

Conversation with FERNANDA BRENNER, Pivô

I is for

Institute

What's in a name? This is the question underlying our investigation into ICA: how it came to be, what it means now, and how we might imagine it in the future.

In a field so often defined by precarity, this project is grounded in a spirit of collegiality, a looking outward that aims to facilitate self-reflection. As such, we have engaged colleagues primarily from small- and mid-scale contemporary arts organizations to discuss their institutional histories and how they understand the stakes of their work. The *I is for Institute* website acts as a repository for these ongoing conversations, as well as archival material relating to ICA's history. We thank our many colleagues for their generosity, enthusiasm, and frankness. Their thinking has in turn energized our own.

— Alex Klein,
Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber
(CHE'60) Curator, Institute
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FERNANDA BRENNER,
Pivô

Fernanda Brenner is the Artistic Director of Pivô, a contemporary art space in São Paulo, Brazil.

With Alex Klein and Tausif Noor

ALEX KLEIN

Can you tell us about your role at Pivô?

FERNANDA BRENNER

I am the founder of the space, and I've been working as its Artistic Director since its inception. I've been fully involved with the project since 2011. It officially opened to the public in 2012.

AK

What was the original idea for founding Pivô? How did it come about? Did you start it by yourself or were you working with other people?

FB

Pivô is the result of an encounter with the venue that houses the institution, and it came to be thanks to the engagement of many people since it opened. It's impossible to tell the story of Pivô without telling the story of the building, Edifício Copan, which is an Oscar Niemeyer landmark building in central São Paulo. Pivô now occupies a space inside Copan which was empty for about 20 years. Back in 2011, I wasn't yet a curator. I used to work as a set designer and a production designer for feature films; and when I came across that huge empty space, I thought it had a great potential to be an art venue.

The first use of the space in 2011 — before the space became "official" — was very informal. We got permission from the owner of the space to occupy it with a temporary exhibition and had almost zero funding, so we invited a group of local artists, mostly friends, to come over and install their works. This first action was the foundation stone of the institutional thinking of Pivô, and right after that, we got the lease to turn the space into something permanent.

An important thing to say is that Brazil was in a very good moment economically. The art system and its gatekeepers were in a really good mood because the economy was doing well, and it seemed that the country was finally entering more progressive times. I would say that we really took advantage of this specific situation; and, opening a space in this context led to a response that we probably wouldn't get nowadays in terms of the public and publicity.

I'm telling you this to emphasize that the institution grew out of the situation — of this abandoned space, the artists occupation, and the great sympathy that the city looked at us with, and what we were doing — a DIY attitude and young people taking over a ruin in an area of the city that was neglected for many years. Pivô's first official exhibition in the following year, *Next Time I Would Have Done it All Differently*, curated by Diego Matos, attracted 3,000 people in its first week. We opened in the same day as the São Paulo Biennial with a huge party.

I always tell the story because, with the response we got, I realized there was this gigantic need for a place like that in the city. There's a lack of spaces for experimentation and exchange between artists in the city. In a city of 12-million-people, there are very few residency programs, art schools, or artist-run spaces. There was — and still is — a need for spaces that artists can rely on to do process-based works, more experimental works or simply meet and chat with each other. In that moment, I realized there was this great number of artists who had projects and a lack of spaces to develop them.

AK

So, that first event really highlighted the need to formalize things. Because it could have very easily just been a one-off thing, right?

FB

And I would say that this formalization took a few years. Actually, the owner of the space was the one who pushed me to do something permanent. Somehow the space has survived the real estate speculation of São Paulo's center and was never sold in 20 years, so he was convinced that it was better to let us occupy it and slowly renovate it. He offered me a lease in exchange for Pivô taking over the monthly expenses, so I accepted the task without really realizing what it meant — that my entire life would become this and I would start working full-time in curating and developing an institution. I quit filmmaking and that's how this crazy thing started happening.

AK

Did he give you the space for free?

FB

Yes. But we have very high maintenance costs.

AK

Wow. And is it still free?

FB

Yes! We have a 15-year lease.

AK

That's amazing.

FB

That's the only way we can do it.

AK

The location that you are in currently, is it the same area of the building that you staged the very first show in?

FB

Yes.

AK

That's a lot of space!

FB

It's 3,500 square meters. It's a museum-sized space.

AK

Can you just talk a little bit about the history of the building, and give us some more context about the neighborhood?

FB

Sure. I started to tell you this story because I think it's impossible to detach Pivô as an institution from this anecdote of its founding. I would say it's a site-

specific institution. People constantly ask me if Pivô can move someplace else and I have doubts about it, because the entire way the institution was shaped, was to really make everything happen in this very crazy situation: occupying an architectural landmark. To make a very irresponsible comparison, the relevance of Edifício Copan to São Paulo is like the Empire State Building in New York. Can you imagine having 3,500 square meters abandoned in the Empire State Building for 20 years? This is what it means to have this space.

It's impossible not to take this into account when doing everything that we do. What kind of city allows a place like that to be empty for 20 years? This hard-to-believe situation informed everything we're doing in terms of space occupation, and programming, as well as the ethical core of the institution, in the sense that we are constantly questioning São Paulo's cultural and heritage protection policies.

The building is an Oscar Niemeyer project. It's from the 1960s, and his main references were Rockefeller Center and Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation, which was his utopian idea of building a city within a city. It is a mixed-use building where nowadays 3,000 people live, which for an art space is amazing because we have a built-in audience for everything we do. It doesn't mean that they come down for every show, and they don't. But it's a beautiful image. And so, it makes a lot of sense to have an art space in a building with this project as a starting point.

But, as with most of the things that modernism did, especially in Brazil, it didn't really follow the theory. The building was meant to be ready on the fourth centenary of the city, in 1954. The company, who was building it was a Brazilian branch of the American Pan Am Corporation, gave up the project in the middle of the construction of the building. In that moment, Niemeyer was too involved in the construction of Brasília, and Carlos Lemos took over the half-built project. Niemeyer didn't recognize the full authorship of the building until very recently, before he died. What happened was that the other architect and the new developers totally changed the inside of the building. The place Pivô occupies today was a part of the building that was actually never meant to have public usage or be seen.

For me, it's especially interesting to work in this situation because it's a paradox. We're doing an art space that makes a lot of sense in the theory of the building, but then Niemeyer never planned to do an art space in that building. The area Pivô is in has no original project whatsoever, it is a combination of residual spaces of the building, its "loins." It is a hidden part that he never meant to expose; it's not the sexy architecture, or the landmark signature Niemeyer building. It's as if you're seeing the back stages of the construction.

AK

Do you have a sense of who was in the space before you, even though it was abandoned for 20 years?

FB

It was a hospital.

AK

That's so strange.

FB

It's another crazy layer of the crazy stories. When Carlos Lemos finished the project, and I don't know why exactly they did this, but the Bradesco Bank (the developer) turned this part of the building where Pivô is nowadays into a private medical facility for their employees.

AK

Interesting.

FB

What's even more crazy is that it was a private medical facility in a building that the 3,000 people living in the building had no access to. In the late 1970s, when this area of the city got rougher, the bank that owned the hospital sold the real estate at auction. The current owner bought it for a very cheap price in the 1980s, and never managed to resell it. From the hospital's closing to the moment we started to do the project was almost 20 years. When we got there in 2011 for the first show I was describing, it was this ruin of a hospital closed for 20 years. You can imagine the state the building was in back then. Although it's still pretty raw, it looks like the Tate Modern in comparison to what it was in 2011. It had no toilets. We had no lighting system. There was a lot of garbage and horrible things. But it was an adventure.

AK

Around when did you formalize the project and who did you bring on board with you? How did you make your organization?

FB

I would say this is still an ongoing process of institutionalization, as you say, because it started very informally as an artist occupation. Firstly, there

was a small team of friends, freelancers, who helped me out with the first show and the launch of the project, mostly working in film and architecture. Besides Diego Matos, who was invited to curate the first show, I had two people that were working with me on a more regular basis and who helped me to structure the project. We did everything — from finances, to set-up, to fundraising, to curating, communication writing the texts — everything. From the start we always worked really closely with the artists, and this is what shaped all of Pivô's institutional thinking.

Institutionalization came out of us trying to find the ways to build a structure for an almost impossible-to-solve equation: how to keep a falling-apart, museum-sized space with no reliable source of income; maintaining a decently paid team; and continuous and consistent programming? Until now, I joke that we rely on monthly miracles to keep operating. We managed to make it work at the beginning because it was a lot of young people with a lot of energy. And this kind of energy fades as you go on, so you cannot keep working like that in the long run.

So, slowly, we started to understand what was necessary to shape the program and to run the office and institutional affairs of Pivô. Residencies were something that we did since the very beginning and now, I would say, they are at the core of the project. The first show, without us realizing it, was already a residency. In building the installations, what the artists were doing was actually just spending a lot of time in the space and really transforming the space as they went. And my job was to watch and to take notes and see how we could keep doing this crazy thing that we did in a more structured and reliable way.

AK

How did you manage to fund all of the infrastructure costs of the building?

FB

I'm still figuring this out, but it's getting easier as we go. Since the beginning, we've had this economy that combines a lot of little sources, I would say. So, the space itself is our greatest asset, in the sense that it's a space that a lot of people want to rent to do events, photo shoots, commercials, everything. Exploring the image of the space was always an important part of the income. We have something in Brazil called the Rouanet Law, which is pretty much the only public consistent support mechanism that exists. It works like this: we get permission from the Ministry of Culture to go to companies, and they can redirect a percentage of their taxes to projects of their choice; which is great, in a way, because once you get the money you are pretty free to work in your own way. But it's very perverse in the sense that there are no categories and

we need to pitch to companies and marketing directors for funding. We rely partly on this, but it's also very unstable because we never know how much we will get every year or from whom. But since the very beginning, we've managed to get part of the program funded through this law. And then, we do everything from selling tote bags, artists' editions, auctions, in addition to renting the space, and having members programs. We do a lot of institutional partnerships, especially through the residencies. In the end, we can only do this because we don't pay rent. The monthly expenses are still high, and we have a lot of expenses, but I think we found a way to create a methodology to work with a very unstable income.

The way we do this is that we do everything in-house. We have a wood workshop. We build everything from walls to frames and we reuse everything and then we reorganize. We have a lot of freedom in that sense.

AK

Do you have a board?

FB

We have a board, but they are an advisory board, not a voting board.

AK

Do you have a sense of your yearly overhead, or does it change from year to year?

FB

It's 1.5 million Brazilian Real, so it's something like \$300,000 USD.

AK

Does that cover your salary and things like that as well? That's an interesting question, I think, in the trajectory of an organization. When did you start to pay yourself?

FB

It all depends. Still, nowadays, sometimes I don't get paid.

AK

Right.

FB

I'd always rather pay the team. The team always gets paid and the artists and curators always have fees. Pivô is still struggling to make itself fully sustainable.

AK

I'm assuming there must have been so much infrastructure to build up coming into this raw space that wasn't necessarily meant to display art, and then the trajectory of how to get it to the point where you could use it for that function and also for residencies.

FB

For the first three years, I would say, every penny we got was directed towards the renovations and to make the space livable. For many years, we invented programs out of scratch with no money, with more performances or welcoming projects that already had a budget, like an artist who comes with a grant. But I think in 2014, we started to commission work. The economy was a little healthier in that sense. Nowadays, we've been able at least twice a year, to do commissions. The thing I like to do the most is doing a project from its inception and really building things on-site and commissioning new works. But it's always this juggling of projects that come with their own financial structure and the structure that we can provide. The overall program is a combination of many types of projects — every show has its own funding structure, and every residency does as well.

AK

Can you give us a sense of what the shape of the season is, how many residents you have, and how many exhibitions are going on at any given time? And is that consistent from year to year?

FB

We have 16 studios in the space, so there's a lot of people.

AK

And they're built-out artist studios?

FB

Yes. It looks like an art school somehow, because there's an open floor plan and they have little booths of around 30 square meters, which is a nice amount of space. There are up to 16 artists at a time.

AK

And how long is the residency?

FB

Three months. It's like three cycles of more or less 16 people.

AK

Wow.

FB

But sometimes people stay for two cycles. We have around 30–40 artists a year in residence.

AK

Are they mostly Brazilian artists or do they come from all over the place?

FB

They come from all over. We always try to organize it in a way so there is a coexistence of local artists and international artists, because I like when the local artists are hosts for the international artists. For the group, it is more interesting when we have artists from here and artists from abroad that are sharing the space. It's usually 20–30 percent artists from abroad and the rest are locals. In terms of exhibitions, I think since 2013, we have been doing at least four shows a year. And now it's up to eight shows a year. It's always a matter of funding.

We have three exhibition spaces. The big one is very big, 1,500 square meters. In that big space, it's usually the more expensive shows. We do two a year. Sometimes we do three, but it's very rare. Then, we have a smaller exhibition space, which is 400 square meters, which is still pretty big, where we do one or two shows a year. And then, on the ground floor, we commission interventions of emerging artists. They are usually artists who have never had a commission. That is an open call and it happens once a year. Sometimes we do an invitational in that space. If we manage to do it all, it's eight shows. But it's between four to eight.

AK

Great.

FB

They're different sizes. And besides that, we have public programming: seminars, talks. We have a blog. We are doing our first publication. We had a magazine related to the residency program. So, it's a lot of things.

AK

Right.

TAUSIF NOOR

How many people are working with you on staff, either full-time or temporary?

FB

Seven. Seven heroes.

AK

Does anybody curate other than you, or are there other curators?

FB

We have a small curatorial team — there's three of us on staff, but we have had many independent curators collaborating with us over the years.

AK

Oh, that's great.

TN

You talked a bit about the DIY ethos that you started off with, where you were connecting with artists who were friends. Now that you are a few years out, do you still see a sense of that ethos? You mentioned that you're looking at artists who are having some of their first shows — are emerging artists who you're looking for? What is your selection process for artists?

FB

I think the first show really formed the methodology of the program. Because the space is so specific, we usually try to ask artists to respond. It's very hard to bring a show that was first assembled someplace else to Pivô, because it's a place that really is best suited for site-oriented projects. Since the very first show, we've had artists from different generations — from very established artists to artists who were having their first project exhibition — to create this intergenerational exchange and also an international exchange. We've worked with very established artists like Cildo Meireles and Anna Maria Maiolino, possibly two of the most established artists in Brazil. Anna is in her late 70s and she worked with us this year. But when they work with us, we usually explore different, more experimental aspects and projects that they wouldn't do in a big museum. Or they're working differently, being in the space installing for a month or opening the drawers of a project that they never realized and that they don't think makes sense in a museum. Cildo's project, for example, was very beautiful because it is a very good example of the way I like working, which was pretty much was introducing Mario García Torres to Cildo Meireles. Mario is a very established, but he had never had a solo show in Brazil. And Cildo is this national hero. What we did as an institution was pretty much to put them in touch. Mario came to Brazil and went to Cildo's studio. It was a very, very simple show that was the result of a beautiful dialogue between them.

Cildo lent us a version of one of his most famous projects called *Meshes of Freedom* to Pivô in plastic, in a way where we didn't have to pay insurance, because we couldn't afford insurance for a piece of his. It is this way of working closely with artists that allows us to make special projects without a lot of funding.

For the young artists, there's always an opportunity to present their work professionally. It really encourages them to test things out or to be more experimental in that sense. This DIY freedom is pretty much adapting the entire structure of the space to enable projects and really supporting the artists with all that we have available and in whatever they want to do in the space.

AK

I was going to say that was actually the show that I did see at Pivô when I was in São Paulo.

FB

Mario's?

AK

Yes.

FB

It was almost a show that went unnoticed. When people went, some people said, "Oh, there's nothing there." But it was a show that needed a commitment from the audience.

AK

It was great. It was my first and only experience in person at Pivô, so I was very happy to have it. I'm curious to hear a little more about how you think about shaping the program and also the scope of the artists that you work with. At first, was it really about filling the hole and the need for the artists that were working locally in São Paulo and more generally in Brazil? At what point did you decide that it needed to become a more international program, or is that still a conversation that's going on?

FB

For me, it was always important to have an international dialogue, since the very first show. I think the art scene here is a bit unhealthy in the sense that it's still a bubble. We opened, for example, in the same year as Mendes Wood Gallery. And we are very good friends. I think it's one of the first galleries in Brazil to behave as an international gallery based in Brazil. It's something that is not very common for the previous generations, to really conceive something that is based on the premise of a strong international dialogue. We constantly try to bring people in and send people out. In the residency specifically, we always had artists from abroad and we always tried to, as much as we could, have as many international artists as local artists. When we have international artists, we always try to build context and generate a lot of dialogue around their practices. For example, when we did the show with Haroon Mirza, it was the first show that he did in Latin America, and he was here with his family for two months and really interacted with the local scene. And although he's a very established artist internationally, he was still pretty unknown in Brazil. We often bring artists that are established elsewhere to show their works for the first time in Brazil. Instead of bringing a show, we would rather bring an artist and work on site. It is also a financial matter, because shipping things to Brazil is extremely expensive and difficult. In a way, the financial adversities

that we face inform the methodology and the way we shape the program. We always try to inhabit these so-called problems and to create meaning out of it and to create a way of working where we are really aware of every aspect of the show, and to really be taking care of the quality of the show regardless of how big the budget is.

TN

Despite those constraints, you're also still a free institution, correct?

FB

Yes.

TN

How do you think about that aspect of it? In terms of introducing a lot of international artists to Brazil, how do you think about your audience? You mentioned that you have partly a built-in audience. Who is coming to Pivô, or who do you think of as a Pivô audience?

FB

The way I like to usually answer this question is that we're turning seven this year, and over the years I know less and less of the crowd who is coming in, so it's a good sign! I think in the beginning it was pretty much the professional audience, like artists, and curators. We are in an area of the city that is very easy to get to; it's the very center of the city. There's a lot of subway lines and bus stops and it's very accessible in that sense, and we have a passerby audience because we're on this pedestrian street. We have people that come in once, and people that come in and keep coming. The square that is 100 meters from Pivô attracts a lot of skateboarders, and they come to the openings because we have free beer. We have around 6,000–7,000 visitors a year.

AK

That's great.

FB

It's good for the kind of program that we do. But in terms of programming, we never think about the audience in the choices of which artists to show.

We never do a show to attract a crowd of people, but we're always trying to be responsible to what we show in terms of trying to be aware and involved with the local issues and at the same time participate in broader discussions in contemporary art and new institutional models.

We always find it important to try to create engagement with people that are not yet an art crowd. Every two months, we hold an open studio day at the residency program, so people can come in and talk to the artist in their own studio. Then, when seeing an exhibition after having talked to the artists and followed their process, they have a very different experience.

We don't yet have a formal education program, but we always try to document and disclose the content generated by our activities. A person entering Pivô's space sometimes gets lost. We deliberately opt for discrete communication and it's hard to tell where the exhibition space starts or ends. We are always looking forward to having active visitors. So, if they want to have the information, they have to find a paper. There's not a big text on the wall. They go there and realize, "Where is the exhibition space? Where am I? I'm in this ruin." With the physical occupation of the space, we try to take advantage of this labyrinth, this maze-like situation, to really raise awareness for the visitors, and to also be experimental in the way we do the communication and the way we relate with the public. That is a luxury of being an autonomous art space.

AK

Right. On that question of mediation, I noticed that things are also bilingual. I'm assuming that having English is also about reaching out to an international audience.

FB

Yes.

AK

And I'm assuming part of your audience is also following you online and coming in once, like I did, when they're coming through São Paulo and that kind of thing.

FB

That's important, of course. Again, since the very beginning, we wanted to create an international dialogue. The website, in that sense, is very important

in that we always try to replicate as much as we can — not only the content, but the energy of the space, either on the website or on social media.

AK

Do you ever do exhibitions with the people who have residencies? Do the residencies ever evolve into shows?

FB

The residencies are research oriented, so we don't expect the artist to provide any kind of palpable outcome. There is nothing attached to their time in the residency, so they don't need to deliver anything just to be involved in the proposed activities. But we always encourage them to propose things. The show that we are traveling now to the Kunsthalle Lissabon is a show with three former residents.

They met at Pivô and by themselves, they found a strong synergy between their own works, and this led to an exhibition project. We've had artists who did a residency two or three years ago and then came back as invited artists to the exhibition program. We are now working on a project with Luiz Roque, who was one of the very first residents of Pivô. He was there in 2014, and now he's doing a solo show.

TN

What does Pivô mean? Where did the name come from?

FB

Pivô means *pivot*, which is the centerpiece of something that turns. And it means beer in Polish, too. I found out later, when we had a resident artist from Poland.

AK

You were talking about the ecology of the art scene when you first started. Would you say it's pretty similar to the landscape now? Do you still feel like you occupy the same void that was there before, or has the art scene evolved in the seven years that you've been open?

FB

I guess that now the country is in a more difficult political and economic situation, there is a lot of uncertainty. And now, with this right-wing government, we are all fearing the impact it might have on culture. Bad signs are already starting to show but it's still too soon to tell. I possibly would do things differently in the current scenario.

AK

Sure.

FB

I guess responses that we got in 2012 would hardly happen nowadays. A positive aspect is that nowadays institutions today are stronger than they were in the last decade, like MASP (Museu de Arte de São Paulo) for example, which went through a complete institutional renovation in the past few years and claimed back its original importance in the art scene and Instituto Moreira Salles opened a new building in São Paulo. I think there was a progressive professionalization of the art system in the past seven years. In our case, we have been focusing on building a strong and regular program and a putting a lot of energy in the residency. There is still a need for younger and more experimental galleries in Brazil. There are very established big galleries, important museums and private foundations and almost no smaller non-profit spaces. When we opened, there was a movement of other spaces like Pivô, for artist-run spaces and small institutional spaces. Unfortunately, most of them have closed, turned into commercial galleries, or given up having a physical space.

AK

The second part to my question is, Brazil, not unlike the U.S., has taken an extremist right-wing turn politically with Bolsonaro where you are and Trump over here. I'm curious if that has impacted you yet, or if you anticipate that it will. I'm also thinking of the news that we've heard coming out of Brazil, about the tragic fire at the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro. I'm wondering how that's impacted the work that you do, or what you're anticipating might be coming your way.

FB

I think, for sure, it's going to be harder, especially in the sense that there's a threat of censorship and even more austere policies towards culture. We thought things were getting better, but the feeling overall, I think is like we're going back 40 years. I certainly have to shape the program in response to these darker times. Some shows that I would like to do, would make no sense today. I'm having conversations with some artists about what ways to be actively involved with the political situation and still maintain the freedom of experimentation and thought we have always embraced.

AK

Right.

FB

There's no other way of doing it. Adjusting the content, the order of the shows, the numbers of shows—I don't know exactly. How we are going to react and to really make something that is indeed meaningful. I think this uncertain moment will raise important discussions and changes in people's mindsets, as with every crisis situation. It has already been happening since last year during the presidential campaign. People are really feeling the need to sit together and discuss things, and how to deal with this. Where do we go from here? I'm terrified, of course, but I'm also somehow excited about really doing something that is more hands on, and it's a good opportunity to rethink what art can really do and the role of cultural institutions. I like to think about the meaning of what we're doing and sometimes it's very easy to forget why we do the things we do, when get overwhelmed by our own daily activities. So a situation like we are in now really brings this back. I think that the artists will respond, and they are super concerned about the indigenous populations, gender politics, and the rise of violence in the country. I think we're going to see very ugly things unfolding in the not-so-distant future.

AK

It's already happening.

How do you think Pivô can contribute to the conversation programmatically?

FB

I think the way I'm dealing with it in this instance is opening up the space more. That's why I'm doing more partnerships and bringing people in and am not really concerned about having authorship over a situation. I'm really responding to a program as a curator, but really opening the doors to dialogues and to proposals in a way. We have some shows scheduled, of

course, but depending on how the situation unfolds, things might change.

For instance, in 2013 there was this big street protest in Brazil. We had a show programmed to open on the same day of the protest and we said, "Okay, that makes no sense, let's change and do a show that is really bringing the streets in." So, we just opened the doors to the street activists, the team went to the street, and things like that. I'm always happy to be in an experimental institution and to really take advantage of this freedom because we have to try to do something that is relevant. And more than relevant, but responsive to the moment. I always think art works better in the long-run. Building critical content takes time, but it is important to always take the temperature of the context and position yourself ethically and politically. I don't think it's a matter of really going to the trenches, but instead, enabling situations and conversations to unfold in an open way, embracing the discussions and using our structure to disclose it, to spread it internationally and make the best use of our channels and access. I think it's more important than ever that we remain open. Our biggest challenge is just to keep doing what we already do. Remaining open and active is now a political matter. I think if we lose the vitality they win. So, let's keep doing the Carnival and celebrating the possibility of making things. We need to scream things out loud and quietly strategize at the same time.

AK

Of course.

FB

At the moment, it is easy to go down and be melancholic, so let's fight, with joy and wit. I think it's more effective than anything else.

TN

That's wonderful. I just wanted to touch, very quickly, on Fora da Caixa. Is that one of your programmatic aspects? Can you tell us a little bit more about what that is?

FB

This is a program that is usually done biennially. It starts when we invite an independent curator to make a proposal to show an artist, or an artwork, that was overlooked in the past decades in a contemporary art atmosphere. The aim is to create a dialogue with the other things in the program and to see that work again with "different lenses" in Pivô's space. We've done great things within this program, restoring artworks that were damaged and shining new

light onto forgotten names. I think it is one of my favorite programs at Pivô, and we're always happy with the outcomes of it.

TN

That's great. You've talked a lot about how you're responding to the present, and I'm interested in now, looking back at these seven years, whether you think of yourselves as an institution. Would you refer to Pivô as an institution?

FB

I think so. I'm always afraid of this word, as I think you are, with this project. But in the end, when I trace back the years, I think that Pivô always had the pretense of an institution.

AK

Right.

FB

It's like this conversation that you and I had with João [Mourão] and Luís [Silva]. As always, we still feel we're mocking this idea and performing it somehow. Sometimes, when I look around, I'm like, "How the hell did this crazy thing come to be?" We're internationally renowned and people come here. It was a ruin not long ago. Roughly, an institution is a group of individuals that gather around a common purpose. I think, in this sense, we were always an institution, in theory. And now, I think more and more, we've become an institution in practice. I think it means being professional in terms of having responsibilities and commitments with the artists, our public and our team. We are following the rules we stipulated for ourselves in the first place. Being an "institution" might sound like a heavy weight with bureaucratic structures, but I would think, especially now in Brazil, that institutions have been in jeopardy, that this is an important statement to make.

AK

That's interesting.

FB

I never wanted Pivô to be seen as a "young and hip place," since the start. It's easy to be coopted by the advertisement industry or even real estate speculation, or just things that are constantly surrounding the art world that

use it as a tool. For me, it was always important to really try to behave as a serious institution, even when we didn't have the means to do so. We had a strong visual identity and a nice bilingual website and no toilets at some point. These things are the very fundamentals of institutionalization — to set yourself some ethical parameters and quality standards and find your own ways to function accordingly.

AK

Because you mentioned institutionalizing to make a statement within the landscape, I'm wondering if you were thinking about artist compensation, which is a key question for us too. It's not standard among institutions here in the U.S. Is it a standard thing in Brazil?

FB

No, not at all. At Pivô we always pay artists fees, but this is not standard in the country.

AK

So, the ethics of working — who you're showing, how you're working with people, how you're accessible — all of those things are a way of remapping what an institution can be.

FB

I guess if you are wondering about identity politics or ethics program-wise, I think for me it's always more interesting if you also do this in your own office, and not just as the final output. Besides perhaps doing a show "about ethics," the most important thing is to make sure you *have* ethics in the way you hire people and pay the stipends, and to really put identity politics in practice when you choose people to work with. I think this is how we change things in the long run, to make certain things that sounded like a given, unacceptable.

AK

We're all habituated to the exploitation of the art world, I'm afraid.

FB

Of course we have to pay the artists. They're working. I remember in the beginning, with this group show that I did, an artist came to me like, "What is a fee? You already commissioned the work." And I said, "I gave you the production money and then I pay you the fee. And with the fee, you do whatever you want. You pay your bills."

AK

I think that's great because it means that you didn't go into the project feeling like you had to do things a certain way. It meant you analyzed the situation afresh, which is a rare opportunity to have.

FB

It's crazy. For example, nowadays when I think about this first show, I would do it completely differently. The name of the show was very symptomatic of Pivô. The name of the show was literally *Next Time, I Would Have Done it All Differently*.

AK

Which is funny.

FB

I think it was a very accurate title that I always go back to. And still, when I remember the crazy things we did in that show out of complete ignorance about how to run an institution, I always laugh and say, "Oh, my god. I could be arrested for some of the things we did." Nowadays I'm truly glad that we did this show, but we'll never do something like that again because it's impossible. I would say that Pivô wouldn't be possible without that show. It's impossible to tell the story of Pivô as an institution without telling the story about how it was a sequence of things that led us to exist, and most of them were completely impulsive. The first grant that I got, for example, I spent entirely on a show and we had no money to pay the electric bills or anything. And then, we did this beautiful show, and everybody got really great commissions, and we had nice drinks and I really liked that.

AK

Right. You made a splash.

FB

It was amazing because, when I started to organize things and properly fundraise, I already had a dossier with great press and images. I could say that we already had an exhibition with a *New York Times* piece that was filmed by *Frieze*. It was easier because of this very impulsive situation. And the sympathy of the world towards Brazil with the economy back then really helped, there were many important art world people in town for the São Paulo Biennial.

AK

Now that you are seven years in, who do you think of as your peers organizationally? This can be internationally, historically, or conceptually — who do you feel yourselves in dialogue with as an organization?

FB

In Brazil we are close to Casa do Povo. We are more or less the same size and exchange a lot of information and strategies on how to keep the projects running. The two spaces are very different, Casa do Povo is more like a community center and they do not focus exclusively on visual arts like we do. It's nice to have people in your context that share the same problems and insecurities. As a reference, one of the very first people I spoke to when opening Pivô was Alanna Heiss at PS1. This would be a larger discussion, but I guess a parallel could be traced between São Paulo nowadays and New York in the 1970s in terms of real estate still being affordable and the city being fueled by high creative energy. I think when Alanna started at PS1, she encountered a situation that was similar in the sense that she took over a massive building that was abandoned, and really started to fill it with artists. I think, for me, it was a very important reference, in a way, to find people who took spaces that were so challenging in terms of physical occupation. I think a great deal of the energy I dedicated to the project in the past years went to maintaining and renovating the space itself. Just to keep our door open is a lot of money, a lot of time. It's a building from the 1960s with a lot of plumbing problems. In terms of programming, I look a lot to ICA London and all the places that were, like Pivô, the outcome of encounters between creative people and an unoccupied spaces. A group of artists that founded something and ended up becoming an institution without them realizing it. I

think I'm always looking for these kinds of stories to relate to, and there are many.

AK

As a final question, because we've talked a little bit about some of the frustrations, I'm curious what your future vision is for the organization. And then, returning to the earlier point that you had, about whether Pivô could exist independent of the architecture, could it exist independent of you?

FB

Without me, for sure! As for the architecture, hopefully! I think the only reason I did so many things by myself is because I couldn't pay people to do it, and I didn't expect anybody to work for free or to have the same passion or drive as I have. I always wanted the space to be of public interest and to belong to the city. This year I am really involved more in structuring our office, the team and the institutional affairs and we have new people on board overseeing these issues. Not only because of the political situation of the country but because of the stage I am in my own career. I want to share more of the planning and the programming of Pivô, give space to new visions and new formats. I'm always very happy when I work just as a curator elsewhere without having to deal with the administrative aspects of the venue I am doing the show in, and I wish I could do this more often. Hopefully I can do this more in the future and Pivô can keep existing full on. But it takes time, of course, because as I was saying before, Pivô was an accident and my entire life has revolved around it for the past eight years. It was never my expectation to be sitting in the same chair for 40 years or something like that. I want to be on the board and to be the really grumpy old lady and say, "Oh, back in my day..."

AK

That's great.

FB

I'm really looking forward to that moment and to be proud of what Pivô has become without me being there every day. Hopefully, I can make it and find the right team to do it with me.