

# Strategy and Spell

## Art as Infrastructural Change

LUIZA CROSMAN, MA in Art and Culture  
Researcher at The Terraforming  
Strelka Institute

*The essay “Strategy and Spell: Art as Infrastructural Change” is an investigation of the performative force art spaces have on the field of art and on various infrastructures at large. It is also a strategic proposition on how to envision a position for action and from which to gain leverage within the current neoliberal global context. Drawing from contemporary art, design and media theory on systemic thinking, and the post-contemporary time complex, the essay reflects on two personal projects: the exhibition space casamata (2014–2017), and the project TRAMA, developed for the 33<sup>rd</sup> São Paulo Biennial – Affective Affinities (2018). Favoring a speculative approach that tackles large-scale problematics and collective organization, it demonstrates how there are many potentialities contained in exhibition spaces and how such potentialities could, through an understanding of a contemporary art megastructure and art practice as infrastructural change, operate new experiments for the art system.*

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### Introduction

Why is contemporary art’s internal operational system still one of power inequality and economic precarity despite its visual and discursive production being critical of political injustices and social stratification? This essay will argue that there is an overpowering system in place, which is not affected by the current visual or discursive production, and which can actually benefit from it. Because of that, the question becomes, how can art production engage with the world not only as a symbolic or visual system, but also through its potent infrastructure?

This essay will think through transformative action propositions by way of two personal reflections derived from my own artistic practice, and extricate from these instructable examples that can be used, in abstract terms, as a way to propose a base model from which to work upon as an artist. The first, a small independent exhibition space called *casamata*, which I directed between 2014 and 2017, located in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. And the second, the project *TRAMA*, which I presented at *Affective Affinities*, the 2018 edition of the São Paulo Biennial, the largest in Latin America. These two examples will guide the text in weaving the idea that art exhibition spaces, or institutional spaces, are one of art's biggest potential currencies in the attempt to dissociate art from a neoliberal agenda. In order to do that, I will introduce current notions on the systemic aspects of contemporary art and its ties with neoliberalism, and I will advocate that any project with a desire for transformation should identify with power and leverage on that. I will propose, though, that it is not enough to enact gestures through art objects, and that it is time to tackle the infrastructures of contemporary art.

In order to argue for the necessity to move to infrastructural change, this essay will start by mapping out the present critical conundrum of contemporary art: the fact that even though critical art is being produced, systemic change informed by this criticality is not happening. This will be done through the notions of contemporary art's moral economy, critical virtue and a timeless contemporary. Then, through a reflection on the exhibition space *casamata*, I will map out the idea of a contemporary art megastructure; that is, the large-scale scope of different infrastructures connected in a dynamic feedback of effects. Following this, a short analysis of new institutionalism will point to ongoing challenges in the institutional sphere. The second example, the project *TRAMA*, will develop further the idea of a megastructure and will include a strategy to operationalize it: a strategy I call "speculative performativity," through which artists can become more involved with art's infrastructures, combining both visual and discursive propositions with pragmatic action. Its central point is to propose recursive interventions that, albeit temporarily, can offer new insights on an institution's operations or the relationship with its context.

Finally, the essay will conclude by proposing that if infrastructural manipulation becomes a model for artistic practice intertwined with institutional organization, it might be possible to acquire the scale needed to start affecting real change.

### **Contemporary art's critical conundrum**

According to curator and writer Tirdad Zolghadr, a moral economy is, in short, the production, dissemination, and use of emotions, values, norms, and obligations that characterize a specific group or historic moment. Contemporary art's moral economy is, Zolghadr continues, defined by the production, demand and distribution of a culture that doesn't identify with power and which institutionalizes and rewards symbolic political effects to the detriment of changes in structural paradigms (Zolghadr, 2016, p.35). That is, one that contributes to the maintenance of a hegemonic system based on class, race, and gender inequality, on precariousness and social stratification by affirming that it is possible to create symbolic worlds that are supposedly disconnected from the underlying reality—while they are, in fact, often dependent on it and embedded in it. But if artists in general are trying to expose such issues, how is that possible?

In its non-identification with power, contemporary art's moral economy is shaped through the constant repetition of the semantics of critical virtue (the ability to speak truth to power) and difference (freedom of production), but also by contemporary art's flattening out of past/present/future temporalities, based on a timeless contemporary which is generated by the artwork's indeterminacy. That is, the open quality of its interpretation and ever accumulating subjective experience of it. Art theorist Suhail Malik, for whom "the reasons why CA [contemporary art] abrogates history despite its ostensible interest in effecting change (be it at small scales) are initially intra-artistic," explains that one of contemporary art's main characteristics, besides its non-disciplinary logic, is its non-doctrinal experience by both artist and audience (Malik, 2016, p.3). This puts the experience of the work of art, and its possibility of open, multiple, ever accumulating and equally valid interpretations, as the pillar of its systemic operation. This open and ever accumulating interpretation is what Malik

calls the artwork's indeterminacy, and through which contemporary art subordinates "both chronoschematics [the sequencing passing of time which differentiates one moment from the next or previous] and the fixity of meaning to the renewal of experience and its appreciation" (Malik, 2016, p.5). By doing this, contemporary art overcomes history.

History, because that is the name for the (retrospectively) meaningful transformation of material, social, and semantic organization from what was to what is to what will be. If that sequence is granted, a future clearly distinct to the present (or a present clearly distinct to the past) destroys the earlier moment either in part, which is the history of reform, or as a whole, which is revolution. Expressed as the tense structure of transformation, this axis of historical determination is precisely the definite, ordinal sequence of a chronoschematics—the very thing that is overridden and attenuated by CA. With its revocation of a history in which one instance of time is clearly distinct from another and ordered—in which the future destroys the past and present—CA abrogates both reform and revolution. That is, CA does not allow even for reform because it vitiates the structuring condition of historical difference (Malik, 2016, p.6).

What Malik is exposing is the process through which contemporary art succeeds in creating potential (and even critical) worlds without them ever actually affecting their underlying reality, as far as systemic or infrastructural change is concerned. That is also how criticality without an association with transformative action came to be not only ineffective, but also very much welcomed as a way to shape contemporary art's symbolic capital and obfuscate the way it is tied to neoliberalism.

### **The neoliberal spell**

It might already sound commonplace to state that contemporary art works as a significant, albeit dissimulated, agent of the contemporary version of liberalism. What is worrisome is that the association has gone beyond mere terms of market trade to include also how the art system itself enacts neoliberal premises. It welcomes and rewards critical virtue, while ever expanding, hand in hand with globalism, because it is protected by the artwork or the indeterminacy of art discourse.

According to political theorist Wendy Brown, neoliberalism goes beyond economic policies, such as facilitating free trade, maximizing corporate profits or challenging welfarism. In her words, “neoliberalism carries a social analysis that, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire” (Brown, 2003, p.40). Thus, it extends and disseminates market values to all institutions and social actions. Everything becomes submitted to an economic rationality, where considerations of profitability and entrepreneurial actions govern all dimensions of human life and its institutions. This means that under a neoliberal regime, we always conduct ourselves according to a calculus of utility, benefit, or satisfaction against a microeconomic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, as well as moral value-neutrality. It not only reduces life to such premises, but also goes further and develops institutional practices and rewards for enacting this vision.

Neoliberal ideology has integrated deeply and smoothly with art since the 90s; enough for the new denomination of “creative industries” and “creative capital” (Fisher, 2018) to arise globally, and for in-depth research to show that art moves through the world population’s one percent as financial capital, together with other luxury goods such as yachts (Fraser, 2011). Through its association with neoliberalism, contemporary art has more and more set out to be a production regime of unregulated and precarious labor, based in two parallel economies: an informal one and another highly financialized. It has become a globally integrated operating system in which institutions, such as museums or institutes, function as a way of acquiring geopolitical prestige while also displacing minorities through gentrification practices. And, above all, where there is the constant dissemination of highly individualized, competitive, and oppressive subjectivities tied to a grid of scarcity. Artists constantly compete with each other, instead of leveraging their power collectively.

These issues can be regarded as systemic since the problematics are very much the same everywhere, in global and local contexts, from material to immaterial practices and from institutions to off spaces. It follows that, for contemporary art to actually break the current neoliberal spell, it is necessary to acquire traction on a systemic scale. Although, according to Malik, “such traction is untenable in neoliberal domination precisely

because the transnational concentration of power is distributed, networked without cohesion, incomplete, partial, and non-total,” this text proposes that acting in a decentralized but coordinated way that is, collectively and artistically leveraging our power as a creative field *and* potent global infrastructure—might work (Fisher, 2018). In that sense, symbolic, systemic and infrastructural change must go hand in hand.

### **Art spaces as manifestations of a megastructure**

A megastructure, as defined by design theorist Benjamin Bratton, is the way through which the extractive, productive and circulation processes of computational devices form a planetary-scale infrastructure of an accidental character (Bratton, 2015, p.8). As an example, he describes the connection between mines, refineries, terminals, ports, factories, servers, personal computers, cell phones, and satellites. According to Bratton, this accidental megastructure reorders the forms and parameters of modes of governance, becoming both a medium and a tool of local and global sovereignty. It redefines and reorients scales and power territories, which can be seen in situations like the recent example of US elections interference by Cambridge Analytica through Facebook.

For this essay, however, I use the image of the megastructure as a way to think through the distribution of resources, devices and processes in the field of art, and how that distribution relates to the current contemporary art system. Thinking through the idea of a contemporary art megastructure complexifies the idea that there is more than just art within the system. It gives concrete shape to previously abstract operations, and thereby potentially shows how and where to act if one desires to change or reshape such operations. That means going beyond aimlessly pointing at production, financing, circulation, and social and communication processes.

Doing critical works about—or, even more generally, repeating ready-made discourses of—things like ‘art world precarity,’ ‘colonial practices,’ or ‘neoliberal institutional agendas’ does little more than exhaust issues before they are properly dealt with. The descriptive methodology of the megastructure allows one to go beyond pointing and to actually describe “the relationships between things or the repertoires they enact”

(Easterling, 2018, p.4), thus tying these layers to existing infrastructures, devices and platforms, both local and global. In other words, it is a way to denaturalize business as usual, and to define new conditions of possibility; that is, the conditions for something to be possible or not, for the art system, whose outline is, after all, flexible.

There are specific issues that can and should be addressed in order to be able to deal with things such as wage policies, diversity in administrative roles, tax evasion through art or artwashing neighborhoods. A contemporary art megastructure, then, would encompass everything from relationships among families and friends to customs laws and free zones, as well as standardizations of training (formal and informal), living conditions and economic subsidies. Thus, in this case, the megastructure is composed of not only technical or infrastructural pieces, but there are also affective politics and matters of subjectivities in place. Contemporary art's moral economy is itself a prevalent vector in its politics. Its production, demand and distribution of a culture that doesn't identify with power is constantly deployed to shape the infrastructures that compose its own megastructure and the subjectivities that are produced by it. One just needs to closely consider, for example, not only contemporary art's role in gentrification processes but also the artist's paradoxical condition within this situation.

### **casamata**

Between 2014 and 2017 I was part of the directorial team of an exhibition space called casamata, located in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil<sup>1</sup>. casamata acted as a research site for experimental exhibitions by young upcoming Brazilian artists. The exhibition space was unique due to the fact that it only accepted proposals for individual shows selected through an open call, something that was lacking within the context of the city at that time. This favored exhibitions that would act as conceptual gestures, where the artist herself would be able to think through the mediation factors of her own

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1 — The word “casamata” stands for a type of guerrilla bunker. The name came from the physical characteristics of the space: a garage-like, low ceiling area.

work. Contextual specificities and necessities are translations of the city's megastructure and can become opportunities to act within it.

Rio de Janeiro's art context traditionally lacks non-commercial spaces dedicated to individual shows of young artists. In its maturation, between the 1980s and 2000s, professional circulation and exhibitions were made mainly through commercial galleries, which were thriving with a newly global art market and expanding curatorial interest in non-northern countries such as Brazil (Basbaum, 2002, p.2). Added to this, there was an energetic but scattered network of artist-run initiatives organized around exchange programs and alternative circulation, such as residencies, magazines, collective ephemeral actions and exhibitions. Because the city lacked institutional spaces without collections that were devoted to exhibition making—such as the European Kunstverein or Kunsthalle—which could afford to exhibit young artists with no or limited experience, or which could embrace more experimental projects, much of the artistic scene was built by the artists themselves. This eventually led to artist and theorist Ricardo Basbaum coining the term “etc-artist”:

When an artist is a full-time artist, we should call her/him an “artist-artist” when the artist questions the nature and function of her/his role, we should write “etc.-artist” (so we can imagine several categories: curator-artist, writer-artist, activist-artist, producer-artist, agent-artist, theoretician-artist, therapist-artist, teacher-artist, chemist-artist, etc.). (Basbaum, 2003)

Building on this history, and Basbaum's theoretical framework, the main point of casamata's open call was to demonstrate how the exhibition spaces themselves produce and are produced by the artistic context, and can have a direct influence on what kind of art is circulated and discussed. It fed on the city's past history, which seemed to have become a bit dormant at that time. In order to foster that discussion, the open call asked for site-oriented projects which responded to any of the many challenges proposed by the space's infrastructure: the fact that it was located inside a multicultural house with no physical separation between the two; that it opened between 6pm–11pm; or that it provided no artist fee or production budget. Therefore, the curatorial perspective—guidelines for applying and choosing the projects—of casamata was that of the infrastructure of the

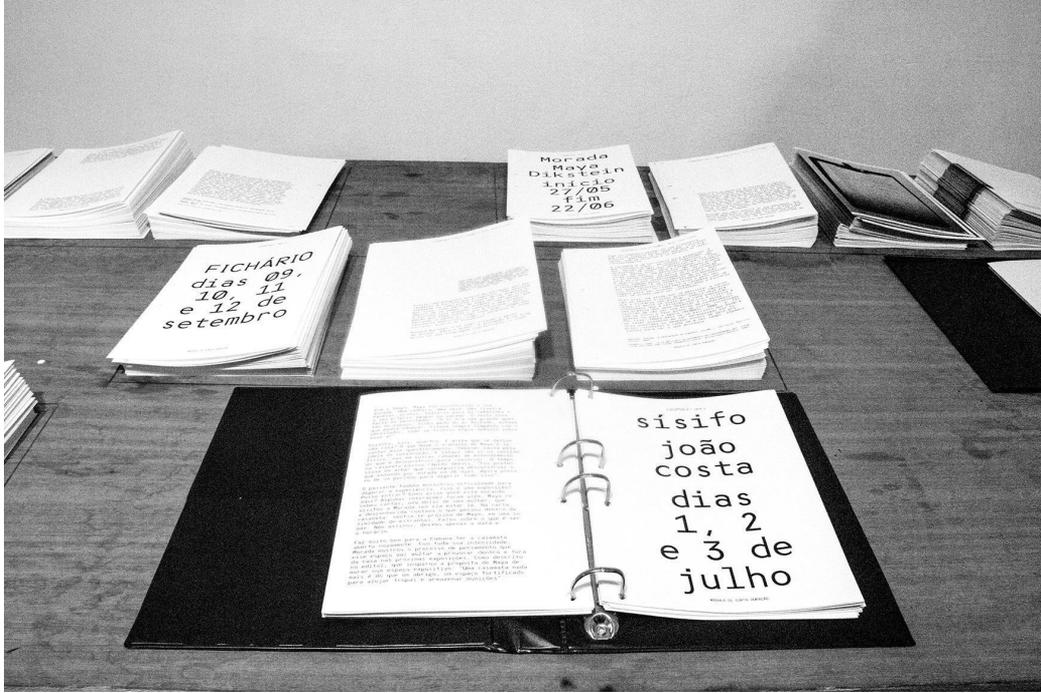


FIG. 1  
Image of casamata's editorial project FICHÁRIO,  
a binder for the collection of the texts and  
photographs of all the shows.  
*Photo: Lua Perê*

space itself. As a result, casamata presented 22 shows, most of them being the first opportunity the selected artists had to show their work, all with an accompanying curatorial text and photographs. The space became an entry point to the artistic context, a space for congregation and discussion of experimental works and, most importantly for the subject of this essay, it was a first step to understanding how the conditions of possibility of the city of Rio de Janeiro affected—and were affected by—an exhibition space.

A concrete example was the issue of funding. A specific characteristic to the cultural environment of Rio de Janeiro in this period was the fact that there weren't any funding laws or governmental propositions regarding the maintenance of a cultural space. There were many funding opportunities for creating short exhibitions in temporary, rented or precarious spaces such as abandoned buildings, especially if they were in recently gentrified areas. What became clear was a lack of governmental interest in investing in spaces that could actually have long-term traction in the city, but a huge

interest in using art as a friendly occupier. Legislation, then, also appears as part of the megastructure.

Directing casamata was my first direct experience as an artist with a much bigger stack of operational connections that are usually veiled from artistic practice. It made me realize the top–bottom distribution process of resources that would shape the context’s conditions of possibility and wonder if, by acting through and within the institutional/exhibition space scale, it would be possible to re-orient this with bottom–up propositions. What kind of power could it yield? Could it be extended beyond the art context? If legislation or urbanization agendas were affecting our possibility to be funded, could institutions or exhibition spaces have any effect on legislation or propose a different kind of urbanization itself? If so, how? These were questions that pointed to the possibility of thinking or proposing the exhibition space as a medium through which to act within the megastructure, as a way to reach a larger scale of problematics.

### **Scale matters: New institutionalism and coordination**

If casamata managed to foster a new way of showing the work of young artists and, in many cases, provide them with an experimental starting point, the financial precarity was much harder to resolve. In retrospect, a broader comprehension of funding strategies and the ability to see a bigger contextual picture would have made it possible for the project to adapt and leverage its physical, affective or cultural resources to its fullest potential. casamata could have had a bigger role in fostering a broad discussion with other spaces and push collectively for changes on funding legislation. What emerges from this experience then is that intersections in terms of infrastructural demands—and not necessarily in symbolic or conceptual similarities—could be coordination points in order to build collectivity. This seems like an obvious statement, but it is telling that in the contemporary art field discussions regarding collective action become messy and complex, especially when tied to economic problematics. As mentioned before, the neoliberal spell pushes for a grid of competition, economic scarcity and highly individualized subjectivities, which in turn pushes artists to act in favor of their own exposure and cultural capital instead of structural change.

Nonetheless, the missed opportunity in fostering a larger discussion around funding sheds light on an important operational aspect of the megastructure: its distributed scale and network. So, in order to propose an exhibition space as the medium through which to act, coordination and collaboration will be crucial between not only artists and curators, but also publishers, audience members, educators, government officials, technicians, and managers, amongst many others.

Although the term exhibition space here relates to a tradition of artist-run spaces, or independent spaces, I would like to push the designation to a variety of scales and formats, including museums and large institutions. The coordinates to be investigated and restructured may be influenced, but do not only depend on size or local specificities. The association of contemporary art with neoliberalism flattens out local problematics in favor of global ones. Also, regardless of variations in concept or size, when an exhibition space is recognized as a manifestation of the megastructure it becomes connected to other spaces in a network of distributed systemic operations—to leverage that is to acknowledge and coordinate the fact that physical space is always a strategic resource.

While in Brazil the autonomous or artist-run scene was developing initiatives and theoretical frameworks between 1990 and 2010, due to a lack of an institutionalized field, in the northern part of Europe, where the institutional field was already quite structured, curators were developing strategies to rethink and repurpose their institutions and exhibition spaces. “New institutionalism,” which Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger describe as “a series of curatorial, art educational as well as administrative practices that from the mid 1990s to the early 2000s” aimed at experimenting with the exhibition space and turning it into “a production, site of research and space for debate,” is an example in reorganizing the structure of the institutional and curatorial activity (Kolb & Flückiger, 2013, p.6). The term is usually associated with the practices of Charles Esche during his time directing Rooseum in Malmö, Maria Lind at Kunstverein München, Jorge Ribalta at Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), and Nina Möntmann at The Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art (NIFCA), amongst others, whose aim was to expand the exhibition format to a range of events, programs, educational and critical initiatives, which self-re-

flexively looked into what kind of new roles art institutions could have in shaping the social and the political.

Even if many of these curators came to reject the term coined by curator and art critic Jonas Ekeberg, and that the curatorial propositions have differences, it is possible to argue that by and large new institutionalism responded to, or even assimilated, the spirit of artist-run spaces, participatory artistic practices and process-based works to inform their curatorial propositions, while still experimenting within the parameters of the exhibition space (Doherty, 2006, p.2).

Sixteen years after the publication that collated these curatorial practices under the one term, many reflections regarding its failures and successes have already been published. What becomes clear from the current discourse around new institutionalism is that, although there were many different strategies and attempts—with different outcomes—to radicalize or provide alternative formats for programming and internal administrative protocols, most projects came to a halt due to overarching, top–bottom problematics, with austerity, financial measures and political resolutions often cited. Curator Nina Möntmann, for example, argues that “criticality didn’t survive the ‘corporate turn’ in the institutional landscape” and that this has affected not only museums branded as global companies, but also the smaller or mid-sized institutions. (Möntmann, 2007). Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger, on the other hand, present an alternative, and complementary, issue:

We might counter-argue that this failure cannot be explained entirely with reference to hegemonial political conditions, but that institutions as agents did not manage to constitute or mobilize the (sub-)publics necessary to oppose the closure of an institution under political pressure, and which might by their very existence legitimate the direction of the program. (Kolb & Flückiger, 2013, p.13)

Kolb and Flückiger go on to argue that the short-term contracts which currently regulate the employment sphere of the art world prevent the possibility of creating a stable and nourishing relationship with the community, local public, or even, I might add, the network of spaces and relationships that, as the authors put it, “are prerequisite for a political project” (Kolb & Flückiger, 2013, p.13).

It is possible to draw a few conclusions from this. First, the possibility of having artistic practices absorbed within the institutional sphere, which points to a less binary relationship between how institutional critique or speculation can be assimilated when it steps beyond the symbolic and becomes, in fact, programmatic. Second, the crucial role a networked relationship will have, between actors within contemporary art and within educational and activist communities, in pushing against overarching structures. And third, the necessity of tactics that go much deeper into the politics and governance of infrastructures than just the programming or administration of a certain exhibition space—this also means developing a more robust, risky and speculative understanding of what institutional practices can be.

In principle, exhibition spaces and organizations already regulate and mediate the system. The goal is not to diminish or reject the associations and effects of power in the spaces and organizations of contemporary art. On the contrary, the idea is to manipulate their potential and performative force into creating new configurations and regulations for the surrounding infrastructures. That means making them the medium through which we act and intervene beyond the exhibition space itself into specific matters of distribution, legislation and economics, amongst others.

## TRAMA

*TRAMA*<sup>2</sup> (2018) was a project commissioned by the 33<sup>rd</sup> São Paulo Biennial *Affective Affinities*, curated by Gabriel Perez Barreiro, initiated by me and carried out together with three contributors: publisher Zazie Edições, researcher Pedro Moraes and musician Negalê Jones. The main idea behind the project was to carry on the legacy of institutional critique through an actualization of what kind of gesture would be relevant today. For better or for worse, institutional critique became the very *modus operandi* of institutions themselves.

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2 — Portuguese word that simultaneously means both “plot” and “weave,” thus evoking both the idea of a “behind the scenes machination” and a multidirectional structure of construction.



FIG. 2  
Installation view of *TRAMA* at the 33<sup>rd</sup> São Paulo Biennial.  
© Pedro Ivo Transferetti and Bienal de São Paulo

When carried out by curators or directors, the assimilation of institutional critique, until recently, did provide an experimental ground for new propositions, especially in programming. That is one of the things that become clear with new institutionalism. However, as an artistic gesture its power has diminished. The representational or symbolic scale of its gestures does not have enough agency to carry out change. The current system reproduces and expands itself regardless of the critical analyses and representations produced by artistic discourse and artworks. In its worse enactment, contemporary institutional critique takes on the function of a *mea culpa* regarding the cultural, social and political oppression embedded in the operation of institutions, becoming part of contemporary art's moral economy and thus being locked down by the hegemonic system as a symbolic act.

But what if these gestures could step out of the symbolic, even if only briefly, and enact institutional speculation instead of critique? What if they could expand an idea of time further than that of the exhibition itself? What model of artistic practice could experiment in proposing alternative infrastructures that could create a future clearly distinct from the present? *TRAMA* was an attempt to do that, proposing an institutional strategy acting as a distributed narrative. The project spanned audio, diagrams, text, an installation in space and institutional interventions.

The first collaboration, with Brazilian digital publisher Zazie Edições, aimed to turn the São Paulo Biennial Foundation into an editorial agent. Five contemporary texts from international authors, originally published between 2016 and 2018, were translated into Portuguese and made available online for free as the *Collection Trama*. The selection aimed to bring recently published texts from unprecedented authors in Brazil. The two most important objectives of the selection were to introduce authors dealing with increasingly complex modes of governance and socio-technical infrastructure, and to update the critical vocabulary in the Portuguese-speaking context as a way of increasing possible traction within critical discussions. The translated titles for *Collection Trama* were: *Medium Design* (2018-Strelka Press), from Keller Easterling; *Xenophily and computational denaturalization* (2017-e-flux), from Patricia Reed; *Cutting yourself off* (2018), from Sara Ahmed; *On the ineffable allure of achieving systemic agency* (2016, Fall Semester) from Victoria Ivanova.

The main factor for the selection of these texts was that all of them, each in their own way, attempt to provide either pragmatic concepts and approaches—such as in the case of Ivanova’s systemic agency and Reed’s xenophily collective—or they go beyond describing a situation to actually pointing at possible actions or protocols—such as in the case of Easterling’s strategy of medium design, Fokianaki’s provocation that stolen cultural artifacts be given back by colonial countries, and Ahmed’s proposition on how to deal with institutional exclusion due to callouts on sexism or racism. That is, the texts are in themselves already a different kind of critical writing, one that not only delineates a problematic situation, but also attempts to build propositions for action. In this sense, they relate directly to the work *TRAMA* attempts to carry out; and so, the nature of the selected texts also creates the theoretical ground for the future of similar operations.

The intervention saw the potential of redistributing the institution’s resources as a way of enlarging the exhibition’s discussion beyond itself in a pragmatically and strategic way, and to provide the institution with an editorial project, which they currently lack. All texts were shared online, via the Zazie Edições website, social networks and the institution’s newsletter. As a result, they were not bound spatially, or temporally, to the exhibition. Nevertheless, all texts could also be accessed at the show, through QR codes

present in posters displayed in the installation. The collaboration took into account ongoing problems in Brazilian editorial art contexts, such as the concentration of distribution in the South East area to the detriment of the rest of the country, the lack of financial investment, public or private, in editorial projects relating to arts and critical culture, as well as the chronic delay in the translation and distribution of new vocabulary and discourse. If language can be considered a part of the megastructure, then translation can be an infrastructural way to connect different parts of the world within the same conversation subject.

In that sense, the proposition meant to go further than just creating or proposing the Biennial as a publisher—it attempted to mitigate a few of the problems hijacking the online infrastructure and actors that were already in place. It looked beyond the institution itself, considering specific coordinates within the larger megastructure. The possibility of continuing the *Collection Trama* with new translations, also from Portuguese texts to English, is open ended. It could be carried out by the Biennial Foundation, by Zazie Edições or I could carry it out myself through other exhibitions. Since the launch of the project, the texts have circulated widely, and were accessed by people in the northern and northeast parts of the country and even Portugal, meaning it was possible that they reached other Portuguese speaking countries, such as Angola or Mozambique.

The second collaboration, with researcher Pedro Moraes, considered the material conditions of São Paulo Biennial Foundation through a chain of software, hardware and physical attributes. The intervention *Come greet the dawn* consisted of an off-grid solar system installed on the institution's roof connected to an Ethereum miner (a cryptocurrency running on a blockchain) installed inside the exhibition space as part of the installation. During the course of the exhibition—from September to December—the intervention consisted of this system and its possibility of generating resources out of the physical conditions and infrastructure of the building. That is, using a sustainable energy generator, solar panels, as a way to provide electrical energy for mining Ethereum (in this sense the work also functions as an experiment within crypto-infrastructure, which requires large amounts of electrical energy to run). The financial resources generated were to be used to produce an event at another venue,

once the show was over, thus generating a redistribution of resources from a large-scale institution to a smaller one. An institution like the Biennial Foundation manages to attract large amounts of funding; however, a rich context is made not only of big institutions and exhibitions, but also of smaller and diverse ones, sometimes much more impactful.

By the end of the show, the solar panels were negotiated as a permanent intervention in the São Paulo Biennial Foundation building. Although the quantity of solar panels installed was not significant in terms of generating the amount of energy necessary for the building, it provided a possible prototype for a future expansion of the system, transforming the 12,500 m<sup>2</sup> of its roof into potential energy. Two contextual specificities are important to mention. First, in Brazil the use of solar energy is still extremely restricted, due largely to the lobbying of electricity companies—one of which is currently a sponsor of the São Paulo Biennial. Second, the building in which the foundation and exhibition is held is considered cultural heritage, so modifying it in any architectural or infrastructural sense is a complex matter. During negotiations with the board of the foundation, its administration and building management, divergent interests, positions and preoccupations became clear. The negotiation thus depended not only on art's critical virtue—art's virtue to take risks, speak truth to power and be critical—but also administrative agreements in which we, the artists, wouldn't use the financial resources for ourselves, for example.

The whole intervention offers another way of thinking about the sustenance of an exhibition context. Not only through public or private funding, but also through technical means that leverage the physical attributes of the site, and through a coordination or redistribution of resources. By the end of the show, the miner had generated 0.9 ETH. However, due to a series of issues in the Ethereum blockchain, and the whole cryptocurrency infrastructure during 2018, the value of Ethereum in relation to the Euro/Brazilian Reais dropped significantly, compromising the final outcome of the project at the time. We are currently planning its finalization for 2020.

In conclusion, the intervention was twofold. One of the goals was to channel certain resources that a large-scale institution like the Biennial has into another productive configuration: an alternative and potentially sustainable one, from an ecologic, economic but especially contextu-



FIG. 3  
Installation of the solar panels as part of TRAMA.  
Photo: artists

al perspective. It is also meant as a kind of political and infrastructural imagining and prototyping: in the sense of thinking of alternative ways for the usual means of generating, managing and distributing resources. Likewise, it was a practical experiment investigating the way in which new technologies might offer alternatives when associated with economic and social questions.

*Collection Trama* and *Come meet the Dawn* were shown together with the sound piece *The Prophecy of Furnarius Rufus*; made in collaboration with Negalé Jones, and available both in the space and on the institution's website. The sound piece tells a story in which bioengineered autonomous birds collaborate with humans in the construction of a large-scale art infrastructure. The sounds were captured from the São Paulo Biennial's empty building and the surrounding Ibirapuera Park and turned into afrofutur-

istic beats by Jones. This last collaboration intervened in the institutional historical narrative, creating an Afrofuturistic alternative to the original modernist account of architect Oscar Niemeyer's building. The project was displayed by an installation within the exhibition where the visitors could see the cryptocurrency miner working and access the five translated texts through QR codes present in five posters. This multilayered access made it possible for both art professionals and the audience at large to penetrate the work's conception.

### **Speculative performativity, a possible operational concept**

Although thought of in relation to the Brazilian context, *TRAMA* resonates with what Möntmann proposes in "The Rise and Fall of New Institutionalism. Perspectives on a Possible Future." To survive the neoliberal and corporate turn, the art institution

would have to widen its scope, consider cross-genre collaborations with established as well as alternative organizations, and initiate multi-disciplinary activities. This conceivable critical institution could, for example, take on the form of an internationally operating "organized network," which strengthens various smaller, independent institutions and activities—be they alternative, artist-run, or research-based—and could also set up temporary platforms within bigger institutions. (Möntmann, 2013)

Instead of creating an institution anew, *TRAMA* intervened within an existing institution as an information-rich system, with many moving parts which did not require centralization or decentralization to work, but coordination. *TRAMA* regarded the institutional and infrastructural space of the institution as a form which acts as "an updating platform unfolding in time to handle new circumstances, encoding the relationships between buildings, or dictating logistics" (Easterling, 2014, p.21). In this sense, to speculate and to perform different protocols or propositions within the institution was an attempt to configure a working alternative to it, which could pragmatically reach beyond the institution itself. A speculative intervention that proposed alternatives, and by enacting them through the exhibition, actually created the conditions of possibility for them to come

into being. Although they were temporarily put in place for the show, because of their nature, once they were produced, they changed the initial conditions of the institution and extrapolated the exhibition's duration or spatial boundaries: instead of an ever-accumulating experience, a future clearly distinct from the past.

I would like to propose a model, then, in which there is a necessary articulation between how programming is done, what formats it proposes, and also how infrastructural propositions by the artists can—instead of being an indeterminate experience—use the program, or the exhibition, as a currency to intervene and experiment with the protocols or organization of the exhibition spaces: to perform speculation, or to act through speculative performativity—an operational concept that enables acting in the present with future-oriented protocols and tools. The tactic comes from the combination of two concepts as a way of acquiring systemic change: speculation and performativity. Speculation becomes a productive tool, as proposed by Malik and philosopher Armen Avanesian's work. As we are living in a post-contemporary ecology which is underwritten by the reorientation of the very logic of time—past, present, and future no longer follow a linear direction—the future often seems to function as the main vector in orienting the present (Avanesian, Malik, 2016). This can be seen in situations such as preemptive policing and financial derivatives where speculation actually informs the present and turns into possible action.

The second concept, performativity—both as conceived by linguist J. L. Austin in “performative utterances,” and as a concept developed through queer theory by Judith Butler—relates to utterances, speech acts, or gestures that act in the world and produce effects in situations or subjects, because of their repetition and embedding in social agreements and relations. For Austin, an utterance is performative when it behaves as a speech act, in which the act of uttering is inseparable from the action it enunciates, given the appropriate context; for example, the act of promising (“I promise”), naming (“I name”), or marrying (“I do”) (Austin, 1975, p.5). For Butler, performativity concerns the process of gender construction in which the subject, through the repetition of gestures and norms associated to a given gender, incorporates and performs that gender. For example, exclaiming, “It's a girl!” at the birth of a female baby conflates sex and gender and ini-

tiates a social identity in that subject. Hence, performativity is a feature of acts that engender a transformation, be it by repetition and accumulation of gestures, or by the conflation of an utterance and a reality.

Speculative performativity is an operational concept proposing the application of new or invented protocols and tools that, albeit temporarily, mediate and update the relationship between a determined exhibition space and the system. In a recursive way, these protocols and tools work as experiments that may come to be instituted. In this sense, speculative performativity also proposes another kind of aesthetics: one which connects with the history between the origins of site-specific art and institutional critique in the 1960s, to its development during the 1990s and 2000s, but which pushes further by inputting in the strategy the recursive and the infrastructural or organizational experimentation as a connection between the artistic practice and the megastructure.

The operational concept can possibly be applied through different interfaces of artistic practice, such as lectures, educational mediations, and social networks. However, it is especially productive as the production of artworks for exhibitions, such as in the project *TRAMA*, because it moves beyond the program or the social congregation itself to propose and enact changes through the institution's environment and within the megastructure. By using the exhibition's capital resources (creative, social, cultural, and financial), artists can make art a potential carrier of alternative infrastructures, politics and economics. It can move beyond promoting acts of unveiling, questioning, or exposing the paradoxes at the foundation of institutions, and move beyond its protection behind indeterminacy to demand and create other systemic possibilities.

### **Art as infrastructural change**

*TRAMA* acted through specific coordinates to maximize its speculative performativity strategy and to experiment with contemporary art's megastructure. The artwork in this case was designing interdependencies and chain reactions that would spark the institution's potential with regard to distribution, economy and architecture. It was successful in acting as a platform, where different collaborations met each other, in distributing

novel theoretical references, and in providing an alternative narrative. In its experiment with cryptocurrency, the project has not achieved its full potential yet; nonetheless, it gave rise to a much-needed discussion in the local context on the necessity of finding new ways to fund projects in a context that is each year more dependent on ideological private funds or precarious state funds. It also demonstrated that coordination is a crucial question and that long-term engagement of all parts is decisive in order to achieve a lasting positive outcome.

*TRAMA* was one of existing, or potential, examples of such a practice as an artistic practice. The key challenge now is to think through how to coordinate the action and narrative of this kind of practice so that a worldwide systemic coordination can take place, in order for art's potential to engage with the world becoming more than just a symbolic or visual system, an open mirror of contemporary times. To propose art as infrastructural change could, for instance, enable us to begin establishing a systemic accountability for violent and disruptive actions that are at the foundation of art's institutions, such as processes of gentrification, colonization, and the precarization of work. As tackling the infrastructural side of art will broaden the whole of institutional possibilities and operations, it will also enable us to multiply and experience novel models and templates for exhibition spaces: one that perhaps will be able to ensure spatial democracy in cities, in the face of increasing commoditization of urban spaces, mediating the possibility of inhabitants choosing how to develop their cities over time. But in order to accomplish that it is necessary to reorient our understanding of how the symbolic and the infrastructural relate within our discursive and exhibition spaces and to act upon it; for example, exposing actions through which contemporary art's moral economy obfuscates the decisions of a board of directors, or patrons. To challenge institutions with new regulatory protocols of payment and transparency or even to boycott—when necessary—exhibitions which profit from critical virtue while maintaining a problematic status quo.

It will also be necessary to engage with more abstract models of thinking about artistic practice. Speculative interventions, acted through coordination, will require that our conception of an artwork transforms itself into a more designed and strategic object; that is, artistic actions

within the systemic and infrastructural side of art as a way of rehearsing and putting forward scalable templates and models which could, in turn, push against a neoliberal, overarching structure. A model in which artistic, curatorial and institutional practices work together to experiment with infrastructural alternatives, share acquired knowledge, set up parameters, and a narrative in which determinate propositions make it possible for us to learn, disseminate and, finally, engage local communities, art audiences at large, and the global artistic class into a coordinated long-term continuity of resistance and invention. It is time to change the spell. \*

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