# Contested Spaces: How We Made An Audio Quilt of One Thousand Names

LabSynthE is a laboratory for synthetic and electronic poetry in the School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication (ATEC) at The University of Texas at Dallas. We are more of a co-laboratory than a laboratory, however we call ourselves a "lab" to conform to language used around the school in other spaces of collaboration, where art and scientific, computational, robotic and otherwise hybrid practices take on a "laboratory" format of experimentation. LabSynthE provides a framework for collaboration among faculty and students for creative practice, thinking, exhibition, and "doing," which takes many forms. During the past two years we have collaborated with faculty from the school of ATEC and the School of Arts and Humanities, and students ranging from undergraduate to MA, MFA, and PhD candidates. The lab began in spring 2016, when the School was under the influence of an interim Dean, by way of a sign posted on the door of a sound recording room by Dr. Frank Dufour. Professor burrough joined the School and the lab in the same year, without knowing what she was stepping into, but found Dr. Dufour's methodologies and interests parallel to her own, so she committed to staying with the lab as a co-organizer. During their first year and a half, the lab consisted of Dufour and burrough with approximately eight regular attendees at two-hour weekly meetings. They produced three exhibitions and a sound recording that was the only U.S. work selected as a finalist in the 2017 *HearSay* international audio competition. The lab operates normally as follows: someone suggests an event or festival to which we could create a piece; the team spends a long time thinking, discussing and researching; we decide on a conceptual direction, produce materials and present work in

diverse spaces. As we are inspired by our collective research and discussions, projects take on multiple iterations (like our projects *Radium Girls* by the co-authors of this paper and *Lion's Breath* co-produced by the lab). One member may have an idea for a project they are developing, or some path they are intrigued to investigate, and the whole lab gets involved, providing feedback, participating in an experimental discovery, discussing and revising one member's work, which at times becomes the work of the lab as a collective. For instance, Ferreira's poetry projects of last winter became a focal point of experimentation for many lab members, which then inspired how *The Radium Girls* was exhibited in a sound art exhibit around the same time.

Dr. Dufour's background in radio and sound recording, and interest in new media audio and installation art and professor burrough's experience in new media art installation and participatory practices inform projects the lab produces. Conceptually, Dr. Dufour's interest in phenomenology and professor burrough's interest in remix studies, social justice, and appropriation, spark dialog between projects that ignite ideas, both abstract and concrete, that lab members reflect on for continuous conversations at lab meetings and on our Slack channel. To date, memory, translation, and poetics are recurrent themes in the projects developed by LabSynthE collaborators.

## Contested Spaces and Challenges

Since we developed unconventionally, without official sanction from the School, we were not at first provided a meeting room or budget. During the first year and a half we met in the sound recording room, as this was a teaching room familiar to Dr. Dufour and his regular students. However, in fall 2017 Dr. Dufour went on leave, and with professor burrough (who does not teach sound) organizing the group we lost privilege to

the sound recording room. We became nomadic, checking out rooms or working in other labs where group members held affiliations. As a group of artists, LabSynthE is always interested in finding places for exhibition. We have tested projects on campus and taken them to academic conferences/media arts exhibits, and we have been able to work together to produce a group exhibition of related works, but one challenge we often face is finding new places to exhibit a work of art that the lab produces together. One way we overcome this challenge is by collaborating with different groups which offer spaces for creative responses. The UT Dallas HIV/AIDS Week 2017opened a call for creative projects to be part of its programming.. LabSynthE saw this as an opportunity for collaboration and exhibition.

## The AIDS Memorial Quilt

The AIDS Memorial Quilt is the largest ongoing art community project in the world. In the 1980s, during the peak of the AIDS crisis, San Francisco activists created two by three foot panels on which they would write the names of loved ones who died of HIV/AIDS complications. These panels would be sewed in groups of eight, creating a twelve by twelve-foot block. In 1987 the NAMES Foundation was created to care for the Quilt and manage its growing, a role it still plays today. The Quilt was displayed in the Washington DC Mall six times; more than a collaborative piece of art, it is an important tool of political action and works to call attention and pressure government and other stakeholders to look for solutions to the AIDS crisis. Since 2002, Anne Balsamo and Dale MacDonald have worked to create the AIDS Quilt Touch, a project which aims to digitally preserve and expand the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Since then, many different institutions and researchers have collaborated in different iterations of the project. In

2010, Dr. Balsamo and her team was awarded a Digital Humanities Implementation Grant by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The Public Interactives Research Lab (PIRL), led by Dean Balsamo and Associate Dean MacDonald, is one of the partners in the last iteration of the AQT project. As part of its commitment to HIV/AIDS activism and social justice, the lab organizes annually the UT Dallas HIV/AIDS Awareness Week, in partnership with other institutions of the University and the School. The events include displays of blocks, free HIV testing, talks and a memorial tradition of reading names from the Quilt uninterruptedly for a day during International AIDS Day (December 1$^{st}$).

In 2017, labs and communities in ATEC were invited to create works of art or installations as part of the HIV/AIDS Week programming. LabSynthE accepted this opportunity to create a work of art open to a generous amount of traffic and interaction. The theme is coherent with the lab's progressive ideas, and the AIDS Memorial Quilt involves community, memory and ritual, all research interests of the lab. As a conceptual, poetic, and practical opportunity, it offers a rich form for participation: every year we can choose to iterate on the same piece or explore other possibilities within a similar environment.

**Conceptual Threads**

Before we started "doing" we had several meetings in which our production was in the realm of dialog. We produced ideas. Having read names aloud during last year's event, professor burrough remembered how it felt to stand on stage and what it was like to look at the students—some attentive, some eating, some talking to friends; how moving it was at the end to add the names of people she knew and people she wanted to

remember: these experiences informed the first broad brush stroke that would paint a portrait of the audio quilt we would create in just under eight weeks. The first pitch for the project was for a card that was interactive, that we would hand to passersby in the ATEC lobby with an invitation to record themselves reading names printed inside the cards, mirroring the reading of the names that happens on International AIDS Day. burrough suggested minimal, white cards, with a red thread keeping the card sewn shut, and no other visual designs on the card other than the recording device and hand-written names. We imagined our version of the reading and recording to be gentle, it would require a LabSynthE member to interact with the public by giving the card, and some amount of instruction with the recording device embedded in the card. We envisioned taking people under the stairwell in the lobby where students meet between classes to record their readings, then hanging the cards in installments of twenty each day for the duration of AIDS Week. Junichi Murata writes about the ambiguity of technological artifacts, "One of the important and most general reasons we create technologies is to free ourselves from various types of work. However, if we examine this aspect of technology more closely its ambiguous character becomes apparent" (153). For LabSynthE the DIY recording device freed us from the work of hosting or staging the reading of the names, and instead relocated this public activity inside another ambiguous artifact, one that is crafted by hand, like the squares of the quilt. Murata characterizes "technological artifacts as co-actors;" and during this installation we imagine ourselves as the hosts, the guests we give each card to as the invited reader, the cards as the keepers of the names, both written and recorded—and hopefully played (154). In this sense, there are multiple co-actors on the scene. Beginning with the humans: There are members of LabSynthE, who

changed daily; people walking through the ATEC lobby who agreed to take a card and record a list of ten names; and people wandering or stalling in the ATEC lobby who pressed the "Play" buttons dangling from the cards. The non-human co-actors, if we call all technological artifacts co-actors, must include not just the DIY recorders but also the cards themselves, with the hand-written list of names and needlework.

One of the most interesting conversations we had was a negotiation of whether we should use DIY technology for the sound recorder inside the handmade card, or create it ourselves. Weighing the price per unit, time for delivery and production, and time until AIDS Week, we decided that with our small team of be nine collaborators, we had to use a readily available DIY technology. In one conversation we wondered if we could call ourselves "artists" if we did not make the things we produced. By the end of the production period, we spent more than twenty hours creating the hand-made cards, with three to four lab members collaborating on a rotating assembly line that would make Ford proud. We arrived at using a recording device specifically made for cards available from Sound Dawgs, priced at a discount in our bulk order.

**Chain Piecing: Learning by Doing**

As soon as we received our first Sound Dawgs recording device we were able to create an alpha version of the handmade card. At this point, a Visiting Associate Professor who joined us on this project, Dr. Heidi Cooley, suggested we sew the recording device into the card. Embedding the technology of the quilt into the card was an aesthetic and structural suggestion that was in conceptual alignment with the idea for the card. Like the AIDS Quilt Touch project, it uses technology to expand the traditions and rituals of the AIDS Memorial Quilt. The reading of names is an ephemeral

performance. Our project allows for the ritual of remembering a person by saying their name to be recreated every time one presses a button, therefore expanding the performance through technology; and creating another performance that is mediated and intimate.

Nine of us met to start a production line two weeks before AIDS Week (xtine burrough, Delaney Conroy, Heidi Cooley, Letícia Ferreira, Morgan Grasham, Clayton Harper, Ritwik Kaikini, Sean Landers, and Sabrina Starnaman). We had most of the project worked out, but realized that the recording device did not have holes or a space where we would easily be able to sew it into the card. burrough pushed the needle through the fleshy part of the speaker to secure it to the paper and Dr. Cooley sewed a bow on the back of it; Ferreira sewed down the cable wires; Kaikini realized we should replace the piece that covers the battery so it would not run out before our installation began. Within the first hour of collaborating on the design of the card, the team experienced what Gilbert Simondon would refer to as an aesthetic sensation, which stayed with us throughout our assembly line process (**Figure 1**). Simondon writes, "Aesthetics is not only, nor first and foremost, the sensation of the 'consumer' of the work of art. It is also, and more originally so, the set of sensations, more or less rich, of the artists themselves: it's about a certain contact with matter that is being transformed through work. One experiences something aesthetic when one is doing a soldering or driving in a long screw" (3). Some of us talked about the aesthetic experience while we were making the cards. Conroy and burrough shared that they were both silent and "in the zone," the work transforming them into a meditative state, while others were talking about television shows, movies, and the upcoming holiday. We also talked about how

coming together to make the piece resembled how panels of the AIDS Memorial Quilt were made: collectively, in workshops at community centers.
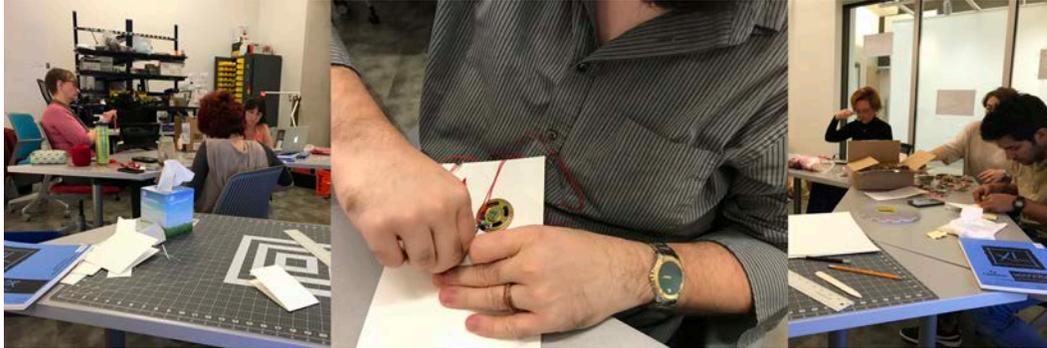


**Figure 1** LabSynthE members collaborate on the production of *An Audio Quilt of A Thousand Names.*

Then we figured our most productive roles: burrough is slowest at threading needles and fastest at cutting and folding paper; Ferreira, Cooley, and Starnaman can work the needle and thread quickly; Kaikini took each recording device from the box, tested it, and replaced the paper near the battery with a red ribbon; Grasham wrote many names. Kaikini and Conroy met again to cut and fold cards, and insert recording devices on a separate working day, prepping the lab for sewing before the Fall holiday. Harper and Landers helped to sew in various parts of the production line, as we met at different times during the two weeks prior to our installation. Thus, the team worked together to produce their version of the quilt of one thousand names.

**20 Cards a Day for Five Days**

AIDS Week took place from Monday, November 27 – Friday, December 1, 2017. ach day at noon we set twenty of our cards on the table next to the display of a block of the AIDS Memorial Quilt (**Figure 2**).

**Figure 2** Cards presented on the table near the AIDS Memorial Quilt where passersby can choose one at random to pick up, untie, and record their reading of the names before a LabSynthE member hangs it in the installation.

When we invited passersby to participate it was almost always necessary to explain the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the reading of the names tradition and the importance of the HIV/AIDS Awareness Week event before talking about the cards. At times, the display of blocks of the AIDS Quilt, the outreach and awareness campaign happening on a table next to it and the Audio Quilt became different layers of the same performance/project, as we shared space, time and team members. Young students, who are often puzzled by the AIDS Quilt display and need time to understand its historical context, would frequently be excited to participate and record names on the cards. We

suggested to participants to record their reading under ATEC's stairs, whichbecame the "official" site of private, intimate performances of remembrance.

We hung the cards at the end of each day in different parts of the building (**Figures 3, 4 and 5**). They slowly occupied more of ATEC's uncontested lobby space as the week passed. As we did not want to permanently alter the recording devices, we tucked the recording button and cables into the board and attached a "Play" label near its button before hanging each card (**Figure 6**). Even so, some people accidentally pressed the record button while trying to play the installation, erasing the previous recording. This was a risk of the project. However, we embraced this as a valid possibility of interaction by the people who occupy the ATEC building. Just as errors occur in the listing of the names that we retrieved from the NAMES database, and in the live readings, we account for these types of errors in the public installation of our audio quilt.

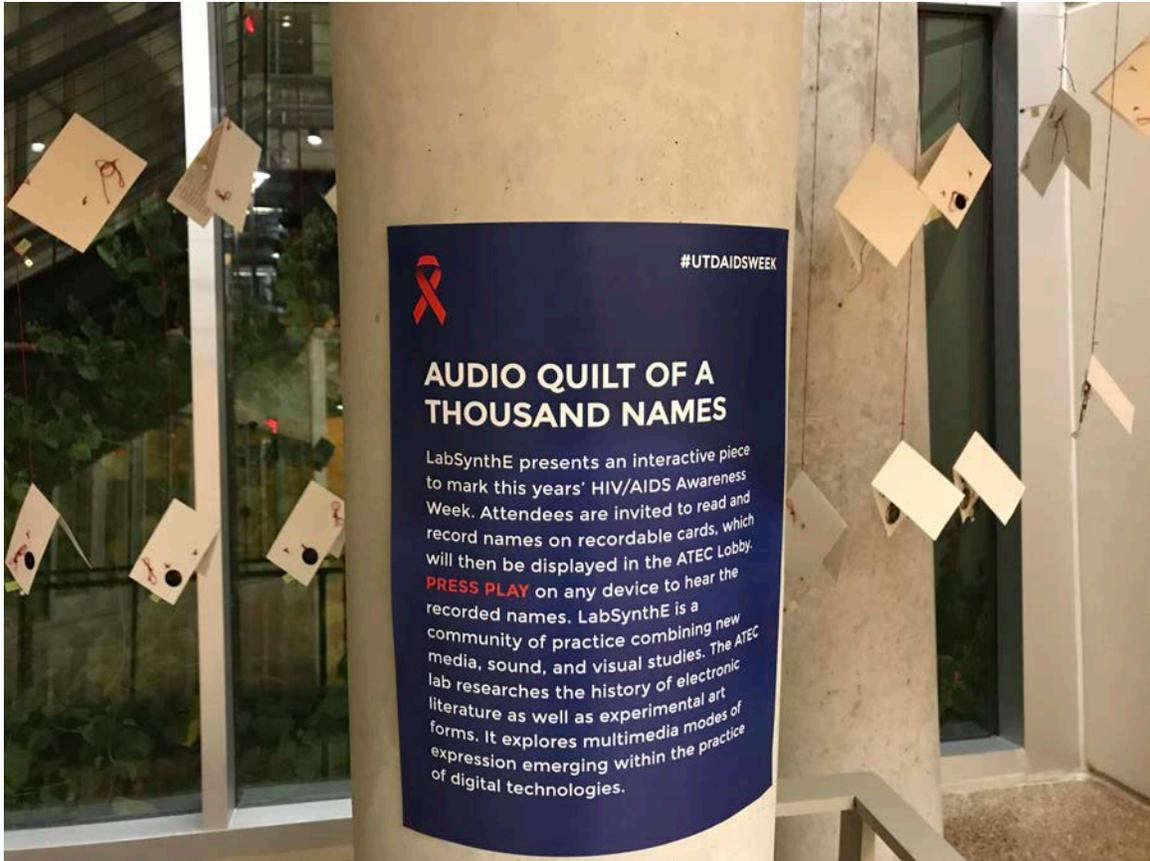**Figure 3** On Monday we installed the cards hanging beneath a stairwell on the east side of the ATEC building.

**Figure 4** On Tuesday we installed the cards hanging under the stairs on the west side of the building.

**Figure 5** On Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday we installed the cards hanging together, over a central space of study and passage.

**Figure 6** A close-up view of one of the hanging cards.

## Iterative Practices

We knew we needed help, but we forgot to ask for it during the week of the event. The team was great at coming together to cut, fold, stitch, and create. Throughout the week—and it was a busy week near the end of the semester, a tough time to ask people for extra help—we could have used more voices and hands to explain the project to passersby and hang the installation. Murilo Paiva Homsi is an affiliated member of LabSynthE who was greatly involved in assisting us with the installation of this project each night during the week. In retrospect, one thing that would have been helpful was to create a sign-up sheet for this invisible labor. Setting the cards on the table to "sell

themselves" is just not enough for a participatory project such as this. To engage an audience with such an intimate interaction, the artist or someone on the artist's behalf must talk with the person who becomes a collaborator in the project. Help comes in various forms, however, and it is important to embrace the creative ways that people provided their assistance. Ritwik Kaikini made a documentary of the *Audio Quilt of One Thousand Names* for our archives and social media (Kaikini).

Another question we had throughout the process was whether people would press the "Play" button, and, more importantly, if people would accidentally (or not) press the "Record" button. These DIY recording devices came with a recording wire labeled with a yellow sticker and the letters, "REC." However, the play button was unlabeled. We decided that adding our own, slightly larger and more legible (and printed by hand, to stay on theme with the cards), "Play" labels would encourage viewers to interact with the installation. The white cards and red thread from which they were hanging were designed so minimally that these labels provided a contrast in hue, and shifted the visual weight of a counter-balance on the horizontal axis in relationship to the cards that were suspended from a pipe near the ceiling. We think people, for the most part, pressed the "Play" button. We did notice many people who pressed one, and then two, and then multiple play buttons to hear a choir of names. The proximity of the cards to one another, and their location—in the lobby at easy to reach heights—set most viewers up for a relatively easy interaction. We spent a lot of time pressing the play buttons in this highly public space, so we could have been influencers. Once someone sees one person interacting with the work, the aura of the art is altered.

Not surprisingly, by the end of the week, some of the cards played a static hum. This is a result of people pressing the "Record" button instead of the "Play" button, despite the clarity of the labeling system we put in place. In a next iteration of the project we will discuss removing the button from the wire after the names have been recorded. However, we will also spend time thinking about the implications of removing the recording button. If only the play button is available, are we suggesting that the one reading of the names listed on the card is final? With the record button in place , we offer the possibility for multiple versions of the reading of the list of names. The cards can be removed, re-stitched together, taken to a new site, and re-recorded. Like the plurality of voices during the reading of the names on December first, with the recording button in tact, we keep the card open to this same possibility.

### Contested/Uncontested

While LabSynthE began as an unofficial "lab," it has offered a highly productive creative practice for faculty and graduate students in and affiliated with the School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication. As a result of the amount of production, quality of the work and places where the work is showcased, the "lab" is likely to soon fall outside of the contested domain and into enter a more official role in the campus community. Sometimes our practices touch on uncontested areas, like the professionalization of graduate education, for instance, reminding graduate students to submit works to new media festivals when the deadlines approach. Other times, our operations also border on contested zones of operation, like when the communications department wanted to take pictures of us making this audio quilt project and had to follow us to three different labs in an hour because we don't officially own a room and

we had to find the best lighting conditions in the room that was available during the week before fall break. In many ways LabSynthE is like our audio quilt. It is synthetically pieced together, everyone plays a part, we are learning who we are by doing the practice, and we are iterative.

**Works Cited**

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