

Notes on occupation and a hypothesis to be developed by practice

Written by Luiza Crosman

The uncertainty of writing about an autonomous art space seems similar to the uncertainty of running it. Words and actions have to be somehow precise, and yet, flexible enough so that practice and theory can keep working together to present new perspectives and propositions. In this text I present many different notes on the subject of occupation. These gathered notes aim to create an ambiance of cross thinking reference, but they won't present any conclusion. The intention is that each note can work as an independent provocation and a self-reflection on how and why to maintain a project art space.

This experimental essay is mostly based in my experience with casamata, a project art space located inside of a multidisciplinary organization called Comuna, at Botafogo, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It was also instigated by the different concepts of occupation as proposed by artist and writer Hito Steyerl and the concept of Eventwork as proposed by political writer Brian Holmes.

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Casamata means “bunker” in Portuguese, but not any kind of bunker, a ^{aasd}~~specific one, intended to keep weapons and guerrilla material alike.~~
Casamata as our project space has a few parameters which govern its operation, parameters intended to make it a space for research on site specificity, public participation and experimental artwork without relying on commercial trades or companies’ patronage to exist. Although open since 2011, this new conceptual configuration has been put into practice only for the last year.

Occupation as concept

Were the parameters that we established to run casamata the starting point for us relating to the idea of ‘occupation’, or was it because we were already so domesticated by this term that we were thinking in terms of time-space relevance and specificity?

Occupation is at the same time an urgent action and a state of continuity. Occupations can complicate temporal and spatial divisions by blurring their edges or they can be determine and impose a space/ power relation between the occupier and the occupied.

An occupation is something one would do for its own gratification without asking a financial remuneration, and because of that, it differentiates itself from work as labour. Occupation is the title or description of many group exhibitions around the independent art

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sphere and, most recently, is a form of protesting.
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An occupation is not an easily definable concept or initiative, and, because it is so multiple, the term now seems to be caught into a social and conceptual trend, a fact that neutralizes its force.

When artistic processes (specially public engaging or participatory art), tactical media (network communications), theory (critical thinking and philosophical investigation) and politics (direct action, collaborative coordination and self-determination) converge into a mobile force, an occupation can overcome its different underlying meanings and become an Eventwork. This convergence has to overstep the frontiers of the four disciplinary fields without losing their specific knowledge or technical capacities.

Occupation as Eventwork opens up a new form of practice, which might be more effective as a form of intervention because it is harder to devour for publicity or public relations strategists. In this sense, occupation is not acting upon a determinate perimeter, but becomes a constant transdisciplinary movement.

Occupation as space-time

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We live in a culture of spectacle and most occupations as art events serve to that effect. In these super mediated times anything that promises presence will draw interest from the consuming public. What happens after the spectacle is gone? The circus, having nothing to leave behind, dismounts its tent and goes to the next city, the next leveled location. It is a beautiful idea. For the circus. The public stays craving for the next event, the next time someone will invite or give them permission to see each other again across the piccadilly.

Events as spectacles are events as destinations. Somewhere where experience goes to die. They are publicized, they are pre-produced, but they don't overcome their limitations through the fourfold which can create an Eventwork. It's a journey's end.

An event-spectacle has a beginning and an end. Its relation to time is well defined: pre and post production. But for us, at casamata, there is no time. Anyone who has to maintain an independent project space feels that urgency. We are already late and we have to run twice as fast just to be here. To be open, to keep being here in between visiting hours. To never come to an end.

Time and space: two of the most luxurious resources in the contemporary cities. I think independent project spaces have to be time-space machines.

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Occupation as rights to the city

In a city like Rio de Janeiro, that has mainly been seen as a postcard and now as the host for the world's largest (and most corrupt) sports events, to build an initiative within the realms of culture is extremely hard work. And most of the independent initiatives, including casamata, have an underground cult feeling to them.

Sometimes the city feels impermeable to our initiatives. In Rio everything seems reverse: failed public transportation, constant segregation of public space, standardization of cultural experience by copying gentrification processes of other large cities throughout the world, urban privatization. While walking through the city democracy feels spatial.

Lately I feel like most cultural enterprises are related to the idea of occupation as an event. Political and economical forces tells us that we cannot have the cities for ourselves. You can borrow the city, even rent it, but it is not yours to build it.

Has ephemerality become a symptom of not really being able to have access to the city and its public spaces? Have we, as in so many other

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things inside a neoliberal economic culture, passed through a
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~~standardization process in our art experiences to believe that a~~
flighty relation with art events is enough?

How are we organizing ourselves within the cultural context of our cities?

Occupying is certainly a sign that citizens need to be in spaces that they feel their own. Where they can fight for the autonomy and authority to do what they want. But it feels uneasy the sense that we are only borrowing space from the city. We should have a right to the city's spaces and the time to make them our own. Places where our lives can unfold in, places where we can keep coming back to.

Casamata as occupation

Is not only creating exhibitions or showing art that interests us at casamata, but also, understanding what it means to shape our lives around a project space and what the limits are in doing so.

How to create a link between processes in art and processes in life

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without aestheticizing "life as form"? Or without allowing the
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~~occupation of life to reach its peak, and together with it, bringing~~
along two of the most pressing problems of occupying (or being
occupied by) a project space: first, the idea that because an
occupation contains its own gratification there is no need for
financial remuneration and second, the problematic strategy of
overcoming alienation by over identification with one's occupation?

Under every concrete floor there is a wish to change the forms in
which we are living, because to open and maintain a project space is
not possible without a big dose of action in your daily life, and one
cannot help but being transformed by the activism involved in doing
so.

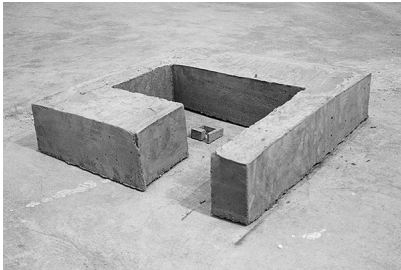
Casamata is struggling to keep going. It will always be struggling
because it is a living organism. Its life is not comprised in its
events only. Or, to be more precise, it is actually the other way
around: its persistence in maintaining itself as a physical location in
our time-space continuum is what makes the events possible. And
because of its location within a location casamata acts more as a
stumble than as a destination.

In between exhibitions and openings, casamata works to generate models
and tools for extending the possible ways of acting within the four
dimensions of Eventwork: art, theory, media, and self-organization.
This means occupying itself beyond itself. And this is the operative

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force behind the maintenance of a independent project space that makes
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it a political act.

A hypotheses to be developed by practice: Long live occupations as
Eventworks, death to occupation as spectacles.



Luiza Crosman holds an MFA in Contemporary Art Processes from Rio de Janeiro State University (UERJ), 2014. As an artist-researcher she works with conceptual drawings as a lexicon for action based works and conceptual performances as context based situations. She also writes about and investigates the political and social relations between art and its institutional sphere. Besides two solo exhibitions, Crosman has participated in both national and international group shows such as Visual Activism Symposium (SFMoma), Double Mouth (Bergen Art Academy), Novíssimos (IBEU) and Exposição 2.0 (CAPACETE). Since 2014 she runs the independent art space casamata in Botafogo, Rio de Janeiro.

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