



REVISTA
DE
**CULTURA
VISUAL**

e-ISSN 2184-1284

No. 13 | 2024

There Are Many Possibilities and Impossibilities in This World: A Reflection on Spiral Time and the "35th São Paulo Biennial"

São Muitas as Possibilidades e Impossibilidades que Habitam Esse Mundo: Uma Reflexão Sobre o Tempo Espiral e a "35.^a Bienal de São Paulo"

<https://doi.org/10.21814/vista.5530>

e024006

Marcela Pedersen



© Autores

There Are Many Possibilities and Impossibilities in This World: A Reflection on Spiral Time and the "35th São Paulo Biennial"

<https://doi.org/10.21814/vista.5530>

Vista No. 13 | January – June 2024 | e024006

Submitted: 20/12/2023 | Reviewed: 16/02/2024 | Accepted: 16/02/2024 |

Published: 27/05/2024

Marcela Pedersen

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2590-0155>

Instituto de Investigação em Arte, Design e Sociedade, Faculdade de Belas Artes,
Universidade do Porto, Porto, Portugal

The epistemological understanding of spiral time, developed by Brazilian thinker Leda Maria Martins (2021), offers a restitutive perspective on the experience of time in its spiral form and serves as inspiration for the design of the “35th São Paulo Biennial”, entitled *Choreographies of the Impossible*. This epistemology, rooted in Black practice, poetry and thought, brings about disobedient movements capable of creating ways of breaking free from the categories established by the colonial hegemonic matrix and of crossing different strategies of survival, rhythm and rupture. The curatorial and educational interest of *Choreographies of the Impossible* — in creating a Biennial conceived from the point of view of the time that spirals — opens space for deep reflections on how curatorial proposals can be involved in attempts at reparative gestures, while at the same time being surrounded by institutional impossibilities. Considering that colonial institutions are intrinsically linked to structures of power, privilege and market logics, the tensions and contradictions of this context inform the impossibilities of decolonising institutions. Faced with these questions, this article seeks to carry out a reading of the *Choreographies of the Impossible*, reflecting on the curatorial and educational work of the “35th São Paulo Biennial” in conjunction

with the concept of "spiral time", at the same time as offering a critical analysis of the tensions and contradictions in the museum's attempts at decolonisation.

Keywords: spiral time, Leda Maria Martins, "São Paulo Biennial", *Choreographies of the Impossible*, decolonising museums

São Muitas as Possibilidades e Impossibilidades que Habitam Esse Mundo: Uma Reflexão Sobre o Tempo Espiral e a “35.ª Bienal de São Paulo”

A compreensão epistemológica do tempo espiralar, desenvolvida pela pensadora brasileira Leda Maria Martins (2021), oferece uma perspectiva reconstituinte da experiência do tempo em sua forma espiralada e serve como inspiração para a concepção da “35.ª Bienal de São Paulo”, intitulada Coreografias do Impossível. Esta epistemologia, enraizada em práticas, poéticas e pensamentos Negros, traz movimentos desobedientes capazes de criar formas de se soltar das categorias estabelecidas pela matriz hegemônica colonial e de cruzar diferentes estratégias de sobrevivências, ritmos e ruptura. O interesse curatorial e educativo das Coreografias do Impossível em elaborar uma Bienal pensada a partir do tempo que espirala abre espaço para reflexões profundas sobre como propostas curatoriais podem se envolver em tentativas de gestos reparadores, ao mesmo tempo que se encontram cercadas de impossibilidades institucionais. Considerando que as instituições coloniais estão intrinsecamente ligadas a estruturas de poder, privilégio e lógicas de mercado, as tensões e contradições deste contexto informam as impossibilidades de descolonização das instituições. Diante dessas questões, esta escrita procura fazer uma leitura sobre as Coreografias do Impossível, refletindo sobre o trabalho curatorial e educativo da “35.ª Bienal de São Paulo” em articulação com a concepção do “tempo espiralar”, ao mesmo tempo que oferece uma análise crítica das tensões e contradições nas tentativas de descolonização do museu.

Palavras-chave: tempo espiralar, Leda Maria Martins, “Bienal de São Paulo”, *Coreografias do Impossível*, descolonizar os museus

To Open Up Possibilities...

There are many impossibilities in this world. Impossibilities that mainly affect groups that have historically been discriminated. For example, forced displacement, structural racism and everyday violence. From a world where justice, equality and ethical and fair relationships are impossibilities informed by limiting aspects of class structures, White hegemony, patriarchy and cis-heteronormativity (Bienal de São Paulo, 2023). We can reference societies organised in political, economic and social terms based on worldviews that have been maintained since the 16th century. Or the very impossibility of repairing all the monstrous damage and losses caused by colonial violence (Mbembe, 2020/2021). As well as the impossibility of decolonising the museum and cultural institutions, which are themselves products and devices of colonial narratives (Cocotle, 2019; Duncan,

1991).

How can we move forward, backward, stretch, disorganise, contract, warm up, expand, circumvent the impossible? How can we create possibilities that are disobedient and resistant to the daily practices that violently delimit what is possible and what is not?

Going through so many impossibilities brings a sense of despair at the vicious cycle of repeating colonial assumptions. Perhaps this is the very intention of coloniality: to paralyse us, in a sense of losing sensitivity and the ability to move. The ideas developed by Leda Maria Martins (1997, 2003, 2021) are disobedient forces and movements that do not allow themselves to be paralysed. The Brazilian poet, essayist, playwright and teacher summons us to life, to movement, to remaking, presenting ancestry as a place of wisdom and companionship.

She develops the epistemology of spiral time as a celebration of the power and complexity of Black practices, poetics and thoughts. Time spirals back and forth, it's made up of rhythms, discontinuities, folds of time,

which returns, restores and also transforms, and which affects everything. A time ontologically experienced as contiguous and simultaneous movements of retroaction, prospection and reversibility, dilation, expansion and containment and relaxation, synchronisation of instances made up of present, past and future. (Martins, 2021, p. 63)

Faced with this reflection, and adding a layer of problematisation, we move on to the case of the "35th São Paulo Biennial". Under the curatorship of Diane Lima, Grada Kilomba, Hélio Menezes and Borja-Villel, the Biennial is looking to the epistemology of spiral time as the fundamental basis for its conception, which is called *Choreographies of the Impossible*.

The Biennial's curatorial and educational project refers to a proposal that tries to escape traditional structures and chronologies, guided by artists who bring different poetics and are from political, economic and social realities that are also delimited by different impossibilities. Their social and artistic practices have been imagining and fabricating other possible worlds that challenge, resist and refuse the effects of their contexts and the global terms of violence that delimit what is im/possible. The curatorial team of *Choreographies of the Impossible* leaves us with a few questions: "if these practices produce ruptures in the spaces to which they belong, when brought together here, what do they create? What consensuses and dissent do these choreographies of the impossible, when in dialogue in space, allow us to enter?" (Lima et al., 2023, p. 31).

This brings us to discussions around impossibilities in the context of museums and artistic and cultural institutions, specifically the insistence on reparative gestures that seek to decolonise institutions. Françoise Vergès (NYUAD Institute, 2022) raises an important question during the conference "The Impossible Decolonisation of the Western Museum": is it possible to talk about a complete

decolonisation of a colonial invention? For Vergès, an institution cannot be fully decolonised if the society in which it is inserted is not yet decolonised. It would be impossible to imagine the institution as a kind of fortress of decolonisation in the midst of social and political aspects structured from and to serve coloniality. How, then, in the impossibility of decolonising cultural and artistic institutions, can new forms of practice emerge that dialogue with a larger project of reparation?

In dialogue, for Brenda Cocotle (2019), the complete decolonisation of institutions in the context of a colonial society would only be possible with the dissolution of their entire rationality, in other words, with the end of the institution itself. The author says that "the museum may not be able to decolonise itself, but it could at least find a path to another institutional and work ethic" (Cocotle, 2019, p. 10).

Another institutional and work ethic is the path that this text seeks to trace, pursuing an understanding of other ways of working in cultural and artistic institutions that collaborate towards fairer and less violent visions of the world and relationships. This is nothing more than an obligation to make amends for colonial history, understood here as a reordering of relations and a larger project to restore life (Mbembe, 2020/2021).

The text is organised into two moments of discussion, understood as dynamic zones of complexification. We'll start with a thought exercise to understand the politics of Western temporality, imposed by colonial, patriarchal and capitalist ideals. Next, an approach to the epistemological understanding of spiral time and the thoughts of Martins (1997, 2003, 2021). In the second part we present the case of the "35th São Paulo Biennial", analysing the educational publications, conceived as procedural movements, on the one hand from a reflection on the curatorial and educational work of the "35th Biennial" in conjunction with the concept of "spiral time", and on the other hand, a critical lens on the tensions and contradictions in the attempts to decolonise the museum. In order to move through some questions: what happens when the epistemological elaboration of spiral time is brought into the institutional context? What possibilities, tensions and contradictions echo from this event? What consensuses and dissent inform the impossibilities of decolonising museums?

... in the Impossibilities of Linear Time

The hegemonic conception of "time" establishes a paradigm in which time is fundamentally understood as a continuum that divides it into past, present and future. In this view, time follows a logic of non-cumulative succession that becomes irreversible. Here, the present turns out to be an illusion, because becoming is always ahead, in a continuous movement that thinks progressively ahead, practising a forgetting of the past. This can be understood as a Western view of time, understanding "West" as a homogenising historical concept that

produces epistemic and political superiority over an idea of the "rest" of the world (Hall, 2016) and which starts from the concretisation of the modernity/coloniality relationship from the colonial experience that began in 1492 (Grosfoguel, 2010).

It is because he considers coloniality to be a virus that Mignolo (2019) draws attention to the fact that coloniality "contaminates our minds and makes us 'see' what the rhetoric of Western modernity wants us to see" (p. 3). This brings us to Tsing (2015/2022), who reinforces the analysis that the unified coordination of time is a mechanism of modernity that sustains alienating discourses of progress. This is yet another trick of the colonial virus. The very idea of progress in modernity is linked to a notion of "scalability", which implies the capacity for projects to expand without altering their premises, ignoring the possible changes caused by indeterminate encounters that may occur.

The idea of progress is underpinned by linear time and vice versa.

This reflection highlights what the modern/colonial matrix tries to hide: the sequential nature of time does not automatically imply an evolution from the inferior to the superior, an evolution of improvement (Bosi, 1992). But here we could ask what the meaning of succession is, if the after is not qualitatively produced by the before, and Bosi (1992) replies: "strictly speaking, none, except that of a temporality in itself that is empty, blind and irreversible" (p. 22).

We can see this with Mbembe (2014/2017), who discusses the triple dimension of violence that operates against the Black population in the three periods of hegemonic temporality. He says: "it is 'violence in the everyday behaviour' of the coloniser towards the colonised, 'violence towards the past' of the colonised, 'which is emptied of any substance', and violence and insult towards the future, 'because the colonial regime presents itself as eternal'" (Mbembe, 2014/2017, p. 183). Here, control over Black bodies ends up combining with control over the time of enslaved people, trying to trap them in a vicious cycle of violent temporal repetition.

Mbembe (2014/2017) puts forward an ethical and political vision of temporality that is "capable of transforming and assimilating the past, of healing the most terrible wounds, of repairing losses, of making a new history out of old events" (p. 55). On this performativity and politics of time, Mbembe touches on an interesting point when we discuss other temporal readings: the principle of unfinishedness. The idea of multiple temporalities breaks with the notion of "teleological history", opening up to the unleashing of different time series, which can be unfinished or resumed.

In the phantasmal paradigm, there is no reversibility or irreversibility of time. What counts is how the experience unfolds. Things and events involve each other. If stories and events have a beginning, they don't necessarily need an end. We can certainly be interrupted. But a story or an event is capable of continuing into another story or another event, without there necessarily being a link between the two. Conflicts and struggles can be resumed at the point where

they were suspended. They can also start again or even see new beginnings, without feeling a lack of continuity, even if the shadow of old stories and events always hangs over the present. (...) That said, the relationship between the present, the past and the future is not one of continuity or genealogy, but of the interlinking of practically dissociated time series, linked to each other by a multiplicity of tenuous threads. (Mbembe, 2014/2017, p. 251)

What If Time Spiralled...

Leda Maria Martins (1997, 2003, 2021) is one of the first Black women to earn a doctorate in Brazil. Her career has been marked by a break with the expectations of Eurocentric references in the field of theatre studies and the performing arts. The writer unveils the knowledge and aesthetics of Black cultures and corporeality, understanding them not only as theoretical, conceptual and performative contributions, but above all as epistemes. Her influence is fundamental in the context of Brazilian Black theatre, shedding light on the African legacy and Afro-diasporic communities, and affirming a political position of struggle and resistance, always questioning the binary categories established by the Western episteme.

In this text, the interest is to go through Martins' (2021) thoughts with regard to time and the experience of temporality as spirals, as an epistemology rooted in Black practices, poetics and thoughts. Through writing that is constructed by repetition modified by a new meaning, her book *Performances do Tempo Espiral, Poéticas do Corpo-Tela* (Performances of Spiral Time, Poetics of the Body-Canvas; Martins, 2021) is a celebration of the power, sophistication and complexity of Black arts, as Martins mentions (Livraria Megafauna, 2022).

The spiral time approach represents an epistemological turnaround in relation to the hegemonic ideology of linear, progressive and substitutive time. Martins (2021) restores and rescues a broader and more diverse perception, part of African, Afro-diasporic and Indigenous philosophy, which manifests itself through curvilinear temporalities, permeated by gestures, vocalisations and rhythms. In this sense,

time can be ontologically experienced as movements of reversibility, dilation and containment, non-linearity, discontinuity, contraction and relaxation, simultaneity of the present, past and future, as ontological and cosmological experiences whose basic principle of the body is not rest, as in Aristotle, but movement. In curved temporalities, time and memory are images that reflect each other. (p. 23)

The complexity of spiral time represents many possibilities for living and experiencing time that are not simply rhetorical but are part of a whole body of knowledge that comes from a series of Black and African epistemologies. Spiral

time incorporate movements that have the past as their present, simultaneously moulding futures.

Western thought of progressive time has traditionally been consolidated through written narrative, enclosing all holistic, empirical, ontological, everyday understanding of time in subordination to writing. As Finnegan (2008) said, "language, especially in its written form, is conceived as a vehicle of modernity, rationality and the value of the intellect. In this ideology, which is still so evidently prevalent, written language (especially in alphabetic form) represents the highest degree of humanity" (p. 20). In other words, writing was established as a privileged and universal place of memory, expression and dissemination of knowledge. Writing has become a device of Western control and domination, used as a form of exclusion and attempts to erase the knowledge of peoples and cultures undesired by Eurocentric thinking, as well as other forms of consolidating knowledge, such as oral and corporeal.

The mastery of writing becomes a metaphor for an almost exclusive idea of the nature of knowledge, centred on the elevation of vision, imprinted in the optical field by the perception of the letter. Memory, inscribed as spelling by the written letter, is thus linked to the field and process of vision mapped by the gaze, apprehended as a window to knowledge. (Martins, 2003, p. 64)

This is why Martins (2021) rescues other ways of thinking, conceiving, experiencing and expressing time as a language. The author does not ignore writing as a form of expression but emphasises that not everything can be fully expressed in written words. For example, the African perspective "takes into account the whole range of knowledge of oral performance as significant for the inscription of experiences of temporality and for their epistemic elaboration. The spoken word is inscribed on the body and its manifestations. And produces knowledge" (Martins, 2021, p. 32).

Martins' research (2003, 2021) has been developed along this epistemological spectrum, in order to think of the body and voice in performances and ritual scenes as more than expression and representation, but as portals for the inscription of different types of knowledge, a place where knowledge is written on the body, in gesture, movement, vocalisations and props. The body in performance is placed by the thinker as a place of recreation, transmission, inscription of memory and knowledge.

It is because she believes that the dichotomy created by the West between orality and writing is illusory and functions only as an instrument of domination, power and exclusion of peoples and cultures that use other languages to postulate and express knowledge, that Martins (1997, 2003, 2021) has been working on the idea of "orality". Inserted in the complex context of performative practices, orality considers that

gesture and voice modulate in the body the form of knowledge of various kinds and of the most diverse natures, including philosophical

knowledge, in particular an alternate and alternative conception of time, its reverberations and its impressions and shaping of our way of being, proceeding, acting, fabulating, thinking and desiring. (Martins, 2021, p. 41)

It's interesting to see how the author brings up the idea of the form of knowledge through performative inscriptions, provoking an encounter and relationship between writing, orality, the body and the image. "Orality", as Martins (2021) calls it, is a gesture that repairs, returns to and restores epistemological resistance to all hegemonic Western oppression and domination. The author's thinking shows us that despite the whole project of modern colonial destruction and erasure, performative practices are political gestures of resistance that carry ways of producing, nourishing and proliferating Black epistemes.

Despite all the repression, what history shows us is that, as much as the performance practices of Indigenous peoples and Africans were banned, demonised, coerced and excluded, these same practices, through various processes of restoration and resistance, ensured the survival of a body of knowledge that resisted attempts to erase it completely. (Martins, 2021, p. 35)

This quote by Martins (2021) shows the power of oral performances in creating and conveying the knowledge and values of African and Indigenous cultures, manifested through rites, celebrations, ceremonies, choreographies, props, designs, colours and flavours. The very knowledge and reverberations of spiral time are written and manifested in the body.

We can also go through another development in Martins' thoughts that intertwine with the reflections we have outlined so far: the notion of the "body-canvas". "The screen-body is an image-body", says Martins (2021, p. 77), thus subverting the dominant idea of the image as the domain only of the visual, of the gaze, of seeing, of the pictorial, bringing it closer to other meanings. In this conception, the image incorporates not only visual aspects, but also sound, movement, gestures, adornments, pigmentation and aromas, expanding our capacity not only to see, but also to listen to an image. The body-canvas, then, is understood as both a material and mental image, expressing and formulating thoughts.

In developing the idea of the body-canvas, Martins (2021) highlights the value of cultures that recognise the body as a reservoir of memory, through orality and movement, as is the case with African and Indigenous cultures. In this line of thought, Martins goes further by reflecting that the body-canvas can be understood as a cultural *corpus*, encompassing individual and collective experiences, as well as personal and historical-social memories, highlighting Black corporealities as an episteme and power for creating other forms of existence that are fairer and more civil.

In this way of thinking, what Martins shows us throughout her thoughts is that being continuous and fluid, time spirals. This makes sense when we realise that the performing body, as a moving image, is constantly updating and rebuilding

itself as it performs, rescuing ancestral knowledge and memories while projecting itself into a future that is already present in the now.

"The whole pendulum process between tradition and its transmission institutes a curvilinear, reactivating and prospective movement that synchronically integrates the present of the past and the future into the actuality of the performed act" (Martins, 2021, p. 83). In other words, Martins also invites us to rethink the idea of the "present moment", realising that it is part of an interweaving and mutual contamination between past, present and future.

... at the "35th São Paulo Biennial"

The "São Paulo Biennial" is the largest contemporary art exhibition in the Southern hemisphere and the second oldest in the world (after the "Venice Biennale"). For each edition, a curator or group of curators is chosen, who are responsible for defining the title and themes of each biennial, as well as choosing artists, groups and works to be part of the event. The 35th edition — *Choreographies of the Impossible* — took place between September and December 2023 and was conceived by the curatorial collective made up of curator, writer and researcher Diane Lima; artist, writer and theorist Grada Kilomba; curator, anthropologist and researcher Hélio Menezes; and researcher and art historian Borja-Villel.

"How are bodies in movement capable of choreographing the possible within the impossible?" (equipe de educação da Fundação Bienal, 2023, p. 19), is the question that opens the curatorial process of the "35th São Paulo Biennial". Placing itself as a poetic and artistic practice of moving as a curatorial process that invites imaginations and possibilities in the face of the unknown and the impossible, bringing the idea of movement as a force that reinvents itself while producing.

What does impossible mean?

What is impossible for you?

Impossible is what can't happen.

Sometimes we feel that some things seem impossible.

But we can invent, do things differently to make things possible.

Let's recall some things that seem almost impossible.

How can we create a world without racism?

How can we create a society without inequality?

How can we imagine a dance to create a world without injustice?

What movements can we invent to make the world more equal? (35^a Bienal de São Paulo, n.d., para. 80–88)

It is therefore with the intention of working on possibilities within the very impossibilities of a world that is marked by a racist, colonial and heteropatriarchal regime that the epistemological understanding of spiral time is brought up as a fundamental curatorial interest of the Biennial. Introduced as a force for thinking about other modes of production, perception, exhibition and relationship with artistic practices, as well as what seems to be a quest to develop a performative and processual character of curatorial and artistic processes.

The very name *Choreographies of the Impossible* suggests an intentionality in the idea of choreographies as a practice that sketches, draws and experiments, "open to the dances of the unimaginable, which are embodied in movements capable of transforming the apparently non-existent into the existing. (...) These are resilient elements, therefore of rupture, and consequently of an attempt at freedom" (Lima et al., 2022, para. 5).

We propose a reading of *Choreographies of the Impossible*, exploring, on the one hand, the reflection on the curatorial and educational work of the "35th São Paulo Biennial" in conjunction with the elaboration of spiral time, coined by Leda Maria Martins. On the other hand, from a critical lens on the tensions and contradictions of attempts to decolonise the museum. To do this, we turn to the Biennial's educational publications, understood as "movements". At the time of writing this article, two publications are available¹: "aqui, numa coreografia de retornos, dançar é inscrever no tempo" (here, in a choreography of returns, to dance is to inscribe in time; 1st Movement), a title based on a phrase by Martins; and "meu modo de pensar é um pensar coletivo/antes de estar em mim já esteve nelas" (my way of thinking is a collective way of thinking/before it was in me it was already in them; 2nd Movement), which incorporates phrases by Brazilian artist Rosana Paulino, recorded during a visit by the Biennial's education team to her studio in March 2023. We also turn to the space developed for experimenting with digital navigation, where the publications that make up the "movements" are available and unfold their contents with some paths and questions from the education team, with the publication called "encruzilhadas" (crossroads), based on Martins' thinking.

The analysis follows two moments of reflection, the first "what are choreographies of the impossible?", which seeks to deepen the understanding of the curatorial and educational project of *Choreographies of the Impossible*, realising the influences of Martins' epistemological approach to spiral time. The second moment: "the im/possible that inhabits institutional limits", which investigates the complexification of the institutional field, along with a discussion on the impossibilities of decolonising museums and artistic and cultural institutions.

¹The publications can be found at <https://35.bienal.org.br/publicacoes/>.

What Are Choreographies of the Impossible?

We can talk about many possibilities and impossibilities that permeate our reality. However, it is important to recognise that there are more impossibilities for some bodies than others. For example, as curator Hélio Menezes points out, we can highlight issues related to forced immigration, structural racism, climate crises and the various practices of everyday violence, whether symbolic, physical, verbal or gestural (Bienal de São Paulo, 2023). It's important to realise that the unimaginable, unfeasible and impossible are informed by limiting aspects such as racism and discrimination.

The curatorial team of the “35th São Paulo Biennial”, immersed in reflection on possibilities and impossibilities, is investigating how the idea of movement and displacement in this world is anchored in a neoliberal conception of freedom. This issue, marked by limiting regulations and the formatting of progressive, successive and time-replacing social imaginaries, raises questions about the impact of these violences and contexts of impossibility on artistic and creative development in different spheres. How to escape, circumvent or even choreograph these impossibilities becomes a central question for the curatorial team (Bienal de São Paulo, 2023). Western, linear, narrative and progressive time, which sees life as a succession of accumulations and substitutions, is thus called into question. The epistemology of spiraling time and the thoughts of Martins (2021) invite us to reflect on a time made up of rhythms and discontinuities, where present, future and past coexist.

The *choreographies of the impossible* are contoured around the performances of spiral time in various aspects of the creation and development of an art biennale. An interesting exercise is the questioning of the physical space itself, of how the design of the exhibition route can respond to the provocations of spiral time. According to Martins (2021), the concept of "spiral time" challenges centralised dynamics, not allowing for a fixed centre; it is a perspective that is in constant movement, where time and spatiality choreograph together, as concepts that cannot be separated. In this endeavour, the curatorial team sought not to move around thematic nuclei, but rather to open up space to choreograph collectively, bringing different poetics, plasticities, visualities and aesthetics to cohabit the same space, brought together under the same perspective.

During a segment of podcast *Em Obras* (Under Construction; Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2024), produced by the São Paulo Biennial Foundation, Martins, as a guest, reflects on how the Biennial's curatorial collective breaks from the routine of Western thought and art and moves on to other possibilities of knowledge. For the writer, spiral time carries the idea of a time inhabited by several simultaneous parallels and this perception is installed in the creation of the Biennial, for example, by the fact that the artistic works that make up the *Choreographies of the Impossible* are based on a combination of various arts, ranging from engineering, architecture, to visual and sound arts. We can see these parallels in various works, such as Citra Sasmita's secular painting made of

leather and fabric, the various layers of video, sculpture, painting, photography, installation and sewing in Januário Jano's work *Batismo* (Baptism), or Kapwani Kiwang's pink-blue installation that brings together a multiplicity of media, such as sculpture, installation, photography, video and performance².

As we go through the artistic proposals that were part of *Choreographies of the Impossible*, we feel the attempt to bring the powerful aspect of time that bends forward and backwards, that structures the idea of ancestry in the context of Black conceptions and that emphasises the need not to forget the past, but to relate to it, with the past, present and future being part of the now. This is an aspect that brings together relationships and collectivities, which is powerful when the curators propose that popular movements, collectives and quilombola communities also take part in the Biennial. Like the Quilombo Cafundó community in Salto de Pirapora (São Paulo), which has existed since 1888 on land inherited after being freed, maintaining African cultural traditions. Or the case of "Cozinha Ocupação 9 de Julho - MSTC", from the Movimento dos Sem Teto do Centro, a movement of working people fighting for the right to housing and the democratisation of the right to the live in the city. The movement is taking part in the Biennial by bringing flavours and knowledge from popular cuisine, with lunches open to the public.

The impacts of the elaboration of spiral time can also be seen in the attempt to maintain a performative character in the creation of the Biennial's educational publications. These seek to accompany the time of the event itself, offering procedural material that returns to what happened during the Biennial and gives space to think, create and reflect on the issues addressed.

In this context, the production and dissemination of knowledge seems to be questioned and challenged to break with the traditions of conventional publications, which often serve as a report that anticipates and predicts content about artists and related themes. As evoked by Martins (2021), when reflecting on how the use of writing by the West places it in an unfair position as the only form of expression and memory, thinking about time is subordinated to the written narrative, emptying it of all its heuristic, holistic, ontological and everyday significance. In the publications of this Biennial, there is an attempt to break away from this tradition, using writing as a place of power, but not as the only place to produce knowledge. Other poetics are brought in, such as conversation circles, music, voice-conversations and mind maps.

It's interesting because the publications feature artists who took part in the Biennial, inviting them to relate to this movement and continue the dialogue proposed at the Biennial. In addition, other people are invited to generate new conversations, for example, Françoise Vergès' text, "O Museu Sem Objetos" (The Museum Without Objects), proposes a choreography of return, where an already published text is called into question to be revisited by the author herself, with

²You can find out more about the people who took part in the "35th São Paulo Biennial" and their works at <https://35.Bienal.org.br/participantes/>.

the aim of creating new connections and dialogues.

The letter-conversation developed by the education team at the São Paulo Bienal Foundation (equipe de educação da Fundação Bienal, 2023) is an example of the publications' attempt to be performative. Written in the third person, the letter speculates a tone to break with the linearity of time and to bring about a horizontal dialogue. It seeks to engage the reader in a conversation about the process that unfolds through questions about what is im/possible and how to imagine choreographies of the impossible. It can be read or listened to, accompanied by sound effects. This writing-speech questions the possibilities of a plural and emancipatory education based on values of diversity, in various educational spaces, in the face of the impossibility fuelled by structural racism. An anti-discriminatory, democratic and anti-racist education that recognises the existence and values of all those affected by the violence of racism, LGBTQIA+phobia and all kinds of exclusion and prejudice is therefore urgently needed.

The name "choreographies of the impossible" is a gesture that seeks to broaden and disobey the traditional conceptions associated with the notion of "choreography". The latter often evokes the idea of disciplined bodies, controlled by commands and bound to a predefined script. The Biennial's curatorial team reflects on this dynamic of creating choreographies in the social context in which governance, through its laws, norms and violence, regulates and restricts freedom, producing impossible contexts.

It is in this sense that, by describing the notions of "choreographies" as "impossible", the Biennial is inviting disobedience, the creation of tensions and counterpoints, and thinking based on the strategies of those who question, reflect, disorganise and escape from the social context in which they live. For curator Diana Lima, *Choreographies of the Impossible* is a space that presents movement strategies and policies developed by a set of artistic and social practices. These practices speculate new worlds and even imagine the end of the world we live in, where ideas such as freedom, equality and justice become possible (Bienal de São Paulo, 2023).

Two central movements make up this attempt to choreograph the impossible: artistic and social practices that seek to challenge, resist and disobey the terms that delimit what is possible and impossible and that shape social imagination. As well as practices that fabricate and anticipate possible societies, creating discontinuities and temporal ruptures through artistic endeavour. These are practices that seek to create the possible despite all the impossibilities that surround them.

It's important to emphasise that this reading of the "35th São Paulo Biennial" is not to position the event as a solution, a model or a reparative formula for all the violence and erasures caused by colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. Much less is it to position the Biennial's work as an endeavour that arises from a void. As the Biennial's curatorial team points out, artistic strategies and creations of

other worlds are already being thought of in other territories, mainly by African diasporas, native peoples, dissident bodies that move in the face of unreachable walls and barriers, and that think from embodied and localised knowledge. *Choreographies of the Impossible* proposes experimenting in that contradictory and impossible space of the institution to create gaps as a collective.

The Im /possible at the Institutional Limits

Is it possible to create networks that extrapolate an expansive and spatial movement, but which, on the other hand, have as their starting point listening, redistribution policies and care for people, spaces and territories that are, in themselves, the very choreographies of the im/possible that inhabit institutional boundaries? (Lima et al., 2022, para. 9)

This question-quote is interesting for opening up a dialogue about the impossibilities that inhabit institutional boundaries. On the one hand, the “35th São Paulo Biennial” raises fertile questions about the need to imagine other worlds and to bring a diversity of proposals and artists into the context of an event like the Biennial. In an attempt at a performative, relational and procedural proposal, the curatorial and educational teams manifested as a gesture of restorative insistence, seeking to put their discourses into practice and assuming themselves as an experimental space, where the desire is to keep trying. The curatorial team is made up of three Black people and one White man. The participating artists come from different parts of the world and have different specialities and languages. They are bodies whose ethical and aesthetic elaborations reflect the complexities of time and temporality.

On the other hand, despite these fertile questions that the *Choreographies of the Impossible* develop, institutional practices remain that feed the impossibilities of fairer, more plural, horizontal and non-violent relationships, both within the institution itself and within the curatorial and educational endeavour of the 35th edition. An anonymous open letter, published on the website of the magazine *seLecT_ceLesTe*, denounced the precarious working conditions at the “35th São Paulo Biennial”, revealing violations of labour, civil and human rights, such as low food allowances that don't match the workload, inadequate working environments and a lack of policies for professionals to remain in the workplace that take diversity into account (trabalhadores da 35ª Bienal de São Paulo, 2023).

This brings us back to the performative proposals by Antonio Gonzaga Amador and Jandir Jr., realised at the 35th edition of the Biennial under the title *Amador e Jr. Segurança Patrimonial Ltda*. The series of performances raises questions about race, dissident bodies, precarious work and capital, criticising and putting into tension the very space where they perform. Dressed in the uniforms of cultural institution security guards, with a black suit, a white dress

shirt, a dark blue tie and, to top it off, an ID on the left side of the chest, the artists bring up the issues of occupying the marginalised bodies of employees in artistic institutions, institutional racism, the maintenance of elites as audiences in cultural circuits and the exploitation of the people who work in these contexts. With debauchery, they tense the spaces where they perform. On certain days, the security guards could be seen sitting at the entrance to the institution, welcoming visitors while enjoying beers from a Styrofoam box; on other days, they remained on the floor, with their heads between their legs in a circumspect posture throughout the day; there were also times when they stood outside the premises, with their faces pressed against the glass, observing those visiting the exhibition; or even carried out their day's "work" wearing blue flip-flops (Albuquerque, n.d.).

The relationship between artists who challenge and provoke limits and impossibilities responds to the curatorial provocation of *Choreographies of the Impossible* to create tension in the space while their bodies perform. The example above highlights the complex relationship between the institution and the bodies that work there daily, recognising the barriers imposed by the institutional space, where power relations often perpetuate inequality, and where historically oppressed bodies are routinely subjected to abusive working conditions.

The invitation to disobedience and the creation of tensions, was not only to the artists, but also to the people who work at the Biennial, who carry out the daily tasks necessary for the event to function. The letter of complaint, drawn up by various people who worked in different sectors of the Biennial, calls on the institution to answer for the poor working conditions and places the curatorial and educational proposal in a conflict zone and in contradiction, which in a way dialogues perfectly with what the curators were proposing.

Although the letter refers to the 35th edition, it echoes the weight of many other biennials and the many bodies that have passed through them over the years. It's a denunciation that, like spiral time, doesn't give in to the practice of forgetting, it fights for an issue that remains there, even under discourses that appear to be more inclusive, diverse and horizontal. Time spirals within the Biennial itself through these bodies fighting for justice. And it shouldn't stop there.

This can lead us to an interesting discussion that permeates debates on reparations: the decolonisation of cultural institutions. In his analysis entitled "O Pavilhão da Bienal Se Lavava em Prantos" (The Biennale Pavilion Washed in Pity), Guimarães (2023) raises interesting points about the case of the Biennial, reflecting on how discourses that value Black, Indigenous, poor, LGBTQIAPN+ and other minority groups' perspectives, aesthetics, lives and artists are not only a strategy of criticism and opposition to the State and capital, but are also part of a movement that generates visibility and, consequently, monetary value.

This perspective contributes to the understanding that, in practice, artistic and cultural institutions not only don't, but can't, become decolonial.

No, they can't, but not just because they don't want to. These are institutions whose practices, philosophies and objectives are a mere extension of the logic of capitalism and neoliberalism. Institutions based on this logic will, albeit at different levels and in different ways, reproduce inhumanities such as those denounced by the workers at the São Paulo Biennial. If the incessant quest for profit/spending retention in the midst of scarcity is sovereign, there will be, I repeat, a reproduction of inhumanity. (Guimarães, 2023, para. 6)

At this point, we come up against the very tide of impossibilities that govern our societies, as explored in *Choreographies of the Impossible*, impossibilities that have deep historical roots in colonial, patriarchal and capitalist ideals. While curatorial and educational practices and discourses offer fertile ground for shaking up our aesthetic, ethical and relational relationships with social and artistic practices, they seem to be just a mirage during other structural practices that make up the whole.

The curatorial team for the “35th Biennial” starts from its own awareness of the multiple impossibilities that permeate the institutional context. They bring a desire to put into practice a preposition, an experiment, to keep trying to create gaps and ruptures. *Choreographies of the Impossible* has a processual and dialogical character, inviting us to exercise imagination and fabrication that are limited within an institutional system. As Françoise Vergès reflects in an interview with *ARTE!Brasileiros* there is

the impossibility within the system of allowing you to go beyond the limits. You can transform the space, not put the table and chair in the same place as in the patriarchal master's house. And this already challenges the perspective of how we move around the space, but the wall is still there. We haven't challenged the system yet. We remain within the system. We do things differently and they're incredible, but as I say, it's time to go further, because otherwise space imposes a certain way of being. (Cypriano, 2023, para. 9)

Cocotle (2019) makes a significant analysis of the tendencies that over time have sought to dismantle the colonial framework of the museum, including the idea of an epistemological solution using the category "South". In Latin America, the beginning of contemporary art's encounter with decolonial issues can be traced back to Walter D. Mignolo's proposal of a "decolonial aesthetic", which gained momentum around 2010 with the exhibition *Estéticas Decoloniales* (Decolonial Aesthetics), curated by Mignolo and Pedro Pablo Gómez. This exhibition was conceived around the need to challenge the colonial logic perpetuated by a "privilege of the eye" — policies of the gaze and aesthetic categories inherited from the West and from artistic institutions that establish forms of control and the maintenance of differences. Cocotle (2019) emphasises that Mignolo's ideas resonated with other groups dedicated to criticising the power structures established by aesthetics and art history, mentioning figures such as Suely Rolnik and groups linked to conceptual art movements in Latin America with names

such as Joaquín Barridos, Ana Longoni and André Mesquita.

In this context, the term "South" emerges as a representation of regions that share a common post-colonial heritage, functioning as a category of dissent in relation to the narrative of art institutions and as a path towards the decolonisation of the museum. However, Cocotle (2019) emphasises that simply including or making discourses associated with this "South" does not necessarily challenge the structure and rationality of the museum, nor the ways in which it articulates power relations. The "South" ends up not being an epistemic category that shakes up the entire institution, in a similar way to one of the first fronts of criticism of the museum as a colonial device, which was the adoption of the notion of "multiculturalism", as categories that simply take on new names, but remain in the same terms as the colonial institution.

The projection of a "decolonised" museum of the South continued to follow the institutional management methods of the museum-company and a museum model that is related to the international circuit of the contemporary art market. "Thus, while the policy of exhibitions and public programmes tends to proclaim their collaboration with peripheral subjects or their inclusion (...) the policies of institutional management and organisation are evaluated according to criteria more akin to those of the cultural industry" (Cocotle, 2019, p. 9).

Despite these attempts, and faced with the impossibilities of decolonising the museum, the most recent book by Vergès (2023), *Decolonizar o Museu - Programa de Desordem Absoluta* (Decolonising the Museum - A Programme of Absolute Disorder), proposes an imaginative exercise in creating a post-museum or counter-museum. Vergès points out that these spaces reflect the structural inequalities caused by slavery, colonisation, capitalism and imperialism, which reinforce structural inequalities of race, class and gender. The author argues that museums are crossed by relations of power and force, through which the neoliberal regime has been exploiting the representation of Black and ethnic people in a way that is faithful to its extractive and lucrative economy.

According to Vergès (2023), to talk about truly decolonial and anti-racist practices in institutions "we need to create a place where the working conditions of those who clean, watch, cook, research, administer or produce are fully respected; where hierarchies of gender, class, race and religion are questioned" (p. 9). This criticism of the structures that maintain power relations leads us to pay direct attention to the case of the denunciation of labour situations at the "35th São Paulo Biennial". These are not new tensions and contradictions; they are inherent and structural practices. Later on, Vergès reinforces the idea that the social struggle needs to occupy several fronts at the same time, inside and outside the institution, with several voices, in order to unveil universal pretensions and precariousness.

In this line of thinking, demonstrations and campaigns for better working conditions and wages, struggles against precariousness, for greater representation of artists and for the restitution of objects acquired dishonestly "must not only

be maintained, but intensified" (Vergès, 2023, p. 16).

... Possibilities to Open

And that's why we return to the epistemological concept of "spiral time", which celebrates the power and complexity of Black poetics and transports us to the struggles and disobedience of colonial Western knowledge. By introducing us to the notions of "body-canvas" and "orality", Martins (2003, 2021) reaffirms the body as a place where memory and knowledge are inscribed. Time, which bends back and forth, transcribes and restores ancestral knowledge, while at the same time calling for not forgetting, bringing the past, present and future into the now. The writer's suggestions are inspirations for us to experiment with other ethical, aesthetic, poetic, bodily, textual and oral movements, instigated by the experiments of spiral time.

Starting from the specific case of the "35th São Paulo Biennial", this study sought to think about the possibilities, tensions and contradictions that echo from the encounter between the epistemologies of spiral time and the context of a Biennial held in an institution that has its origins and is, at the same time, a colonial device. From this crossroads, the decolonisation of museums emerged as an important discussion, especially when, during the research, the letter of complaint drawn up by the people who worked at the Biennial was found. This letter creates tension not only in the institution itself, but also in the curatorial proposal itself.

In tackling these issues, the decolonisation of museums, as well as the possibility of talking about ethical, fair and non-violent institutional practices, are characterised as impossibilities surrounded by colonial, patriarchal and capitalist ideas. As Vergès (2023) points out, it's time to go beyond these spaces. With or without the Biennial, other practices, aesthetics and ways of life take place in spaces that are not confined to a false idea of freedom. These are the spaces occupied by peripheral, diasporic and dissident bodies where knowledge is embodied, localised and other worlds are imagined in the midst of spiraling time. Likewise, there remains a struggle for new forms of negotiation in the face of unequal ways of inhabiting the world and a reordering of relationships (Mbembe, 2020/2021), even if, as the *Choreographies of the Impossible* curatorial collective proposes, in an attempt to open gaps, in-between times, between spaces, even if they are minimal moments of freedom.

Translation: Linguae mundi

Acknowledgments

The work was developed in the context of the PhD Scholarship awarded by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia - FCT, within the scope of the

European Union's European Social Fund and the Northern Regional Operational Programme.

Biographical Note

Marcela Pedersen is a PhD student in Art Education at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Porto, with a PhD scholarship from the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (Ref: 2022.10957.BD) and integrated non-doctoral researcher at the Institute for Research in Art, Design and Society. She has a master's degree in Educational Sciences from the University of Porto and a degree in Physical Education from the São Paulo State University. She is an activist member of the Fine Arts Immigrant Centre at the University of Porto. Her research interests question the possibilities of artistic mediation and education practices in artistic and cultural institutions as reparations of colonial history through anti-discriminatory and anti-colonial lenses.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2590-0155>

Email: marcela.pedersen@hotmail.com

Address: Instituto de Investigação em Arte, Design e Sociedade. Av. de Rodrigues de Freitas 265, 4049-021, Porto (Portugal)

References

Albuquerque, I. de. (n.d.). Amador e Jr. Segurança Patrimonial Ltda. 35^a Bienal de São Paulo. Retrieved February 23, 2024, from <https://35.bienal.org.br/participante/amador-e-jr-seguranca-patrimonial-ltda/>

Bienal de São Paulo. (2023, May 17). #35bienal Conversa com os curadores [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S_mdK2VMk5s

Bosi, A. (1992). O tempo e os tempos. In A. Novaes (Ed.), *Tempo e história* (pp. 19–33). Companhia das Letras.

Cocotle, B. C. (2019). *Nós prometemos descolonizar o museu: Uma revisão crítica da política museal contemporânea*. MASP – Afterall: Arte e Descolonização.

Cypriano, F. (2023, December 15). Hora da imaginação radical. *ARTE!Brasileiros*. <https://artebrasileiros.com.br/arte/hora-da-imaginacao-radical-francoise-verges/>

Duncan, C. (1991). Why museums make me sad. In I. Karp & S. D. Lavine (Eds.), *Exhibiting cultures: The poetics and politics of museum display* (pp. 255–277). Smithsonian.

equipe de educação da Fundação Bienal. (2023). Correspondências entre vozes, uma carta para abrir conversas. In C. Fino (Ed.), *Aquí, numa coreografia de*

- retornos, dançar é inscrever no tempo* (pp. 18–29). Bienal de São Paulo.
- Finnegan, R. (2008). O que vem primeiro: O texto, a música ou a performance? In C. N. de Matos, E. Travassos, & F. T. de Medeiros (Eds.), *Palavra cantada: Ensaio sobre poesia, música e voz* (pp. 15–45). 7Letras
- Fundação Bienal de São Paulo. (Anfitrião). (2024, February 27). Leda Maria Martins e Manuel Borja-Villel [Podcast episode]. In *Em Obras*. Trovão Mídia. <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/podcast-Bienal/episodes/9--Leda-Maria-Martins-e2ga615>
- Grosfoguel, R. (2010). La descolonización de la economía política y los estudios postcoloniales: Transmodernidad, pensamiento fronterizo y colonialidad global. In A. Pacheco & W. L. P. Melendez (Eds.), *La descolonización de la economía política* (pp. 17–48). Universidad Libre.
- Guimarães, J. V. (2023, October 19). O pavilhão da Bienal se lava em prantos. *seLecT_ceLesTe*. <https://select.art.br/o-pavilhao-da-bienal-se-lava-em-prantos/>
- Hall, S. (2016). O ocidente e o resto: Discurso e poder. *Projeto História*, 56, 314–361. <https://revistas.pucsp.br/index.php/revph/article/view/30023>
- Lima, D., Kilomba, G., Menezes, H., & Borja-Villel, M. (2022). *Coreografias do Impossível*. 35ª Bienal de São Paulo. <https://35.bienal.org.br/sobre-a-35a/>
- Lima, D., Kilomba, G., Menezes, H., & Borja-Villel, M. (2023). Quais movimentos compõem as coreografias do impossível? In C. Fino (Ed.), *Aqui, numa coreografia de retornos, dançar é inscrever no tempo* (pp. 32–36). Bienal de São Paulo.
- Livraria Megafauna. (2022, July 14). *Performances do tempo espiralar: Leda Maria Martins com Dione Carlos, Grace Passô e Lucelia Sergio* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5fd0pMtxPc&t=685s>
- Martins, L. M. (1997). *Afrografias da memória: O reinado do Rosário no Jatobá*. Perspectiva
- Martins, L. M. (2003). Performances da oralitura: Corpo, lugar de memória. *Letras*, (26), 63–81.
- Martins, L. M. (2021). *Performances do tempo espiralar: Poéticas do corpo-tela*. Cobogó.
- Mbembe, A. (2017). *Crítica da razão negra* (M. Lança, Trans.). Antígona. (Original work published 2014)
- Mbembe, A. (2021). *Brutalismo* (M. Lança, Trans.). Antígona. (Original work published 2020)
- Mignolo, W. D. (2019). *A colonialidade está longe de ter sido superada, logo, a descolonialidade deve prosseguir*. MASP - Afterall: Arte e Descolonização.

NYUAD Institute. (2022, December 15). *The impossible decolonization of the Western museum* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BEPp5IuZOA>

trabalhadores da 35ª Bienal de São Paulo. (2023, October 18). Carta aberta de repúdio às condições de trabalho na 35ª Bienal de São Paulo. *seLecT_ceLesTe*. <https://select.art.br/carta-aberta-35a-bienal/>

35ª Bienal de São Paulo. (n.d.). *Sobre a Fundação Bienal de São Paulo*. Retrieved March 3, 2024, from <https://35.bienal.org.br/leitura-facil/>

Tsing, A.L. (2022). *O cogumelo no fim do mundo. Sobre a possibilidade de vida nas ruínas do capitalismo* (J. M. Barreto & Y. Rafael, Trans.). n-1 edições. (Original work published 2015)

Vergès, F. (2023). *Descolonizar o museu - Programa de desordem absoluta*. Ubu Editora.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.