rhizome in a more descriptive way to illustrate the movement and expansion of this networking practice through space. In other moments it provides a tool to explore the Network's potential to be resistant, their aspiration as a youth initiative and their contribution to the reconstruction of the social network in Guatemala.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome, however, is not to be understood as opposed to the tree as "there are knots of arborescence in rhizomes" (1987, 20). Neither do the authors suggest that tree structures have to be eliminated. Instead they present them as stable environments, which may provide resources for rhizomes to develop: "a new rhizome may form in the heart of a tree, the hollow of a root, the crook of a branch" (Ibid., 15). Despite the fact that they mention the coexistence of both tree and root as well as their mutual dependence, they express however their distrust in arborescence and clear sympathy for rhizomes:

We're tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They've made us suffer too much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics. Nothing is beautiful, or loving or political aside from underground stems and aerial roots, adventitious growths and rhizomes.

(Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 15)

My understanding of the relationship between tree and rhizome takes on a slightly different perspective and seeks to highlight their symbiotic relationship and mutual dependency. I argue that tree elements have been key for the network's emergence and sustainability, in particular during the early years, and can provide important nodes within rhizomes providing key notions for stability and continuity.

Through my exploration I aim to stress that rhizomes of cultural practices, as explored in this study, are able to store, develop and spread knowledge and skills, but only if they consist of continuous places or nodes that enable practices to develop. Hence, they can be *responsive repertoires* that are able to store skills and experience, an approach that contrasts with Deleuze and Guattari's assumption that rhizomes are characterised by a short-term memory, which includes "forgetting as a process" (Ibid., 16). In order for repertoires to be responsive, they have to be *locally embedded* and respond to the specific needs of the community and context. I understand responsiveness in relation to practice, as the ability to adapt and react to changing social and economic patterns and, in order to do so, must build on the resources available in its immediate context. My argument understands their role in two ways. First, the importance of a place of practice tracing the rhizome back to its origin in botany, which describes the ability of nodes to store starch in challenging times such as droughts. Second, the understanding of practice as an active and embodied experience which lingers in the bodies of the network protagonists and is further developed through their actions.

In order to develop my understanding of the Network as a *responsive repertoire of practices*, I build on Diana Taylor's (2003, 20) exploration of performance and embodied practice as a form of knowing, as well as a system for storing, transmitting and developing knowledge. She distinguishes between the archive and the repertoire. While the archive refers to enduring materials such as, for example texts, images or film, the repertoire in turn comprises embodied practice or knowledge such as dance, ritual and spoken language amongst others. It also includes community arts practices in a more general sense. According to Taylor, archival memory sustains power over the repertoire as the more common and recognized source of knowledge (Ibid.). Although Taylor declines the binary of the archive that constitutes hegemonic power and the repertoire through which power structures can be challenged, she suggests



an understanding of the repertoire as the domain of cultural processes and therefore the space in which acts of resistance can take place (Ibid.). Building on Taylor, I aim to stress the Network's practices as embodied and continuously performed, reproduced and developed by its protagonists not only during their collective encounters but in particular through the youth groups on a local level.

Community arts practices are the shared element of the different groups that constitute the Network, and they all use the arts in some ways and as a strategy to articulate themselves as groups in their communities. This is the result of their participation in Caja Lúdica's community arts processes and encounters, which have accompanied many of the youth groups on a regular basis for several years and supported their local development through different cultural workshops (see chapter 3). Hence, certain elements of Caja Lúdica's methodology such as the arts workshops, encounters as well as *comparsas* or community festivals as public interventions can also be traced in the youth groups' practices, however, as I argue, they are expressed and further developed in different ways. Moreover, elements such as the replication of the acquired arts skills is one of the shared characteristics of the youth groups and most of them perform outreach processes in their neighbouring communities. Yet, this element of uniformity within the Network has been one of the main criticisms put forward against Caja Lúdica, with some describing it as a "self-replicating or "self-cloning organisation" (JO 2013). The argument of this thesis, however, is that the youth groups are characterised by their diversity in cultural expressions, which constitute the Network's responsive repertoire. As *hybrid practices* these expressions are constituted by both Caja Lúdica's methodology, and elements of the local experiences and cultures. This has also been repeatedly emphasised during the interviews. One of the Network's coordinators points out:

The group in Huehuetenango applies the arts in their local work different to Sololá, Rabinal or Caja Lúdica in Guatemala City [...] you can observe similar elements which we use and share, such as the *comparsa* or the stilts

for example [...]. However we all believe in community arts as the means to make changes in ourselves, our families our communities.

(JL 2013)

Despite the fact that the different groups are linked through a common cultural practice and a shared understanding of the arts as a means for transformation, as stated above, their organisational structures and strategies as well as artistic expressions differ, and so do the themes they deal with in their community work. These themes include for example: health; the defence of natural resources; environment; and youth rights (amongst others). This notion of connectivity versus heterogeneity reminds us of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987, 7) development of the rhizome through six principles, and the first two are particularly useful here:

any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything else and must be [...] This is very different from a tree or root which plots a point, fixes an order. A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organisations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles.

I argue that the Network's practices through their rhizomatous notion and ability to connect across territorial and social borders re-emerge in diverse locations and continue to be expressed in different ways on a local level. The shared cultural practice, however, not only permeates the youth groups' local struggles (and by doing so connect them like invisible threads), but it also significantly impacts the ways in which they engage with their communities. It opens up new possibilities for the youth groups to publicly articulate and express themselves through the arts on an individual and collective level (see chapter 6). Hence, it seems to represent "this moving sideways, for the fostering of specifically transversal connections" (O'Sullivan 2006, 17), which allows alliances between different organisations, groups and individuals as well as their practices and networks.

In order to develop the argument of this chapter, which stresses the importance of local embeddedness for community arts and networking practices and explores how the responsive repertoire develops in a rhizomatic way, the following sections focus on Peronia Adolescente, one of the local youth groups.

### **Local embeddedness: A case study of Peronia Adolescente**

Peronia Adolescente is located in Ciudad Peronia, a municipality of Villa Nueva, south of Guatemala City. Like many other settlements in the area, it was created after an earthquake in the late 1970s and since then continued to rapidly grow as many, mainly indigenous people, left their land during the war in the 1980s or later moved to the outskirts of the city hoping to improve their living conditions (Cocode Peronia 2011). In 2011, Ciudad Peronia has an estimated population of 80,000 people, and the majority are young people and children (Ibid., 2). Due to high levels of violence and delinquency the government has catalogued Ciudad Peronia as a 'red zone', which in Guatemala describes an area that should be avoided by non-residents.<sup>66</sup>

A short excerpt from my field diary (September 2013) describes my experience of travelling from Guatemala City to Ciudad Peronia:

*I always feel slightly tense on urban bus journeys, because in recent years bus drivers have been a target of assassinations and violent robberies by gangs. I am also the only white person in an overcrowded bus, often resulting in people's gazes pointed towards me, triggering a rather uncomfortable feeling in my body. For safety reasons, travelling down the winding roads to Peronia is not recommended for people unfamiliar with the*

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<sup>66</sup> 'Red zones' are suburbs with particularly high levels of violence and crime, which are officially declared as 'no-go' zones. However, for the local population the term is highly contested, as it stigmatises not only the area but also its citizens. This affects young people in a negative way, for example, when applying for a school or job or when stopped by the police, who often suspect groups of youth in public as potential gang members (MCH 2013).

area. Therefore I am accompanied by an old friend and one of Peronia Adolescente's former coordinators. Walking through the small alleys and streets, surrounded by hundreds of humble houses, made out of concrete blocks or laminate, which are built on steep hills, is an experience which usually remains hidden for foreigners visiting Guatemala (see figures 7 and 8). While we are heading to the youth group's cultural centre my friend tells me that many of the houses in Ciudad Peronia, in particular the ones without official register, lack connection to drinking water or electricity and other infrastructure.



Figures 7 and 8: Houses, Ciudad Peronia (2013).

My friend and personal guide through Peronia highlights that in particular youth is affected by issues such as alcohol and drug abuse as well as the involvement in gangs or informal networks and often struggle to find employment or an adequate career path. Moreover, he highlights young people's experiences with everyday violence and crime, as well as oppressive interventions undertaken by state forces such as police or military, who, during their search for criminals, often stigmatise youth as gang members. He tells me that many of the young people who are getting involved with Peronia Adolescente, were or are still in direct or indirect ways affected by gang activities or rivalries, which

*often causes tensions in the group, has forced them to lower their profile or to negotiate with their leaders in order to not endanger their safety.*

This description reflects the conditions of many settlements of Latin American cities where municipal services such as transport, schools, health care centres are scarce, which has been described by some authors as a phenomenon of “social abandonment” (Biehl 2004, Cruz 2007). In particular the lack of opportunities and employment, which in the settlements such as Ciudad Peronia is higher than in other parts of Guatemala, affects young people and often results in their involvement in informal networks often linked to increased levels of crime and delinquency (Winton 2007).

Peronia Adolescente emerges within this particular context from a series of community development projects directed at young people in Ciudad Peronia, which were implemented since 1998 by SEFCA.<sup>67</sup> After six years, in 2004, it gained independence and legal status as a youth organisation and three young people, which emerged from these processes, continued to lead the group by developing their aims and objectives, working strategies and their understanding of youth leadership within their community (MCH 2013). Between 2003 and 2008, Peronia Adolescente was also part of Caja Lúdica’s community arts processes, which, according to one of the group’s coordinators, were key during their journey as a youth initiative<sup>68</sup> (Ibid.):

Our involvement in Caja Lúdica’s processes has impacted on the way in which we engage with each other as a group, how we work and collectively articulate ourselves on a community level, but it has also facilitated opportunities and links with other youth initiatives in different parts of the country and world.

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<sup>67</sup> SEFCA (Servicios Ecueménicos de Formación Cristiana en Centro América): <http://sefcaguatemala.blogspot.co.uk/> (Accessed 12 January 2015).

<sup>68</sup> Other collaborators were UNAMG (Unión Nacional de Mujeres Guatemaltecas): <http://unamg.org/>; as well as ACJ (Asociación Cristiana de Jóvenes): <http://acj-ymca-guatemala.blogspot.co.uk/> (Accessed 14 January 2014).

This respondent's words not only indicate how their involvement with Caja Lúdica changed their local practices, but also draw attention to their collaboration with other youth groups, which indicates Caja Lúdica's role not only as a facilitating organisation but also as a networking agent and intermediary. Since 2008, Peronia Adolescente is not part of Caja Lúdica's processes any more. It is however involved in the Community Arts Network and to date, in 2016, is one of the main coordinators and is among the most experienced and established urban groups (JL 2013).

In 2013, Peronia Adolescente is based in a small building with two rooms and a small backyard, which serves as their regular meeting place and cultural centre. It also provides a workshop for their bicycle project *Eco-Bici*<sup>69</sup>, which contributes to their sustainability and is directed to the training of young people in recycling and repairing of bicycles. Figure 9 shows the group in front of their cultural centre.



Figure 9: Peronia Adolescente in front of their cultural centre, Ciudad Peronia (2010).

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<sup>69</sup> The bicycles are collected and donated by Bikes for the World: <http://www.bikesfortheworld.org/about-us/how-we-re-funded> (Accessed 14 September 2014).

Despite the fact that they receive a small financial support for festivals or other activities from NGOs or initiatives such as PSJ and *Kinderpostzegels* (a Dutch fundraising organisation), most of their activities are on a voluntary basis and rely on the collaboration with other local groups and social actors (MCH 2013).<sup>70</sup>

In 2014, the youth group is coordinated by around eight young people between sixteen and twenty-seven, who, according to one of the youth leaders, “assume the organisation and decision making for the implementation of cultural, social and political processes directed to young people, children and adults living in Ciudad Peronia and the surrounding communities” (MCH 2013). This statement clearly indicates the group’s understanding of their arts processes as actively engaging with and providing spaces for the community. This *local embeddedness*, which they share with the other groups of the Network, I argue reflects a particular perspective on practice as place-bound. Hence, the diverse community arts practices are situated, and therefore the Network’s cultural expressions can only be found in the youth groups’ territorially dispersed communities. This has also been pointed out by one of Peronia Adolescente’s coordinators, who describes their relationship as youth practitioners with the local community:

We are the young people who live in the community, and we are the ones who are 100% there. We know the challenges and problems, we work with others and share our experiences and skills with young people, children and adults and learn from them [...]. We contribute to the community through our permanent workshops in our cultural centre as well as through our interventions and festivals for people to meet and coexist.

(MCH 2013)

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<sup>70</sup> PSJ (*Programa de Seguridad Juvenil*): <http://centroamericajuven.org/?q=node/3923>; *Kinderpostzegels*: <http://www.kinderpostzegels.nl/en> (Accessed 12 April 2013).

These words reflect the connection between the young people, their arts practice and the local community, and they emphasise the role of the young people as protagonists in this particular setting. Hence, I argue that Peronia Adolescente is one example of the Network's ongoing practices or what Dewey (1938, 19) has described as continuity: "Continuity [...] means that rational operations *grow out* of organic activities, without being identical with that from what they emerge". These 'organic activities' that Dewey refers to are also an organism's attempt to survive and function within the environment where it emerges (Ibid.). In this sense, the youth groups, in contrast to Caja Lúdica's processes, which terminate after a certain period of time, represent a *continuity of practice* which not only sustains the Network's activism, in between the collective encounters, but also provide a persistent space of learning through regular engagement and an opportunity to experiment in particular during their outreach practices.

### **Laboratories of practice and peer-to-peer learning**

The importance of local groups for the continuity of networks as well as social movements and their dynamics has also been pointed out by Melucci (1989, 1996) and his research on collective identity formations. He suggests that most of the activity undertaken by collective forms of organisation can be traced within smaller "submerged" or "subterranean" networks, which through their embeddedness in the everyday are less visible and therefore often beneath the view of most research or media attention (Ibid. 1989, 208). Several other scholars (Poletta and Jasper 2001; Della Porta and Diani 2006) have also drawn attention to such networks, which according to them are key for the creation of meaning and identity within new social movements, and also enable people to meet face-to-face on a regular basis. As Melucci (1989, 208) suggests: "The submerged networks are laboratories of experience. New problems and questions are posed. New answers are invented and tested, and reality is perceived and named in



different ways” and therefore they make such movements a rich source of development and experimentation. Borrowing and expanding Melucci’s term through a cultural lens, I understand youth groups such as Peronia Adolescente as *laboratories of practice and learning*, which provide important spaces where individual and collective identities are negotiated within a local setting. They are however related to the Network’s collective articulations, which mainly take place during encounters as well as through their collective public performances, the *comparsas* (see chapter 5 and 6).

Most of Peronia Adolescente’s activities happen regularly and have therefore become part of young people’s routines and community life. In the afternoons, the core group is based in their cultural youth centre providing workshops and informal games activities for around thirty young people (MCH 2013). Many of their community arts processes are based on Caja Lúdica’s methodology and therefore include collective breathing and games, creative workshops such as stilts, juggling, face painting and corporeal expression. They also explore themes such as environmental issues, health or the local history of Peronia.

At the same time, the youth group’s practices differ as they introduce new elements which, according to one of the coordinators, “depend on the interest of the youth leaders and the needs of the young people” as well as the internal group dynamics (Ibid.). On a workshop level, for example, some of the young leaders, sharing skills they have acquired elsewhere, have introduced Zumba, guitar lessons, and break dancing amongst other activities. The group also focuses on building integral relationships between girls and boys through collective meditation and games, and have developed workshops to support young girls in their development as leaders. This, according to one of the youth coordinators, “is key in a society ruled and dominated by men, which often does not provide a safe space for girls to express themselves” (DA 2013).

Figures 10 and 11 (below) grasp such moments of Peronia Adolescente's everyday activities and show a youth facilitator during a Zumba workshop (left) and a break dance workshop (right). They also illustrate how the youth group's cultural expressions differ from Caja Lúdica's workshop repertoire and instead emerge from the young people forming the group. These examples are representative for many other activities and reflect an understanding of the local youth groups as laboratories of practice and learning. Here, knowledge is passed on and developed on a regular basis between peers, this, however, often in collaboration with groups from other communities (see section on bartering below).



Figure 10 (left): Zumba workshop, Ciudad Peronia (2013).

Figure 11 (right): Break Dance workshop, Ciudad Peronia (2013).

In contrast to an understanding of many community arts practices as projects, which “involve(s) professional artists and community members in a collaborative creative process resulting in collective experience and public expression” (OAC 2002), practice here relies on a knowledge and skill exchange between young people. When I asked Peronia's youth protagonists in a group discussion where and how they acquired their creative skills as well as gained

the ability to undertake workshops, some of them emphasised that they had learned from their own group peers, who in turn had received workshops with Caja Lúdica or elsewhere (group discussion 2013). Peer engagement, as described here, enables the young people to learn from other fellows of similar age, status, needs and development. According to Boud (2001, 4), peers are

other people in similar situation to each other who do not have a role in this situation of a teacher or expert practitioner [...]. They share the status as fellow learners and they are accepted as such. Most importantly they do not have power over each other by virtue of their position or responsibilities.

Hence, peer learning<sup>71</sup> is understood as a “two-way reciprocal learning activity” (Ibid.) and involves sharing of knowledge, ideas and experience between the people involved. Similarly, learning in Peronia Adolescente seems to be regarded as a process and mutual sharing experience, which takes place within the group and through the interactions between the young people and protagonists of the Community Arts Network. Rather than being a teacher-student - or in our case a community arts practitioner or artist-youth participant - binary, where the facilitator often is an adult with more experience and therefore has a different status, the relationship between the learners here appears to imply less authority and is therefore more horizontal with shared responsibilities and tasks. One of the former youth coordinators recalls his experience of facilitating a workshop with peers:

Me as a young person working creatively with other young people is a good tie, because it is not something that is forced or major, and I am not an adult

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<sup>71</sup> Most of the accounts on peer learning emerges from cognitive psychology building on scholars such as Vygotsky (1978) and educational studies emphasising learning in pre-school environments (Mathes, Howard, Allen, and Fuchs 1998), school settings (Topping and Ehly 2001, Chi, Siler, Jeong, Yamauchi, and Hausmann 2001), universities and colleges (Topping 1996; 1998), as well as community contexts (Scoble, Topping and Wigglesworth 1988).

who wants to educate or impose something. No, I am a young person with the same needs like other young people and through these same needs we can create really cool things [...] it is not about becoming youth artists, experts or expose our talents as individuals. It is more about receiving and sharing knowledge and skills in other words learning through practice between us.

(AH 2013)

This respondent emphasises an approach to practice, which is based on the idea to not only participate and learn from other young people but also to become active and continue to 'share' gained experiences, such as for example artistic skills, with others. One of the current youth coordinators shares his personal journey with Peronia Adolescente and his development from a participant to a workshop leader and youth protagonist:

I have been with Peronia Adolescente from the age of 13, for 5 years now and since then I have been participating in the different workshops and supporting different activities [...] I slowly started to get more involved and represent the group in different spaces. Now I am responsible for the group's communication as well as leading some of our workshop processes such as break dance and games.

(VA 2013)

These words support the argument that highlights the local youth groups as *laboratories of practice and learning* where artistic skills and knowledge as well as leadership are passed on from one generation to another. This *practice sharing* and *development* is particularly important for the understanding of the Community Arts Network and the active role of the local youth groups within that. At the same time, it reflects how Caja Lúdica's methodology is further developed in this particular group and how an understanding of practice as a locally embedded process has enabled them to sustain themselves on a local level. As a strategy for sustainability it also allows practices to continue after Caja Lúdica's direct support terminates. This is key for the argument and for recognising the importance of *local embeddedness* for community arts processes. Significantly, it

highlights the turn from participant to protagonist through participation as essential for their sustainability and continuation.

Moreover, the youth groups not only serve as laboratories and therefore storage nodes of the Network's repertoire, but also develop their own dynamics as agents in their community because their practices do not only take place in their cultural centre. Instead, they expand into different spaces such as, for example, other youth groups or schools, and the young people play a key role as facilitators and protagonists of this local practice. Peronia Adolescente's outreach processes, for instance, include the following creative workshops that take place in different schools of the area<sup>72</sup>: circus skills, crafts and other creative activities, self-esteem and leadership, games with children, violence prevention and sexual education. At the same time, they work with around 400 primary teachers of the region, providing training sessions and workshops for teachers in how to introduce games and arts as teaching methods into the classroom. Moreover, they currently engage with a group of 60 parents and families providing workshops that aim to raise consciousness and prevent intra-familial violence and child abuse. As one of the coordinators stresses, these workshops, which run under the name *Crianza con cariño* ('Growing Up with Love'), highlight the importance of continuous dialogue between children and their parents, and give advice on bringing up children in a safe and trustful family environment (MCH 2013).<sup>73</sup> Figure 12 (below) represents a moment of Peronia Adolescente's outreach in collaboration with a local school.

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<sup>72</sup> According to one of the coordinators of the groups the workshops undertaken in different local schools cover around 1000 children on a weekly base (MCH 2013).

<sup>73</sup> See Safe Child: <http://www.safechildnc.org/services/crianza-con-carino/> (Accessed 13 December 2013).



Figure 12: Drum workshop, Ciudad Peronia (2014).

It shows a youth leader providing a drum workshop for younger peers. The active engagements of the local youth group in their community through outreach practices are not only an essential element and characteristic of Peronia Adolescente but also of most other youth groups, which is key for the development of the argument emphasising these young people as protagonists in their communities. Figure 13 (below) shows young people from a rural youth group in Rabinal, located in the Baja Verapaz region, providing a games workshop on the street to an emerging youth group in San Miguel Chicaj, one of its neighbouring villages.



Figure 13: Outreach in Rabinal, San Miguel Chicaj (2015).

This embeddedness and local outreach, which most of the groups share with Peronia Adolescente, I argue gives them a certain autonomy and independence, and allows the differences and diversity of the groups to coexist within the Network. It also enabled them to develop networks of exchange and collaboration with other social organisations and initiatives from the community, and to establish a certain status as a youth group in the area. This is key, especially considering the fact that young people and youth organisation are often perceived in relation to gangs, which has contributed to young people's negative image in many communities (see chapter 3).

Such outreach processes however do not stop with the sharing of skills during workshops. Instead, the new youth participants often become facilitators themselves and continue to develop their own practices. One of the coordinators of an urban youth group based in Ciudad Quetzal highlights:

Our processes aim to leave the young people with a diverse and playful toolbox of ideas, skills and methods, which they can use and adopt for their own purpose, and we gain new skills through our practice not only for our

facilitation and leadership skills but also knowledge we can then share with others. (AH 2013)

These moments of further replication by the Network's youth groups described here have been difficult to grasp during my fieldwork because they often take place in remote villages, which are difficult to access. For safety as well as logistical reasons I was not able to observe these processes. I have, however, witnessed and accompanied them during my previous collaboration with the Community Arts Network. Moreover, only a few of the youth groups' photographic archives or testimonies during the interviews provide an insight into this *moving practice* transcending different spaces and organisations. The uncontrolled movement through space as well as its diverse expressions through the youth facilitators supports the argument and understanding of the development of this practice as rhizomatic. Figure 14 (below) illustrates such a moment of replication with young girls that have previously received workshops from Peronia Adolescente and are now applying their skills in a neighbouring primary school.



Figure 14: Replication processes, Ciudad Peronia (2015).



These replication or exchange processes are not only beneficial as a knowledge exchange in one way. Through the exchange with other local organisations and national networks, Peronia Adolescente's young people have gained new skills and perspectives for their practices, which go beyond their artistic expressions. These dynamics impact on the Community Arts Network because the young people actively engage in and often propose and facilitate workshops during their collective events (see section below). Examples of Peronia Adolescente's experiences are exchange processes with environmental (and also health) organisations in Ciudad Peronia, and their participation in a youth leadership programme with YMCA,<sup>74</sup> which enabled them to share the gained knowledge in subsequent workshops with other youth groups during one of the Network's encounters (MCH 2013). Many of these processes emerge from Peronia Adolescente's ongoing networking activities and relationships with other social actors from the local community, some of which have developed from collaborations during their cultural festival (see later section on youth protagonism). The openness of the Community Arts Network through the youth groups' local embeddedness has enabled many of the groups not only to collaborate with other organisations across disciplines, class and even age, which is a characteristic this initiative shares with other cultural networks in the region (see Delfin 2012). It also shows the presence of heterogeneity within the Network and their ability to connect other groups that may otherwise remain apart.

I consider the continuous replication and expansion of the Network's practices through outreach processes and active implementation as one of the most important, however controversial elements. On the one hand, it shows how

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<sup>74</sup> YMCA (Youth Men's Christian Asociación) implemented the program Liderazgo Joven Cambiando el Juego with different youth groups in Guatemala: <http://www.ymcaguatemala.org/que-hacemos/liderazgo-joven-cambiando-el-juego/> (Accessed 16 September 2015).

the Network's practices develop and spread through the young people, who instead of remaining participants, turn into protagonists and practitioners themselves after long-term participation processes. This turn or what I call *activation through participation processes*, I argue, represents a significant strategy which has allowed the Network to sustain their practices in different spaces. It is also a requirement for their rhizomatic development and expanding movements as a youth initiative.

At the same time, such an approach may be criticised as an 'instrumentalisation' of the youth groups involved, as they seem to provide the milieu or useful anchors for Caja Lúdica's methodology to grow roots and by doing so, increase their impact as an organisation and networking practice in a rather indirect way. By using connectivity as a working strategy, Caja Lúdica were able to link diverse groups and this clearly is a result from their methodology, which is based on notions of multiplication and therefore allowed them to expand their artistic interventions into other spaces and communities. Seen from this perspective, Caja Lúdica's methodology, on the one hand, works in a rhizomatic way by transcending and linking different spaces, and, by doing so, contributes to the reconstruction of the social fabric through cultural youth organisation. Their methodology, however, also shows arborescent elements, in particular within the Network, as it slightly dominates the different practices of the Network and provides a common methodological basis and approach to community arts as a means of social transformation which all the youth groups share (see chapter 3). This, in turn, has enabled them to expand the impact radius of their methodology for change, which aims to contribute to more peaceful communities in Guatemala through cultural processes and interventions.

The described processes of this multiplying and expanding practice under the right conditions can, as I argue, continue to further develop over time and across generations as well as spread into different spaces and directions. A rhizomatic understanding of this practice as continuously expanding, however,

has its limitations as its development depends on possibilities and choice of the young people and their youth groups as well as their local environment. Hence, there are many cases within the Network where processes of replication face major challenges and struggle to grow roots and flourish. The youth group based in CopalAA la Esperanza, one of the Network's most remote communities, represents such an example.<sup>75</sup> This, according to one of its youth coordinators is linked to the fact that young people there have to work on a daily basis to sustain their families, which leaves them with few time for engaging in arts activities:

Since the age of five I have been working in the field with my dad. We get up at 4am and leave the house at 5 to walk for two hours to in the fields to clean the corn and cardamom. I go to school in the afternoon [...] I learnt a lot from Caja Lúdica's workshops on the weekends: it was something different and I was fascinated, but at the time I was not able to do arts on a regular base as I had to work instead.

(JA 2013)

One of the teachers, who is fostering youth arts processes in CopalAA mentions another reason why youth organisation through Caja Lúdica's methodology has been challenging in his community. He links it to the strict hierarchical system of elders who rule the community, and although civic organisation, according to him, is one of their most important values, within this context young people struggle to be acknowledged and heard, and often lack opportunities and confidence to take on leadership and organise (RO 2013). He emphasises that he replicates and adapts some of the artistic skills, which he acquired through Caja Lúdica, in his teaching because regular youth engagement and the establishment of a regular youth group failed (Ibid.).

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<sup>75</sup> CopalAA la Esperanza is a community of returned refugees, who were forced to leave their homes during the armed conflict. After ten years of exile returned in 1995 and founded the community CopalAA la Esperanza. It lacks basic support from the local council or state and therefore only a few houses have electricity through solar panels. Moreover, running and clean water is scarce, and communication through mobile phones or internet is limited (informal conversation with RO 2013).

However, he highlights, and this is key, that since he has started to link the arts with the community's collective struggles and protest against a hydroelectric plant, which threatens their land to be flooded, young people started to get more involved in the activities as artistic interventions in relation to this issue seemed to be more relevant for them.<sup>76</sup> Thereby, he refers to the production of several theatre plays, which he developed together with some of the young people in order to raise awareness in other communities about this megaproject. The group in CopalAA also uses the *comparsa* as a way to publicly manifest and show their resistance against international interventions and other issues emerging in the community (see chapter 6).

The example described here illustrates the limits of Caja Lúdica's methodology as emerging from an urban context, which does not coincide with the perception and expected roles of young people in this particular community. The teacher's words, however, show how he has developed and adapted elements of the methodology and artistic expressions to make it more relevant to the young people's situation as growing up in an environment that is under imminent threat to be flooded. It also illustrates how the Network's practices transform through the places they encounter. This example supports the argument that the Network's practice develops in a rhizomatic way and "change(s) its nature as it expands its connections" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 8). Moreover, it contributes to the charter of the overall thesis that the

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<sup>76</sup> For several years CopalAA alongside other surrounding communities has been fighting against a megaproject and hydroelectric plant *Xalala*, which requires the construction of an artificial dam in the area. In case of an approval of the megaproject, more than fifty-five communities will be flooded which is threatening the homes, life and land of thousands of people (Presentation during the encounter in CopalAA 2013). For further information on the construction of the damn see: Nisgua Blog: <http://nisgua.blogspot.co.uk/2014/02/pressure-to-construct-xalala.html> (Accessed 13 January 2015).

embeddedness of community arts practices in the culture and networks of the community fosters their sustainability and continuation.

There are also examples of young people, who continue to develop their own practice, often working with other organisations long after they have received a workshop or participated in the Network's community arts processes. A youth protagonist from Nimlaha'kok, for example, after several years of replication in his local school and after participating in Caja Lúdica's diploma for socio-cultural animation, continued to develop his practice with children in a nearby town which helped him to finance his further studies in science in a nearby town (AC 2013). Another case is a youth leader, who was one of the first young people involved in Caja Lúdica's activities, however, she left in 2007. Since then she has worked in various youth and indigenous organisations, and has established herself as an independent practitioner in Guatemala. In an interview she emphasises how she continued to practice, develop and apply elements of Caja Lúdica's methodology:

Although I am not working with Caja Lúdica anymore, I continue to practice parts of the methodology with children, the elder, young people [...] I have adapted and translated it into Mayan language, and I have linked its playful and creative elements to different issues such as the struggle for territory in the organisation I am currently working with [...] to date I feel part of the network and at times I collaborate.

(RCH 2013)

This reminds us of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome which according to them "may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but will start again on one of its old lines or on new lines" (1987, 9). Along with Deleuze and Guattari and the young girl's words I emphasise the resistant notion of this practice, which continues to develop although it is not directly linked with the Network's main activities any more. This does not mean that they continue with the exact workshop they received or skills they learned, however, they embody the

experience gained through their participation in the Network's creative practices or exchange processes and therefore remain part of its responsive repertoire. Hence, the practice develops and expands as well as finds new directions, and *through* the young people it is able to transcend different spaces. This ability continues even once its flow has been interrupted, and I argue that this has enabled the practice to survive within post-conflict Guatemala where youth organisation is challenging to develop and sustain (see chapter 3).

Moreover, the Network's responsive repertoire of practices, which has emerged from Caja Lúdica's methodology, is continuously developed and fed through the exchange processes between the different groups, which transcend the local and enable the network to build a sense of connectivity and mutual support through their practices. I argue that these local and cross-group exchange processes are not only key for the Network to increase their autonomy from Caja Lúdica but with it, their external funding too. These processes also provide a model for other youth community arts initiatives and groups facing similar conditions in other parts of the world. They illustrate how *networking through practice* can provide a useful means for knowledge exchange and resource sharing, and can also develop a climate of solidarity rather than competition between organisations. At the same time, sharing *practice experience* and *practice commons* between groups, as illustrated in the following, can provide a safety net and survival strategy for groups that are struggling and developing their practices in challenging conditions or contexts.

### **Youth protagonism and networking: A case study of Peronia Adolescente's Cultural Festival**

*Field diary 14.09.2013*

*The night before the Community Cultural Festival, I find myself, together with four adolescents from Peronia Adolescente and others camping on the floor of their cultural centre and meeting space. I am trying to find rest between cardboard boxes, loudspeakers,*

*different parts of a stage, and wooden planks that had been stored there for the event. We were abruptly disturbed and woken up by loud knocks, unknown voices and flashing torch lights. I was scared and slightly irritated and so were the others who are familiar to the context. My heart started to beat faster. A cold shiver ran down my back. For a short instant I felt vulnerable and helpless anticipating the worst case of being in danger. It was 4am, still dark outside and one hour before the agreed time to meet with the others to set up the stage, marquee tents for the workshops and a photographic exposition at the bus station.<sup>77</sup>*

*Then everything happened very quickly. The door banged open and fifteen young people between thirteen and twenty years old loudly burst into the room, each of them carrying some form of equipment for the event. They started to form a circle, which we quickly joined barefoot and still in our pyjamas. I was overwhelmed by the situation and at the same time I was pleased to have the opportunity to witness such an important moment for the youth organisers of the festival. One of the groups' coordinators facilitated the activity with the following words: "With this circle we connect as a group and with the universe, which provides us with strength and energy supporting us during this important day for us and our community. Let's slowly breathe in and breathe out and with every breath we absorb oxygen and distribute it into each and every part of our bodies, giving us life and reminding us that we are alive [...] HA!"*

The following two pictures (below) visually illustrate this turn, moving from the threat of an unknown place with its strange shapes, colours and sounds (figure 15) to a moment and space of life and energy making me as a researcher feel safe, connected and part of this circle and youth initiative in one of the most dangerous parts of Guatemala City (figure 16).

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<sup>77</sup> Another group of young people from Peronia Adolescente as well as groups had collectively camped with two of the older youth coordinators in one of Ciudad Peronia's local primary school.



Figure 15 (left): Shapes, Ciudad Peronia (2013).

Figure 16 (right): Circle of connection, Ciudad Peronia (2015).

This feeling of being connected and safe, as I found out later was not only important for myself, but also for the other young people and collaborators, who would themselves otherwise avoid the empty alleyways of Ciudad Peronia in the early morning darkness.

This, however, was only possible because the community had been informed in advance about the procedure and pre-production of the event, and had agreed to cooperate and guarantee the young peoples' safety. According to the youth organisers, negotiations with local gang leaders, other social actors, as well as the police are among the most important activities undertaken by the pre-production team in preparation to the festival so as to avoid unforeseen incidents (VA 2013). She describes this process as part of "an important networking exercise" which Peronia Adolescente's young people have been practicing and significantly improved during many years of organising this festival (MCH 2013).

Networking as a strategy has enabled Peronia Adolescente to establish connections with different sectors from the local community such as church



organisations, educational institutions, and other social actors; moreover some of the collaborations continue even after the festival (Ibid.). This supports the argument which stresses the youth groups' *local embeddedness* and their role as networking protagonists on a local level. Through their public activities, they provide spaces of encounter for the community, and by doing so, temporarily undermine the constraints of spaces that are normally dominated by actors and dynamics of violence. Significantly, they also create links to local actors and foster dynamics of social organisation and collaboration, which are often hindered due to high levels of mistrust and fear.

Such regular public events on a local level are key for the Network's groups as they provide opportunities for them to engage with the local community and to articulate their identity and position as organised youth and as a wider movement of community arts practices. It is there where they unveil their resistant potential as a networking practice linking different initiatives and creating moments of encounter and community. By doing so, they undermine the constraints of a post-conflict context, which often impedes social organisation, and instead enables connectivity through practice. Moreover, as a support network, they enable events, as described above, to take place even if the conditions of the local community do not allow it. This is the case in many Guatemalan communities due to the negative image that youth organisation has gained through increased gang activities.

While the festival is the most visible intervention of the group and as an event itself appears to be short-term, the argument here is that the links and collaborations created through the festival go beyond the event and become part of the youth group's local networks. In contrast to the Peronia Adolescent's outreach processes explored above, their cultural festival takes place only once a year, however is embedded in their long-term processes on a community level as the young people "replicate the skills, which they have acquired and practiced in processes, during the festival" (DA 2013). Since 2001, the festival has been a

regular event and despite emerging challenges during planning and development, the group's persistence, according to one of the coordinators, has turned this event into "an important and welcoming space of encounter for the whole community" (MCH 2013).



Figures 17-20: Bus station turns into a festival site, Ciudad Peronia (2013).

It is Peronia Adolescente's most visible intervention as it transforms the local bus station into a site of workshops, arts expositions, cultural presentations

and information stands, which represent different sectors of the community (see figures 17-20 above). A final *comparsa* terminates the event.

It is organised by a team between 30 and 40 young people mainly from Ciudad Peronia, other youth groups from the Community Arts Network as well as social organisations from the area. As a public statement and representation the cultural festival is Peronia Adolescente's most important intervention, and its pre-production period spans over a period of 6 months (MCH2013). Similar to other festivals such as, for example, EPRODEP's *Caminata por la Vida* in Ciudad Quetzal or Jovi's *Festival Calle 22* in Villa Lobos, it has also become one of the Community Arts Network's most regular activities.<sup>78</sup>

During such events, most of the youth groups closely work together with organisations from their local communities, however, they often rely on the support from the Community Arts Network, whose groups collaborate by sharing their experience, skills and resources in order to make these events happen (see also later section on bartering). While setting up the festival stage in 2013, for example, the youth organisers had to literally battle over the space, although it had been approved by the local municipality as a festival site. In the early hours of the event, the bus drivers had moved and ignored the blockages that the young people had set up the evening before, and continued to manoeuvre their vehicles as usual. This resulted in heated discussions between the festival organisers and the drivers, who finally gave in and collaborated. Moreover, the sound equipment that had been hired from a local organisation, according one of Peronia's youth protagonists, was "suddenly not available" and instead Caja Lúdica offered to provide their resources for the event (VP 2013). In an interview one of the youth leaders highlights that similar incidents have been reported previously and "often take place during the youth groups' first interventions. They can be linked to emerging tensions because of generational

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<sup>78</sup> EPRODEP and Jovi are both urban youth groups.

issues, opposing interests or traditions, but improve once they have established themselves as a group in the community” (JL 2013).<sup>79</sup>

As stated by Peronia Adolescente, the aim of the cultural festival is to reclaim public spaces through cultural interventions and to fight the high levels of violence, which have caused fear and mistrust in the community (group interview with Peronia 2013). Therefore in 2013, for example, the festival slogan was “We are alive<sup>80</sup>”, which according to the youth organisers is an important political statement and message against violence and homicide in the area (MCH informal conversation 2013).



Figure 21 (left): The girl with the drum, Ciudad Peronia (2013).

Figure 22 (right): Live life and do not let it die, Ciudad Peronia (2013).

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<sup>79</sup> One of its youth leaders recalls that the local church was expressing their concerns about Jovi as a group as well as their festival in Villa Nueva. Although Jovi’s first festival had already been announced the church spontaneously organised a street festival on the same day in the same location. According to him they asked Jovi to cancel their festival or move it to another street. Many years after Jovi had established itself as a group, the church suggested organising a collaborative event in front of their building (JL 2013).

<sup>80</sup> The overall theme of the festival was: *Estamos vivos mucha!* The Spanish expression ‘*mucha*’ translated into English means ‘group of friends’.

Figures 21 and 22 (above) visually illustrate the overlap of a challenging context and the intention behind the cultural intervention, and this tension is rarely visible or visually documented during such events. The left figure shows a young girl with a pink shirt and a drum holding in her arms who is about to join the *comparsa*, which took place at the end of the festival. On her way she closely walks past a (probably drunken) man who is lying on the floor close to the festival site. Her gaze is directed away from the man, and despite the fact that we do not know if she has noticed his presence, in this moment her path goes in a different direction, the *comparsa*. The picture on the right (above) illustrates the words 'live life and do not let it die', which during the festival have been written with liquid chalk paint on one of the few, however cracked tarmac streets in Peronia. Despite the fact that the words transcend the cracks and by doing so seem to almost tie them together, the latter continue to be visible and provide a rather uneven basis for the colourful words. As soon as it rains, the letters will be washed away and what remains is the grey, cracked tarmac left without any traces of colour.

This ambiguity between a challenging environment and artistic interventions, which I see visually represented in these two pictures, has also been pointed out by one of Peronia's youth coordinators:

There is no doubt that we live in a red zone where life is not guaranteed and yes, we are stigmatised as young people and we live in challenging conditions [...] instead of presenting us as victims of this situation during the festival we display not only what we do on a daily base as a group [...] but also demonstrate that we are alive and that within all that misery, life and joy can exist here and we can find ways to live coexist in a different way.

(MCH 2013)

This respondent's words highlight the importance of the cultural festival so as to communicate a positive message of Peronia's youth to the community. During my fieldwork in Guatemala this 'pro-life tone' emerging from rather challenging structural conditions and as a response to oppression seems to reflect a common

spirit amongst various youth groups of the network and their struggles. They seem to offer, what Raúl Lewis calls “critical hope”, which integrates the recognition of structural constraints and conditions with a “creative capacity to find the possibilities within them” (Lewis quoted in Barndt 2011, 132). In other words, “critical hope” emphasises the belief in people’s capacity to understand the oppressive conditions of their lives, but rather than being paralysed they are empowered to move towards change (Ibid.). Hence, Peronia’s cultural festival provides an example of such an approach to practice where young people are seeking gaps and alternative spaces within a rather challenging environment, and by doing so contribute to a more peaceful community life.

Moreover, as pointed out by the girl above, the festival also serves as a means to reproduce and share Peronia Adolescente’s everyday cultural practices to a broader public as well as to manifest their identity as a positive youth. This understanding of the festival is also reflected in literature on traditional festivals which emphasises them as “platforms for the representation and reproduction” of cultural identities (Sassatelli 2012, 240). The group’s representation through the festival here, however, goes beyond that and instead serves as a means to challenge the most common and socially constructed perception of young people as gang members, which continue to control settlements such as Ciudad Peronia (MCH 2013).

In a context where youth in public are perceived as a threat, this festival seems to be a symbolic but clear statement of a youth initiative challenging this image, and an act of resistance against the discrimination of young people in public spaces. Instead of being portrayed in relation to violence and crime, this performance of Peronia’s youth is characterised by creativity, skills and community engagement. As one of the festival visitors highlights:

The young people from Peronia Adolescente are a prime example for others, who get involved in gangs and organised crime [...]. This festival shows that it is possible to take a different path to bullets and violence.

Instead of being bored and causing trouble on the streets these guys have learned some skills and do something useful for the community.

(Anonymous 2013)

Figures 23 and 24 (below) visually support the argument and understanding of Peronia's festival as a practice, which enables the youth group to not only share their everyday work with a wider audience but also to communicate a rather positive image of young people in Peronia. Although this representation through the festival may illustrate a rather ideal picture of youth as creative and engaged in their community, it still challenges and contrasts with other socially constructed images of young people as violent and linked to gangs. This tension is reflected in figure 23 (left), which shows a former gang member, known as Mascota, who has been involved with Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network since 2000. He is providing a juggling workshop for the community during the festival.



Figure 23 (left): Juggling with Mascota, Ciudad Peronia (2013).

Figure 24 (right): The juggling man, Ciudad Peronia (2013).

The tattoos on his arms as well as face represent traces from his past as a former gang member, and while in his previous life people would have avoided his presence, here he is surrounded by a group of children. As can be seen in figure 24 (right) there are also adults involved in his street workshop. A man who had been sceptically watching from a safe distance joins in, engaging in a playful interaction with Mascota, throwing juggling balls. This moment represents many other interactions, which take place between young people and adults during such cultural activities undertaken by the Network's youth groups. It shows how these young people through their interventions in public start building relationships with the wider community, in this case a man, who gets involved in one of the workshops offered by Mascota which at the same time represents Peronia Adolescente.

Mascota's participation in the cultural festival as a workshop facilitator, supporting the groups during their local events also illustrates another characteristic of this Network and also a nuance of the groups' responsive repertoire of practices: the collaboration and the sharing of skills and resources. Events such as the festival represent moments during which one local node of the Network's responsive repertoire as well as its practices become most visible. This enabled me to further explore how knowledge exchange and resource sharing takes place on a trans-local and cross-group level.

### **Bartering and its potential for practice in challenging contexts**

We are not only a network through the things we realise together; we are a network through the different nature of our organisations and their local practices.

(TE 2013)

What you know, I don't know and our dynamic of exchange is that you teach me but I teach you something different.

(RO 2013)



Through my involvement in the youth group's festival preparations I gained an insight into some of the exchange processes of the Community Arts Network's groups, which take place on a regular basis. These dynamics slightly differ from Peronia Adolescente's outreach processes explored in earlier sections because they take place between the Network's youth groups that all share a similar practice, despite being located in different communities. These trans-local exchanges are particularly important during community events or cultural festivals such as in Ciudad Peronia but take place on a much more frequent level. To this end one of Cero Miedo's youth coordinators stresses:

Whenever we have an event, the first thing we do is convoke the other groups of the network [...] Who can help us with this task or that workshop, we need X amount of people for this day and that amount for the other days. Many of them have a lot of experience and through these exchanges we have strengthened ourselves as a group because we learn from each other.

(EG 2013)

During the interviews it was repeatedly pointed out that exchange processes take place on a more regular basis between nearby groups. Usually the receiving group offers transport and food, while the travelling group provides the 'service', which is reversed at a later stage (informal conversation 2013). Due to the fact that there are often small funds available for transport during festivals, it is more likely that groups which live in more distanced communities can also participate. This is one of the reasons why usually more exchange activities take place during larger events. It does however not mean that these processes are dependent on funding because most of them rely on a resource exchange basis rather than money.

Figures 25 and 26 (below) illustrate moments of exchange during Peronia's cultural festival. They show a coordinator of Caracol, a youth group in Belize (left) as well as one of Caja Lúdica's directors (right) sharing their experience with others, who are watching, accompanying and assisting them throughout. They

both have several years of experience with the logistics of such events, and in this festival cooperated by setting up of the stage.



Figure 25 and 26: Setting up the stage, Ciudad Peronia (2013).

On another occasion, in return, young people from Peronia Adolescente will provide some of their expertise to the groups, who collaborated here during the festival. Examples have been: violence prevention and Break Dance workshops or simply supporting another group as *comparsa* performers (MCH 2013).

Despite the fact that these photographs grasp only a small fracture of an ongoing exchange process in one community, they are representative for many others that take place on a regular basis. They can range from the development of projects or strategic plans to creative skills and games workshops or the participation and mutual support during local activities or protests. One of the youth group's coordinators and founder of a school in CopalAA highlights:

We regularly exchange with other groups, which has been essential for the development of our school, because it is not supported by the state. In 2009 for example the founder and director of EPRODEP helped us to develop a strategic plan and curriculum for our school [...]. Our community paid for

his travel expenses and provided food and accommodation during his one week stay [...]. In turn we shared the strategies which we use in our struggle against the hydroelectric plant as well as our knowledge about growing and using medicinal plants.<sup>81</sup>

(RO 2013)

Later in the interview this respondent also stresses that since the monthly workshop processes with Caja Lúdica terminated, the youth group increasingly relies on exchanging activities with other groups. This enables them to gain new skills and further develop their local practices.

In this study, I call this form of interaction *bartering*, which I define as exchange processes between cultural organisations, individuals or other social actors. It can include workshops, skills, working strategies and methodologies or human resources. These processes are based on the resources or *practice commons*, which an organisation or group and its protagonists have gained through their local work and experience. They are specific to a particular context and therefore essential part of a networking approach to community arts practice. Bartering is not only based on the idea of trading knowledge but rather on *sharing resources by connecting through practice exchange*. The idea of bartering used as a verb here is slightly different to Eugenio Barba's concept of barter which can be described an "event in which actions are the currency of exchange, performances of songs and dances, displays of training exercises and techniques, even fragments from full-length plays are transformed into commodities in barter" (Watson 2002, 95).<sup>82</sup> While Barba's barter is based on the idea of cultural exchange taking place during moments of encounter, bartering here is understood as a strategy for fostering and sustaining long-term community arts processes with minimal or no external

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<sup>81</sup> Other exchanges according to the local teacher over the years included creative workshops such as pinhole camera with the youth group Caracol from Belize, theatre with Rabilúdicos from Rabinal, break dance workshops with Jovi from Villa Nueva (RO 2013).

<sup>82</sup> See also Schinina (2004, 29) who uses barter as a term in relation to social theatre.

financial resources. Cultural exchange, however, is an important part of this process but cannot be discussed in-detail here.

The Community Arts Network's bartering processes, in contrast to Caja Lúdica's activities which due to funding require regular visual documentation (PO 2013), are rarely documented or seen on the youth groups' blogs or social media pages. However, I consider them as key elements for the development of the youth group's repertoire and their sustainability as a youth initiative and network. According to one of the former Network coordinators as well other young people that I interviewed, several attempts have been made to better document their exchange activities - albeit unsuccessfully -, an issue that has been repeatedly discussed during encounters. This challenge, which is closely linked to the Network's aim to improve the communication dynamics and their resource sharing, seems to be one of the main issues for their coordination team (Ibid.). One of the youth leaders highlights:

Around eighty per cent of the activities, which we realise within the network, emerge from the groups' own resources and their support from their communities [...]. These activities are not visible, because they are not linked to any mayor funding sources and so there is less need to document them. To date we have failed to successfully bring all these activities on paper, visualise or plan them better [...] there is only little information about them. They just happen.

(JL 2013)

The difficulties to grasp the dimensions of the youth groups' *bartering* activities, I argue, are evidence for the rhizomatic notion and development of the Network's diverging practices. Rather than being controlled and undertaken by one organisation or centrally coordinated, due to their spontaneous nature they develop in an organic and rather chaotic way or as highlighted above, 'just happen'. This not only changes the Network's territorial expansion but also impacts on the youth groups' practice dynamics because new groups contribute

different ideas, experiences and local connections. They are difficult to trace as they emerge from the relationships between the groups or individuals, rather than from an operational centre or organisation. Therefore, the bartering activities develop their own dynamics, which differ not only in the ways in which they emerge but also during the very moments of exchange. As a network of lines rather than points, with multiple entryways and connecting lines, this practice develops rhizomatically and therefore like a rhizome spreads “in diverse directions instead of a single path, multiplying its own lines and establishing the plurality of unpredictable connections in the open-ended” (Semetsky 2007, p. 200). Due to its rhizomatic development it does not have to be understood as a closed system or one practice. Instead it forms part of other practices, which are also constituted by elements some of which may show rhizomatic characteristics themselves.

Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of the rhizome as “composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather dimensions in motion [...] neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows” (1987, 21) proves useful to understand how this *multiplicity of practices* within the Community Arts Network constantly reshapes and expands in different directions. Multiplicities are rhizomatic, and according to Deleuze and Guattari (Ibid., 8), instead of being characterised by unity through a centre or direction, only have

determinations, magnitudes and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing nature (the laws of combination therefore increase in number as the multiplicity grows) [...] an assemblage is precisely this increases in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections.

Hence, due to its rhizomatic notion, this multiplicity of practices sends out shoots and roots from its nodes as its practices are replicated, transformed and spread

beyond their own boundaries. Through their constant development and expansion, these practices open up new spaces of encounter and learning and also change their nature through this movement across space (see sections above). The groups performing these practices have the potential to connect with one another either in a more visible way through their public interventions and encounters, or in a less visible and more hidden way through their interactions and exchange activities. This development of trans-local connections across territories and cultures through bartering, and through shared experiences during the encounters enables the Community Arts Network's groups to build a sense of connectivity. Despite the fact that the Network has to be understood as a constant process of movement and change, this notion of connectivity is maintained through the regular face-to-face interactions mentioned here, and through the relationships that emerge from these exchange processes and collective events.

There are of course tensions emerging from these dynamics in particular from the dominant role of Caja Lúdica within the Network as well as the groups' common aim to decrease their dependency from Caja Lúdica's resources and experience. The bartering dynamics are an example of this process. According to several youth groups, this has also fostered a search for opportunities to exchange with other organisations so as to develop new and different practices (informal conversations 2013). In particular the older groups struggle with the fact that the Network's repertoire is mainly based on Caja Lúdica's workshop modules, which therefore often results in repeated activities during the exchange processes and encounters (FB 2013). Despite the fact that the young people have changed throughout the years, most of the practices - and in particular the workshops - have remained the same. Hence, the youth groups' local collaborations with social organisations who are engaged in struggles for social change (such as the defence of natural resources, indigenous rights or health) are key for the repertoire to be nourished and further developed.

Another tension emerges from Caja Lúdica's link to funders, which, according to one of the Peronia Adolescente's coordinators (MCH2013), has impacted on the selection of themes implemented in the community arts practices with the youth groups as well as during encounters. They do not always correspond to the current needs and shared interest of the Network or youth groups:

When Caja Lúdica organises the Network's encounters [...], well, they don't impose things on us, but yes there is a certain agenda developed by them certainly linked to those who fund the processes or encounters, which still affects our dynamics as a youth initiative.

This respondent's words suggest that Caja Lúdica's role within the Network, which has only started to change in the last few years, has impacted on the ways in which they developed, because they often had to fulfil the requirements of funding bodies and donors. The bartering processes, which emerged from the creation of the Community Arts Network and which have increased since Caja Lúdica have taken a less influential position, however, enabled the groups to increase the self-determination of their encounters and to develop the exchange processes according to their needs. By doing so, they have become less dependent on Caja Lúdica's agenda and with it the external funders.

This chapter has shown that Caja Lúdica's methodology and in particular their element of replication has enabled the Network to develop an alternative space of practice where learning can take place outside the traditional education system but also to create gaps within it, which allowed them to flourish. My exploration through the lens of the rhizome has shown the coexistence of both rhizomatic as well as arborescent elements within this networking practice. Its rhizomatic notions, on the one hand, enabled them to link different organisations and establish an expanding network of diverse practices led by young people, which allows them to exchange, learn and grow and at the same time undermine existing constraints that often hinder youth organisation in post-conflict

Guatemala. On the other hand, Caja Lúdica's working strategies clearly represent the Network's arborescent elements, which shows that this rhizomatic practice is not totally free of means of control or structure. Caja Lúdica's methodology, which transcends different spaces and organisations has served as a strategy to expand the impact of their practice as a networking organisation, and it still slightly dominates the young people's local practices as well as the Network's large encounters (see chapter 5). However, through the youth groups increased autonomy from Caja Lúdica, this seemingly arborescent characteristic gains rhizomatic elements and develops and transforms in rather unforeseen and chaotic ways, thereby enabling links with different organisations and groups, which contribute new elements and approaches.

Moreover, this chapter has found evidence that connectivity through practice as well as peer-to-peer learning and the element of replication are key for the sustainability of Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network. It has highlighted the importance of local embeddedness for this practice, which serves as an anchor and rich ground to develop on a local level and to be sustained through the peer-to-peer learning and outreach practices. Moreover, through local networking with other organisations and spaces, the repertoire of practices is nurtured and expanded. Hence, between local embeddedness and territorial expansion as well as connectivity, this fluid practice develops in a rather rhizomatic way and expands as well as transcends the boundaries and limits of the spaces it encounters. My exploration here provides an example of young people becoming protagonists in their communities not only through their participation in artistic practices but in particular through their long-term engagement. Such *activation through participation* processes, I argue, foster the self-acknowledgment of the young people's abilities to facilitate and lead, but also their potential to contribute to social struggles and community life on a local level.



This chapter also considered what bartering as a strategy for sustainability can offer to youth organisations and initiatives as it draws the attention to their existent resources, which can be activated and shared through practice exchange. Yet, although bartering, as I argue, has the potential to provide support for groups and their development as a network, and contribute to their independency from funding bodies, it has its limitations, in particular when the groups and organisations involved share a similar practice, because networks also rely on diversity and multiplicity of expressions (see also chapter 7).

Having used this chapter to deliberate the Network's local nodes and their dynamics and interactions across space, that often remain invisible and are difficult to trace, in the next chapter, I focus on one of the Network's main collective gatherings and events, an encounter. The aim is to explore: the role of encounters for the Network and the social proximity of the groups; how collective identity is created during these events; and how these moments are experienced by the youth participants.

## CHAPTER 5

### NETWORK PLATEAUX: FROM (SPI)RITUAL ENCOUNTERS TO RELATIONAL BONDS

#### **Encounters: processes of convergence and divergence**

Since the early years of Caja Lúdica, encounters, according to Jose Osorio (2013), together with the community arts processes and festivals, have been the most important elements of the Network's methodology, and aim to foster youth articulation and organisation between different youth initiatives in Guatemala. There are two types of encounters: 1) regular encounters, which take place in different communities several times a year and only include youth coordinators; 2) community encounters, which, for one weekend, once a year, bring together up to 450 young people in a space of learning and exchange. In contrast to the local and more consistent practices and interactions between the different youth groups discussed in the last chapter, the larger encounters require more time for preparation and logistics which can take between three weeks and six months (TE 2013).

One of the Network's main challenges regarding encounters is the fact that their scale and frequency is tied to the amount of funding available for such events, most of which Caja Lúdica administers and manages to date (RM 2013). While in 2009 for example the Network managed to invite groups from other countries such as Colombia, El Salvador and Honduras, in other years most of the participants were from national groups and organisations. Many of the youth groups often manage to get partial funding for transport from their local community and bring food from their families such as for example one *quintal* (45.9 kg) of corn, one *quintal* of beans, oranges, eggs, tomatoes, or a basket of fruits as a symbolic contribution to the encounters. The main costs for transport

and alimentation, however, is usually covered by external funders that support the event.<sup>83</sup>

Despite the fact that since 2008 many encounters have been undertaken and hosted by the different youth groups and their communities, Caja Lúdica continue to play a key role in planning and realisation processes due to their social, professional, financial and networking resources (RGDAC 2011, 4). As large scale events, encounters are highly significant for the Network's youth groups. According to one of the coordinators, the young people often prepare and plan the logistics of their participation long in advance (MCH 2013). Encounters enable the young people to travel and provide a safe space during which they can meet, coexist and express themselves. Such spaces are often hindered by the conditions and circumstances youth groups often face in their communities. During the gatherings the young people engage in activities such as collective rituals and games, creative workshops, forums and discussions, cultural presentations, concerts, dancing in the evenings as well as a final *comparsa* that usually terminates the event.<sup>84</sup> While the scale and themes of each encounter vary slightly, they all follow a similar structure and methodology that build on Caja Lúdica's experiences of realising such events for many years. Despite the rather diverse activities during such encounters, this chapter only emphasises the ritualistic and playful notions of their collective practices. I consider them as key for the creation of safe spaces, which provide the conditions for social relationships as well as notions of community to emerge and these

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<sup>83</sup> The funders of the Network's encounters vary, depending on their financial situation as well as individual project themes, which change regularly. Some of the main financial collaborators for the Community Arts Network's 10<sup>th</sup> encounter in 2013 were: Christian Aid: <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/whatwedo/the-americas/guatemala.aspx>; Plan International: <https://plan-international.org/where-we-work/americas/guatemala/>; US Aid: <http://www.usaid.gov/guatemala>; PSJ <http://www.centroamericajoven.org/?q=node/3923>; as well as Federación Luterana Mundial: <http://www.lwfcamerica.org/?cat=1026&title=Guatemala&lang=es> (Accessed 13 December 2015).

<sup>84</sup> See appendix 2 for the agenda of the Network's 10<sup>th</sup> encounter in 2013.

collective experiences are key to connect the Network's otherwise rather dispersed practices.

Hence, this chapter explores the role of encounters as essential for the continuous development and maintenance of the Network's identity as a youth initiative and movement. As *moments of network convergence and conjunction* they contribute to the collective identity creation process of the Network and sustain the connectivity between the territorially distanced groups.<sup>85</sup> The shared experiences and relationships emerging from the encounters represent the *relational repertoire* or the invisible storage space of this practice through which collective meanings are created. These experiences and relationships are not spatially or temporarily bounded, but instead linger as embodied memories long after the events. Relational repertoire I define as the dimensions of human or interpersonal relationships, which cannot be developed by an individual on their own. Instead they emerge from personal interactions during cultural activities and represent the intangible outcomes from such moments. The collective experiences, as well as the relationships which emerge during such encounters, are key elements for the sustainability of this practice as they foster a sense of identity and belonging to a broader struggle of social change. They also feed into the youth groups' local practices as well as foster their bartering processes, which keep the Network alive between the encounters (see chapter 4).

Through my exploration of the Network's encounters as long-term identity creation processes, I aim to emphasise the importance of the relational and the collective as key for community arts practices with young people in challenging

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<sup>85</sup> While in my account, convergence is used to mainly describe the gathering of the Network's different groups in one place, other authors such as Paul Routledge (2000, 25) for example use the term convergent space, to explore grassroots globalisation networks. He defines it as "a heterogeneous affinity of common ground between resistance formations wherein certain interests, goals, tactics and strategies converge." Routledge's emphasis on social relations that emerge from these spaces is key for understanding these networks and their political actions.

contexts and elsewhere. In other words, for community arts practices to become sustainable, they not only have to be locally embedded but also, and this is key, must be linked to a wider network of collective processes and struggles for social change. This link, I argue is key, so that the collective experiences of community as well as the emerging relationships during such encounters do not vanish after the event but continue to develop and grow. Authors such as Zygmunt Bauman have emphasised the ephemerality of aesthetic communities, which according to him fail to “weave between its adherents a web of *ethical responsibilities*, and so of *long-term commitments*” (2001, 71). Moreover, he points out that “whatever bonds are established in the explosively brief life of the aesthetic community, they do not truly bind.” (Ibid.; also quoted in Mayo 2014, 60). Through my exploration I aim to challenge this perspective and provide an example of a long-term aesthetic community and network, which has persevered in this particular context for more than a decade. Their collective encounters and shared practices are significant in terms of fostering identity creation processes as well as for the provision of spaces during which relationships and social bonds can emerge, which, rather than being ephemeral create a sense of belonging for the young people involved.

Following a description of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of plateau, I explore the encounters and their ritual practices as intense moments of network convergence and conjunction that last beyond the ephemeral. I offer a brief ethnographic account on the arrival of the young people, the early moments of network convergence and then I analyse an encounter, which took place in August 2013, the most important and largest of the Network’s meetings during the year. To support my argument that encounters provide spaces of coexistence and affect through which identity can be created, negotiated and sustained, I will go on to explore from this encounter: a Mayan ceremony; the contemplative and playful element of their practice-in-circle; and the hug as a gesture and ritual of trust.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, a plateau is “always in the middle, not at the beginning or the end. A rhizome is made of plateaus [...]. We call a ‘plateau’ any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome” (1987, 21-22). Building on Bateson (1972; 2000), who developed the plateau through his exploration of Balinese culture, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 22) describe it as a “continuous self-vibrating region of intensities” which is reached when an activity or process is brought to a peak of intensity, but not dissipated in a culmination point or external end followed by a state of rest.

In this thesis, plateaux are defined as events or intense moments of network convergence, during which the otherwise dispersed elements such as, for example, youth groups, their practices and identities come together in one location. They are momentary spaces of encounter and face-to-face interactions which not only enable the young people to exchange their experiences and knowledge, but also - and this is key - provide the conditions for community and social relationships to emerge. This is particularly important in a post-conflict setting where the development of social relationships is often hindered due to mistrust and the lack of spaces for people to engage with each other. It supports the overall argument of the thesis, which emphasises the Network’s contribution to the reconstruction of the social fabric in different Guatemalan communities.

My development of this particular perspective builds on Chesters and Welsh (2002, 2006), who have used plateau to describe mass gatherings such as, for example, the World Social Forum and other large-scale summit sieges of anti-globalisation movements. They highlight the importance of plateau for fostering processes of interaction between global locales, the relationships between the virtual media and the real, as well as the interaction between different forces of different social actors and their opponents (Ibid. 2006, 12). While their account mainly focuses on what plateau represents within a movement, through my exploration I seek to ask the following questions: How are plateaux events and

practices experienced by the young people? How do they contribute to identity creation processes of networks and social movements? What happens after such events and how does this impact on the local practices?

As intimate moments of encounter, plateaux events and practices in this thesis nourish the Network's relational repertoire, which creates a connection and sense of belonging for the youth groups even when the encounter has long terminated. Therefore, once the intensity of the plateaux event dissipates, instead of vanishing, it transcends and rather than having a point of arrest it reaches "a threshold at which it metamorphoses into a different position altogether" (Andermatt C. 2012, 97). In other words, it leaves a "a kind of afterimage [...] that can be reactivated or injected into other activities, creating a fabric of intensive states between which any number of connecting routes could exist" (Massumi 1987, xiv). The reactivation and emergence of plateaux experiences into other activities is key for this particular Network, which continuously creates and re-creates such intense moments of connectivity through its diverse local practices.

Hence, the experiences of such encounters differ from short-term interventions such as workshops, presentations or performances, which generate a rather brief period of interaction as they form part of a process and are therefore characterised by continuity, transformation and perseverance. In other words, they shift, metamorphose, and travel with the young people as embodied experiences into their communities. Therefore, these experiences feed into the local practices and struggles of the youth groups, as well as impact the young people's everyday actions on an individual level. Having said this, plateaux events are relational spaces rather than one-off convergences, and have to be understood as part of the Network's self-creation process and movement cycle. This is characterised by the Network's convergent and divergent dynamics, which mutually feed into each other and hold them together like an invisible force. As intense moments of *network recess* they contribute to the continuous

development and re-creation of the Network's collective identity as a community, which feeds back into the local youth groups and their practices.

### **Web watching or the art of standing still: a moment of network convergence**

I find myself in Muxbal, a recreational area with beautiful glades and hills, green meadows, little forests and facilities in the outskirts of Guatemala City. It has been hired as a location for the Community Arts Network's 10<sup>th</sup> encounter, which took place in August 2013. Due to its size and diversity in fauna and flora the park also serves as a training centre for the local scouts as well as other social organisations and has the facilities to accommodate around 300 people. Through my participation in one of the Network's most significant events, I was hoping to grasp a better picture of the dimensions and different groups, which is a very rare opportunity for a network researcher or "web watcher" (Lederach 2005, 102). According to Lederach "web watchers rarely see the whole of the arachnid's net. It is not immediately visible (Ibid.)." He introduces web watching to describe the research of complex webs of relationships involved in peacebuilding processes. It therefore has to be understood as a practice and journey of following connections and threats on the one hand, and stillness and close observation on the other, and the combination of both makes it possible to grasp the network's entire "micro-universe" (Ibid., 102).

As a fortunate web watcher, I had the opportunity to witness the arrival of the different groups in Muxbal. I placed myself strategically on the stairs at the entrance of the site, which enabled me to see the small stony street winding and leading towards the city, whose grey dusty silhouettes I could see in the distance. I was hoping to witness this early moment of *network convergence* in order to get an overview of the different groups and young people involved. This turned out to be a more challenging task than I expected, because it required great patience and endurance: I had to remain still in one place for several hours and wait.



Figure 27, a photograph, which has been taken by a colleague, visually illustrates this particular moment showing myself sitting on the stairs of the main building with my arms crossed; a researcher and web watcher in waiting position.



Figure 27: Web watching: the Community Arts Network's 10<sup>th</sup> encounter, Muxbal (2013).

However, this still position enabled me to see what was happening around me and notice little details that may have remained invisible with me moving within them. "Stillness", for Lederach, "requires a commitment of patience and watchfulness. Its guideposts are these: Slow down. Stop. Watch what moves around you. Feel what moves in you" and by doing so, he continues, you will be able to "see what exists" (2005, 104). What did I see and feel in this particular moment of arrival?

I saw movement and joy, and I felt energy, a lot of energy as I suddenly found myself in the middle of hundreds of young people from urban and rural communities, some of which had travelled up to nine hours in order to participate in the event. I was bearing witness to a rather chaotic and moving instant of social encounter, reflected in the figures (28-30) below: young people

were arriving in busses or sitting at the back of pick-up cars, unloading their luggage, carrying sleeping bags, stilts and food.



Figure 28-30: Moments of arrival: the Community Arts Network's 10th encounter, Muxbal (2013).

Despite the fact that some of them had travelled far they did not seem to be exhausted or tired. Instead, most of them were full of energy, jumping out of the vehicles, waving, greeting each other with hugs, shouts, handshakes, brief gazes or smiles. Some of the young people, however, seemed not to be familiar with the dynamics, and closely stuck to their group, instead observing the others 'in action'. Later I realised that they formed part of new groups that were participating for the first time in such an event. While registering for the encounter the young people were engaging in conversations, communicating in different Mayan languages or Spanish; they were laughing and joking with each

other, taking pictures with their phones, asking questions and receiving name badges as well as instructions for their stay at the site.

As a researcher-participant this was not only a key moment of encounter to observe but also an opportunity to share and sense these early instants of connection and excitement with the others. I was particularly touched when I recognised some of the young people, with whom I had engaged in previous occasions and not seen or spoken to for several years. One of them walked towards me with a smiling face, gave me a hug and said “Miriam, I am glad you are here”. Although I had not participated in these encounters for many years and my position had slightly changed from a volunteer to a researcher, in this particular moment I strongly felt that I also formed part of this space - albeit briefly (see figure top right above). At the same time, I saw many new faces, some of which belonged to the groups I already knew, and others represented groups that had only joined recently.

Experiencing the atmosphere of this network convergence and witnessing this moment of encounter was key for how the analysis of this chapter developed as it drew my attention to the social relationships, which seem to play a significant role in this particular network. Despite the fact that the young people came from different urban and rural communities all over Guatemala and some of them had not seen each other for several months, they encountered each other in a rather kind, trustful and intimate way, which their gestures indicated. The gentle way in which most of them engaged with others continued throughout the course of the encounter and I was interested in exploring this connection, which seemed to go beyond notions of excitement about their arrival and reunion. Hence I am asking the following questions: How are social relationships created during this encounter? How are notions of identity and community created in these spaces? What relevance do these social gatherings have for the Network as well as the youth groups and individuals?

## **Everything is connected: The practice and re-creation of an ancient Mayan ceremonial during the encounters**

From the beginning of our work we felt connected with the Mayan culture, their worldviews and practices such as the Mayan ceremonial, which are based on the idea that everything, humans, nature and universe are connected [...] They coincided with our aim to contribute to the recreation of the social fabric after the war through the recuperation of spaces for encounter, dialogue and coexistence.

(JE 2014)

These are the words of Julia Escobar, one of Caja Lúdica's founders, who highlights the coherence between the principles and aims of their community arts practices after the war, and core values such as the connectivity and harmony of all life emerging from an ancient belief system and culture. In this section I argue that the re-creation of Mayan rituals plays an important role during the Network's encounters as this provides the conditions for moments of community to emerge. Moreover, through the rootedness of their symbolism in Mayan cosmology, the rituals' values and meanings represent a shared cultural anchor and identity that links the otherwise dispersed practices like an invisible thread. However, before I develop my analysis, I provide a brief insight into the role of Mayan cosmologies and their cultural expressions in Guatemala.

Ritual practices and cosmology were important elements of life for many Mayan populations in Guatemala and Latin America, they were however affected and changed through wars, migration and Spanish Conquest. The different Mayan people had to adapt to these circumstances which resulted in the re-shaping of cultural patterns that were established and re-created through their daily practices and rituals (Cecil 2009, 3). Many of the rituals that can be seen in Guatemala today, including Caja Lúdica's practice, emerged through these dynamics and are diverse expressions and interpretations of an ancient culture. However, they all build on an underlying belief and value system, which most Mayan cosmologies in Guatemala share to date and which is key for our analysis later: namely, the emphasis on the interrelationship between the

universe, nature and human beings which all form part of an integrated order (García, Curruchiche and Taquirá, 2009). In other words, their principles are based on the idea that 'everything is connected' and emerges from the same origin. This therefore not only represents the unity between humanity and nature but also links the spiritual to the physical-biological sphere (Ibid.). For human beings, this implies the development of a consciousness of the inner Self in relation with this universe so as to work towards and reach a harmonic way of living together on a communal level (PNUD 2006).

Particularly during the thirty-six years of armed conflict in Guatemala, during which many expressions of Mayan culture were prohibited, a belief system embedded in thought and actions enabled many communities in Guatemala to continue their life according to these values, and at the same time, preserve some of their cultural practices (Ibid.). Similarly Daniel Matul, a Guatemalan sociologist and expert in Mayan culture, emphasises these elements and the importance of interconnectedness, as the core potential of Mayan struggles and resistance against cultural oppression as well as the economic exploitation since the colonial period (Matul and Cabrera 2007). It was only after the signing of the peace accords, which officially acknowledged the political, social and cultural rights of the indigenous population, when the different spiritual practices were recognised and constitutionally protected (Samson 2007, 51; AIDPI 2006). Therefore, Mayan culture and in particular rituals started to re-appear slowly in different public and social spaces after the war and are to date the expression of such complex belief systems based on the idea of inter-relatedness and connectivity. In their early years, Caja Lúdica was one of the first organisations that re-created a Mayan ceremony in public after the signing of the peace accords in 1996 (VM 2013). While such rituals are usually led by spiritual leaders or community elders, when performed during the Community Arts Network's encounters they are either facilitated by a spiritual leader from a collaborating organisation or by one of the young people familiar with the

procedures. But what role do Mayan ceremonies play for the connectivity of the Network and how are they performed during the encounters?

Despite the fact that during the Network's encounters each Mayan ceremony is performed in a slightly different way, *Toj*, its physical centre, is the most important element (see figure 31 below). It represents the sacred fire as well as a symbol for reciprocity and provides an offer of gratefulness to the universe, the source of all life (Mendez, Valey and Hernández 2008).



Figure 31: *Toj*: Festival for Justice and Dignity, Guatemala City (2014).

*Toj* or sacred circle, which in Mayan cosmology symbolises harmony, balance and union as well as restoration and change (Pranis 2005), is drawn with sugar on the ground and then filled with pine needles, sawdust or rose petals, which are believed to clean and neutralise the space where the ceremony is to be held. The four colours - red (east, life and fire); yellow (south, water); black (west, ancestors and earth); white (north, wind and energy) - not only represent the cardinal points and elements but also define Guatemala's main people and ethnic diversity: Maya, Xinca, Garifuna and Ladino (PNUD 2009). This symbolism also

became evident through the words of a youth leader, who facilitated the ceremony during the Network's 10<sup>th</sup> encounter in 2013:

We came together to initiate this ceremony [...] It represents the colours of our diversity and reminds us that we emerge from one origin [...] as we all represent different groups and communities [...] I will ask someone from CARACOL, to light the red candle as a representation of the groups and organisations in the East [...]. Finally we remind ourselves that we are connected to creation by lightening the blue and the green candle in the middle [...]. Now I invite each of you to light a candle and join this circle of energy which will accompany us during this encounter and support us during our future work in the communities.

(RO 2013)

These words support an understanding of this initiation rite as a moment of connectivity and re-creation of the Network's rather diverse community consisting of young people from different parts of the country. The spiritual notion of this moment becomes evident when he emphasises the connection of all beings as part of one source of life giving energy, which not only connects the young people with each other but also continues to support the individuals and their groups in their everyday practices. The latter is particularly important for the development of the argument which suggests that the experience emerging from the ritual goes far beyond the temporary moment of connection and community created through the collective performance. As one of the young people highlights: "The mystical element of the Mayan ceremony, which connects us to our ancestors and its strong symbolism reminds us every day why we do our work in the communities and that each of us contributes to a more peaceful whole through our actions" (BO 2013). The transcendence of experience across different spaces is suggested here, because it is both embodied by each individual but also lingers due to its spiritual notion and connection with an ancient culture and belief system, which is based on the idea that human coexistence and a peaceful living together is possible.

Through the lighting of a candle every participant becomes co-creator and part of this ritual of unity and symbolic performance of connectedness. While candles were originally used in shrines and caves to provide and give light, today they are often used to re-create a sacred atmosphere as well as to help define the ritual space as different from its surrounding (Schirch 2004, 71). Here, the lightening of a candle by each participant goes beyond notions of creating a sacred space. The performance not only acknowledges the presence of the individuals, who are active parts and contributors to this moment and community space, but according to Julia Escobar can also be understood as “a symbolic representation of life” and the “being alive” of each young person present in this ceremony (JE 2013). This pro-life gesture seems to have a particularly strong meaning for the young people, who grow up in a context such as Guatemala. A youth participant highlights: “Each group present today has lost at least one young person or knows someone who has been killed or simply disappeared. Lighting a candle for life gives me hope and belief that together we can change things although I know that this will take a long time” (SO 2013).



Figure 32 and 33: Ritual of connectivity, Muxbal (2013).



Figures 31 and 32 (above) are representative of such intimate moments of both individual and collective engagement and co-creation of this ritual of unity. At the same time the lighting of a candle by each participant acknowledges and emphasises the presence of every young person as an active part of the circle and a contributor to the network community and its shared struggle. It reflects the Mayan understanding of unity within diversity, which particularly values the contribution of every individual to a balanced and harmonic life.

This brings us back to the argument and understanding of plateaux as intense moments of convergence and community, during which the dispersed groups of the Network come together and after the event diverge into their communities. As Deleuze and Guattari point out: “We have given it a circular form [...] we watched lines leave one plateau and proceed to another like columns of tiny ants. We made circles of convergence [...] each plateau can be related to any other plateau” (1987, 22). The gathering of the young people during the Mayan ceremony can be seen as such a *circle of convergence* or performance plateau during the Network’s encounter, which is however embedded in continuous processes and movements of convergence and divergence. Hence, the collective experience during the Mayan ceremony cannot be seen in isolation from other performance plateaux during the encounter but instead is closely related to them. After such intense moments the collective experiences diverge like lines or paths and with the young people’s return to their communities they proceed into other spaces and locations. As Deleuze and Guattari (Ibid., 11) remind us: “then you see whether inside that line new circles of convergence establish themselves, with new points located outside the limits and in other directions”. Within this practice process each line can connect to other, often much smaller performance plateaux emerging in the local communities such as for example the circle of connection as part of creative workshops or *comparsas* (see chapter 4 and 6).

Another aspect of the Mayan ceremony and its unifying role for the Network is its notion as a re-creation of an ancient ritual and belief system, which has a strong meaning for many Guatemalan people. Even though the Network's protagonists draw on a ritual tradition and symbolism from the past through their initiation rite, they adapt it to their present circumstances to celebrate their diversity as an initiative, and acknowledge each participant as an important contributor. A similar observation has been made by Drewal (1992) in her account on the Yorumba ritual through which she highlights creativity and innovation as part of traditional rituals and their recreation: "When Yoruba people say that they perform ritual 'just like' their ancestors, did it in the past, improvisation is implicit in their re-creation and restoration. Innovations in ritual, then, do not break with tradition but rather are continuations of it in the spirit of improvisation" (Ibid., 23). Along with Drewal, I understand the Network's rite as a continuation of an ancient Mayan ceremony and its strong symbolism, however at the same time by introducing it into their practice, they keep it alive *and* add new meanings to it. Hence, through the performance of the ancient ritual they do not only re-produce an ancient culture and tradition but also create a new culture by adapting it to their social and emotional needs and circumstances as a youth initiative and network in post-conflict Guatemala. Thus, their collective performances are "providing for identity through historical rootedness" (Cook 2013, 3), which as part of an ongoing process links the otherwise dispersed youth groups.

Moreover, as an initiation rite or passageway it clearly marks the network convergences, which are spatially and temporally elevated from the everyday and as plateau events contrast to the young people's local practices. Through the collective ritual that brings the young people together in a symbolic circle of coexistence, they enter a different realm or liminal space, which they create and experience as a group. One way of understanding the quality of the Mayan ceremony as a threshold to the encounter and ritual of connectivity is Turner's

(1969) exploration of liminal phenomena or in-between spaces which are collective experiences that are separated from everyday life. Thus, they emerge from what he calls “natural breaks” or disjunctions in the flow of social processes and therefore have the potential to form new ideas, symbols, models and beliefs (1974a, 85). According to him, liminal phenomena such as sacred ceremonies often include symbols which represent a shared intellectual and emotional meaning for the ritual participants and are linked to their shared history (Ibid.). As a disjunction in the flow of the youth group’s everyday practices, the Mayan ceremony (indeed, the whole encounter) represents such a ‘natural break’ or recess. Through its separation from the everyday it enables the young people to collectively create a different place based on a more peaceful way of living together, one that is ideologically grounded in a vision of connectivity and harmony between all life, emerging from an ancient Mayan practice, however, enacted in the present during their ceremony.

This symbolic re-enactment of connectivity through the Mayan ceremony is a key element for the Network and its collective identity creation process as it is constituted of territorially separated diverse groups including young people across different ages, social classes, regions, races and cultures, which would probably not come together otherwise (see chapter 3). This has also been pointed out by one of the network protagonists (DF 2013): “The energy of the *Toj*, the sacred fire includes everyone. It is a space of encounter where we are all represented and no one is left behind. This space means both unity and difference at the same time.” Notions of encounter through difference are particularly relevant in a post-conflict context such as Guatemala where youth organisation has turned out to be challenging after the war, which has left deep wounds in the social fabric of society. In the aftermaths of the armed conflict, culture and race are still elements closely linked to social exclusion and discrimination. Racism and the emphasis on difference continue to remain deeply embedded in the everyday culture and life of many Guatemalans, in particular affecting the most

vulnerable and excluded parts of the population. According to Salzar, who in her book refers in particular to the Guatemalan context, racism is cultural and structural and therefore “creates genocide and other material and cultural-symbolic violences and injustices” (2012, 64). She continues by highlighting the negative consequences of experiencing racism, which in Guatemala can be found throughout all classes and cultures: “For anyone treated as inferior, as an uncivilized Other, regardless of their class, education, religion or gender, the experience of racism in all of its myriad forms causes deep pain and long-term wounds” (Ibid.).

During the Mayan ritual, such social structures, which separate people, emphasise their differences and impact on their actions are set aside for a moment offering what Lisa Schirch would call a more ‘humanizing space’ which enables the participants to find a common identity as well as to recognise difference and complex identities each person holds (2005, 126). Through their mutual engagement during the ritual an atmosphere of community and solidarity can emerge. Victor Turner has defined such moments as ‘communitas’, which he described as “a direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities” obtaining a “flash of mutual understanding on the existential level” (1982, 48). The participants become absorbed into “a single synchronized fluid event”, however without the elimination of their difference (Ibid.). According to Turner, “communitas does not merge identities, it liberates them from conformity to general norms [...] The bonds of communitas are anti-structural in the sense that they are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, extant, nonrational, existential I-Thou relationships” (Ibid. 1974b, 274).

Along with Turner I hold that the Mayan ceremony not only represents the encounter’s threshold, but also within that provides the conditions for the young people to meet each other and their differences outside the norms and constraints of their everyday lives. They collectively create a space of community and connection with each other in the present and now, however based on a common

belief system and ritual practice emerging from a shared historical past. This notion has also been pointed out by Jan Cohen-Cruz, who in her account on ritual as cultural performances emphasises that they “provide emotional and intellectual linkages between our individual lives, those who have come before, and those who come after” (2005, 85). What for some groups is a shared religious practice, the faith of ritual for others is based on a common belief or vision that a better world is possible. For Cohen-Cruz the ritual dimension of fusing past, present and future signals the power of spirituality to channel the strength from those “with shared values who have come before striving towards something that has yet to be” (Ibid.). During the Network’s ceremony this spiritual notion and connection of the past with present and future becomes evident when the facilitator emphasises the fire circle as a unifying source, whose energy will accompany the young people and support them during their future work in the communities (see earlier section).

### **The circle of connection: a methodological tool and practice of community**

The circle is not only key during the Mayan ceremonial as explored above, but also represents a key methodological tool and practice of community as well as a safe space of encounter between youth groups and individuals, most of which originate from different contexts. It can be traced as a repetitive practice during the Network’s encounters, *comparsas*, as well as the workshop processes in the local communities. Amongst the Network’s youth protagonists, this practice is commonly known as *the circle of connection* (‘circulo de connexion’). Julia Escobar (2013) recalls the importance of a practice-in-circle during one of Caja Lúdica’s first large-scale encounters:

There were around 200 young people [...] some of them belonged to one gang others to a different gang. They were enemies on the streets [...] you could feel the tense atmosphere, full of insecurity, mistrust, fear,

prejudices [...] So we had to create this space to be able to work together [...] exercises such as breathing and meditation [...] and the playful interaction were key for such an encounter to be possible.

Figure 34 below shows such a moment of practice-in-circle during the Network's 10<sup>th</sup> encounter in 2013.



Figure 34: Circle of connection, Muxbal (2013).

As can be seen in the picture here (figure 34), the circular formation creates a rather enclosed space that temporally as well as spatially defines the boundaries for the activities of this group. This has been pointed out by one of the youth protagonists (DF 2013), who emphasises the circle as the delineation of a safe space and as a universal symbol for coexistence and encounter, which connects the participants, forming a community:

The circle for us represents the definition of a safe space where we meet one other, connect and synchronise as a group. Through the circle we continuously remind ourselves of this community space, our connection as a network, just as the Mayan populations connect through their ceremonies, and the *Toj*, the sacred circle, which also connects us energetically.

Similarly, Lederach and Lederach (2010, 64) stress the importance of spatial metaphors and formations for feeling “comfortably surrounded, having a container in which one feels a sense of belonging and trust”. A search for security and “at-homeness” is particularly important in geographies of violence and war (Ibid.). According to them safety is not only finding a way to assure physical security but in particular “expresses the search to find a way to feel at home in the world, to feel once again a sense of being [...], such that it is possible to trust oneself, one’s immediate family, others and the wider social landscape” (Ibid., 64). Along with the young girl and these authors I assert that the Network’s circle of connection represents one such security point and safe container that provides the conditions for the participants to “*touch and feel* a sense of safety and change” (Ibid., 199). The provision of a safe space for the possible re-creation of relationships and community is particularly important in contexts such as Guatemala, where the emergence of social bonds is often hindered by mistrust, which can be linked to continuous threats of crime on an everyday basis as well as and the country’s violent past.

While being-in-circle can physically lead to feeling safe, circles due to their enclosing shape have also been used to describe and represent notions of community. Baldwin (2009) identifies the circle as the basic primal shape, which has served as an ancient form that enabled rites of meeting for different cultures over thousands of years. According to her the circle is “a leap forward to create a new form of community” and a way to “get far enough outside our usual ways of acting and perceiving to have a real experience of each other, and to discover alternatives for the way things are” (Ibid., 4). In this sense the circle of connection can be understood as providing a space to create, practice and maybe experience an alternative mode of community based on trust, respect and care (see section entitled: Turning inwards). Moreover, as a *sphere of relational incubation*, during which new ideas and relationships are re-created and deepened, it contributes to the Network’s collective identity as a community space, which provides a sense

of belonging for the people involved. I define *spheres of relational incubation* as intense moments of human interaction such as, for example, circular practices or performance plateaux that foster the development and emergence of social bonds between people.

The relationships and connections that emerge from the Network's ritual practices, however, go beyond the moment of mutual engagement during the circle. Instead, they transcend and are reaffirmed through the Network's other practices on a collective level during the encounter but in particular, and this is key, linger as embodied experiences of community and feelings of belonging, which the individuals take with them to their local communities. It is in the youth groups' everyday practices where they continue to be developed and expanded (see later sections). The sense of belonging, which goes beyond the momentary experience during practice-in-circle, has been described by various young people in interviews during fieldwork in 2013. They used words such as "second family" (MCH 2013), "chosen family" (RB 2013) or "feeling at home" (PO 2013). A youth representative from Cero Miedo, an urban youth group, states:

It feels really good to be part of this large family, because in our own community we are often discriminated [...]. Here like brothers and sisters we know each other well, we hug each other, we talk about our situation, our groups, about how we feel because we care for each other [...] The network is my family and it is very special to be part of it.

(EF 2013)

Similarly to the young peoples' descriptions, other research emerging from performance and arts education studies has emphasised that collective experiences and engagement in arts activities can foster a feeling of community. These experiences are characterised by the emergence of social relationships, close connections, mutual support and purpose amongst the participants (Heath and Smyth 1999, Wootton 2004, Askins and Pain 2011), and additionally foster a sense of belonging and community (Nicholson 2005, Skudrzyk et al. 2009, Parr



2006, McAvinchey 2014, Mayo 2014). While the accounts mentioned here mainly emphasise creative practices or workshops *as* community building spaces, my argument is that the young people's experiences-in-circle during the encounter go beyond the momentary creation of community. They not only build community through their collective practices and experiences, but also, and this is key, *practice* during the circle how an alternative community may feel or look like in particular on a relational level.

Hence, the circle of connection not only represents a methodological tool to practice community, but also, as I argue, provides an example of a more holistic and relational approach to practice, which expands notions of individual and collective artistic expressions and engagement with an emphasis on self-exploration and development (see also chapter 7). Practice-in-circle, which incorporates contemplative and ritualistic elements not only "readies" young people for creative engagement but also, and this is key, provides the conditions to foster long-term processes of self-exploration and mutual awareness of the 'other' on an individual and collective level: elements which are crucial for community to emerge and to be sustained. Instead of using the arts to bring people together, the circle of connection brings people together *before* the creative activity and fosters a certain form of 'readiness' or 'being' in the moment together as a group. The practice of these elements not only nurtures a more profound level of engagement between the young people but at the same time represents a re-enactment of the Network as an expression of community itself, where shared values of connectivity are explored (see also the section on the Mayan ceremony above).

The engagement in collective rituals I argue changes the *quality* of the emerging relationships during the encounter and the circle itself represents the product of this practice as well as part of its process. It has a significant impact on the engagement of the young people during the subsequent practices as mentioned above. Additionally, and this is key, it impacts on the relationships

within the Network as it connects the young people individually and collectively on a deeper emotional and spiritual level. On one level then, the contemplative and playful practices-in-circle encourage individual awareness and the connection of body, mind and spirit. Going beyond this, they also foster the enactment of new social and affective relationships which bring together the group in a 'fullness' and on an emotional and communitarian level, creating an atmosphere of care, intimacy and trust towards the other (also see below). Hence, the practices-in-circle are part of an ongoing community creating process which is not tied to one artistic intervention or workshop. Instead it is linked to a much wider and long-term identity creating process of the Network as a youth initiative and community, which has sustained itself over more than one decade.

Caja Lúdica share this approach to practice with other cultural expressions in Latin America, which have introduced elements of their cultural heritage and rituals into their practices (see Barndt 2011, p. 25-27; Goldbard 2006b). Arlene Goldbard for example emphasises how spiritual questions, vocabulary or ritual are commonly integrated in community arts practices in particular in countries with a high degree of religious participation such as Mexico, in order to connect the practice to "deeply shared cultural meanings" (2006b, 133; see also 2006a). Caja Lúdica's approach goes beyond an exploration or promotion of an ancient culture and belief system, but rather seeks to contribute to the young people's processes of self-exploration and development through their creation of spaces for encounter with the self and the other.

### *Turning inwards*

Although every performance of the circle of connection follows a similar pattern, it is expressed in different ways depending on the person who facilitates it as well as the emphasis of the activity or workshop. That said, they all include contemplative and playful exercises so as to create an atmosphere of trust

between the young people involved. At the beginning the participants engage in a collective exercise of respiration and meditation during which they are accompanied and guided by one of the young people who facilitates the contemplative moment. This also took place during the Network's encounter in 2013:

Close our eyes for a moment [...]. Connect yourself with your breathing [...] observe and relax every part of your body. How am I today, how is my body and heart. What are my thoughts, what are my worries, how can I leave them behind for an instant? [...] I am aware of the moment [...] the other people and my surroundings. It's not just me anymore, I am part of nature and the universe which gives us energy and connects us [...].

(KG 2013)

Figures 35 and 36 (below), show young people during this exercise. They are representative for many other moments during the Network's circular practices.



Figure 35 (left): Contemplative moments, Muxbal (2013).

Figure 36 (right): Collective breathing, Guatemala City (2009).

Some of the young people have their eyes closed; some gaze into space. Others have directed their front towards the floor and the palms of their hands directed towards themselves, gently touching their chest. These gestures illustrate the contemplative atmosphere during the practice-in-circle, which fosters a moment of concentration and turning towards the self as one of the former youth coordinators of a rural youth group recalls:

The process of connecting yourself with your respiration and body helps you to focus for a moment and to be with yourself, become aware of your body and thoughts. On an everyday basis we do not pay attention to our bodies, although we continuously use it, we walk, we sit, we eat [...] this process changes the relationship to your inner self and others and helped me visualise myself not only as an individual but rather as *within* and part of a whole.

(ACH 2013)

This interviewee draws attention to essential elements of this practice-in-circle, such as connection to the body and mind on an individual level and in particular in relation to others and the environment. He highlights how his engagement in these practices has affected his self-awareness on a physical as well as psychological level and how the experience of Caja Lúdica's 'sensitisation process' has changed his view on how he sees himself in the world. The elements he describes here are very similar to notions of a variety of contemplative practices, which can be found in both religious as well as secular contexts and environments.

According to Haynes (2005), there is no single way to describe or engage in contemplative practices, and the Latin word *contemplari*, which means to observe, consider or gaze attentively, gives an idea of the varied forms and expressions. Therefore, it is a challenging task to find a coherent definition for the wide range of contemplative practices. Goler (2014, p. 76) for example stresses: "Contemplative practices are actions and experiences that absorb our focus - which is usually directed outward toward the activities of the world - and then

turn that focus inwards to the invisible world inside each of us.” Such practices can range from sitting, walking, lying down, to imagery journeys or physical exercises. What they share is their “sense of presence” (Ibid.). According to Goler they “move us out of the thinking mind and into the experiencing body” (bid.). While most contemplative practices are rooted in the world’s religious traditions, they can also be increasingly found in secular contexts and practices. They are often described with the word ‘mindfulness’, which makes them accessible to everyone regardless of religion or spiritual orientation.

Moreover, studies emerging from the field of education prove that contemplative practices can have a profound impact on students’ experiences in school settings and beyond as they can help to transform their inner relationships with themselves “through generating an overall sense of calm and well-being” (Haynes 2009, 26). Additionally, as Deborah Haynes argues, contemplative practices can foster an atmosphere of respect in learning environments, where relationships emerge through “compassion and kindness”, and this can bring together groups as a whole (Ibid.). Similarly, one of Caja Lúdica’s protagonists highlights how processes of self-awareness can impact the ways in which people relate to others:

As soon as you recognise, know and feel yourself you start developing confidence and trust in yourself. Our practices foster these processes of self-acknowledgement which support the young people in recovering their confidence. From the moment you recover confidence and trust in yourself, you can open yourself up towards the other and relate in a different way.

(KG 2013)

Considering the interviewee’s words, the contemplative elements in the Network’s practices-in-circle provide the space for the young people to connect with their self on an individual level but in particular to connect as a group, and

through the exercises collectively create an atmosphere of trust and respect between each other.

The collective breathing and meditation exercises synchronise the group's encounter in the present moment as well as initiate a process of connection between them. The collective activity of "closing eyes" within a circle of unknown peers as well as putting the arms around the other (see figures 35 and 36 above) are intimate gestures that require a certain level of trust towards the group. This can be challenging or even impossible for young people who are participating for the first time, which one of the network protagonists points out:

When I first participated in the circle of connection I was not able to concentrate or close my eyes. On an everyday basis you have to be constantly alert and closing your eyes for an instant can cost you your life. Here, I have learned to relax, trust and just do it.

(RS 2013)

Some of the young people struggle to fully engage in the circle process in particular participating in exercises that include body contact, as their upbringing impedes interaction between boys and girls if not married (see later section on play). One of the important aspects of facilitating practice-in-circle, according to a youth leader from a rural community, is being able to "adapt the methodology to the group you are working with", which is particularly challenging when engaging with a group for the first time (RO 2013). Moreover, this interviewee highlights that he often advises participants to stand aside and observe, especially if they are unsure about their engagement in the exercise (Ibid.)

However, at the same time, collective contemplation is a powerful process for creating an atmosphere of trust and shared intimacy. It not only fosters the internal connection of each individual with their inner self and body but also - and this is essential - allows a connection or encounter with others. Such a safe space and moment of 'turning inwards' towards the self and 'turning outwards'

towards the other I argue enables relationships based on trust and kindness to develop. Hence, the social bonds emerging from this collective experience not only go beyond the moment of the circle but also transcend the other activities of the encounter. Moreover, they feed into the Network's identity creation process as a community and place of belonging; these are elements that, as argued in this thesis, are key for the sustainability of this particular practice and its continuity for over more than a decade.

Even though the Community Arts Network introduces some aesthetics and symbols of Mayan rituals in their collective practices, instead of representing a specific religion or belief system, they understand an ancient culture or "our shared roots" as their cultural commons which links the rather diverse youth groups as a community (VM 2013). On the one hand, this link serves as these groups' cultural anchor by providing a common basis that deeply grounds and connects them as network initiative with the ancient culture of an oppressed people in Guatemala. However, the appropriation and re-creation of elements such as the aesthetics and rituals of Guatemala's indigenous cultures have to be seen from a critical perspective, in particular when representational aims are more important than shared underlying values and meanings as can often be observed in Guatemala's tourist sector (see chapter 6).

At the same time, even though the network protagonists practice connectivity and respect to all life during their contemplative and playful encounters, they do not promote a singular religious belief, but rather foster personal development and relationships with the inner self on an individual as well as collective level.

### **Encounter through play**

In contrast to the stillness and silence of contemplation, which is aimed at fostering internal connection and presence, stands another aspect of the practice-

in-circle: *contact games*. They aim to create a joyful - and trustful atmosphere and foster playful encounter between the young people (JE 2013). As a safe space, play, on the one hand provides the conditions for them to relate to each other in a more compassionate and trustful way. On the other hand, I argue, it has its limits as it can never fully elude the real world and its social and cultural constraints. Therefore, despite the fact that play can be understood as ephemeral and separate from the 'real' world, it always has to be seen in relation to it. This means that the collective experiences of play and the relational energy created through the intimacy of these moments go beyond the encounter itself, and impact on the participants' actions and everyday life.

According to Caja Lúdica *la lúdica*, which can be translated as play or playfulness describes

the condition inherent in human nature, which starts to move the different dimensions of the being: the physical, the spiritual, and the cognitive. It prepares the individual to recreate and transform his life, his reality and to express himself in a free, critical joyful and purposeful way.

(Lopez 2008, 16)

As a phenomenon, play can be traced in diverse spaces such as, for example, rituals and the arts, and also transcends all of the Network's practices such as their workshops, circles, *comparsas* and public interventions. Through its relational and communicative characteristics, which re-signify the collective and coexistence, it contributes to the human development of the individual as well as the group (Ibid.). As a liberating and creative space, according to Julia Escobar (2013), play "provides the conditions for the symbolic or the imaginative to emerge, which enables the young people to break with the ordinary and propose new models of action and thought, this on an individual as well as collective level". Play, in this sense, can be understood as an adverb, which describes "how and under what conditions and action is performed" (Millar 1968, 21) but at the same time I use it here as a description for Caja Lúdica's activities such as their



games during the circle of connection. The pictures below (37/38) illustrate exemplary moments of interaction during games, many of which are inspired by Augusto Boal's (2002) theatre games for actors and non-actors (TE 2013).



Figure 37 (left): Vibrant dynamics, Guatemala City (2009).

Figure 38 (right): Encounter through play, Guatemala City (2009).

Figure 37 shows some of the young people in motion running and jumping in the air, which illustrates the dynamic and vibrant atmosphere created through the game. Figure 38 grasps moments of a communal greeting dynamic during which the participants run in opposite directions forming a spiral shape and by doing so touch each other's hands. Looking at the pictures and young people's smiling faces one can feel the joyful and energetic atmosphere created during these games. This heightened energy was also noticeable when talking to some of the young people after the play in circle: "I had so much fun playing together, I jumped and moved a lot, I crossed boundaries many times [...] we let ourselves go and I feel that I really met the others. We let go of bad vibes; I am so relaxed now and energised [...] I am happy, happy, everything is fine" (BCH 2013). The girl's words describe the atmosphere of laughter and the energy created through play, which encouraged her to move and use her body in unaccustomed ways,

to take risks and by doing so, engage with others. She also highlights that she was able to 'really meet' the others which suggests a certain quality of mutual engagement during play and supports our argument and understanding of play as a safe space of encounter and performance plateau during which social relationships and energy are created.

This discussion resonates with other authors (Thompson 2006; Paterson and Rohd 1998) from theatre studies, who have made similar observations. They have built their analysis on Boal's understanding of games as key part of theatre practices as they foster "a better awareness of the body and its mechanisms, [...], its capacities for recuperation, restructuring, reharmonisation" (Boal 2002, 48). According to him, they foster the link between body and mind that together constitute an "indivisible whole". Due to their dialectical nature games not only foster an internal dialogue but on an external level dialogue with the other (Ibid.). Games are therefore particularly important during the Network's encounters, which bring together large numbers of young people, some of whom are not familiar with each other due to the frequent changes of the youth groups within the Network.

Hence, play during the circle of connection, as a separate and self-contained sphere, creates the 'ideal' conditions for the young people to relate to and connect with each other in a way that may be otherwise hindered by social and cultural constraints. Similarly, Huizinga defines play as "stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity" with its own "boundaries of time and space" (1950, 9; 13). This gives play its liminal quality as performance plateau and ritual of encounter, which enables the young people to explore new forms of engagement with each other.

This, however, has its limitations as play, although seemingly separate and self-contained, can never fully elude itself from the everyday and is in some ways connected to ordinary life. Therefore it often expresses itself as a display or "representation of something" (Huizinga 1950, 13). In this sense, play during the

encounters seems to reflect notions of the Network's understanding of itself as a community based on harmony and respect. Figure 39 (below) portrays such a moment of community during which the young people perform a closely connected circle. At the same time, figure 40 (below) shows how socio-cultural differences between the participants impact on the Network's play activities, which also illustrates the limits of play and its understanding as a safe self-contained space outside ordinary life (see sections below).



Figure 39 (left): Collective hug during play, Rabinal (2008).

Figure 40 (right): Limitations of play as a safe space, Guatemala City (2009).

The moment of stillness and collective contemplation seen in figure 39 reflects the level of intimacy during the Network's collective practices-in-circle, activities which expand conventional warm-up games through elements of body contact and touch. The young people's bodies are entwined, they hold each other on their hips or shoulders. Their heads are resting on the back of the person in front of them and it seems as if they were sleeping or resting on each other's shoulders. As performance plateaux they are the most intense moments during the encounter, fostering the young people's engagement with each other in ways

that contrast to most of their interactions with peers. A young girl from a rural community highlights:

I never thought that I could put my arms around another girl's waist or touch noses with someone because this is something you are not supposed to do. When you've done it once, the second time is easier and then it becomes normal [...]. I have noticed that I am closer to the people from the Network than with anybody else.

(ED 2013)

The young girl's words supports the argument that the affective notion of the young people's encounter through play are key as they are embodied experiences and practices which connect the young people as a network community. On a methodological level performance plateaux are crucial part of Caja Lúdica's practices as they foster the emergence of relationships and new social bonds as well as a more trustful and caring interaction, which transcend the moment of play and sustain the Network between the encounters. At the same time such moments can be understood as re-creations and practices of the network community, and therefore represent key collective experiences for the participants. Although the safe and temporary sphere of play and community disappears, the feeling of connectedness and intimacy perseveres on an emotional level and lingers as an embodied experience and collective memory that the young people share.

At the same time, the play sphere has its limits and can only be sustained if the temporary rules of the game are upheld and its emergence is closely linked to the players' attitudes and willingness to fully engage, which means to "commit to one another" and at the same time consider the shared moments of play as valuable (Henricks 2006, 14). The crossing of this boundary into the play sphere implies a shift in the players' identities from their "ordinary" self into their "ludic self" and a rather experiential mode which can only occur during play (Calleja 2013, 1). This attempt to create a demarcation between experiences of play and

real life can be challenged, in particular when trying to explain how the young people's social and personal background as well as experiences can be excluded from the play activity.

Figure 40 (above) illustrates a moment where action patterns from the 'ordinary' life emerge within the boundaries of the play sphere and disrupt the temporary ideal of the Network's re-creation and practice of community as a closely connected circle. For some of the young people, here two girls from CopalAA, physical contact which implies touching the other is challenging. This results in their initial resistance and hesitation to embrace the person in front of them during the activity. As can be seen in the picture, another young woman is trying to encourage one of the girls to hold her hips and it almost seems as if she was gently pushing the other girl across an invisible boundary by taking her hand and guiding it towards her body. The second girl is observing the moment with her hands crossed. Despite the fact that the act of embracing another person seems to be alien to the young girls, and they hesitate to fully engage in the activity there seems to be some kind of fascination and curiosity or even joy about the process as they have a smile on their face.

Shortly after the picture was taken, I observed that the same girls were drawn into the flow of the game, embracing and approaching others, and it seemed as if they had temporarily forgotten about who they were just a minute ago and how they were supposed to act, think and feel. Henricks (2006, 2) emphasises that in "play, all of us are granted a certain dispensation from the normal consequences of action", which in our case would probably be the reaction of CopalAA's community members to the young girls' actions if the game was undertaken there. They are, however, in this moment, a nine-hour bus drive away from their community. Play, according to Gordon (2009, 4), has the ability to detach "messages, experiences, or objects from their context of origin, creating a new frame that allows for greater freedom, interactivity and creative possibilities". The moment illustrated above shows this potential and power of

play which has been described by Millar as “an attitude of throwing off constraint” of cultural, social, physical or emotional nature (1968, 21). Play here on the one hand gives an impulse to both freedom and connection and some kind of transformation or change of pattern of action which occurs through the interaction of the two girls across their physical as well as cultural boundaries.

At the same time, the temporary rules of play foster certain forms of interaction which highly contrast with the girls’ everyday experiences and expectations in their communities. They are experiencing a form of engagement with other young people, which may contradict some of the social norms they have embodied through the upbringing in their community. One of the girls (DL 2013) points out: “I always thought that as a girl you should not really hug or touch a boy without being married to him because that’s what I was told by my family. It took me a while and I flushed in the moment of doing it but why should I feel embarrassed. I did nothing wrong.”

Considering the girl’s words, a full engagement in the play activity can require a certain level of risk, leaving the participants’ experiences behind for a moment and, by doing so, resist their own cultural structures which are interwoven with issues such as power, identity, and attitude amongst others. This is probably one of the reasons why the young girls were reluctant to participate and engage at the beginning of the play activity, and would step aside or adjust their actions in a way which was compatible with their upbringing. Even though their participation in the Network’s culture of play has created a new and additional framework for them to interact with others in different ways, such interventions have to be examined with caution and also seen in a critical way. These experiences cannot only be seen as contained within the safe space of playful exercises and artistic workshops. Instead, as embodied experiences they are interconnected with the real world and therefore may have an impact on the young people’s ways of thinking and their actions, which may later challenge expectations and norms persistent in their local communities. This has been

highlighted by the coordinator of the girls' youth group who links similar experiences of cultural reluctance at the beginning of play activities during the Network's encounters to their community culture (RO 2013). However, he also points out how the experience during such play activities has strongly impacted the young people and their attitudes as well as challenged the social norms of their community culture:

In my community women do not easily relate to men and are therefore rather withdrawn in their presence [...] Through games we have experienced that that boys and girls can engage in a way which is respectful and not offensive [...] it is a new culture, a commitment for us in CopalAA to develop a more equal relationship between men and women.

(Ibid., 2013)

The girls' experience as well as this respondent's words both illustrate that blocking out the complexity of the young people's social and personal relations as well as their cultural background during play is almost impossible. At the same time - and this is key for the argument - the experiences during play, as this interviewee highlights, have impacted the young people's engagement and their actions in their everyday community life. They have, for example, mutually agreed to change their attitude towards how they relate to each other in their youth group and therefore introduced a new practice and culture emerging from their experiences during encounters. This change may cause tensions and difficulties with other people or groups of interest in their community as it clashes with the local norms and expectations of how young people are supposed to act in CopalAA. The tensions, as described here, may even turn into an imminent risk for the people involved, especially in contexts such as CopalAA, where community life is determined by groups of power and where the actions of young people, as described in this example, would represent a threat to the status quo.

Similarly, Thompson (2009a) has highlighted the importance of considering the interconnections that exist around any theatre practice, and questions any limitations of the distinction between the rather private workshop space and the public sphere. He urges practitioners to be aware of the fact that practices in particular in war and conflict zones have to be seen in relation to constraints of the respective context and can even become bound to power relations, which are difficult to ascertain if the attention is only given to the practice space rather than the wider picture (Ibid., 17). Therefore, the boundaries of the play-sphere during the circle of connection have to be understood as fluid and permeable, and this suggests that the experiences of play always have to be seen in relation to the everyday and may have a social or cultural impact on the people who participate.

The observations made through the example above support the argument that these experiences do not stop when the play-sphere disappears, but permeate and impact young people's everyday lives. In other words, at the end of play, the experience "goes into the body" (Schechner 1988, 17) and therefore leaves the play sphere as an embodied memory with every participant. Hence, an understanding of play as clearly separated from the everyday, as Schechner highlights, is "too stiff, too impermeable, too 'on/off', 'inside/outside'" (1988, 16). He suggests "net" as a more suitable metaphor for play, which he describes as "a porous, flexible, gatherer: a three-dimensional, dynamic flow-through container" (Ibid.).

Following the metaphor of play as a net, I understand the ritual and playful activities as *relational weaving moments*, during which the young people similarly to threads get entangled into a fabric of social bonds and connections. As moments of increased network density, such performance plateaux are the most intense moments of interaction and conjuncture during the encounters, as well as within the other activities during the year. The net of relationships, becomes very dense through the notions of contact and touch during play as described above. During such instances the young people's bodies not only become literally



entangled, such as, for example, during a hug, but also and this is key, their emotions become linked to this collective experience of connectedness during the play circle or performance plateau. They are remembered both reflexively through the body as well as reflectively through a shared narration and therefore contribute to the Network's collective identity creation process as a family and community space.

### **A micro-perspective: The hug ritual and the power of touch**

In our culture it is easier to hit a person than to say 'I like or love you' or to give each other a hug (*'un abrazo'*). Instead of being caring and gentle, people often are aggressive and violent not only on a physical but also psychological level [...] The violence of the war in Guatemala is more silent now as it takes place in and through our bodies [...]

(AH 2013)

These are the words of one of the Network's youth protagonists who emphasises how, in the aftermaths of the war in Guatemala, expressions of violence are much more subtle and less visible. According to him they are embodied and therefore can impact on how people relate to each other on a daily basis. *Un abrazo* ('hug'), which this interviewee and also other young people mentioned several times during interviews, seems to be a gesture and an important part of the Network's playful activities. The act and ritual of embracing, described here, can not only be observed on a small scale between two people (see figure 42 below) or on a large scale as a group hug (see figure 39 above) but also, and this is key, takes place outside the facilitated activities, on a more informal level between young people during the encounter.

*Un abrazo* ('hug') derives from *abrazar* ('to embrace') and has its roots in the Latin expression *brachium* ('arm'), which literally describes the act of clasping another person in the arms. It can be understood an action during which people

hold each other close with their arms usually to show that they like or love each other. A hug as a form of nonverbal communication, depending on context, culture, religion and relationship can be associated with friendship, love, affection, emotional warmth and sympathy amongst others. At the same time, it may contrast with certain cultural and social norms, be experienced as unpleasant or even considered as an invasion in someone's personal space (Keating 1994). While *un abrazo* ('hug') as a greeting gesture can feel rather uncomfortable for some people, in particular if the person is not family or friend, it is a much more common form of interaction between people in Latin America (Diran K. M. 2009). Physical contact and touch here seem to be much more common on an everyday basis than in Anglo-Saxon or Asian cultures where it is often reserved to close family and friends (Argyle 1996, Núñez and Taylor 1996). This still differs within countries, regions, communities, families as it depends on each individual's background and its social and cultural values and individual choices.

However, in the context of this thesis, emerging from the interviews, the hug has often been mentioned in relation or contrast to violent human interaction such as one of the youth interviewees recalls: "In my family there are mainly men, I was scared of them as I was beaten and this was normal to me. They beat me and then hugged me but not in a good way. In Caja Lúdica I learnt a different form of hug, one without violence, one I was not used to, one that made me feel valued and loved" (DF 2013). Moreover, during fieldwork, I have identified the hug as a ritual in the Network's practices and part of Caja Lúdica's methodology and sensitisation processes, which aim to foster and develop more human and joyful interaction as well as the rebuilding of trust through play. Physical contact such as, for example, the hug as a form of *facilitated interconnection* is incorporated into Caja Lúdica's playful activities to enhance one's encounter with the self as well as to develop a connection with the other. At the same time, and this is key,

the hug also transcends other non-facilitated activities and has developed into a *gesture of trust* and a way of relating to one another.

The weaving of social relationships based on trust seems to be particularly challenging, however essential in the context of Guatemala where despair, mistrust and fear have become patterns in many communities as a result of high levels of insecurity and violence, which Winton (2005, 171) has described as a “a vicious circle where the lack of trust breeds further distrust”. Similarly, Green (1994) stresses that fear as an internal part of people’s lives impacts and destabilises social relations within communities or even family members and friends and is able to divide communities through suspicion and mistrust of strangers. In contrast to these conditions, the hug, which fosters a rather intimate encounter between two people on a physical as well as emotional level here can be seen as a ritual and re-enactment of connectivity and trust. The hug is a “mutually creative interaction” (Beaumont 1993, 90); it is a sensual and co-created experience that impacts the bodies of the people involved.

Hence, the hug, as a *counter gesture* as well as a resistance to expressions of violence in Guatemala and its consequences, represents not only a symbol but also a practice for a more compassionate and intimate way of encounter between human beings. Moreover, it goes far beyond its symbolic significance as a counter practice and resistance to violence. Through the repetition of the hug ritual during the encounters and its application in the Network’s local practices, it becomes emotionally internalised and thereby turns into a repetitive pattern for the individuals involved. As a shared experience and culture of compassion and trust it is a key element of this particular practice as it feeds into the continuous development of the Community Arts Network as a community and place of belonging, which resists violence and celebrates human interaction based on love and respect. Figures 41 and 42 (below) represent such intimate moments and illustrate the hug ritual and its embracing gesture, which is directed towards and involves connecting with the other.



Figure 41 (left): Hug, CopalAA (2013).

Figure 42 (right): Hug, *Guatemala City* (2009).

In figure 41 we can see two young people during one of the Network's play activities. They are in the process of stepping towards each other, appear to be separate from the rest of the group and temporarily enclosed within their own space. Their arm postures indicate that they are just about to embrace each other opening up the front side of their bodies towards one another. Just before their bodies touch, their arms are reaching towards the other, moulding a circular space between them, which then in the course of the hug process will tighten, decrease in size and finally disappear, once their bodies unite.

Figure 42 (above) has grasped the ephemeral and moment of unity, a hug between two young girls during a playful activity. One of them has a smile on her face, and she seems to enjoy this temporary moment, which she shares with the other person. It is the same girl, who struggled to participate in the Network's playful activities during one of the encounters (see earlier section on play). The girls' arms seem to both hold and define this intimate moment and space created for an instant through the two entangled and physically touching bodies. This intimate space will disappear as soon as the bodies separate, however leaving a

kind of aftermath, which we all may have experienced to some degree in our lives 'once a hug is over'. But how can we explore and understand such an intangible, fragile and ephemeral space as created here, which bursts like a bubble, however leaves something behind and can only be felt by the people who shared it?

Peter Sloterdijk's (2011) spatial anthropology of spheres, through which he conceptualises the spatial and affective dynamics of human coexistence, helps us to understand the contours and 'shared inside' of such an intimate space created through the touching bodies during the hug ritual. According to him, the sphere is "the interior, disclosed, shared realm inhabited by humans - in so far they succeed in becoming human. Living in spheres means creating the dimension in which humans can be contained" (Ibid., 28). Hence, spheres are "the original product of human existence" and created through human interactions and relationships between each other and are therefore dependent on constant renewal (Ibid., 46). Sloterdijk identifies bubbles as the smallest and most intimate forms of spheres. They are socio-spatial configurations and the most basic form of relationships between two human beings; they are "micro-spheric units" which "constitute the intimate forms of the rounded being-in-form and the basic molecule of the strong relationship" (Ibid., 62).

The hug ritual during the encounters can be understood as such a small micro-sphere bubble or "interfacial sphere of intimacy" (Ibid., 139) that is temporarily created between two individuals, and touch plays a major role during this human interaction and symbol of trust. In the moment of the hug the two bodies are turned towards each other each other. When they join, something new emerges, a "shared inside" which links the two people in this particular moment. At the same time, the element of touch probably "represents the most direct invasion" into our own protective shield of privacy which people maintain around themselves (Finnegan 2005, 18), which during a hug appears to temporarily dissolve.

Perceptions of touch, which are socially and culturally determined therefore vary for different people and social groups, and unwritten rules often indicate when tactile contact such as for example hugs are seen as legitimate. Thayer's analysis of social touching emphasises this point: "Touch represents a confirmation of our boundaries and separateness while permitting a union or connections with others that transcends physical limits. For this reason, of all the communication channels, touch is the most carefully guarded and monitored, the most infrequently used, yet the most powerful, immediate" (1982, 298). Within the practices of the Community Arts Network, touch and in particular the hug seem to represent such gestures permitting connection between two young people and therefore can be observed in various occasions during their gatherings. In comparison to the Network's collective activities such as the encounters in general, the ceremonies, the circles, the artistic workshops as well as the *comparsas*, the hug seems to be the most subtle albeit one of the most powerful forms of their practices as it is less visible and much more natural as an everyday action. *Tactile spheres* such as the hug seem to mark the relationships and connectivity between the network protagonists and stand for the culture they aim to promote as a community space. As both "a physical symbolism and practice" (Ness, 1992, 232) it can therefore be understood as an expression and experience of the social values and the culture of trust and connectivity, which the different groups of the Network foster through their collective encounters.

However, as a form of mutual engagement and encounter it particularly surprises newcomers, who are not used to this way of physical engagement and contact. One of the network protagonists recalls:

I remember to date the moment when I participated in one of the encounters and people welcomed me with a hug on my arrival. The feeling I had is difficult to describe with words but being hugged impacted on me [...] I live in a place where people would not trust a young person, where they judge you for your appearance or simply for being different.

What I found here, one might call it a hug, but in the end it comes down to a space of family and friendship with people you can trust.

(HM 2013)

Even though the tactile sphere of the hug, as described here, is experienced individually and starts as a one-to-one process, it expands at the same time outwards, and by doing so creates new connections as well as a culture within the Network based on shared values and practices. What this young man experienced in this particular moment as an individual can probably best be described as a feeling of solidarity and link to this particular space and group, and the hug contributed to this positive sensation. Tactile spheres emerging through hugs during the encounters are temporary and “are dependent on constant renewal” (Sloterijk 2011, 46), yet they continue to exist even beyond people’s separation after a hug. The affective experience and bond of trust emerging from the hug, however, lingers as an embodied memory or even new practice and meaning, which the young people may want to choose for their future engagement with others. Moreover, as a gesture it clearly defines the relationships as well as the values of the Network as a community space.

The hug, however, does not remain within the Network’s practices, and in this sense it is potentially most resistant and powerful. As an embodied experience and practice it transforms from a collective ritual pattern and culture into an individual action and can become part of the young people’s personal repertoire and everyday actions. One of the former youth coordinators highlights (RCH 2013):

The experiences I had through the sensitisation processes with Caja Lúdica and in particular the way in which to relate to each other stick with you for a whole life. I am not only talking on a professional level but also on a personal level it helped me to become a better person in my family with my kid and break the cycle of violence with a more loving way of engaging with others.

The respondent's words reflect how experiences during encounters have impacted on her life, which supports the argument that the experience of a hug as part of a long-term process can impact the ways in which the young people engage with their families, friends and communities outside the network activities.

Additionally, the relational element of the Network's community arts practices rather than a short-term phenomenon, through their link to a broader struggle and shared aim for social justice in Guatemala becomes a long-term process of learning and commitment for the young people's lives. This has been highlighted by another youth leader:

I saw a man today, beating his child on the street and I asked him why he was beating his child. Don't get involved he said [...]. I disagree, because it is my obligation to ask him why he beats his child, because I am now someone who has become more conscious and sensitive to these things as I have experienced how human interaction can look like [...]. And this is something I have learned through the community arts processes with the Network.

(ACH 2013)

This interviewee's words support my argument here that the experiences of the hug as part of a long-term sensitisation process can in a very subtle and invisible but powerful way change the young people's approaches and relationships towards other people in their immediate surroundings and communities. The way in which the practice of the hug impacts on the young people's everyday lives, as mentioned above, illustrates the notion of the plateau as being enclosed during the performance, and then opening up and diverging into other directions through the young people's practices and actions in their communities.

To sum up, this chapter has explored the Network's encounters as plateau events, and in particular the ritual practices within it that not only provide the conditions for the young people to meet and exchange but also create a safe space to connect and relate with each other as a network community. This chapter has



unveiled that the re-creation of the Mayan ritual and notion of connectivity represents an important cultural anchor and performance plateau for the Community Arts Network. As a cultural performance it not only represents the diversity of the Network which is united through the sacred fire, but also recognises and draws attention to the individuals and their (inter)actions as essential part and contribution to human coexistence and more peaceful living together.

The circle of connection, due to its liminal notion of standing outside the everyday, provides the conditions for the values, which emerge from this ancient belief system, to be practiced and experienced on an individual as well as collective level. It is a moment of their practice where rules for acting and interpreting meaning are not determined by the context, but instead are negotiated through play and collective contemplation, which opens up new ways of exploring human interaction and relationships. The creation of a safe space for mutual engagement is particularly relevant in a context such as Guatemala where space may be physically dangerous or emotionally charged, elements which in such a setting may become less powerful and impacting. Notions of connectedness and community practiced during the circle change the ways in which interaction takes place, and impacts on the way in which relationships are developed, valued and sustained.

The playful and contemplative activities during the circle of connection as well as the hug as a ritual of trust are the most intimate and intense moments during the network convergences. They feed into the Network's *relational repertoire* and contribute to the groups' collective identity creation process as a community space which forges a sense of belonging for the young people involved. As performance plateaux they foster processes for the young people to connect with themselves and others in ways that regular spaces might impede to do so. In short, "a circle is drawn around the (network) community and everything within that circle is sacred and taken out of the ordinary" (Beck and

Walters 1977, 39). In this sense, I argue that the Network's circle of connection as well as the other practices re-create bonds and relationships but ultimately sacralise them as the essence of community and coexistence between humans and all beings, because their practices are rooted in elements of Mayan Cosmology.

Furthermore, the practice-in-circle represents Caja Lúdica's key methodological tool and *ritual of practice and community*, which, through its contemplative and playful notion, generates an intimate sphere in which social ties and relationships of trust can emerge. Due to the affective and emotional atmosphere, which emerges from this practice, social energy is created which as an embodied experience lasts long after the momentary circle formation itself. This social energy is not only key for the social interactions during the subsequent creative activities, but also - and this is essential - contribute to the collective identity creation process of the Network as a community and place of belonging for the young people. The link between rebuilding relational spaces and identity has also been highlighted by Lederach (2005) in his account on the importance of relationships in peacebuilding initiatives. According to him, relational spaces "create social energy that simultaneously is centripetal and centrifugal" (Ibid., 73). He continues that relationships create and emanate social energy and represent places to which energy returns for a sense of identity, direction and purpose (Ibid.).<sup>86</sup>

In this regard, I argue that the ritual practice-in-circle creates such a sense of identity with a two-directional force, which pushes out and pulls in and by doing so creates an invisible centre, and this holds the Network together as one community. The encounters are spaces that provide the conditions for such spheres to emerge and are therefore key as they foster a sense of collective identity and community, which is concrete and imagined (Anderson 1991) at the same time. On the one hand, this is a community space and youth initiative,

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<sup>86</sup> See also Uphoff's exploration of social energy (1987).

which promotes and practices social values of respect and trust as a base for human interaction during their encounters. On the other hand, it is concomitantly a community that is imagined and held together through an invisible bond, which enables the young people to maintain network cohesion and social proximity between the different groups across space. On reflection, the encounters are key for the sustainability of this network community, as they foster the continuous re-creation of the groups' collective identity and solidarity between them.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE *COMPARSA* AS A CONNECTING PROCESS AND SMOOTH SPACE

This chapter extends the discussion of the previous chapter and focuses on the Network's most visible performances in public, the *comparsas*. It explores how these street performances, which emerge in different communities throughout the country, have reinforced the Network's collective identity and solidarity across space as well as have maintained social proximity between the different groups for more than a decade. In Latin America, *comparsa* not only means 'carnival group' but also refers to the carnivalesque performance itself. According to Caja Lúdica, *comparsa* is "a playful and moving street celebration, which consists of different characters on the ground or on stilts with colourful costumes and masks. They dance, sing and follow the rhythm of the music bringing a message of life and joy for the community" (Escobar 1996, 6).

On first sight, observing one of the Network's *comparsas*, one may recognise its similarity to other spectacles such as carnival including its playfulness and celebratory character, in particular if the event remains the main focus of analysis. Moreover, it shares elements with different authors who highlight the temporary suspension of rules during carnival; its subversive notion of being outside the everyday; its understanding as an enactment of 'the world upside down'; and its being an intervention that challenges but at the same time maintains the status quo (see Bakhtin 1984, Burke 1978, Bristol 1989, Fiske 1989). One of the main critiques put forward by scholars analysing carnivalesque street performances, however, has been their role as a safety valve to "relief oppositional pressure", which helps to strengthen and maintain the status quo (Kershaw 1992, 73; Eagleton 1981). Similarly, others highlight its ephemeral feature as a short-term intervention, which has been regarded as a limitation to its potential as a thriving motor for change as things go back to "normal" after the event (Schechner 1993). Schechner, for example, stresses: "The difference

between temporary and permanent change distinguishes carnival from revolution" (Ibid., 93). This binary distinction between carnival time and everyday life, which I argue emerges from an overemphasis on the event itself, has also been identified by other scholars from different fields. They suggest including pre-and post-production processes in the carnival research so as to extend the focus of study (Babcock 1993, DaMatta 1991, Waite 1998) as well as argue for a stronger emphasis on the experiences of the people involved (Aching 2010). Despite these few attempts to widen the research framework for carnivalesque performance through an analysis which goes beyond the event itself and speaks out against its ephemerality, the understanding of it as a temporary intervention and safety valve still continue to be predominant features.

In this chapter, rather than allowing the *comparsa* to be dismissed as a short term street intervention, I draw on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of smooth space to examine the *comparsa* not only as a single public intervention but also as a practice that *perseveres, connects, and transcends* different spaces. By doing so, I aim to suggest a different framework and rather a process-based approach to such performances. After providing a brief insight into the development of the *comparsa* from an intervention of public space, which I argue has contributed to the Network's persistent and collective struggle for social change over more than a decade, I focus on three aspects: 1) An exploration of the creative workshops as key parts of the *comparsa* process and the role of individual experience of *creative agency* during creative processes of making; 2) The *comparsa* as the Network's collective representation and imagination, through which processes of identity are fostered, developed and articulated; 3) Limits and potential of the *comparsa* as a means for collective action and protest on a local level.

### **The *comparsa* as smooth space**

An exploration of the Network's practices through different interpretations of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome is linked to notions such as space and collective action. Hence, in this chapter, I draw on two of their articulations of space and movement, the smooth and the striated. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 498), smooth space is open and short-term rather than prescribed and therefore in constant flux and movement as it consists of a continuous variation of "free action", movement and change, which can hardly be controlled or mapped out. It is the space of what they call the nomad, who, as taken up by the authors occupies and holds smooth space. Striated space, in contrast, is regarded as a space that controls and organises, and is therefore often structured by rules, predetermined and segmented. However, the openness and freedom of smooth spaces according to Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 500) is limited: "Smooth spaces are not in themselves liberatory. But the struggle is changed or displaced in them, and life reconstitutes its stakes, confronts new obstacles, invents new paces, switches adversaries". Hence, the smooth describes the space in which liberation processes as well as movements are possible, even if these may not be lasting or succeed as they can become determined again through new forms of control and structure. Deleuze and Guattari provide examples of smooth spaces such as the sea, the desert or ice and identify them as "local spaces of pure connection" in general terms, which stand in contrast to striated spaces that can be mapped out such as for example a city (1987, 493).

Despite the fact that the smooth and the striated are seemingly set in opposition, they often exist in mixture as oscillating from one into another. Deleuze and Guattari highlight: "smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space" (Ibid., 474). In other words, smooth space can move towards the striated and there exist forces within striated spaces that are able to challenge and undermine its regulations and borders. Nevertheless, smooth

space according to these authors “always possesses a greater power of deterritorialisation than the striated” as it “gnaws, and tends to grow in all directions” (Ibid., 480; 382).

Carnavalesque street performances such as the *comparsa*, I argue mainly function within the smooth space, which through its imaginary dimensions and playfulness provides the conditions for free movement and the exploration of different notions of identity. During the performance the young people are protagonists of their own collective imaginary, or in Deleuze and Guattari’s words become nomads, who determine the movement and organisation within that space. Although the smooth space of the *comparsa* is characterised by improvisation and allows identities to be explored and negotiated, it still has striated characteristics at the same time. However, the combination of both notions, I argue, has enabled the *comparsa* to sustain itself as a practice that gnaws at striated determinations and structures, and expands even within a rather challenging context.

On the one hand, the *comparsa* is the end product of workshops with a particular group in a particular space and therefore operates as a one-off public intervention and seemingly short-term transformation of public space. On the other hand, it represents the Network’s long-term collective action and continuous practice which expands and spreads across space into the different communities. It therefore shows new characteristics and qualities of performance, which, rather than being short-term and local, are able to transcend the local and can provide a strategy for sustaining collective initiatives and practices across space over time. It is a public intervention and means of collective action, which is unpredictable and adapting while spreading across space, and its performance and appearance is slightly different every time it emerges. This makes it particularly difficult to trace, control or even publicly ban, which shows its resistant potential as a practice. At the same time, there are many elements that are organised and predictable as they reappear in almost every

*comparsa*, such as for example the stilts whose symbolism is based on notions of resistance and struggle emerging from Mayan Cosmology (see section on stilts).

The Network's methodology of multiplication has enabled the *comparsa* to transcend spaces, and by doing so, it has established itself as a continuous, however fractured and territorially distanced public intervention in different communities. This suggests that a nomadic practice such as the *comparsa* might, for example, appear in one locality and then in another, and the lines that connect these performances are not defined or systematically aligned in a striated grid. By doing so, *comparsa* spaces create their own invisible pattern, which, rather than being based on notions of control, in contrast continuously permeate or gnaw striated spaces from within in order to expand their territory. The *comparsa*, however, still holds striated characteristics because it represents the Network's shared and most established practice, which I argue is key for its sustainability as a youth initiative.

Hence, the *comparsa* goes beyond a temporary intervention and short-term spectacle and instead I argue has established itself as a *patchwork of practices*, whose elements can be found in different communities and which is much more stable and long-term than Deleuze and Guattari suggest. Despite its framework based on similarity and repetition, which enabled perseverance and connection between the different groups, it allows space for movement and flexibility for change and this ambiguity represents its resistant potential as a practice.

### **From a single intervention to a practice of perseverance: a historical perspective**

*Field diary 11 August 2013*

*Zone 1. Guatemala City. Bang! Bang! Bang! A familiar noise akin to the reverberant echo of gun shots which can be perceived on a daily base in the streets of many Guatemalan communities, and which had woken me up several times at night during my research period in Guatemala. After a two to three minute period of silence, one would usually*



*hear the noise of rushing footsteps, banging and opening doors, followed by screams, police and ambulance sirens, which turn the street into a spectacular site of crime, chaos and mass gathering. Fortunately, this time the sound emerges from the drums of the comparsa's percussion band, which leads and accompanies a comparsa, a moving and colourful spectacle making its way through the streets. It is the final performance marking the end of the Community Arts Network's 10<sup>th</sup> encounter [...] This comparsa consists of more than 300 young people in colourful costumes, dancing on stilts, turning and twisting their bodies in acrobatic moves, stunts and performing circus skills such as juggling, flags or devil sticks. With their movements they are painting the grey streets with colours and fill the air with chants of life and joy. I am witnessing a spectacle which through its magic and movement interrupts the everyday routine of the city dwellers, who often lay down their work, watch or even accompany the itinerary of the celebration.*

The first *comparsa* in Guatemala was the inauguration ceremony of the *Festival Octubre Azul* ('Blue October Festival') in 2000 and while local artists performed most of its interventions, the former was introduced as a cultural expression from Colombia (see chapter 3). Figure 43 (below) shows the Columbian forerunner, Fernando Garcia during one of his first performances in the early 1990s.

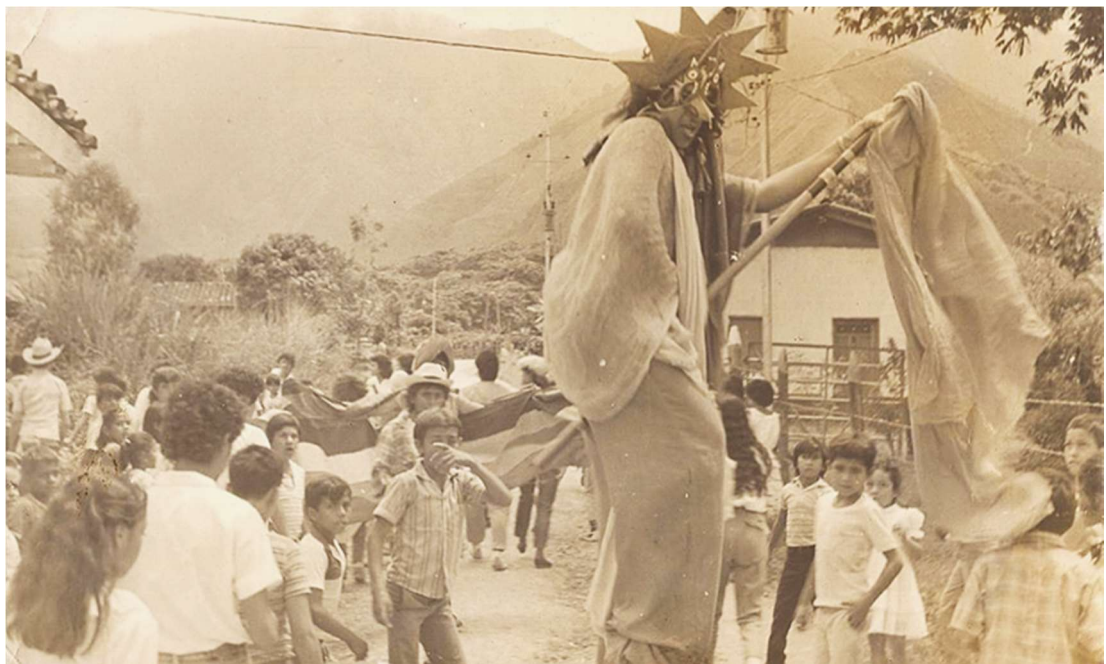


Figure 43: Fernando Garcia during a *comparsa* in Columbia in the early 1990s.

This was the starting point for a subsequent collaboration with other artists and organisations that organised frequent *comparsas* in their communities in order to resist constant threats of violence and crime in and around Medellin (JE 2013).

The early *comparsas* in Guatemala were performed by Caja Lúdica and different youth groups, and as can be seen in figure 44 (below), they were characterised by a simple, however rather colourful aesthetic. Often, they were created with minimal financial resources and had a similar appearance to the *comparsas* in Colombia.



Figure 44: One of Caja Lúdica's first *comparsas* in Guatemala (2001).

This was the case not only because one of the Colombian artists and Caja Lúdica's founders facilitated most of the workshops in the communities at that time, but also because they provided most materials for costumes and accessories (JE 2013).

According to Caja Lúdica, the *comparsa* as a public celebration and spectacle has its roots in carnival, which both through their play and joyful dynamics permeate public space and evoke encounter, celebration and coexistence (Garcia K. 2011, 11). The *comparsa* enables the young people to freely express themselves and at the same time temporarily challenge the situation of youth and the status

quo in a rather creative way (Ibid.). Moreover, it has similarities to other traditional celebrations and dances, such as for example traditional dances, the *Rabinal Achi* ('Man of Rabinal') or the *Xajooj Keej* ('Deer Dance'), which find their expressions in different Guatemalan communities. The *comparsa* can also be linked to *convites* (invitations), which in contrast to the traditional dances in Guatemala are street processions and often take place around the date of religious ceremonies and national festivals (JE 2013). The preparations, practice and public performances of such community processions and dance-dramas are important events of spiritual and social life in Guatemala and contribute to community building processes in many communities (Mace 1985, 150).

In 2000, creating spaces for community was one of the main aims of the *comparsa*, because public celebrations were particularly scarce after many years of oppression during the armed conflict. In the light of Guatemala's rich cultural heritage and diversity of public festivities, as described above, the *comparsa* according to Julia Escobar (2012) was received in a rather positive way: "The community was accustomed to celebrations in the street as they are elemental to community life [...] it provides a moment where people are able to rediscover these traditions and re-create their creative expressions held back for so many years during the conflict." Hence, on the one hand, the *comparsa* as a community celebration can be linked to these traditions in Guatemala and has significantly contributed to the recovering of public spaces after the war (see also Mayan ceremony in chapter 5). Nevertheless, its colourful aesthetics as well as its understanding as a street manifestation and methodological tool did not exist in Guatemala before, and therefore it contrasts with the more traditional dances and public celebrations mentioned above.

Despite the fact that Caja Lúdica shared their critique of the persistent system of control and exclusion in Guatemala, which they expressed through the *comparsa* with other youth initiatives at the time, their colourful interventions were challenged by those local groups that used different means of resistance

and protest against the current situation (JO 2013). Especially its playfulness and celebratory character and its perception as a new and therefore “alien” cultural expression was not well received by some organisations in the city. The *comparsa* was very different to the on-going processes of participation and the protests of left-wing political organisations emerging in the post accord period, which were seeking for much more radical structural changes (Castañeda 2013). Caja Lúdica’s rather subtle form of resistance, expressed through their colourful street celebrations at the time, stood in contrast to previous manifestations and public protests, some of which had a strong impact on the political developments before and during the war (see chapter 3).

Despite existing critiques, the *comparsa* resonated with young people and especially informal urban youth groups, which had existed in Guatemala for many years. Yet, after the war, members of these youth groups were targeted and used by organised crime and drug traffickers, which led to a stigmatisation of organised young people as gangs. While many of these groups were often formed around cultural expressions such as break dance or graffiti, which were linked to gangs, Caja Lúdica’s *comparsas* and festivals according to Jose Osorio (2013) provided “cultural expressions and spaces, which resonated with those groups and were flexible enough to be integrated in the already existing youth cultures and their activities.”

Through the Network’s different youth groups, the *comparsa* as a cultural practice and means of public manifestation has developed and gained new meanings, aesthetics and forms of expressions over time. Together with the encounters, it is the youth group’s most regular and consistent practice, and the argument is that it has persevered as a form of collective action for over a decade. While the encounters only take place several times per year, *comparsas* are performed more frequently on a local level. They range from large colourful spectacles with hundreds of young people from different parts of the country and

Latin America (see figure 45), to manifestations on stilts as a tribute to the struggle and historical revindication of the Mayan people and culture.



Figure 45: *Comparsa* during the Community Arts Network's 9<sup>th</sup> encounter, Guatemala City (2009).

Some *comparsas* are performed by a small group of people, often without a brass band, and the protagonists are dressed in rather simple costumes or even lack any form of masquerade (see later section on stilts).

The rather diverse expressions of the *comparsa* in different spaces and its perseverance over so many years, suggests that its role within the Community Arts Network goes beyond a simple intervention aiming at the reclamation of public space. Hence, I argue that the Network's *comparsas* and the processes they imply can be understood as collective actions that contribute to the sustainability of this particular initiative in Guatemala. The youth groups' public performances expressed in different parts of the country and other parts of the world therefore can be understood as public ritual practices that strengthen their group solidarity as well as their collective identity as a network community and youth initiative.

The youth group's *comparsas* are therefore not only a means to make themselves visible as young people, although public presence still remains one

of their aims. Several young people during the interviews expressed the importance of sharing the *comparsa* as a practice with other groups that are facing similar conditions. These respondents highlighted how the common form of cultural expression made them feel part of something much bigger, which in turn empowered and connected them. This is how some of the young people expressed their feelings about the *comparsa* as a common practice as well as an expression of a collective identity and feeling of belonging to a wider network, which connects them across communities:

Although we work in different communities, we know that there are many other young people who also walk on stilts during *comparsas* and seek to change their situation.

(ACH 2013)

The *comparsa* is the public expression of our network community and as a shared expression connects the different youth groups. It is the symbol of a struggle we share as young people in our communities in Guatemala and in other parts of the world.

(EH 2013)

In this regard, *comparsas* constitute the Network's *patchwork of practices* with self-similar or fractal patterns, through which the modes of their symbolic manifestations and collective imaginary are able to transcend borders and develop and expand across different spaces and communities. Through their ability to adapt and constantly change, which results in multiple expressions, they constitute a force of resistance and dispersed agency. Rather than a direct action against a single source of oppression, as nomadic practices, *comparsas* intrude and act in many different spaces and communities to expand their territory. Rather than being a single practice, intervention or project, then, *comparsas* have to be seen as part of a larger community arts process and struggle for change, which enables them to frequently open up new smooth spaces of creation and imagination in different parts of the country. These spaces allow

new meanings to emerge as well as freedom of expression and action for social change. Hence, these young people have not only created their own and lasting sense of belonging but have also re-created a spatial, however, rather symbolic proximity between each other. Even though the local *comparsa* performances differ according to their locality, they all include stilts as an important form of expression and symbol for their shared struggles (see later section on stilts).

The perseverance of the *comparsa* practice over the years suggests that a shared practice can act as a source and expression of solidarity and shared struggle, which have been key for the Community Arts Network and the groups to sustain themselves over the years. Collective performances such as the *comparsa* illustrate that the bonds between the different groups are not only created through their face-to-face interactions during the encounters. These bonds, I argue, also develop through a rather symbolic sense of proximity, which is based on the youth group's identification with a particular approach to practice or even a cultural expression such as the *comparsa*, and the stilts as a symbol for resistance and struggles within that (see section on stilts below).

### **Workshops as part of the *comparsa* processes**

In order to understand the *comparsa* as a nomadic practice that connects, perseveres and transcends spaces, as well as its role and place within the Network's broader community arts processes, it is essential to draw attention to the artistic workshops, which take place prior to the *comparsa*. They enable the young people to engage in processes of creation and to prepare themselves for the performance. As part of the *comparsa's* smooth space, the workshops on the one hand foster creative processes and the exploration of new skills, and momentarily disrupt the patterns of the spaces they intervene. On the other hand, they represent a rather established part of Caja Lúdica's methodology, and for that reason they can be understood as a strategy for Caja Lúdica to sustain

themselves as a networking practice, as well as to share and disseminate their approach. This clearly shows the workshops' striated characteristics.

The workshops also represent the *comparsa's* aftermath and continuation and are therefore key for the Network's patchwork of practices to further develop and expand because they are replicated and further developed by the young people in their communities. The argument put forward here highlights the *comparsa* performances as well as workshops as part of a larger process, which is characterised as being in between continuity and change, or striation and smoothing at the same time. Furthermore, their coexistence has enabled the Network and its groups to sustain themselves as an initiative and to resist and face political and social challenges which hinder youth organisations and networking in post-conflict Guatemala (see chapter 3).

In performance research, attention is often paid less to workshops and the preparation of a performance in general, as they are less visible and often span over a longer time-period in contrast to the more accessible performances themselves, which take place in public spaces or cultural centres as well as within a shorter time frame. Workshops are, however, mentioned as part of the performance process by authors such as Richard Schechner (2013) and have been explored in relation to community creating processes (see: Crehan 2011; Nicholson 2005; Cohen-Cruz 2005). According to Schechner's theory on performance processes, for example, workshops form part of the first phase or "proto-performance", which also includes training and rehearsal (2013, 225). It is followed by a second phase, the *performance* itself including warm up, public performance events, cool down and the third period called *aftermath* which consists of critical responses, archives and memories. The first phase represents the period which "precedes and/or gives rise to the performance", and the workshop within that aims to "open people up" to new experiences, supporting them to recognise and develop new possibilities that may never be performed in public (Ibid., 234). However, as a "pretext" to the performance it represents a way



to conceal from the audience significant parts of the performance process and therefore results in the fact that rehearsals as well as workshops are usually closed to a broader audience (Ibid., 226). This “hidden” part of the performance process, according to Schechner, therefore also represents the elements that the performer or participant has learned through the workshops and rehearsals prior to the performance such as, for example, skills or certain techniques. In this way, such hidden processes operate “secretly, concealed deep within the performance” (Ibid.).

While many performance processes can be explored through Schechner’s three-phase framework, his rather linear understanding does not apply to our case study and in particular Caja Lúdica’s understanding and use of workshops in relation to the performance itself. Instead, their approach as put forward here questions the notion of workshops as performance ‘pretexts’ as well as their far too often hidden role of shadowing the performance spectacle. Their practice shows slightly different, rather circular dynamics and therefore requires a different analytical framework. The argument here is that the creative workshops, instead of representing the performance’s hidden pretext, which ends with the presentation of the performance, are fundamental and key catalysts for the sustainability and continuation of such processes. Therefore, they require a much more central position as well as different understanding of their role within performance analysis as well as community arts processes in general.

This approach challenges the very common linear approach to performance and the place of workshops within that. Instead it suggests that performances, and in particular community arts projects, have to be developed based on their embeddedness in a larger and ongoing process. The case study presented here provides such an example where different practices are closely interlinked and feed into each other: workshops, for example, are part of the *comparsa* process, which itself can lead to further workshops and so on. Here, the replication of workshops through the youth protagonists as explored in chapter 4 contribute to

the continuation and expansion of the *comparsa* process rather than its abrupt end after the final evaluation.

*Between the smooth and the striated*

In the early beginnings of Caja Lúdica, the arts workshops during encounters were mainly facilitated by its base group (see chapter 3) and since then have been modified, further developed by the different youth groups and have also been established as the Network's repertoire of practices (see chapter 4). The figures (46-49) below show workshops during the Network's 10<sup>th</sup> encounter, which included the making of face masks and accessories, placard painting, stilt making and corporeal expression.



Figure 46 (left): Workshop: placard painting, Muxbal (2013).

Figure 47 (right): Workshop: Accessories, Muxbal (2013).



Figure 48 (left): Workshop: Corporeal expression, Muxbal (2013).  
Figure 49 (right): Workshop: Stilts, Muxbal (2013)

The different means of expression provided during the workshops and during the *comparsa*, according to Julia Escobar (2013), are key on a methodological level as they “open up the possibility for young people to get inspired and experiment with different techniques and learn skills which they can also use for their own creative exploration and practice on a local level”. Even though they foster the exploration of different creative means, which the young people can then subsequently apply in their local work, I argue that the level of creativity involved is limited as they are clearly framed by Caja Lúdica’s methodology, and are often solely aimed at producing elements and rehearsing for the *comparsa*. This striated notion of the workshops, on the one hand, provides a rather safe and guiding space for exploring new ways of creative expression alongside a youth facilitator. On the other hand, the freedom of expression is somehow restricted as the young people mainly follow the instructions of the workshop leader to succeed in creating props or accessories for the performance. Moreover, the clearly defined repertoire provided by *comparsa* workshops results in a limited skill set within the Community Arts Network, as the processes, as mentioned earlier, are, most of the time, based on the same workshop modules.

Therefore the workshop repertoire, which is repeated during most of the encounters, has been criticised by some of the youth groups, in particular those who frequently engage in the Network's activities. Many of the older generations already master most of the artistic expressions that a *comparsa* requires. Some of the young people have further developed their cultural work in their communities and are now seeking a focus on structural changes and the development of cultural policies on a local level. They would like to see the Community Arts Network to go beyond its current already established repertoire and to better define their political position as a youth initiative, which both would support the groups in their communities. One youth coordinator highlights:

Caja Lúdica's workshop processes have remained the same for many years, in particular during the encounters [...] we are facilitating similar workshops for others in our community, but as a group we want to learn something different, have a more political focus so that we can impact on the local authorities.

(MCH 2013)

However, the limited workshop repertoire as well as the simplicity of the workshops have enabled the skills and techniques, which are needed for a *comparsa*, to be passed on between different generations of young people, and this enabled the practice to move and spread across space. This informal sharing of skills has resulted in the expansion of this nomadic practice into different spaces, and the content of the workshops has not significantly changed. Most of the workshops require none or only few materials such as fabric, string, paint, wood or recycled plastic, all of which are available in many communities. This makes replication possible with minimal resources. Hence, the workshops serve as a platform for learning new skills, which the young people can take with them into their youth groups and local communities where they are shared, practiced and further developed. Therefore, the methodology of replication, which has

been introduced into the Network by Caja Lúdica, can be seen as a striating mechanism, which relies on 'prescription' and minimal change as illustrated through the workshops. Yet, as noted before, as a methodological strategy with smooth characteristics, it has enabled the Network to transcend different spaces and organisations, expand its practices into different communities and, by doing so, persevere in this particular setting for many years (also see chapter 4).

Moreover, the workshops are not only an essential part of the *comparsa* process but also, as noted in chapter 4, constitute the Network's responsive repertoire of practices. They provide a rather smooth platform where learning and exchange between young people from different communities can take place outside the traditional education system, as well as the constraints of post-conflict Guatemala. Therefore, I argue that although the workshops and the Network's methodology may show striated and institutionalised elements, they provide rather smooth qualities which allow the young people to explore new ways of creativity and action. Moreover, and this is key, through the young people's active engagement this practice develops, grows and expands as well as connects, perseveres, and transcends different spaces.

### ***I made this mask***

*Field notes, 10 August 2013*

*During the Network's 10<sup>th</sup> encounter in 2013, I find myself observing the dynamics of a face mask workshop when my attention gets drawn towards one girl who is in the process of making a mask [...] She does not notice that someone is observing her and for a moment I am able to follow her in the process of transforming a white sheet of paper into a mask. My eyes follow her hand carefully mastering a pair of scissors, while cutting out a shape, which she had previously drafted. In the course of the process of gluing the mask on another colourful piece of cardboard, making adjustments to the shape and decorating it with colourful fabric, felt and glitter, she engages in brief conversations and giggles with her peers.*

*Then she suddenly lifts her face, looks at me with a deep but shy smile on her face and says: 'Look I have made this. First they showed me and then I created. I never thought that I could make something like that, but I tried ... and I made a mask ... look.' She starts to playfully move and turn the mask in front of her face, and then holds it still while looking through two almond shaped gaps cut out at the centre of the mask. After a brief moment of improvised performance she asks me to take a picture of herself and the mask. Her eyes sparkle and she still has a smile on her face. I take the picture, promise to send it to her via e-mail and leave as I have to continue observing the other workshops.*

When re-reading these lines during my writing process, I recall the moment of interaction between the girl with the mask and myself when two aspects particularly strike me: first, the power of the simplicity and process of making, which in this case is transforming a piece of paper into a mask; second, the moment of connection and communication between herself and myself and the role of the mask during this interaction.



Figure 50 (left): Making a mask, Muxbal (2013).

Figure 51 (right): I made this mask, Muxbal (2013).

Figures 50 and 51 (above) visually illustrate these two aspects, which are particularly relevant for this section and provide key starting points for the

analysis and exploration of the process and development of the *comparsa* as a smooth space and the role of the workshops within that.

One of the main characteristics of the *comparsa* workshops, as already noted above, is their simplicity, which results from the Network's shared approach to community arts practice based on an understanding of creativity as "the capacity to create with the resources we already have within and around us" (Garcia 2009, 1). This approach according to Julia Escobar (2013), rather than searching to impose knowledge, aims to provide the conditions to "discover", "awake" and "reclaim" creativity, which can be understood as "the capacity to recreate and reinvent new imaginaries and allow themselves to generate a variety of responses to issues which affect their dignity of life on an everyday basis."

Julia's rather optimistic account on the importance of creativity and imagination for change reminds us of Nordstrom's research (1997) on the relationship between creativity and violence in Mozambique. One of her main findings was the emergence of recreating processes and the importance of creativity and imagination as means for rebuilding communities and life after periods of destruction from war, violence and oppression: "it is in creativity, in the fashioning of self and world, that people find their most potent weapon against war" (Ibid., 4). Hence, Nordstrom argues that creativity represents a "core survival strategy" as well as a "profound form of resistance" to political violence and oppression (Ibid., 13).

Although the young people in Guatemala are not living in a war zone as in Nordstrom's case study, they are coping with similar conditions such as the transformation, rise and continuation of violence on a daily basis, which highly affects them on a social as well as emotional level (Winton 2011). The argument presented here is that the workshop processes, and in particular their notions of making, which foster creativity and imagination, support and empower young people in different ways to transform and to some degree improve their situations. They also inspire young people to find strategies for survival,

resistance and hope within rather challenging conditions of post-conflict Guatemala.

While the process of cutting a mask out of a piece of white paper for some people may appear to be a rather trivial undertaking, for the girl, mentioned above, it has been a new and rather satisfying as well as seemingly positive and pleasant experience, as her gestures and words indicate. What is key about this rather simple transformative moment, is that she has made something, which she never thought she would be able to make. The workshop provided the conditions for her to actively produce something new or better, and transform one material into a previously unimaginable object, a mask. Moreover, as highlighted through her words, she was not only using the template of the mask as previously shown by a facilitator, but instead ‘invented’ part of the shape and decoration based on her own imagination. The argument here is that the positive experience of making a mask, and the feeling of “being able to do” which emerged from this process, has empowered the girl at least to some degree. This, as I suggest, indicates the potential of not only this moment but can also be found in any other creative process that includes elements of ‘making things’.

During my research I have observed similar moments as described above, and young people from different communities have repeatedly highlighted how such processes impacted on their self-esteem, as well as the way in which they viewed themselves in relation to their communities. A young girl highlights:

I often get told that I cannot or should not do things by my parents or brothers but also at school. It’s different here [...]. The creative exercises have helped me to wake up and see that I CAN do things. I can make and walk on stilts, dance and move my body, make a dress, express my opinion.

(DF 2013)

The power of the making process has also been stressed by Parker (2010, xx), who, in her exploration of embroidery as craft practices, emphasises how



creativity and in particular the “finding of form” have a transformative impact on the sense of self. According to her: “the embroider holds in her hand a coherent object which exists both outside in the world and inside her head” (Ibid.). She continues that the experience of embroidering as well as the tangible creative product both “affirm the self as being with agency, acceptability and potency”, which results in the embroider seeing a “positive reflection of herself in her work” (Ibid.). A similar process can be observed in the example of the girl, who is attempting to ‘find a form’ for her mask. Here, the mask represents the tangible object that emerges from her imagination and becomes visible to the outside world through the process of creation. The mask, however, not only represents such a ‘positive reflection’ but also a *proof of her ability* to create something from her imagination.

Hence, the girl’s creative experience of making a mask and the mask itself seem to have impacted on her self-esteem. They have given her confidence in her own ability to ‘do’ or in her own words, the awareness that ‘I CAN DO’. The argument here suggests that this *experience of creative agency* during the process of making might have not only contributed to the way in which the girl started to playfully interact and connect with myself through the mask. It also - and this is key - clearly expands into the everyday life and as the girl pointed out above, impacted on her feelings, thoughts and actions in her community. This has also been stressed by one of the former youth coordinators from a rural youth group:

I had so much fear to express myself, I did not talk [...] I found out that there is another me, which I did not know. Someone who is able to feel more secure to talk, to manifest himself, to do many things [...] I have liberated myself from this fear and learned that that I can use my imagination to actually change little things in my life and community.

(ACH 2013)

Building on the young people’s words, I argue that the experience of creating and making during such workshop processes can have an empowering impact, in

particular as they contribute to gaining confidence in one's ability to *do* things, which is linked to a positive emotional experience and sometimes is even reflected in a tangible object. The mask, therefore, represents on a very small scale the transformation of a reality, which has just appeared to be another, a white sheet of paper. Something new has been created; something that was not there before; something that the girl had not thought would even exist. This 'something' emerged from the girl's imagination but became visible *and* tangible through the object of the mask. This process of *imagining, creating and making*, which here emerges on a very small scale, I argue, can also be observed on a larger level during the *comparsa* spectacle, where the street is transformed into a stage for an itinerant and joyful celebration and collective imaginary created by the performers and the audience (see next section).

Moreover, as mentioned above, the experiences during such processes of creation expand beyond the Network's organised activities such as workshops or the *comparsa* and permeate the young people's everyday lives. This highlights the resistant and much more subtle potential of creativity as an empowering as well as connecting means, which can enable young people to shape and generate new spaces for self-expression and imagination. These spaces, as argued here, not only emerge during facilitated workshops but are also - and this is key - created through the young people's everyday interactions with their social and physical environment in general (also see chapter 4).

Another aspect closely linked to the analysis made above is the notion of *connectivity*, which emerged from the girl making the mask. Through the process of making the mask and the tangible result, the girl was able to interact with myself, a person unknown to her, who was observing the workshop and the creative process it involved. This coincides with David Gauntlett's (2011) exploration of creativity as contributing to favouring social links resulting in his main thesis and title of his book: "making is connecting". He argues that making *is* connecting because through making things and in particular through "sharing

them with the world, we increase our engagement and connection with our social and physical environment" (Ibid., 2). In this regard, the girl's performance of sharing her mask with the world, in this case myself, enabled her to communicate with me in a way she would have probably not done otherwise.

Hence, the previous empowering experience of making the mask on the one hand, and the end result of the mask itself on the other is what facilitated our interaction. The mask served as both a protection, behind which the girl was able to hide, and as a connector and tangible object directed towards me. This supports the argument that the workshops foster new possibilities for the young people to *create* and *act*. Thereby, the smooth notion of the workshop constitutes an "outside to the inside" (Skott-Myhre 2008, 85) of a culture and bounded space, which may have hindered the young girl to act in the way she did. Outside in this sense is not understood as another site, but rather an "offsite that erodes and dissolves all other sites [...] the outside is never exhausted; every new attempt to capture it generates an excess or supplement, which, in turn, feeds anew the flows of deterritorialisation and releases new lines of flight" (Boundas 1994, 114-115 quoted in St Pierre 2000, 265).

Following Boundas' understanding of the smooth space as an outside or offsite that continuously emerges within controlled spaces and creates lines of escape, I argue that the young girl, through her action of expressing herself in a new way, has temporarily created and at the same time experienced such an 'outside' moment. This line, however, does not stop with the moment of the interaction. Such moments of escape and connection, as described here, are embodied experiences that feed into the ways in which the young people engage in their communities where other 'outside' spaces may emerge. The argument put forward in this section suggests that the process of making, and in particular the *experience of creative agency* during processes of making, empowers young people to make changes on a very small scale in their immediate environments. In other words, the smooth space occupied and created by the youth-as-nomad

continues to emerge from such moments as described here. Several moments together create a grid/map of practice that can be “torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group or social formation [...] conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation” (Deleuze 1987, 12). This grid/map connects different places and illustrates the unpredictable and contingent spatial expansion of the smooth space.

Such a suggestion, however, has its limitations: the young people may not be able for example to make significant structural changes on a larger or national level. That said, they are certainly able to actively change their engagement and connection with their immediate environment such as family or community. Many of the network protagonists have improved their living conditions and relationships through these changes as mentioned above, as well as use artistic means to foster spaces of encounter and creativity in their communities (see chapter 4 and 5). Moreover, while this moment of connection and creation of an “outside” here takes place during a workshop, the argument is that it develops further on a larger scale between the young people of the *comparsa* and the audience on a collective level (see next section).

Even though these workshop processes forge smooth elements such as creative exploration through processes of making, they still differ from the *comparsa* performance itself. The latter is characterised by a much less measurable and organised process during which the young people become co-creators and part of an itinerant representation and collective imaginary of the Network.

### **Representations of collective identity: an inside perspective**

Researching smooth spaces, which are created through performances such as *comparsas* turns out to be particularly challenging due to their continuous movement and variation in shape and location. They therefore require, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 493) suggest a rather “close vision” and perspective

from within: “Contrary to what is sometimes said, one never sees from a distance in a (smooth) space of this kind, nor does one see it from a distance; one is never ‘in front of’ any more than one is ‘in’ (one is ‘on’).”



Figure 52: In the *comparsa*'s core, Guatemala City (2013).

Hence, I placed myself with a camera ‘in’, or, put differently, in the core of the *comparsa*, which concluded the Network’s 10<sup>th</sup> encounter in 2013 (see figure 52 above). While I observed and filmed the *comparsa* dynamics from an inside perspective, I was surrounded by the dancing performers and their colourful costumes as well as their rhythms and chants. While the individual performer, viewed from an ‘outside’ perspective, may perish in the colourful conjunction of dancing bodies, a close vision from within drew my attention to the diversity of characters and their wide range of costumes, make-up, bodily expressions, and movements. Some of the youth protagonists had elements of traditional fabric patterns from their communities woven into their self-made costumes, while others presented the accessories they had created prior to the *comparsa*. This diversity of expression clearly indicates that the young people were “parading

their own creations” (Kershaw 1999, 81), and with them, I argue, were making a statement of their own creative abilities and capacities *to make things* as discussed earlier. At the same time, this may also be interpreted as a representation of the Network’s cultural diversity. As Julia Escobar (2013) points out:

During the *comparsa* the young people create their own character [...] even when the *comparsa* has a common theme, each participant brings their own ‘colour’. There is this diversity and at the same time this possibility to encounter a common language, which is, however, understood through its difference.

This sense of togetherness (in terms of common language or expression) during the *comparsa*, becomes particularly evident during a moment of circular formation, which is connecting the diversity of young people and their creative expressions in ‘one single shape’. In the centre of the *comparsa* it is only the young people who can - at least for a moment - experience absolute movement, and their colourful bodies seem to create and “fill the smooth space in the manner of a vortex” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 381). This “vortical or swirling movement” (Ibid.) is the performers’ essential feature and power because they represent the nomads of this space. In my field diary (August 2013), I have described it as follows:

*The chaotic and rather improvised street celebration suddenly slows down and transforms into a human chain of young people holding each other’s hands, which gradually turns into an open circular shape organically spiralling through the street. As soon as the comparsa troupe crosses the main square, the circle fully expands itself and stands still for a moment of collective breathing and chants. The performance is led by one of the youth protagonists, who upfront determines the path and pace of the performance and while moving through the street spectators are invited to join. After a while it dissolves again into an itinerant collective dance and street celebration.*

Figure 53 below illustrates such a moment, which is representative for the many circular formations during the Network's *comparsas*.



Figure 53: *Comparsa* spiral, Guatemala City (2013).

Despite the fact that the circle is only a brief moment during the *comparsa*, it is significant for the understanding of this public street performance as a visual representation of the Network and smooth space, in which notions of identity can be explored and created. While the circle, during the encounters and workshops, can be understood as a practice of community through which social bonds and an atmosphere of trust are created (see chapter 4 and 5), when performed during the *comparsa* spectacle it projects this experience and practice outwards to the public.

Hence, the circular performance here serves as a means of communication and “visual display” (Goldstein 2004, 4) of the Network’s collective identity as a connected and diverse community, which is otherwise not visible to others. Goldstein contends that it is through the use and manipulation of symbolic elements that “spectacle performers create meaning, offer critiques, or suggest alternative readings of social reality, often through mimetic reference to other

events” (Ibid., 16). The circular formation in public here represents such an alternative social reality or “symbolic model” of a youth that is connected as a rather diverse group of people of different age, classes and appearances (Ibid.). It also reminds us of the many other practices-in-circle during the Network’s encounters and workshops on a local level as discussed in chapters 4 and 5. The openness of the circle performed here as a spiral, however, enables other people from the audience to become part of this symbolic representation, as they often join in and are drawn directly into the dynamics.

This rather utopian imaginary of the Network as a connected and diverse community, contrasts with the rather dystopian imaginary of many communities in Guatemala, which, after many years of armed conflict, remain fractured, making peaceful living together rather challenging. Dolan (2005, 5) would describe such a moment as “utopian performatives”, which lift “everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking and intersubjectively intense.” This momentary transformation of reality has also been pointed out by one of the *comparsa*’s youth protagonists:

The circle represents our connectivity during the *comparsa* because in the circle we are family, union, horizontality [...]. Here, we encounter diversity through a collective dance [...] and through this movement the perspective of reality is transformed into our imaginary [...] we are all connected.

(KG 2013)

The imaginary discussed above is created through the interaction between spectators and performers in circle. It represents not only the short-term version of ‘how the world might be’, as Dolan (2005, 15) might refer to in her account on utopia as a “no-place” that emerges in the present of the performance rather than in the future. Significantly, it is also part of the Network’s long-term identity



creation process as a diverse yet connected community that can foster a place of belonging. The interviewee above emphasises this, and, as I have noted before, it is created through the ritual practices during the Network's encounters and its overarching aim to contribute to a more peaceful society grounded in an ancient belief system and Mayan culture (see also chapter 4).

Hence, through their performances in public the youth protagonists make this connected community and their collective identity visible. Their public interventions, during which they enter in dialogue with the audience, enable them to "define themselves as part of the public" rather than to be dismissed as a group on the margins of society (Goldstein 2004, 18). Moreover, instead of enclosing themselves as a group through their playful and colourful interventions, they approach the community and by doing so include themselves as part of the public (Ibid.). As nomads and creators of the smooth space, they suggest a different definition of an organised youth. Instead of being portrayed as a threat and linked to gangs this youth is characterised by movement and creative action, which transmits a rather positive energy to the audience (see also chapter 4). Thus, the *comparsa* and its swirling movements cannot only be understood as a visual display of a connected youth but also a collective protest and invisible form of resistance against the discrimination of young people in public space which challenges the socially produced image of young people as a threat to the public. Hence, while the perception and identity of young people within striated spaces such as the city may be demarcated and stabilised as being linked to violence, crime and death, it is undermined here through the colourful camouflage of the performance and representation of a new public identity of youth which is alive and connected.

One of the most important elements for this collective representation and manifestation of the Network as a connected community in public, performed within the smooth space of the *comparsa* are stilts, which can also be found in

Mayan cosmology and due to their symbolism have a strong significance for the young people involved (JE 2013).

### **The stilts as an artefact of collective resistance and power**

In order to understand the *comparsa* as a smooth space, where notions of collective and individual identity are created, and that connects, transcends and perseveres, it is key to have a closer look at the aesthetics of the performance and in particular the stilts. Similar to the Mayan ritual, discussed in the previous chapter, the symbolic meaning of the stilts is a reference to Guatemala's ancient culture and struggle of a people. Their use during the *comparsa* reflect Caja Lúdica's aim to recover and draw attention to Guatemala's shared cultural heritage through their practices (see also chapter 3). I argue that the stilts as used in the Community Arts Network have converted into a common symbol of resistance and struggle for the young people as a network but also on a local level. Moreover, they represent the visible artefact of a new imagined social reality and collective identity of a strong and connected youth, which the Network and the groups aim to create and practice and which is based on common roots that link all young people in Guatemala rather than notions of ethnicity or race. This also supports the overall argument of the thesis, which suggests that the Network's groups through their cultural practices contribute to the reconstruction of the social fabric in Guatemala as well as foster youth protagonism on a local and national level.

The stilts are mentioned in the *Popol Vuh*, the sacred book of the Mayan people, in relation to the Chitic dance<sup>87</sup>, which was performed by the hero twins and ballplayers *Hunahpú* and *Ixbalanqué*. They danced on stilts in their successful struggle against death and the Lords of the Underworld, *Xibalba* (Tedlock 1996, 364). Moreover, stilts were applied in rain dances against droughts and hunger

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<sup>87</sup> *Chitic* literally translated into English means "walking on stilts" (Tedlock 1996, 364).

crises to calm goddesses as well as to hold off illnesses, resentments and envy (De Zarate 2009). Originating from this ancient source, the *Chitic* is also the name for the Network's most important collective actions and public representations, which take place every two years in one of the youth group's communities. During this two-day festival that terminates with a *comparsa*, hundreds of young people on stilts gather and perform together in "a homage to Guatemala's ancient cultural traditions and the reincarnation and arrival of the stilts as a means of artistic expression and manifestation" (*Chitic Bulletin* 2012, 7). An announcement on the Network's webpage indicates this link between the young people's performance of the stilt dance and its origins:

Our ancestors announced dawn and today we respectfully reaffirm hope for the beginning of a new existence for the different peoples [...]. Organised as youth groups from different communities in Guatemala and Central America, on stilts we follow the traces of our origins and history, asking for love and justice, defending our cosmologies, our intangible heritage. We defend our community culture, our dreams, rights, hope and freedom [...] that our people join and together celebrate the *comparsa* of life.<sup>88</sup>

These words not only indicate the connection to an ancient culture but support the argument that puts forward the importance of the stilts in the creation of a new community culture and identity. Rather than being based on race distinctions this identity is rooted in a common heritage, which includes and connects all (young) people in Guatemala and beyond. The significance of creating new identities in conflict affected communities, especially if the conflict has emerged based on tensions linked to race or ethnicity, has also been pointed out by Lisa Schirch (2005, 125). According to her, in situations of conflict and post-war people's sense of themselves often moves from "understanding identity

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<sup>88</sup> Comparsa Chitic Blog: [http://comparsachitic.blogspot.co.uk/2012\\_12\\_01\\_archive.html](http://comparsachitic.blogspot.co.uk/2012_12_01_archive.html) (Accessed 17 August 2015).

as defined by multiple cultural groups towards an emphasis on one form of identity”, such as, for example, ethnicity, rather than an understanding of identity in a flexible and multiple sense (Ibid.). The creation of new identities as discussed above seems to be particularly important in the Guatemalan context where ethnic identity and racism were key during the armed conflict, elements which to date often hinder the emergence of social relationships and organisation (see chapter 3). Building on Schirch, I argue that the creation of the Network’s shared identity based on Guatemala’s cultural heritage visualised through the stilts is not dependent on ethnicity, as the Mayan Cosmology includes and connects all people and life. It therefore enables the Network to break down walls and form connections across rather rigid notions of identity, which centre on one aspect rather than on the multiple and complex identities a person holds.

Another notion contributing to the discussion is that the stilts symbolise the continuation of a struggle for rights and freedom, which had started many years ago. As a representation of this new collective and shared identity as used by the young people during the performance, the stilts are now convoking peace and coexistence for Guatemala’s fractured communities. While the pre-Columbian performers on stilts as emerging from the *Popol Vuh* successfully overthrew the ‘Lords of the Underworld’, in 2015 the young people through their stilts and costumes during the *comparsa* transform into ‘characters’. Here, the performers create a new reality where *they* are the active agents fighting for justice and against violence. One of the youth leaders highlights (AS 2013):

The stilts have been used by the Mayans as a means to defend themselves [...] they danced in stilts against death and evil, and it is this history and energy which they bring with them and which makes them so powerful and fascinating for us. This energy is not visible, but you notice it as soon as you mount them and when you walk and dance on stilts during the *comparsas*.

Thus, the stilts have an empowering effect on the young people not only because they draw attention to the performer during the *comparsa*, as they increase its body size up to 1.50 meters, but also as the young girl points out, because of their mystical notion as an artefact that the young people seem to experience when walking and dancing on stilts during the performance. As Michael Taussig (1993, 13) emphasises: “in some way or another the making and existence of the artefact that portrays something gives one power over that which is portrayed.” Hence, wearing the stilts not only provides the young people with their symbolic strength but also, and this is key, is an empowering experience itself. Both the process of making the stilts and the mastering of stilt walking are challenges which require a large amount of patience and perseverance. This has been stressed by a youth performer, who highlights the challenges of this process: “It is like learning how to walk again, it’s a big challenge because you have to leave all your fears behind, concentrate and relax the body [...] If you don’t relax your body you will not learn to walk on stilts or you fall” (MA 2013). Hence, during this process of ‘learning how to walk again’, which I argue is also a transformational challenge, the young people put their faith on an ancient heritage, when they publicly perform as the protagonists of a new reality.

Thus, due to the fact that stilts are difficult to master, they represent one of the Network’s fundamental practices, which requires young people to “leave their fears behind” as mentioned above and, according to Julia Escobar (2013), supports them to “gain confidence, break with insecurities and to become empowered”. Hence, I argue that, on the one hand, the stilts as a shared artefact of resistance are a key element of the Network’s collective identity as a youth initiative. The walking and performing on stilts, on the other hand, is an empowering and therefore embodied process, which is experienced on an individual level. Learning how to mount stilts represents an individual challenge and can therefore be seen as linked to the young people’s sense of identity,

namely as protagonists. One of the youth coordinators of an urban youth group highlights:

The stilts become part of yourself, you make them, you learn to mount them and walk [...] when I mount stilts I feel strong and good because I am not scared and I express that when I walk through the streets as a giant. You appropriate the stilts for yourself as you have to keep on practicing; they are part of my everyday struggles, part of our lives.

(KR 2013)

This respondent's words, which coincide with the testimonies of other young people during my interviews, support the argument that the practice on stilts not only has a high significance during the *comparsa* but also continues as a reference to the Network in the local communities. As a common cultural expression and embodied practice, it links the young people and the groups as a network, and contributes to the re-creation of the Network's collective identity and shared struggle for change. The individual, however, plays an important role as an agent of this practice. This becomes also evident when looking on the Facebook pages of the network protagonists, many of whom frequently post pictures of themselves while practicing and teaching others how to walk on stilts on an everyday basis. Figure 54 (below), for example, shows two girls from the youth group Caracol located on the Guatemalan border to Belize, while practicing in their cultural centre.



Figure 54 (left): Practice on stilts, Belice (2012).

Figure 55 (right): View from above, Ciudad Peronia (2015).

Image 55 has been taken by a young boy during a moment of rest after an afternoon of stilt walking rehearsal in Ciudad Peronia. The comments referring to the images such as for example “I love my stilts, I miss them already” (AS, Facebook, 28 July 2012) or “Today we walked on stilts from Peronia to the Petrol Station, wow this was one of the best things to happen” (PR, Facebook, 21 June 2015) indicate the young people’s affection for their stilts and the cultural practice that the groups of the Network share. These images are only a few examples of this phenomenon, which can also be observed in other youth groups. As evidence they support the argument that the stilts within the Network have developed into a culture and practice that is expressed during the *comparsas* and also plays a major role in the young people’s everyday lives.

Hence the stilts, which as tangible objects are closely linked to the Network’s collective identity and creation of a new social reality and place of belonging, are also key for the perseverance of the *comparsa* and its expansion into different spaces. As part of the Network’s responsive repertoire, this practice is shared through the youth groups’ workshop processes in the local communities (see chapter 4). Moreover, and this is key, I suggest that the stilt

experience gained during the *comparsa* often continues because it is practiced by the individuals on an everyday basis. This is how the Network's wider representation and identity as set of strong and connected youth initiatives continues to be re-created on an individual and collective level until the next *comparsa* takes place.

This draws the attention to the performer's body, which I consider as the smallest unit and territory of the smooth space through which notions of liberation and free expression are experienced and embodied. The body is understood here as a site through which identity can be articulated and developed on an individual level. It therefore, as I argue in the following, becomes a tool of articulation and manifestation for each individual performer during the Network's collective *comparsas* and also during the much smaller local group manifestations.

### *The stilt-walking girls from CopalAA*

While during the *comparsas*, cultural artefacts such as the stilts as mentioned above are indicators and key for the Network's struggles and identity as a youth initiative, the young people's individual expressions as performing characters at the same time are rather diverse. Moreover, the co-presence and fusion of different notions of identity representing the Network or a local youth group and community during the *comparsas* can often be seen alongside each other in one character or a small group. Diverse elements, such as, for example, fabric patterns or colours in costumes are often indicators for the representation and expression of a particular local youth group. They can, however, also be linked to individual preference and taste. The diversity of expression supports our argument of the *comparsa* as characterised by notions of a smooth space, which provides the conditions for identity to be questioned, expressed and developed. Smoothness



here implies movement and fluidity, and therefore the possibility of different notions of identity to exist alongside and merging into one another.

Figure 56 (below) exemplifies such a fusion and expression of different identities illustrated through the appearance of one performer during the Network's *comparsa*, which took place during their 10<sup>th</sup> encounter in 2013. Shortly before the *comparsa* starts, my attention is drawn to a girl sitting on the pavement in Zone 1, Guatemala City.



Figure 56: The girl from CopalAA is putting on stilts, Guatemala City (2013).

The girl is wearing a traditional indigenous dress, which in Guatemala usually indicates the region and community of Mayan women. Her face is decorated with a matching red flower pattern, applied by one of her peers prior to the *comparsa*.

She is putting on her stilts, which, as noted above, represent one of the Network's most important markers and means of common expression, and are therefore key for the creation and representation of its collective identity on a symbolic level. Her colourful finely woven and hand stitched *huipil* ('handwoven blouse') and *corte* ('skirt') dramatically contrasts with the rough wooden material of the stilts as well as the faded grey sports shoes glued and nailed on to a short plank. The process of tying the purple shoe laces around both her lower leg and the wooden stilt provides the connection between body and artefact, which ultimately makes walking on stilts possible.

While the stilts in figure 56 (above) seem to be rather separate from the girl's appearance, which is probably due to the rough making of the stilts and their aesthetics, in figure 57 (below) they entirely disappear under the girl's extended skirt. Both the stilts and the traditional dress fuse into one 'character', which she represents during this *comparsa*. Only a closer look at her dress reveals the seam where the length of the skirt has been adapted for her performance on stilts.



Figure 57: *Comparsa*: the girls from CopalAA, Guatemala City, 2013.

Figure 57 (above) also shows the girl performing alongside her peers, some of whom are wearing similar clothing, and as I found out later, belong to the same youth group and community, CopalAA. Their traditional dresses and aesthetics as seen in this image contrast with the two other girls on the right side, which are members of Caja Lúdica and whose costumes remind us of the simple, colourful and carnivalesque aesthetics that are characteristic for many of Caja Lúdica's *comparsas* (see the beginning of this chapter). Through the stilts, however, they represent a rather coherent image as a group of performers. Based on this moment, which is key for this analysis and understanding of the *comparsa* as a smooth space, where notions of identity are re-created and developed, I am asking the following questions: What does mean for the young girl from CopalAA to perform on stilts in her traditional dress during this event and collective manifestation of the Network, and what does this tell us about the role of the *comparsa* for the youth protagonists?

The *traje* ('traditional dress'), worn by many Mayan women in Guatemala, according to Velásquez Nimatuj (2011), is highly contested on a social, political, as well as cultural level. While the tourist industry emphasises the folklorization of Maya cultures and images of Maya women, many of them continue to experience racial discrimination on an everyday basis. In Guatemala it is still common for indigenous women in traditional dress to be refused entrance at certain pubs or restaurants, or to become victims of discriminatory acts at universities, schools and public offices (Velasquez Nimatuj 2002; 2011).

However, as Macleod (2004, 681) stresses, the regional dress for many Mayan women in Guatemala (amongst other elements) expresses and forms part of their identity, as well as the social struggle of the indigenous population. In a wider context, during the war, where many people - in particular those who were displaced - had to 'camouflage' and disguise their origins (bid. 685), the choice of wearing or not using the dress comprised notions of resistant or even survival. Thus, while to date, many women from the war generation and often their

children have stopped wearing their *traje* ('traditional dress') or only use it on special occasions, others re-discover the use of the Mayan traditional clothing for themselves as a sign and continuation for the recognition of their culture. This has also been pointed out by the stilt walking girl portrayed in figure 56 (above), who highlights the significance of performing in her traditional dress on stilts during the *comparsa*:

During the war, my parents and other community members, all coming from different regions, had to abandon their traditional dress to survive when they fled to Mexico during the war. Now only a few women wear *huipil* and *corte* in my community, and we as young people hardly use it on an everyday basis [...] today I am wearing a traditional dress from my mum's community of origin. I have adapted it for the stilts [...] they are both an important part of who I am, where I come from and who I want to be and here I can freely express that [...] I want to publicly show that I resist discrimination and that I can fight for my rights as a young girl.

(DD 2013)

Her words emphasise the *comparsa* as an experience, which enables her to express different notions of her 'self' and to liberate herself from determinations that emerge from Guatemala's history and her community. This supports the argument that the smoothness of the *comparsa* enables young people to find new and different trajectories and the possibility to develop and experiment with notions of identity. In the example here this process becomes visible through two elements: the young girl seeking to re-cover the traditional dress of her mother's origin; and the use of the stilts.

While identity in striated space and everyday life may be rather determined, socially controlled and often stabilised within certain environments, the liberating notion of the smooth space fosters the possibility of transformations by creatively expanding the body through movements of 'becoming', and provides the conditions for "stabilised territories, identities and meanings to be escaped" (Dovey 2005, 22). Here, it fostered new and creative

ways of expression, and enabled the girl to draw attention to her origins, represented by the traditional dress. Her encounter with tradition and her performance within the smooth space of the *comparsa* therefore creates what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) would refer to as 'lines of flight'. Lines of flight are understood here as processes of resistance that emerge from smooth spaces, and similar to threads, continue to weave themselves through different elements of a society (see also chapter 5). Through their composition as free and creative experiences, rather than having a specific direction, they provide new paths for movement and alternative forms of expression outside expected norms or interests.

However, the creation of lines of flight or escapes is not meant in the sense of fleeing from everyday life but instead as a direct action against dominant social and cultural conditions and systems of control in general. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 204) remind us: lines of flight "never consist in running away from the world but rather in causing runoffs [...] There is nothing imaginary, nothing symbolic, about a line of flight. There is nothing more active than a line of flight." Hence, the girl's act of wearing the *traje* ('traditional dress') as a 'costume' during the *comparsa*, clothing which she would not usually use on an everyday base in her community, goes far beyond a simple and symbolic act of temporarily 'dressing up' as an indigenous woman. Instead, it can be understood as an active gesture and a choice of expressing her cultural rights as a young indigenous girl, as well as an act of resistance against the consequences of the war, which has forced many people to hide their region of origin in order to survive and which have become norm in her community. Moreover, the girl's performance on stilts, which draws the attention to her as a 'character', enables her to make such a claim and message even more visible in public.

While wearing costumes or masks during carnival or protest is often used as a means of "collective disappearance" to protect the identity of the participants (St John 2008, 178), the traditional dress as a costume displayed on stilts here,

rather than hiding the girl's identity clearly signals her origins during the Network's collective performance. Additionally, during the *comparsa*, which is a manifestation of the Network's collective identity and diverse community, it indicates the togetherness and group identity of the young girls from CopalAA (see figure 57 above). In other words, as examined here, the *comparsa* as a smooth space not only fosters the Network's collective identity creation process but also enables group and individual identities to be developed and negotiated at the same time.

Moreover, the body in visible camouflage here becomes a means of articulation and resistance which, in the girl's case, carries both her cultural history as well as the Network's shared struggle, represented through the stilts. Similarly, Susan Leigh Foster (2003, 395) has highlighted the body in protest as an "articulate manner", which can serve as a "vast reservoir of signs and symbols". For Foster the body is key for constructing both individual agency, as well as collective action for social betterment (Ibid.). A young girl from an urban youth group shares her experience of agency during the *comparsa*:

The body is our tool to manifest, to protest. The process of transforming and expressing yourself through your body starts from the moment you choose your costume, apply make-up, to dancing during the *comparsa* until after [...]. The *comparsa* is catharsis to me and it feels as if you are becoming a different and stronger person and this is what we publicly proclaim through our performances.

(DF 2013)

Building on Foster and the young girl's words, I aim to stress the performer's body as key for creating individual and collective agency during the *comparsa*, which as an embodied experience, extends into the young people's everyday lives and their local practices. Hence, I suggest the smooth body space of each individual as the *comparsa's* smallest territory and unit, which represents both its expressive and playful agent, as well as its repertoire where experiences of

agency linger long after the event. Therefore, even when the young people do not wear their costumes any more, these experiences of both individual and collective agency, I argue, remain and become distributed across space as the young people return into their communities. Moreover, they becomes re-created on a local level as all of the youth groups use the *comparsa* in some ways as a means of expression and manifestation in a similar albeit different way.

Despite the fact that most of the groups strongly identify with the *comparsa*, which according to one of the youth protagonists from an urban youth group results from “its characteristic of representing a youth identity and energy, and therefore fosters a certain sense of belonging for many youth groups”, some of them reject its celebratory character once introduced by Caja Lúdica (BO 2013). Thus, the girls’ appearance in traditional dresses during the Network’s collective *comparsa* can also be interpreted as such a rejection or resistance against the celebratory and colourful character of many of the Network’s *comparsas*. This tension has also been pointed out the coordinator of CopalAA’s youth group, to which the stilt walking girls belong:

When Caja Lúdica performed the *comparsa* for the first time in our community, it was a cultural clash and the community perceived it as rather ridiculous [...]. The colours, the juggling, the painted faces and the loud noise of the drums [...] we have developed our own *comparsas* to show our presence in CopalAA but also to protest against our struggles which we face as young people in the community [...] we often perform in our normal clothes, use less colours and make up, but many of us walk on stilts because they transmit this strong energy and connect us as a youth initiative.

(RO 2013)

These words clearly indicate how some local youth groups, on the one hand, identify with the *comparsa* and the stilts, which provide a sense of belonging to a wider initiative for the youth groups. On the other hand, they resist its ‘original’ aesthetics and have adapted it for their own purposes in different ways. Figures 58 and 59 (below) illustrate an example of a *comparsa* performed and initiated by

CopalAA's youth group with the aim to highlight the important role of women in the community and their rights to publicly express themselves (DO 2013).



Figure 58 (top): *Comparsa*: struggle for women's rights, CopalAA (2015).

Figure 59 (bottom): *Comparsa*: girls on stilts, CopalAA (2015).

As can be seen in figure 58 (top), the *comparsa* consists of women in their traditional dresses accompanied by their children as well as the young people from the local youth group performing as stilt walkers or musicians (figure 59).



Some of them carry hand written placards with phrases such as 'stop violence against women', or 'dignity for women', which indicate that they are protesting against domestic violence and are calling for a better treatment of women in the community. The local teacher and coordinator explains that, in CopalAA, women or young girls are often oppressed or even treated violently within their own families and have little voice in community decision making processes (RO 2013). Moreover, in a presentation, which I witnessed during their encounter, the young people from CopalAA gave testimonies about how inequality and domestic violence affects them as growing up girls in the community. One girl, for example, highlighted that she often feels "less valid than men" because she is denied "the possibility to study or travel" (FF 2013). Hence, their *comparsa* here cannot only be understood as a protest against violence, but more accurately as a form of resistance to the social hierarchy established in their community, which clearly disadvantages women.

During this performance these young people become the protagonists and centre of attention in their community and this seems to be particularly important for the young girls on stilts. As one of them points out: "When I walk on stilts on the main street of my community, I have the feeling that people actually see me, listen and pay attention to what I have to say" (AB 2013). Considering the challenges young girls face in this particular context, the *comparsa* here provides opportunities to articulate her ideas and rights as a young girl. This also supports the argument and understanding of the *comparsa* as a smooth space, which opens up new trajectories and movements within even the most oppressive systems.

The girl group of stilt walkers here are also centre of the analysis here, because they are the same girls from the earlier sections, where I explored their performance in traditional Mayan dresses as a means of claiming for their rights to freely express their identity as well as to represent their youth group within the Network's collective *comparsa*. Here in CopalAA, they perform in their everyday wear, yet their public manifestation has a clear political message. This

*comparsa* may be less about expressing their identity as indigenous girls, as they did during one of the Network's largest *comparsas* performed in an urban context (see above). It is rather about making a public claim for a matter that affects them as young women on a daily basis.

I argue, however, that notions of individual agency, which the girls experienced and embodied during the Network's collective *comparsa* on stilts may have empowered them to organise a *comparsa* in their community and to publicly claim for their rights and dignity as young women. Although they do not wear a 'costume' during the local *comparsa* the stilts may provide them with an important distance (in height) to their community as well as an invisible strength and connection to the Community Arts Network, which probably has supported them in their decision to organise a public manifestation and protest in CopalAA. This espouses the argument that the experience of agency or lines of flight created during the *comparsa* do not end with the performance itself but rather continue to be developed either during subsequent *comparsas* or other spaces. Moreover, this provides an example of how the *comparsa* can be understood as a practice that expands into different spaces, how different *comparsas* may be connected with each other, but also how agency of smooth spaces can disperse and further develop.

To sum up, in this chapter I have shown how the *comparsa* has developed from a single intervention to the collective representation and action of the Community Arts Network on a local as well as national level, which has enabled them to keep together as a cohesive initiative despite territorial distance. It represents an important space where different notions of identity can be explored, challenged and developed and the stilts have been identified as an artefact of resistance and power which play a key role for the continuation of this practice on a local level. As a process and practice that perseveres, connects and transcends, it shows striated and smooth elements that have both enabled it to sustain itself as well as spread across space and further develop. Hence, on the

one hand the *comparsa* within the Network can be seen as a result of Caja Lúdica's methodology and clone of their first *comparsa*, which has been copied and similarly applied by the different youth groups in their communities. However, a closer look at the different *comparsas* and how they are used unveils the diversity of their expressions, which result from the replication element inherent in the methodology.

Rather than a clone, then, the *comparsa* has to be understood as developing in a rhizomatic way. Its dispersed agency cannot be controlled, which constitutes its potential to be resistant as a cultural expression. Resultantly, the different expressions of the *comparsa* as a patchwork of practices show fractal characteristics whose expressions and development reassemble themselves as a whole as well as in its parts, yet each time expressed in a slightly different way. The methodology and the workshops, on the one hand, frame the *comparsas* as patchwork squares, which are continuous and self-similar. On the other hand, these 'squares' or striated elements are rather diverse in colour and pattern, which is notably similar to the Network's diverse *comparsa* expressions. Through the *comparsa's* means of frequent repetition, this therefore represents a much more stable and long-term practice than expected from similar public interventions and carnivalesque street performances, which often remain loose elements in a pile of fabric squares. Fractal smooth space, similar to patterns of self-similarity in complex systems, represents ways in which modes of symbolic manifestation and imaginary can transcend borders and connect different communities as well as spaces on a local as well as national level. Through its ability to adapt and constantly change as well as its characteristic as an embodied experience and practice, it represents a rather subversive form of resistance and its potential may remain undetected through its spatial expansion.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

My research set out to explore Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network with a particular emphasis on the young people's experiences and their protagonist role in the Guatemalan context. I have argued throughout that the Network's different groups not only temporarily create spaces of encounter and community through their interventions, but instead have established notions of a practice assemblage, which is characterised by its diversity of expressions in different parts of the country as well as its rhizomatic development and movement across space. Their shared approach to practice, which is grounded in a collective identity and struggle for change, has enabled them to develop and persevere as a cultural initiative for over a decade, this despite the rather challenging conditions of post-conflict Guatemala. These elements, as I argued, represent their potential to be resistant as a practice, which, rather than a direct action against one source of oppression, is characterised by dispersed agency and interventions undertaken by its different groups and individuals. Moreover, my argument has emphasised that young people can be protagonists in their communities. Through their cultural interventions and networking practices, they not only undermine the constraints of this particular context, but also contribute to the reconstruction of its social fabric on a local as well as national level.

The networking and relational approach to practice demonstrated by this initiative in Guatemala offers new ways of thinking about the sustainability of community arts practices, and provides useful contributions to debates in the fields of the arts, youth and peacebuilding. In this final chapter, I firstly summarise the main arguments of this thesis and frame its main findings as an exploration of the Network's diverse practices as *rhizomatic assemblage*. This

discussion at the same time suggests potential implications for practices in other parts of the world. Then, I move on to highlight remaining questions for future research, offer a brief reflection on the writing process, and close with some final thoughts and ongoing challenges.

I started this thesis with a prologue highlighting the personal underpinnings of this account as well as my positionality as a researcher-fan, which clearly determined the general tone of my writing. I was hoping to find a balance between my emotional attachment and previous involvement with Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network, and a more critical perspective and distanced position, which turned into one of the most challenging tasks during this journey, on a personal as well as professional level. Nevertheless, looking back, my close relationship enabled me to access data, which I probably would have never encountered otherwise, and at the same time it represents one of the major limitations and methodological challenges of this study and research journey (see reflections on the writing process below).

Despite the differences in context on a political, social and cultural level, I argued that my analysis of this particular practice would add new perspectives to debates on community arts and their sustainability in Britain and Europe, this by introducing local embeddedness, youth protagonism, and networking through practice into the discussions. A literature review and historical perspective on community arts in Britain provided starting points that helped me to make sense of what I experienced in Guatemala. While initially I felt more connected with the early debates of the community arts movement in Britain, I soon became aware of a group of authors and practitioners who, obviously for other reasons, were looking back in history with the aim to understand the role of community arts in current debates and practices (see chapter 1).

One of the most recent examples that resonate with my research are Alison Jeffers and Gerri Moriarty's ongoing *Unwrapping Histories Research Project*

(2015)<sup>89</sup>, which encourages practice-based knowledge exchange between current and historic practice in Britain (1970s/80s); a similar research process and event took place during the same year under the name *Storming the Citadels?*<sup>90</sup> at Birkbeck, University of London. It was organised by Sophie Hope and brought together different generations of artists to explore connections between arts approaches during the 1970s in Britain and now. Although some of the mentioned debates may be infused with a certain degree of nostalgia, there seems to be an imminent need and desire to understand and closely examine current participatory arts practices and their development in relation to funding policies and other issues alongside observations which have been made in the past.

Through my literature review on community arts in Latin America with a particular emphasis on cultural networks, I was able to locate my research within a small scholarship focusing on this particular region (see chapter 1). I also saw my argument supported by others, who wrote about the potential of how networking on an economic but also social and solidary level had been an important survival strategy of many organisations to persevere through dictatorships and civil unrest as well as challenging economic conditions present in Latin America. The relational dimension of networking was also key in the literature review that focused on the connection between arts and peacebuilding processes. What became evident was that young people were clearly underrepresented in all mentioned areas, and accounts of their role as positive agents in post-conflict settings were particularly scarce. Therefore, my exploration, which draws the attention towards youth, is a significant contribution to the debates in the mentioned fields of literature reinforcing the

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<sup>89</sup> See: Community Arts Unwrapped Blog: <http://communityartsunwrapped.com/2015/07/14/making-change-happen/> (Accessed 11 August 2015).

<sup>90</sup> See: Sophie Hope Blog: <http://sophiehope.org.uk/blog/storming-the-citadels/> (Accessed 11 August 2015).

potential of young people as contributors to more peaceful communities in Guatemala and elsewhere, and the role of creative expression within that.

In order to research the multiple dynamics of this particular networking practice, I used Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory as a starting point as well as methodological approach to explore different ways of data collection such as photography, interviews, moving methods and concepts and to analyse and connect them in a creative way. During my fieldwork, for example, I developed 'following' as a mobile and embodied research method, which emphasised geographical movement but also built on my relationships with the Network and the youth groups, thereby allowing me to take part in their trajectories and social interactions as an active participant. The use of carefully selected images as sources of data enabled me to create a more complete picture of the patterns of this networking practice, which as a visual assemblage aims to synthesise complex experiences to its rather simple essence (chapter 2).

Elements of Guatemala's political, social and cultural history provided the background within which this practice emerged and from which it continues to develop to date (chapter 3). My historical perspective on Caja Lúdica, from their opening parade of the *Octubre Azul Festival* ('Blue October Festival') in Guatemala City in 2000, to establishing themselves as part of a network with rather diverse expressions, provided key information that complemented the analytical chapters (4-6). Including this rather linear perspective of one of Caja Lúdica's histories coincided with a key principle of this research 'to give something back' to the involved initiatives in Guatemala. However, a history of Caja Lúdica from an insider's perspective is only a humble contribution to their work. Concurrently, this centred approach was challenged through my analysis developed in the thesis, which seeks to draw attention to the Network's local groups and individuals and, by doing so, underlines its rather rhizomatic development as a practice. Moreover, it aimed to stress the importance of the

histories of organisations and cultural initiatives, which in themselves represent valuable data and are underrepresented in research to date.<sup>91</sup>

### **Rhizomatic assemblage and implications for sustainable practice**

The second part of the thesis focused on the analysis and exploration of what I consider to be Caja Lúdica's key constituents, and which can also be traced in some ways as elements in the practices of the Network's different youth groups in their local communities: community arts processes, encounters, and public interventions such as festivals or *comparsas*. In the following sections, I discuss some of the key findings of this study, which as themes run through all 3 chapters in some ways. I framed this as an exploration of practice as rhizomatic assemblage, which at the same time provides a framework for what a networking approach for more sustainable practice may look like. It aims to grasp the multiplicity and complexity of the Community Arts Network such as the groups' interactions, their spatial dynamics as well as their rather diverse expressions that emerge in different parts of the country. Yet it seeks to particularly highlight the potential of networks for continuity and sustainability in challenging contexts.

The word assemblage derives from the French work *agencement*, which can have different meanings from arrangement to fitting or fixing (Phillips 2006, 108). Assemblage in the arts represents a technique and process of connecting unrelated elements, often found objects, into a unified whole. As a term it has recently gained currency in social sciences and humanities with a variety of different interpretations and meanings (Ibid.). For example, it has been applied in fields such as Geography (McFarlane 2009, Dittmer 2013, Müller 2015) to

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<sup>91</sup> Crehan's (2011) book *Community art: An Anthropological Perspective*, however is an excellent in-depth account on the 40-year history of Free Form Arts Trust and shows how a historical perspective can provide a basis for understanding more general questions and issues related to arts practices.



explore notions of space, interactions and power within social movements or networks; it has also been developed in different ways as a theory by some political philosophers (DeLanda 2006, Bennet 2010, Grosz 2008). It originally emerges as a key concept of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory and represents one characteristic of the rhizome to form endless multiplicities referred to as assemblages. According to Deleuze, an assemblage can be defined as

a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and with establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns - different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy'. It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagious, epidemics, the wind.

(Deleuze and Parnet 1987, 69)

Deleuze and Guattari's notions of assemblage are developed here as a constellation of heterogeneous elements. These can range from individuals bodies, organisations, spaces, events, performances and actions that are connected, interact and gather as well as collaborate for a certain amount of time. Hence, community arts practice understood as rhizomatic assemblage consists of many kinds of different agents, which are interacting with each other, and the potential of their alliance and agency is enhanced by their heterogeneity and distribution across space. While the replicating workshop processes, the plateau events, as well as the *comparsa* as smooth space represent the Network's interacting key cultural expressions, an exploration of practice as rhizomatic assemblage in more general terms has at least three constituents and this has emerged from this study: Local embeddedness and youth protagonism; relational connections and collectivity; and notions of 'I can (be) change' or a holistic approach to community arts.

My findings suggest that community arts practices in other parts of the world can benefit from considering these elements for developing more sustainable practice and long-term engagement with young people and communities in general. These orientations amongst others, I argue, have enabled the Network and the groups to sustain themselves as an initiative in a context such as Guatemala, this not only on a collective but also on a local level. They are also key for understanding the Network's contribution to creating more peaceful communities in Guatemala; through the groups' cultural interventions and also through the individual's everyday (inter)actions. The latter emerge from a shared value and an understanding and practice of community based on relationships, compassion and kindness that is explored during encounters and other collective activities.

### *Local embeddedness and youth protagonism*

One of the main findings of this thesis was the role of the local youth groups as the Community Arts Network's 'life nodes' and their importance for the continuity of their activism between collective encounters, which only take place a few times a year. As place-based but not place-constrained network constituents, they are locally embedded and responsive to the specific needs and struggles of their context. Their public interventions in the communities proved to be important for their acknowledgement as youth initiatives, and the example of Peronia Adolescente's cultural festival illustrated that the collaborations and relationships with local partners and organisations are key for their activities (see chapter 4). Concomitantly, they benefit from trans-local connections and exchange processes to further develop and thrive as groups.

Moreover, I coined the term *responsive repertoire of practices*, to suggest that cultural networks are able to store, develop and distribute knowledge and skills. In the case of this study the repertoire develops in a rhizomatic way, however

only through the local youth groups and the actions of each individual. Hence, the local nodes as places of practice are key constituents, which allow the repertoire to develop and expand on resources that emerge from the youth groups' local experiences. These resources represent the dimensions of this practice and they become visible through the youth group's diverse expressions in their communities. Moreover, most of the local youth groups represent continuous spaces where learning and skill exchange can take place. While Caja Lúdica, which have been implementing workshop processes as 'outsiders' visiting the youth group's local communities for many years, terminate their collaborations after a certain period of time - after the project runs out of funding - most of the youth groups, sustain their cultural activities on a local level for a much longer period by sharing and furthering different skills across generations. In contrast to Caja Lúdica, most of the groups do not rely on international funding, yet some occasionally manage to acquire financial support from local authorities for some of their interventions.

This networking practice in Guatemala offers an example of youth amateur artists embedded within a community, which, instead of positioning themselves as aesthetic catalysts to create community through the arts, have some kind of connection with their surroundings, where they learn and gain expertise in a rather informal setting and rehearsal of becoming community artists or facilitators. Hence, their relationships to the community contrast to the artist/community divide or the artist as 'a visitor', often the case in those organisations and collaborative projects that terminate after the final performance or intervention. Thus, most of the practices of this particular network are not only "by with and for the community" but also - and here we agree with Prentki - "very much *in* the community" (2015, 52). This, as I argued, makes them more likely to turn into long-term processes.

Therefore, this study puts forward the argument that the sustainability of community arts processes clearly benefits not only from locally embedded

practices but also from the provision of *laboratories of practice*, which allow the further development of skills as well as their continued facilitation through the people involved. Learning in such places, as I argued, is more likely to take place through experiential practice or, as one of the youth protagonists describes, as “learning by living and experiencing” (PR 2013). In particular, knowledge exchange between different generations within one youth group or organisation, and learning from the experiences, methodologies and challenges of similar initiatives across locations has turned out to be of key value within the Network. This approach to knowledge exchange through peers challenges traditional forms of learning and arts engagement, where the ‘professional’ or ‘expert’ provides a space for people, who often have less experiences in creative expression, to participate.

Hence, I argue that in order to foster long-term engagement in arts practices, there is a need to create spaces and strategies that enable regular gatherings and interactions between people in ways that foster learning experience to be mutual and collective rather than mainly one way and directed towards ‘non-experts’ or a specific group. Examples of rather experiential dimensions of learning, as this study has shown, are workshop environments and processes (chapters 4 and 6) as well as encounters. Here, experiences and skills can be valued and become more accessible (chapter 5), and new insights for practice can be gained from others, even from those with less experience in the arts.

Moreover, the findings of this study suggest that the notion of bartering, which I described as exchange processes between cultural organisations, individuals or social actors based on their existent resources or *practice commons*, can be particularly useful for organisations who struggle due to the lack of funding and access to resources.<sup>92</sup> The provision of resources emerging from local

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<sup>92</sup> See also *Poor Theatre Research* blog entries.

<http://blog.poortheatres.manchester.ac.uk/towards-theatre-commons/> (Accessed 13 January 2016).

experiences in exchange with others can help initiatives to make better use of their repertoires and maybe support each other to continue with their activities and interventions even with minimal available budget. While the bartering dynamics within the Community Arts Network, as the study unveiled, are limited due to the similarity of approaches, which most of the groups share with Caja Lúdica, exchange processes across localities between organisations and diverse actors clearly can have, as I argue, positive implications for the sustainability of individual as well as collective initiatives. Elements such as, for example, methodologies, ideas, and site-specific knowledge and experience can provide essential *practice assets* also of potential value for others. Hence, practice understood as rhizomatic assemblage as described here allows the development of *resource infrastructures*, which instead of having a competitive motive clearly rely on collaboration, notions of collectivity and joint action (see also later section). This of course does require a certain level of trust and relationships as well as some shared values between the people and organisations involved. It is, however, essential for any practice to become more sustainable and less dependent on external funding.

This study has also provided examples of how young people through long-term community arts processes can move beyond participation and instead become agents themselves, who also mediate the engagement and articulation of other young people in their community. Hence, it speaks importantly to an emerging trend in youth studies emphasising youth engagement and in particular research on youth-led engagement (Wilson 2000, Ilkiw 2010, Jahromi, Crocetti and Buchanan 2012, Ho, Clarke and Dougherty 2015), and young people's empowerment and participatory activities (Kirby et. al 2003, Shier 2001). Accounts on youth-led engagement are particularly underrepresented in research on arts participation (see for example Rimmer 2011) and my study is an original contribution to this gap.

While the engagement of young people in youth organisation projects often emerges when adults invite them to participate (Ilkiw 2010) and to 'attend' the activities which have been 'provided for them' - which is also the case in many arts practices -, this study in contrast is an example that shows elements of youth-led organising and engagement. Youth-led engagement differs from youth organisation or youth engagement projects as it is mainly organised and set up by young people and their activities develop on a grassroots level. Those initiatives often emerge as a reaction or critique to what is happening in their local context, and therefore their continuation, as stated by Ilkiw (2010, 36), does not solely rely on funding. Concurrently, taking responsibility or ownership for a project or process is one clearly prominent factor of youth-led initiatives. This is, and here I coincide with Rimmer (2009), less likely when young people are not included in the decision making process of the activity.

Moreover, and this is particularly relevant for community arts practices engaging young people, as emphasised by Bragg, Manchester and Faulkner (2009, 26), the public performance of a project is often linked to the skills of the creative practitioner working alongside a group of young people, who may therefore also "be judged by the outcomes". Whether there is a connection between these expectations and the involvement of young people in the process of the project remains unclear (Rimmer 2009). However, as illustrated by Rimmer (Ibid., 332), high level of youth involvement is linked to the degree in which the young people are incorporated in the process. One clearly important factor in the practices of the Community Arts Network's groups, as argued in this thesis, is their ability to sustain young people's involvement, which is related to the fact that they are the protagonists of their own practices. Hence, even though elements of Caja Lúdica's methodology can be traced in the group's practices, this study has shown that the groups still make their own decisions, and determine their creative expressions and the connections they develop with other actors on a local level. Having said this, it is often the case that older peers from

the local community or other groups support them during these processes (see chapter 4).

Therefore, this study proposes that that youth-led engagement as well as young people's protagonism in decision-making are key for sustained interest, ownership and finally the involvement of youth in arts processes. This calls for the ability and awareness of community artists and practitioners to: 1) understand young people's needs, interests and enthusiasm; 2) to be able to share ownership of a project or process with the group; 3) to incorporate them in decision making processes and accompany them throughout; 4) to trust young people's ability to organise, take on responsibilities and lead now and not only as adults in the future. Hence, my research asserts that organisations and programs working with young people should not only support youth in developing these capacities for their own personal lives. They should also, and this is key, explore notions of social awareness and ways in which such gained skills may be shared with others and applied in their surroundings and communities.

### *Relational connections and collective identity*

Another aspect of understanding practice as rhizomatic assemblage, as the findings of this study unveil, is the importance of relational connections and processes as well as notions of collective identity through which the Network's different constituents are held together as a whole. I identified them as essential for the sustainability of this particular practice and their successful struggle of survival despite the lack of support for their initiatives and the challenges organisations face in a context such as Guatemala.

This thesis has suggested that one of Caja Lúdica's main strategies from the beginning was their networking and collaborations with other organisations on a national as well as international level (see chapter 3 and 4). Despite the fact that

the civil society sector after the war was highly fractured due to political and ideological issues emerging from the conflict as well as increased competition for international funds between organisations, Caja Lúdica established their connections as part of, what Yudice (2001, 56) would call, a “dense network of connections”. Apart from their funding from external donors, I argue that this becoming *enredado* (‘entangled’) through practice helped them to survive as an organisation and networking initiative in these rather challenging conditions, and created a kind of safety net for them to develop and expand. As the basic principle of their work, building multiple relationships through networking did involve often rather controversial actors, such as social organisations and informal groups, NGOs, educational institutions or even governmental programs. These actors may, in some ways, have impacted on Caja Lúdica’s practices or funded some of their processes, but also may have been impacted by the ludic methodology themselves.

While Caja Lúdica’s collaboration with different networks may be questioned by some, due to the lack of opposition to systems of control as well as the likelihood to turn from a grassroots to a top-town initiative, I consider their networking approach as a strategy to increase the impact of their actions, and by doing so, resist and undermine such systems from the core. The established connections, which Deleuze would call “relations of exteriority”, imply that parts of an assemblage “may be detached from it” and therefore can be “plugged into” another assemblage with rather different dynamics and interactions (DeLanda 2006, 10-11). The ability to ‘detach’ and ‘plug into’, as I argued, on the one hand enabled Caja Lúdica to maintain some of their autonomy as a practice as well as continue with their resistant approach. However, at the same time, through that interface they were able to engage in mutual interactions, and assemble and share agendas with other social actors, who may have appeared to be distinct in ideology and working strategies. However, through this ability to create ‘relations of exteriority’, Caja Lúdica managed to negotiate a space for their



cultural interventions over time, which nevertheless was accompanied by their fierce insistence and belief that a different Guatemala is possible.

At the same time, their networking and relational approach to practice were key for the creation of the Community Arts Network, and many youth groups have adapted Caja Lúdica's networking approach for their local work. In particular, personal relationships have been pointed out as key motors for the youth group's articulation and bartering activities, which take place between the encounters. For example, this has been illustrated in the ways in which Peronia Adolescente works together with parent groups in their community, as well as different schools in the area (see chapter 4). Hence, these findings suggest that networking and building relationships with different actors, even outside relevant sectors, can provide opportunities for collaboration as well as a safety net for practices to sustain themselves through mutual interactions.

Organisations working with young people could therefore build on the findings of this study and evaluate their already existing networks and relationships with other social actors or individuals, and draw more attention towards establishing and nourishing such connections. Of course, this may not have the potential to fully replace funding, however; in positioning networking and social relationships at the core of sustainable practices, this study suggests to organisations and practitioners to consider 'thinking about themselves *as* networks' rather than sole entities. This could provide new opportunities for collaboration and foster notions of *collectivity as an approach to practice*, which many initiatives may lack, in particular, if they mainly focus on their own profile and branding as an organisation.

There are certainly many initiatives, which develop their work from a networking perspective, but my point here is that there is much more potential in such connections than is often used. Regarding collaborations, I am talking about potential encounters and collaborations with other social, political or cultural organisations in the neighbourhood, from the craft skills of a

participant's parent, the neighbour from 'down the road' who owns a mini bus, to the landlord of an empty building in the area or a nearby council park. Even the seemingly smallest connections, which one may not have even considered, deserve more attention and nourishment. These collaborations do not emerge from one day to the other, though; instead they are part of a process and change in perspective towards practice as a *networking performance*.

In this sense, my exploration speaks to current *Poor Theatres Research* at The University of Manchester led by Jenny Hughes, which is exploring relationships between theatre, poverty and economic inequality in different parts of the world and the impact of the economic crisis on participation and theatre making (see also chapter 1).<sup>93</sup> My account provides an original contribution to these debates as it shows how networking through practice can support organisations or groups to succeed in rather challenging conditions, and can foster the creation of a practice infrastructure and articulation sustained through social relationships and collectivity. Moreover, it emphasises the potential of local practice assets, which are site specific and therefore unique for each initiative and context. These assets, I argue, can be of great value for other organisations, yet only if they are open for rehearsing resource exchange and sharing new strategies and approaches to practice.

While these debates in Europe are relatively new and are currently emerging from a general economic crisis affecting the cultural sector amongst others, they have a much longer history in Latin America. The sharing of knowledge through networking in Guatemala and the Latin American region has emerged from a need to tackle the decrease of international funding. It also may have resulted from the fact that the challenging conditions (economically, politically and socially) of the area may urge people to collaborate and to create new perspectives for collaboration rather than rely on external resources. Many

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<sup>93</sup> Poor Theatres Blog: [www.blog.poortheatres.manchester.ac.uk](http://www.blog.poortheatres.manchester.ac.uk) (Accessed 13 December 2015).

cultural organisations in Europe seem to be in a similar situation finding themselves with less funding, which urges them to narrow their selection of projects and interventions, create relationships with other organisations, maybe overcome some divides in the sector that may emerge through competition for funding, as well as improve the use of already existing resources.

At the same time, these developments are probably nothing new looking back in the history of the beginning of community arts movement in Britain, where many interventions and practices were not funded and took place on a volunteer basis. However, after many years of funding and support through Arts Councils, trusts and other institutions as well as the professionalization of the artist/practitioner, which requires a career path and includes a salary as any other job, the continuous cuts to the public sector do have an impact on the panorama of arts practices, and this situation has slowly turned into a condition, which indeed is new. Although the argument here does not suggest that we should go back in time, to when the arts practitioner or community artist was not paid adequately and not acknowledged as a professional, it suggests, however, that increased attention in these debates has to be drawn towards the “the amateur” and “the protagonist”. These agents will be particularly important in the discussions that are exploring strategies to develop more sustainable practices and long-term processes in times of austerity.

Another aspect closely linked to the importance of networking and relationships for the sustainability of the Community Arts Network are, as I emphasised, processes of collective identity creation, which keep the social proximity between the different groups, despite their territorial distance. Through my exploration of the Network’s encounters as plateaux events and moments of convergence, I drew the attention to the provision of ritual and playful spaces, during which relationships and social bonds emerge and notions of identity can be explored. I argued that the relationships created through the interactions during the Network’s encounters as well as the collective

experiences of community, represent the relational repertoire and intangible outcome of such events. This repertoire is not spatially or temporarily bounded and instead continues to connect the otherwise territorially distanced groups in their local communities. It is the regular assembling and face-to-face encounters as well as the Network's shared cultural anchor, the Mayan Cosmology and its underlying belief system based on the idea of coexistence and connection of all life, which sustain and nourish their collective identity and feed into the youth groups' local practices. Moreover, as long-term processes they foster the sustainability of strong social bonds between the young people as a network community, who may have known each other for a long period of time but not encounter each other on an everyday basis.

These notions coincide with other research on collective identity such as Poletta and Jasper (2001, 298), who describe it as "imagined as well as concrete communities." Moreover, they point out that "it is fluid and relational, emerging out of interactions, [...] rather than fixed" (Ibid.). The Network's search for autonomy from Caja Lúdica as well as their continuous journey and search for a shared purpose and identity reflect this fluidity Poletta and Jasper describe. Additionally, I have identified the *comparsa* as a key process and representation of this connected community in public on a local as well as national level. It provides a rather symbolic sense of proximity between the otherwise territorially dispersed youth groups.

Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that the collective identities both as a 'network' but also as 'a positive youth', contribute to social change, and are a key forces for the groups' local practices to continue. Beyond this, they are also an encouragement for the individuals, who are an essential part of this initiative and seek to foster positive change in their communities. Moreover, each individual is a key part for the creation of this collective initiative, which in turn has an impact on the protagonists who repeatedly experience notions of collectivity during events such as the encounters or the *comparsa* (see chapters 5

and 6). The creation of this collectivity has actually become the centre of their shared practice, which as a *performance of connectivity* in its own right is key so as to contribute to the reconstruction of the social fabric in the context of Guatemala but also, as I argue, is key for practices to become more sustainable.

### *'I can (be) change' or a holistic approach to community arts*

Another aspect which contributes to developing an understanding of practice as rhizomatic assemblage is what I call a holistic approach to community arts, which emerges from Caja Lúdica's change-orientated methodology and expands into the Network's multiple practices. As explored throughout the thesis, one of its most important elements are the workshop processes on a local level or during encounters that provide a safe space for exploring and sharing creative skills (see chapter 4/5/6). In particular, their smooth notion fosters processes of imagination and 'making', which, as argued in chapter 6, can create empowering experiences of agency and change for the young people involved. These, what I call 'I CAN' or 'I AM ABLE TO' experiences, as suggested throughout the thesis, do not terminate once the workshop is over, but instead feed in some ways into the young people's everyday lives. They increase the young people's self-esteem and can empower them and their ability to make changes on a very small scale, for example, through making a mask on an individual level or during the *comparsa* collectively, and also in their immediate environment such as their families or communities (see chapter 6). This does not suggest that the young people and their actions can significantly change the major structural issues that impact their lives. Yet, it clearly highlights their potential to improve their living conditions and immediate surroundings by searching for new opportunities and possibilities for themselves and their local communities.

The creative elements, however, and this is key, are interlinked, with contemplative and playful practices-in-circle (chapter 5), during which processes

of self-exploration and reflection are fostered, and new ways of social interaction and community are created. They are based on values emerging from the Mayan worldview, which understands all life - including plants, animals, and humans - as equally important parts of creation, and therefore they are highly respected and cared for. For human beings, these principles imply the development of a consciousness that starts from the inner self, yet always in relation to its surroundings. In this regard, it is the responsibility of each individual to contribute towards a more harmonic way of living together through their actions. By building on these values, the Network's approach to community arts draws the responsibility of change directly to the individuals, fostering a two-directional process on a personal and internal as well as collective and external level. Accordingly, these individuals can (be) change through their cultural practices but also, and this is key, through their (inter)actions with others on an everyday basis.

The understanding of change as starting with the individual and their actions in relation to others is the core of the Network's practices and one of the most important findings of my thesis. It distinguishes the Community Arts Network from many other initiatives insofar as the latter equally engage with young people through the arts but often prioritise the development of individual talents and their performance in public. My research alternatively suggests an approach that emphasises young people's integral development as human beings, and as part of a group and wider community. Hence, through my thesis I aim to put forward the importance of developing a more holistic understanding of arts practice that puts human relationships and personal development right at the centre rather than considering it as a by-product or aim of creative practices. As Holloway states, change "must be practical; it must involve the construction of another way of doing, another sociability, another form of life" (2003, quoted in Pleyers 2013, 117; see also Holloway 2002). This perspective clearly places change and resistance in the context of everyday interactions and directs it to

how we relate to ourselves, others, and the world. This is, as I have argued throughout the thesis, what the young people put in practice during the Network's encounters, in their local groups as well as through their interactions with others in their communities.

Hence, this study has provided an example of how youth can contribute to more peaceful communities and resist notions of violence through their cultural practices and their own individual (inter)actions. Similarly, Berents (2014, 15) reminds us that "notions of everyday peace are located in the routines and practices of the everyday that sustain interaction and participation". Accordingly, the example of everyday resistance presented here goes far beyond the notion of cultural interventions. It highlights the importance of the complexities of a context in relation to the role and dimensions of youth in peacebuilding processes as well as in communities and illustrates how "peace in action" (Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015, 118) can possibly look like.

This embeddedness or *rhizomatic transcendence* of practice beyond the workshop is a key element of what I propose as a holistic approach to practice, which is equally concerned with the "whole" person fostering growth an emotional as well as intellectual level. It allows freedom in creative exploration and also encourages elements such as *self- and community awareness* on a long-term level. While there are many philosophical accounts on holism, especially in the field of education and learning theories (Clark 1991; Miller 1991), in performance and community arts debates on youth it remains on the margins and I am hoping to address this gap through my account. In particular, Clark's suggestion of holism in education as an "attitude, a philosophy, a worldview" with the purpose to change "the way in which we look at ourselves and our relationship to the world from a fragmented perspective to an integrated perspective", could well be applied to arts practices (1991 quoted in Miller 1991, 53-55). This opens up a range of ideas of how holistic practice may be developed.

Therefore, by building on my study, I suggest three interrelated and equally important components as key for more holistic but also sustainable practice with young people: 1) *I/We encounter*: Contemplative practice and mindfulness as a practice of encounter, which foster personal development and self-awareness; 2) *I/We express*: Creativity and expression on an individual and collective level; 3) *I/We connect and act*: Community awareness and engagement as well as relationships through protagonism and networking. Within the limits of this chapter I am not aiming to develop these ideas further on a theoretical level as this would require more research and time. However, these elements provide a starting point and one of the next steps to further the outcomes of this study in the future.

### **Remaining questions and implications for future research**

This thesis has laid the foundations for many paths for future research and further exploration. One of the most important potential implications may be opening the research up to a more diverse group of participants such as, for example, other young people and network initiatives in the Latin American region as well as representatives of related funding bodies. Due to time restrictions but mainly because of my emphasis on the youth protagonists' experiences, I focused on those who are or were in some ways directly involved in the Network's activities. While this enabled me to provide a rather focused and in-depth account of the dynamics of this practice in Guatemala, data emerging from other participants that are in some ways related to the Network would for example allow a stronger focus on the exploration of power relationships between donors and cultural initiatives. It would also draw the attention to the role of grassroots youth networks within large scale campaigns such as *Cultura Viva Comunitaria*, which are emerging in the Latin American region (see also chapter 3). These are important themes and questions that have



been mentioned in this thesis, however, they remained on the margins as I prioritised the young people's voices and perceptions regarding their networking practices. A survey of existing networks and initiatives in Latin America and their connections would also provide an important step for future research. This would not only further contribute to ongoing research on cultural networks in the region (see Delfin 2012) but also feed into research projects such as *In Place of War*, where Latin and particularly Central America are clearly underrepresented.<sup>94</sup>

As I have argued throughout the thesis, elements of Caja Lúdica's community arts and networking practices show the potential to provide a model for organisations in other parts of the world and in particular for practices that are searching for new and more sustainable ways to work with young people. Through this suggestion I am not aiming to idealise or romanticise this example emerging from Guatemala as it has its own struggles, tensions, power dynamics and inequalities. I share, however, my fascination for Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network with many other initiatives that have shown interest for their work. Caja Lúdica's collaborations and exchange with partners in the North had already initiated way before this thesis and especially more recent developments provide a whole new terrain and questions for future research. Since 2006, young people from the Community Arts Network have shared their networking and practice experiences with organisations in Utrecht and elsewhere: One example was *Mind and Jump the Gaps* (2008-2009)<sup>95</sup>, a project through which a young woman from the Netherlands spent 4 months with Caja Lúdica so as to subsequently share her experience with the local organisation she engaged with back home. It was supported by Creative Cooperations<sup>96</sup> and their

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<sup>94</sup> *In Place of War*: [www.inplaceofwar.net/discover](http://www.inplaceofwar.net/discover) (Accessed 12 December 2016).

<sup>95</sup> See *Mind and Jump the Gaps* Blog: [https://mindandjump.files.wordpress.com/2008/12/mjg\\_concept\\_en081105.pdf](https://mindandjump.files.wordpress.com/2008/12/mjg_concept_en081105.pdf) (Accessed 07 August 2015).

<sup>96</sup> See Creative Cooperations: [www.creative-cooperations.de](http://www.creative-cooperations.de) (Accessed 07 August 2015).

emphasis on art and social transformation as well as AVINA,<sup>97</sup> however, was terminated due to the lack of funding and reorientation of initiators.

Moreover, in 2013 four young people, between 18 and 26 years old, from Utrecht as well as from Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network participated in an exchange collaboration between different organisations from the Netherlands and Guatemala, which resulted in a site-specific performance piece named *Guerras Escondidas* ('Hidden War').<sup>98</sup> It was a collective creation and directed by two theatre practitioners, 1 from each country. The collaboration and partnership between Utrecht and Guatemala included institutions such as the Utrecht School of Arts or CAL-U. However, it took place because of individual relationships that had nourished this connection and exchange over many years (see Bedoya and Van Erven 2015, 232-233). The aim of this project to explore possible methodological exchanges between the organisations involved, attracted funding organisations such as E-Motive, which is Oxfam Novib's reverse development scheme.<sup>99</sup> These donors were interested in the transference of knowledge from South to North and the opportunity to raise awareness in Europe about the importance of international cooperation (Ibid., 236).

These exchanges are situated within other cultural exchanges and encounters between Latin American and European cultural organisations initiated by *People's Palace Projects (PPP)*,<sup>100</sup> an independent arts charity and research centre based at Queen Mary University of London, which explores the practices and understandings of the arts in relation to social justice and as a form of social action, often linked to youth (see Heritage et al. 2009, 2012, 2013).

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<sup>97</sup> See AVINA: <http://www.avina.net/avina/> (Accessed 07 August 2015).

<sup>98</sup> For an account on the exchange program *Guerras Escondidas* see: (Bedoya and Van Erven 2015).

<sup>99</sup> Emotive: <http://emotiveprogram.org/projects/hidden-war-caja-ludica/> (Accessed 07 August 2015).

<sup>100</sup> People's Palace Projects: <http://www.peoplespalaceprojects.org.uk/about/> (Accessed 07 of August 2015).

Examples were *Favela to the World* (2008-2012)<sup>101</sup> followed by *Cultural Warriors* (2009-2012),<sup>102</sup> an initiative and international dialogue between Brazilian artists engaging with young people and organisations in the UK. They emphasised knowledge exchange and focused on how different organisations support young people and their development as cultural leaders in their communities (see Paul Heritage, quoted in McAvinchey 2014, 243-255). *Points of Contact* (2012),<sup>103</sup> another exchange programme developed by PPP, explored notions of transformation through artistic means on a social and personal level. It sought to foster collaborations between artists, funders and policy makers and increase their capacity for cultural actions (Ibid., 251). One of PPP's most recent projects is a collaboration between Contact Theatre in Manchester, Battersea Arts Centre and PPP to develop a cultural festival of young people's ideas, which has been inspired by a Youth Agency Network (*Agência Redes para Juventude*)<sup>104</sup> in Rio de Janeiro.

These networking partnerships, which have increasingly been developing in the last decade, raise a completely different set of questions about knowledge exchange processes between continents, issues of globalisation and development, and economic and ethical issues of North-South exchange. Research exploring these areas will also require a reassessment of persistent North-South binaries or the role of culture and the arts in international development, and in more general terms, how practice exchange across continents can become more sustainable with mutual benefits for both sides rather than advantaging only one.

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<sup>101</sup> People's Palace Projects: <http://www.peoplespalaceprojects.org.uk/projects/from-the-favela-to-the-world-2009%E2%80%932012/> (Accessed 07 of August 2015).

<sup>102</sup> People's Palace Projects: <http://www.peoplespalaceprojects.org.uk/projects/cultural-warriors/> (Accessed 07 of August 2015).

<sup>103</sup> People's Palace Projects: <http://www.peoplespalaceprojects.org.uk/projects/points-of-contact/> (Accessed 07 of August 2015).

<sup>104</sup> Agência Redes para Juventude: <http://agenciarj.org/> (Accessed 07 August 2015).

## **Reflections on the research and writing process**

As mentioned in the prologue, the methodology section and at the beginning of this chapter, my close relationship with Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network and with it the negotiation of my own positionality within this research has been one of the main methodological challenges during this journey in particular during the writing process. My aim to write in-between as a researcher-fan turned out to be a constant struggle, especially when trying to bring the two together in one coherent piece of writing. Now, looking back I have to admit that I often found myself as writing from within, recalling key moments that I personally experienced in the field. This is also reflected in my methodology, which builds on ethnographic narratives as well as photographs portraying myself within the everyday routine of the practice in Guatemala. Through this process I have become part of my own research process through which I wanted to understand Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network, and also my own personal experience and development through them.

By turning this unique perspective into one of the main characteristics of my thesis, I hope to contribute to other debates that challenge conventional limitations of academic accounts by exploring notions of researcher identities as well as by including their emotions in their writing (Ronai 1995, 1998; Bondi 2005). Moreover, I aim to encourage other researchers to seek new ways in which to reflect, creatively explore and perform their positionality within their research. I am aware that my position as a fan may have contributed to the fact that I often struggled to articulate a more critical voice regarding Caja Lúdica in my own writing. I think, however, that it enabled me to provide a rather distinct account on this particular practice and highlight key elements, which may be useful for others.

On reflection, throughout the process spanning over almost four years now, I have developed a self-critical and analytical lens and have managed to grow, rather than remain stuck in a romantic imaginary of an important part and

experience, which has had such a significant impact on my life on a spiritual, personal and professional level. Hence, my relationship with Caja Lúdica and its youth protagonists remains, as Heritage (1998, 154) would describe it, a negotiation between “True Love and Real Love”. On the one hand “disengaging from the comforting warmth of this romance” for me has been challenging “or perhaps even impossible” (Ibid., 155). After almost 10 years of engaging with Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network and seeking to understand their role in the Guatemalan context, my understanding may always remain an imaginary one colored by a rather positive experience. On the other hand, this exploration, my first-hand experience as well as my search for understanding this practice has enabled me to feel aspects of a maybe less romantic “Real Love”, which revealed some of the challenges and failures that this initiative faces in Guatemala, and has left me personally with some scars and a sense of disconnection and loss regarding our long-term relationship.

However, this development has also fostered a re-negotiation process seeking ways in which my relationship and collaboration with Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network can continue with no direct involvement in their activities and despite the lack of connection with the practice due to territorial distance. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, fear has become an integral part of this research affecting my well-being not only through its constant presence during my fieldwork in Guatemala, but also manifesting itself in many ways during the research and writing process. It has determined how this research developed and also will have an impact on how it continues in the future, as it hinders me from going back to Guatemala amongst other changes I had and still have to make. Throughout this journey as a researcher, one of the main learning processes was to actively listen to my intuition, and, in particular, to carefully acknowledge my emotions and consider them as key part and guidance during my research process. This has not only saved my life several times in Guatemala, but also forced me to develop a sustainable work rhythm

that was less likely to jeopardise my well-being. While one part of my researcher-self tells me to overcome my fears and continue with my research in Latin America, another more intuitive part reminds me of the long-term challenges this process has brought with it for myself on a physical as well as psychological level. This latter part therefore has a strong desire to seek an alternative and more local area of research and practice, but at the same time, to build on the outcomes of this thesis and *follow* Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network in Guatemala in some ways from the distance.

### **Closing thoughts and ongoing challenges**

At the end of this research and now looking back, most of the time during this journey of almost four years, I have found myself looking at a computer screen studying Caja Lúdica and the Network's activities and interventions through their web pages, social media as well as Skype calls and chats. While the communication with the youth groups before and shortly after fieldwork was taking place on a regular basis, in the present moment of writing this conclusion I realise that I have not spoken with any of my friends, personal contacts and research participants in Guatemala for many months. Maintaining regular communication has been challenging due to the time difference between Manchester and Guatemala, unreliable internet connections, busy schedules on both sides as well as changes of actively engaged young people in the Network. Some of my main contacts have given their responsibility to others, who are now leading most of the Network's activities. Figure 60 (below) reflects this new position, which I have taken on as a researcher, who is desperately trying to maintain and re-establish contact with initiatives in other parts of the world.



Figure 60: Researcher self-portrait, Manchester (2016).

I am looking at an image on the PC screen, which shows an announcement of a *comparsa* on Caja Lúdica’s Facebook page as part of a nation-wide movement and campaign against corruption in the political system and claiming the renunciation of Otto Perez Molina, who was president in 2015 (see also chapter 3). On their flyers they described this particular *comparsa* as a “playful mobilisation” clearly indicating it as part of a campaign entitled *Renuncie Ya* (‘Step down now’), and animate people to become active and bring “drums, guitars, flowers, stilts and songs.”<sup>105</sup> The main mass gatherings took place between April and September 2015 and significantly decreased when Otto Perez Molina and other politicians stepped down from their positions, and juridical processes were initiated against them. Young people were a major thriving motor of the movements in Guatemala City during which student and other civil society initiatives collectively gathered every Saturday on the main square and this for months. Representatives of Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network were

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<sup>105</sup> See Caja Lúdica on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/cajaludica?fref=ts> (Accessed 13 December 2015).

present with their colourful expressions throughout several months of protests, posting pictures of the mass mobilisations and themselves on social media.

Figure 61 (left) below shows the dimensions of these protests, with thousands of people taking over the main square for days, weeks and months.



Figure 61 (left): *Renuncie Ya* Campaign, Guatemala City (2015).

Figure 62 (right): Drummers, Guatemala City (2015).

A closer look at the protesters and the directions of their gazes reveals a circular pattern emerging within the seemingly chaotic picture of the masses. In the centre of the circle I recognise Caja Lúdica's musicians with their white spiky wigs who lead the chants of this small group in circle with their drums and whistles.

When I look at these pictures at my PC screen, I can imagine and almost feel the vibrating atmosphere of these protests, I recognise the young people and I even start making connections and analysing these dynamics within the broader picture of my thesis. At the same time these moments are alien to me. The pictures contrast with the interventions I know from my fieldwork and the previous time spent in Guatemala as they show Caja Lúdica and their *comparsa* as part of a wider social and political movement and protest. Through their



participation here they seem to clearly indicate a political position against corruption and the president at the time, elements which, from what I knew, back then were expressed in a much more subtle and maybe careful way or often not publicly expressed at all.

This also represented ongoing tensions between the Network's youth groups and Caja Lúdica, as well as between individuals within the organisation itself. In this part of the thesis I am not able to further explore these tensions and this particular moment in circle during the mass protest. However, I can share some initial thoughts, which obviously require further research and exploration. The young peoples' engagement in the gatherings here can be linked to Caja Lúdica's decreased support from external funders, which may previously have had an impact on the ways in which they handled their collaboration with other social initiatives and protests. This may also be linked to the fact that a different generation of young Guatemalans, who have grown up through Caja Lúdica's processes, now lead this networking practice, which as shown in this thesis foster youth protagonism and empower young people to improve their current situations. Maybe this moment represents an example of how young people through continuous protests are actively contributing to structural changes in Guatemala. Their performance may also be a reflection of how the Network's local youth groups, which often advance a much stronger social justice emphasis and view, have impacted on Caja Lúdica and their identity as a cultural organisation in the Guatemalan context.

As these thoughts develop, I realise how little information I have gained by 'following' Caja Lúdica and the Community Arts Network through online research and how little I know about their values, changes and internal developments as an initiative and movement in 2016. Caja Lúdica as a networking organisation and practice currently struggle to maintain their high amount of activities and interventions due to the decrease of international financial support, which also has led to changes and restructuring processes on

an internal level. They have significantly reduced their outreach arts processes in different communities, members have left, and in 2015 they had to temporarily give up their cultural centre and working base as resources were not sufficient to pay rent and bills of the venue (Skype conversation LR 2015). In their search for a new place, it seems as if they have gone back in time, when they started as a grassroots organisation with little financial resources searching for collaboration and connections (see also chapter 3). Their working base and cultural centre in 2016 is located in a much smaller and affordable building, in a different neighbourhood of Guatemala City, where they seem to be trying to newly establish themselves locally as a cultural centre.

Caja Lúdica are now, however, part of a wider cultural youth initiative, the Community Arts Network, which they have supported to develop and grow, and whose diverse expressions can be found in different Guatemalan communities. As a Network of different groups, which share a common aim to change the situation of youth in Guatemala for the better, they have, over the years, developed strategies to establish themselves in this setting, to persevere and to support each other in and across community borders. This allowed and still allows them to continue their practices even in the most challenging economic conditions and despite social and political changes, which this particular context has undergone in the last sixteen years.

Many questions emerge from these most recent developments and dynamics mentioned above. While some were answered through my exploration, others remain unanswered, but I am not able to explore them at this point. It is time to end my part of this story here, because I cannot travel to Guatemala anymore and for my research I need to be able to see, feel and get immersed in moments and practices in order to explore, understand and write about them. Some of its colourful threads, however, will be woven into new stories - such as my future work as a researcher, amateur, community artist,

networking protagonist - and thereby will hopefully connect with other practices like an invisible web.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Diplomas of Socio-cultural Animation and Management

Caja Lúdica's diplomas are developed by their Educational Program in collaboration with a local university in Guatemala City, the *Escuela Superior de Arte*. To date they count with 9 cohorts which have graduated since 2007 (Caja Lúdica 2013):

#### *Animación cultural comunitaria* ('socio-cultural animation')

- La Cambalacha, San Marcos, Sololá (2007-2008), funded by Christian Aid; (7 young people).
- La Cambalacha, San Marcos, Sololá (2009), funded by Christian Aid; (8 young people).
- Rabinal, Baja Verapaz (2009), funded by Christian Aid and the European Union; (15 young people).
- Ciudad Quetzal, San Juan Sacatepéquez (2011), funded by Christian Aid; (13 young people).
- Guatemala City (2012), funded by AECID; (25 young people).
- Guatemala City (2013), funded by USAID-RTI; (25 young people).

#### *Gestión cultural comunitaria* ('cultural management')

- Guatemala City (2007-2008), funded by PNUD, SOROS and Christian Aid; (8 young people).
- Guatemala City (2008), funded by Christian Aid; (7 young people).
- Rabinal, Baja Verapaz (2009-2010), funded by Christian Aid and the European Union; (13 young people).

Appendix 2: Agenda of the Community Arts Network's 10<sup>th</sup> encounter 2013  
(Archive Caja Lúdica)

**JUVENTUD Y ARTE COMUNITARIO**

**10**

**ENCUENTRO DE COMUNIDADES RÍO GUATEMALTECA DE ARTE COMUNITARIO**

**09-12 AGOSTO 2013**

**VIERNES 9**

1:00 p.m. Bienvenida y Almuerzo  
2:30 a 5:30 p.m. Juegos y Dinámicas de Integración  
7:00 p.m. Fogata y Cena

**SÁBADO 10**

8:30 a.m. Círculo de conexión e integración

**FORO:** ...Y los derechos de la juventud?

- Avances en la articulación de RGAC.
- Formación Política, Movilización y Cabildeo para la incidencia; **Iniciativa de Ley 3896 y los Derechos de las Juventudes**, Coordinadora de Juventud por Guatemala
- ...Y la voluntad política? Motivación a la Articulación Juvenil. Carolina Escobar Sarti.

**FORMACIÓN ARTÍSTICA INICIO TALLER - JUEGO PÚBLICO Y COMPARSA...**

1:00 p.m. Almuerzo

2:30 a 5:30 p.m. **TALLER JUEGO PÚBLICO Y COMPARSA.**  
• Animación • Zancos • Máscaras • Pintura • Batucada • Escritura Creativa.

6:00 p.m. **AGENDA CULTURAL:** Los Hermanos Rex - Panchorizo y Tonibelle Che

7:00 p.m. Cena; Fogata y Noche Cultural  
• Bacteria Sound System • DJ Fender • Fiesta

**DOMINGO 11**

9:30 a.m. **FORO** .....Y los derechos de la juventud?

- Avances en la Implementación de la Política Nacional de Juventud. Presentación CONJUVE.
- Movimientos de Jóvenes: Construyendo un mundo posible
- Diego Bautista, Yo Soy132 - / -Andrea Ixchiú, 48 cantones Totonicapán -

**TALLER JUEGO PÚBLICO Y COMPARSA.**  
• Animación • Zancos • Máscaras • Pintura • Batucada • Escritura Creativa.

1:00 p.m. Almuerzo

2:30 a 5:30 p.m. Final de Talleres • Preparación de **COMPARSA**

5:30 p.m. **COMPARSA HOMENAJE** por Movimientos Juveniles, inicia en Caja Lúdica hacia el Parque Central.

7:00 p.m. **CIERRE** del 10 Encuentro de Comunidades, Juventud y Arte Comunitario.  
En el Centro Cultural Comunitario Caja Lúdica.

<http://www.ustream.tv/channel/tvludica> **WWW.CAJALUDICA.ORG**