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Abstract: Alternative Sprawls, Junkfutures: Buenos Aires Libre’s Urban Epistemology

In this paper I discuss the horizontally organized Buenos Aires Libre, a cadre of new media artists, hacktivists, programmers and technophiles who are building their own autonomous network, apart from the internet, in Buenos Aires. The network uses line of sight connections via directional antennae to link member-built nodes and users throughout the city. I look at the alternative activations of sprawl and horizontality in urban space done by the project as potentially resistant. I also examine notions of junk and excess in urban intervention as sites with distinct political potential.

The Buenos Aires Libre network uses older, clunkier technologies to speculate on the possible futures of this very wired South American city. Connecting via the web is quite easy in the vast majority of the city so, unlike most examples of autonomous networks throughout Latin America, Buenos Aires Libre does not fill an infrastructural gap. The superfluity of the network, however, is key to the speculative labor the group is invested in doing. It asks users to ground their access to the network in its material substrate. It eschews ‘virtuality’ and easy access in favor of a ‘do-it-yourself’ approach to informational traffic, demanding that users understand themselves as producers of the network’s future.

Members often express concern that some future ecological or political fallout would leave the infrastructure that supports internet access junked. In this way their gesture toward the future Buenos Aires might be read as dystopic, bordering on survivalist. But there is, too, a presentist activism visible in the group. Many members build nodes in the network because they feel that commercial and governmental surveillance is inevitable on the world wide web. An autonomous network allows for information flows to be directed entirely for and by users of the network. Both strains of argument among members mean that Buenos Aires Libre serves as an ideal site to examine what is at stake in our contemporary cities.

My paper directly engages themes of speculation and the construction of new (both imagined and material) futures through technological intervention.