Luisa Strina Desde [Since] 1974 luisastrina.com.br

Contrato
[*Contract*]

Ilê Sartuzi

4 novembro 2025 — 13 fevereiro 2026

[November 4, 2025 — February 13, 2026]

CONJURINGS, or a few notes on contracts (for ilê sartuzi)

Pedro Zylbersztajn

1.
Every contract is, in a sense, a spell: a set of words and symbolic gestures that establish a new reality. A signature and an incantation are very much alike from a linguistic perspective, and can be classified as *performative utterances*, that is, discursive acts that not only describe the world, but transform it.

2.
Traditional economic narratives concerning the origin of money proclaim that the first-ever exchange mechanism developed by human societies was barter, an inefficient form of commerce (if I want corn and I have bread, I must find someone who specifically wants bread and specifically has corn). The coin would have emerged to correct this limitation, as a fungible, and therefore more efficient, unit of value (if I want corn and I have coins, I can find anyone who has corn and is willing to trade it for any other good with an equivalent value in coins). Currently, however, anthropologists and historians pose that the first structure for the circulation of value was a different one: debt.

3.
Barter and money are the product of low-trust contexts, in which any transaction must be carried out at the time of negotiation itself, to reduce the risk of conflict. Debt, on the contrary, takes place precisely in the interplay between present need and future possibility. And it is a belief in its ability to self-realize that is the condition for its existence. In fact, not only do debt and its counterparty, credit, depend on a structure of trust, but they are instrumental to the production of trust among people and communities: if I lend to you — or borrow from you —, we are now part of a unit whose principal value is reciprocity. My expectation is that as soon as it is possible or necessary, you will do the same for me. In such a structure, to give and to receive are one and the same gesture. In a sense, credit and debt are mutually contained, a single action that can be differentiated only through where it is situated in time.[1]

4.

⇔ CREDIT ⇔ DEBT ⇔ CREDIT ⇔ DEBT ⇔ CREDIT ⇔ DEBT ⇔

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TIME

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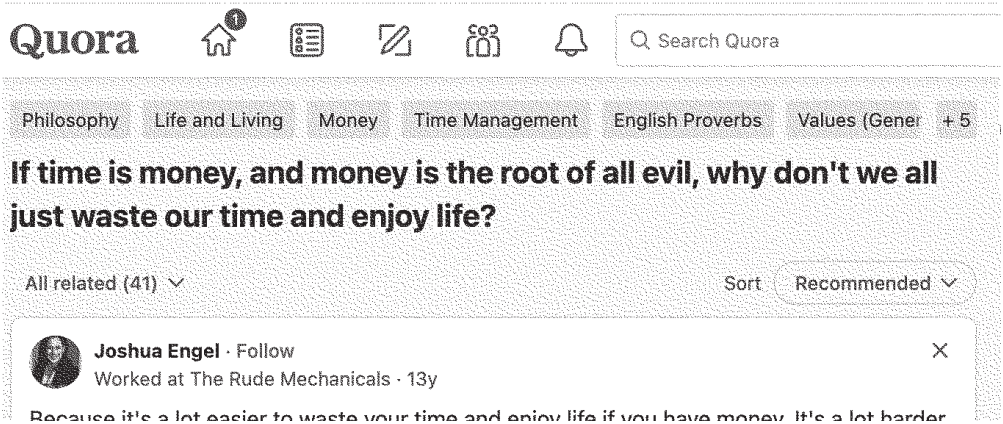
1. This note paraphrases excerpts from the entry *Credit*, written a few years ago by Alice Noujaim and myself for the glossary of the platform *Weird Economies:* https://weirdeconomies.com/glossary. Accessed on Oct. 2, 2025.

5.
Contracts have strange relationships with time. Their temporality is seldom the present. They presuppose a duration: one month, five years, a lifetime, eternity. They also project future action. However, contracts *presentify*. That is, in order to allow the operationalization of exchanges that are not necessarily concurrent from a temporal perspective, they drag elements from other times into the here and now — they treat assets in a speculative way, treating objects that *may come* into existence in the future as functionally existent entities at the time of signature. Not by chance, time becomes one of the main elements of value-building. It is in the timespan between now and the future that a loan is created. And even more so for interest, which is nothing but a pledge, or a promise, of benefit. While the momentary loss of a resource in the present time motivates the obligation of material compensation, the urgency of immediate access to said resource is great enough to encourage the payment of additional sums.

6.
Time is the matrix of transformation. It is in it and through it that all things change: texts accumulate, bodies perish, interest compounds, paper turns yellow, ice melts. Values fluctuate, and no known form of magic guarantees they will rise or fall.

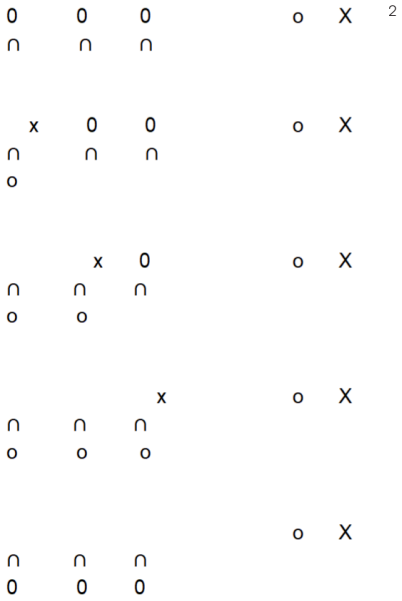
7.



8.
Here, contracts are something between promises and scores. They lay down obligations but also insinuate performances. They attribute gestures and roles that must be fulfilled by certain actors over a specified timespan. The relationship between the score and its performance — a symphony, for instance — carries

an ontological ambiguity: are they the same thing, or two entirely distinct things? Perhaps something in between? In such case, where along the continuum between those two positions does the answer reside? A score is often understood as a memory device, nothing but a resource so that a past event can be conserved and repeated. This notion, however, ignores how the score plays a disciplinary role in the exercise of the performance, establishing through (more or less) rigid linguistic codes what can and cannot be done in a certain field. The introduction of staff notation, for example, brings about a qualitative change in the approach to composing chamber music, causing it to respond to conventions that take place on paper as much as to aesthetic and material demands of the very act of playing. There are entire compositional forms, such as serialism, that make sense only if viewed as consequences of their notation system. Therefore, to assume that the performance always prevails over its score means to ignore the ordering effect of notation itself. On the other hand, to assume the superiority of the score means to subordinate the act of performance to the prescriptions of procedural signs, overlooking the fact that, in order to be actualized into performance, the score must be *interpreted* and is therefore subject to variations, errors and, simply put, to the physical realities of the world. As such, we must never mistake *order* for *execution* nor presuppose the primacy of one over the other.

9.



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2. Excerpt from score created by Ilê Sartuzi for the magic trick featured in the video *all fixed, fast-frozen,* 2025

10.
A performative utterance only confirms itself, that is, accomplishes its transformative role upon the world, if it accounts for the social relations in its context. Every utterance is read by considering the position of its utterer within a scale of power; no order or execution thereof will stand without due authority. Contracts make this clearer than most other forms of communication, as they are explicitly based on the negotiation of power asymmetries between its parties. However, this does not mean that such power maps are less ambiguous or simpler to read. Where do we expect the most power concentration — i.e., capital, in all its variations — in the relationship between an artist, a gallery, and a (potential) group of collectors? Who holds, from the outset, the greatest authority, the greatest executive capacity to convert their desires into action, and in what way is this rearranged through the contractual exercises presented here? The idea that these questions could truly be resolved on the basis of individual negotiations is, of course, deceptive, and made absurd by the very premise of each of the exhibited contracts. The contract stabilizes yet never nullifies the constant struggle for the trimmings of power. In the best of circumstances, all parties act in *good faith*, but as with any score, they interpret, make mistakes, and are confronted with the material reality of the world. Once again, we must dissociate order from execution, which never entirely overlap.

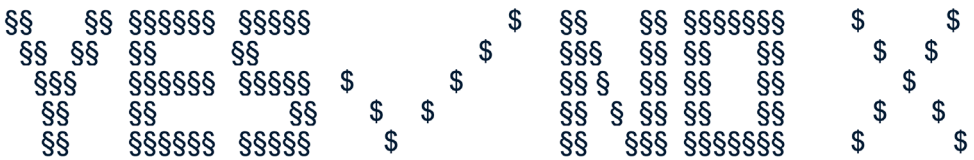
11.
The exception is perhaps magic, which looks to affect the world through such a precise enunciation, such a categorical representation of action, that it becomes action itself. Perhaps, in its most genuine form, magic is always aiming to go back to the first enchantment: the beginning through the word, the original *logos* whose power is absolute and therefore able to make orderexecution a single term. Total knowledge of the world, which makes it totally manipulable. The unbreakable blood contract whose foundations are unequivocal and unquestionable. But one must remember that here, nothing is about magic, only illusion.

12.
why must the devil sign contracts to acquire people's souls?

13.
In the context of a society based on individuation rather than community ties, debt renders the debtor vulnerable. Why, then, as an artist, should one bring this vulnerability upon oneself? Drafting a perpetual debt into a contract rather than to simply carrying out the expected trade of an art object for a specified sum of money? It seems to me this certainly would not be, as it may seem at first glance, a personal sacrifice for someone else's speculative benefit, in a sort of

subprime of the self. Perhaps, yes, this would be an attempt to reinscribe into the explicit language of the contract the artist's tacit experience and, in doing so, to acquire a certain agency over processes that would usually elude them. And possibly, as a result, to create a sworn implication of the other parties in the contract in the artist's stability, as a guarantee of returns. By contractualizing this vulnerable position required by debt's own mechanisms, perhaps one can rearticulate it, reverting it from being a burden, as it is currently viewed, back to its original status as a trust-building system. The uncomfortable fact that this system is entirely underpinned by the logic of private investment rather than that of mutuality simply amplifies the latent discomfort in the normal operating conditions of the art world.

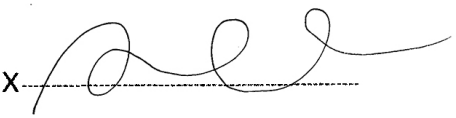
14.



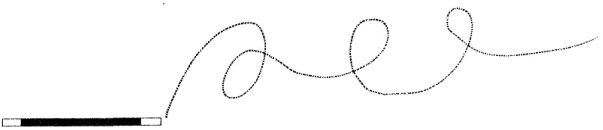
15.

Out of the magician's tools, perhaps the most important one is the ability to direct the gaze, through a complex game of forced concealments and visibilities — the sleights of hand, manipulations, and disorientations performed by any illusionist. The so-called "visual" artist operates in a similar way, disguising their occlusions in the act of sharing the visible. This is not the place to enumerate and, in doing so, reveal illusions, but it should be said that this is, first and foremost, an exhibition about what one does not see.

16.



with the certainty of practice, a wrist draws a line over the dotted line.



with the certainty of practice, a wrist draws a line in the air.

17.
In English, it is common to refer to the magician as a *conjurer*, one who conjures, that is, makes incantational invocations and is able to materialize inexistent objects, to pull things out of thin air, to transform nothingness into value. In Portuguese, however, the conjurer, *conjurador*, is the one who conspires. One who joins others in the intent to redesign systems. One who *con-jures*, who shares a promise. Someone you trust.

18.
x PEDRO ZYLBERSZTAJN [signature]

segunda a sexta, 10h—19h
sábado, 10h—17h

[monday to friday, 10am—7pm
saturday, 10am—5pm]

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