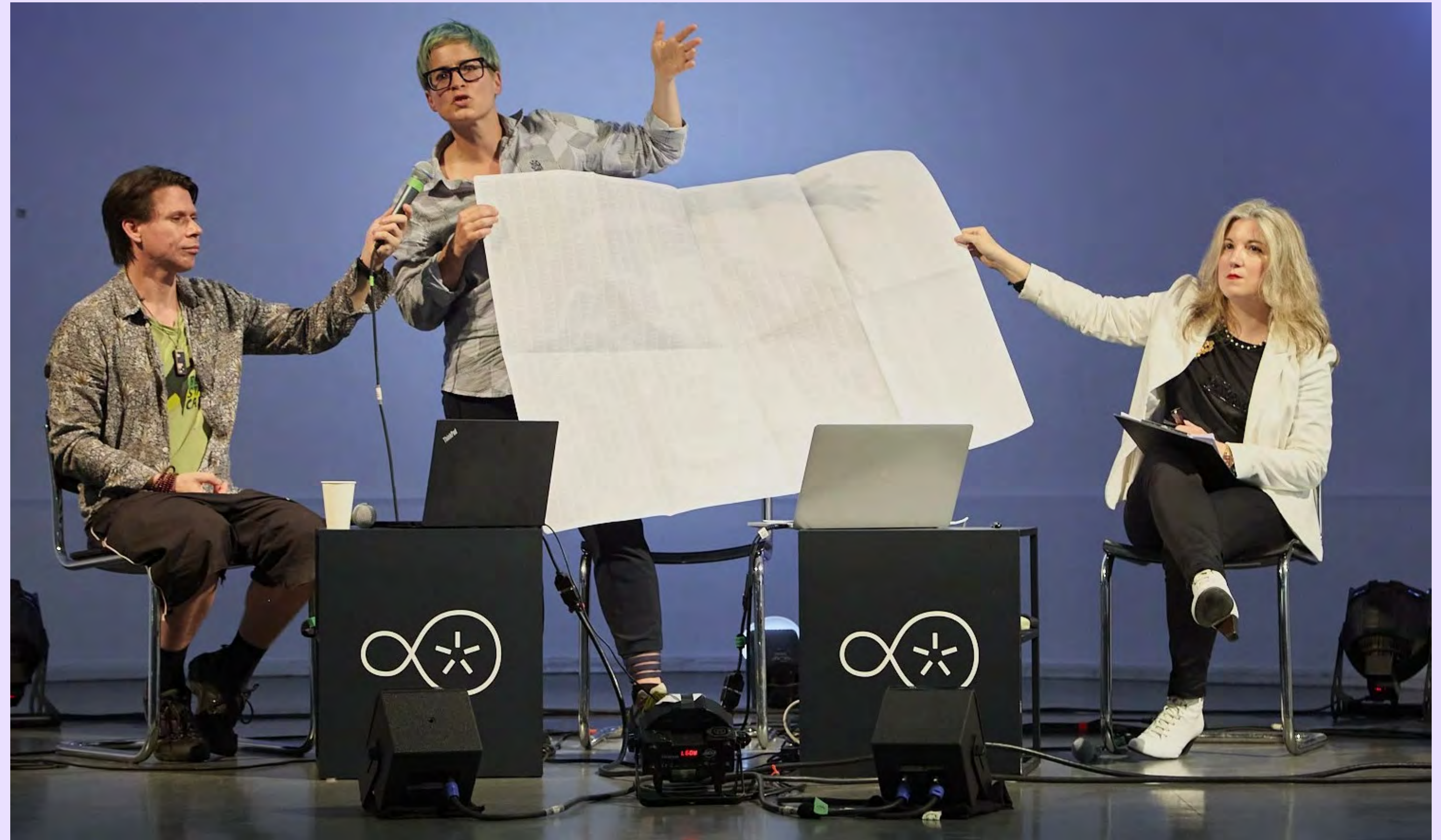


Disrupting Systems, Activating Communities: Tactical Practices from the Disruption Network Lab

Tatiana Bazzichelli



Re —
Imagine
Europe

— New
Perspectives
for Action

INTRODUCTION: The Disruption Network Lab

In April 2014, drawing from her background as a curator, researcher, and networker in the fields of digital culture and activism, Tatiana Bazzichelli founded the **Disruption Network Lab** in Berlin. The aim was to develop a public programme, grounded in artistic experimentation and critical investigation, to expose systems of power and injustice and empower transdisciplinary communities. Conceptually, the curatorial methodology connected three principles: **disruption**, as a challenge to interfere within closed political and technological systems; **networking**, as a means of developing open, participatory contexts for exchange between artists, activists, tech experts, whistleblowers, investigative journalists, and researchers; and the **experimental laboratory**, as a format for creating awareness, literacy and reflection, focusing on the pressing topics of our time.

↑ Cover artwork:
From the left: Lauri Love, Manu Luksch, Tatiana Bazzichelli. Conference “Artivism”, June 2023.
Photos by Maria Silvano, Disruption Network Lab.

Over the past eleven years, these practices evolved into a dynamic programme of interdisciplinary events, conferences, and community activities, as well as a research centre – the **Disruption Network Institute**. Since 2015, the organisation has hosted more than thirty-five conferences in various independent locations across Berlin, notably Studio 1, Kunstquartier Bethanien, a venue historically connected to countercultural and cultural movements in the city. Today, their objective is to continue exploring how artistic and activist practices, combined with an investigatory approach to producing evidence, can generate new forms of literacy, participation, and social awareness, both locally and globally. In this text, Disruption Network Lab’s director Tatiana Bazzichelli offers a reflection on the curatorial methodology behind the organisation, with a focus on building networks of trust, activating interdisciplinary communities, and fostering cultural participation at the intersection of politics, technology, and society.



SAT 25.3 2023 · 19:00

TARGETED BY SURVEILLANCE

JULIAN ASSANGE · WIKILEAKS
& NETWORKED REPRESSION

STELLA ASSANGE · KEVIN GOSZTOLA
STEFANIA MAURIZI

SMART PRISONS
TRACKING, MONITORING & CONTROL

From the left: Tatiana Bazzichelli, Stefania Maurizi, Stella Assange, Kevin Gosztola, Conference "Smart Prisons", March 2023. Photo by Maria Silvano, Disruption Network Lab.

Disruption as a Method for Political and Artistic Engagement

In the business tradition, disruption signifies not only rupture, but also innovation and the re-design of behavioural tendencies. “Disruptive innovation” is a term coined by Clayton M. Christensen, Harvard Business School professor and author of the 1997 book *The Innovator’s Dilemma*. Here, disruption is used to describe a process that disrupts the market in unexpected ways to generate a new market and value network. Disruption occurs when a process of business innovation takes shape by displacing an earlier technology, provoking a change of consolidated business values, whilst simultaneously generating new forms of business. A disruptive innovation usually happens when a new, often cheaper, product is introduced to the market, transforming the market from within by progressively winning over the competition. Following this perspective, disruption happens when previously consolidated companies and industries fail – the establishment is “broken apart” so to speak – as new products and trends thrive simultaneously.

The methodology adopted by the Disruption Network Lab, which is grounded in my PhD research on “Networked Disruption” (2008-2011), transfers the concept of disruption from an economic context to a curatorial, artistic, and political method of critical transformation. In this sense, disruption becomes an inspiration for political critique and an opportunity to imagine new tactics in the frameworks of art, activism, and social justice, thereby creating alternatives to systems of oppression and exposing hidden mechanisms of power creation. Disruption is also a curatorial method to critically engage with power structures, dominant narratives, and systems of control. Disruption is neither destructive nor chaotic by default; instead, the concept functions as a framework for exposing invisible infrastructures and opening new possibilities for civic participation and artistic dialogue.

In this speculative appropriation, the term ‘disruption’ refers to unexpected interventions that provoke a change from within by revealing the hidden logics of political, technological, social, and economic systems. It asks us to imagine a transformative practice not rooted in a frontal opposition, but in the idea of stretching the limits of the systems that we want to criticise. Such interventions,

coming from artists, activists, whistleblowers or investigative journalists, become entry points for public engagement, inviting communities to question, investigate and propose alternatives within the systems themselves.

From its inception, the curatorial work at the Disruption Network Lab has focused on whistleblowing as a paradigm of disruption: a single act that can trigger far-reaching, systemic consequences. By learning from whistleblowers, activists and artists, we have developed a programme that combines the ethics of truth-telling with the poetics of creative resistance. We invite participants who have a deep understanding of the systems under investigation, either because they were previously a part of them as is the case of whistleblowers, or because they have been studying their inner mechanisms. This investigatory approach allows us to expose important information in the interest of the public.

The Disruption Network Lab addresses the notion of ‘art as evidence’, combining an investigatory approach with creative tactics. We present experiences and artworks that invite people to dig deeper into societal injustices, while at the same time, exposing wrongdoing and misconducts. We understand artistic experimentation to be a means for agency, one that can especially resonate with communities that are marginalised or oppressed. Rather than providing ready-made answers, our events encourage dialogue between participants and the public, fostering cross-sector learning. Through this method, disruption becomes a constructive practice, generating political insight and community empowerment.

Experimental Formats: Conferences as Networks of Trust

The concept of disruption takes on its deepest meaning through the network that it activates and the experimental spaces that it generates. The Disruption Network Lab creates a multidisciplinary environment where artists, whistleblowers, journalists, activists and scholars converge, building what I define as “networks of trust”: open and collaborative contexts that allow for interaction and exchange of multiple perspectives, foster critical literacy, and support collective interventions.

The most important aspect is to create a dialogue among people that share a similar vision of the world even though they come from different backgrounds. Sometimes participants already know each other and have worked together; at other times, we bring them together because their different points of view complement each other, helping to expand on a theme through unexpected outcomes.

The Disruption Network Lab's conference series functions not just as a recurring event format, but as experimental, curated spaces for generating transdisciplinary alliances between artists, whistleblowers, activists and other participants. When organising a conference, we aim to create a narrative that evolves over the course of the event (usually three days) and concludes collectively, with a hands-on workshop for speakers and our community to engage in deeper explorations of the topics under investigation. Together we exchange shared practices, tactics, and information for future follow-up.

Speakers are chosen based on previous research they have done on the specific conference's topics, ensuring that their expertise and ideas align with the conference's themes and objectives. The curatorial method develops a conceptual hypertext that imagines how different perspectives could be combined in a dialogue to strengthen and complement each other on stage. The idea behind this experimentation is to foster a multi-angled analysis of a subject – because reality is never just one-dimensional. The format also encourages the public to connect the dots in a creative way, making them feel part of the conceptual narrative. The intention is to leave space for an openness of interpretation – not only analysing a subject from a journalistic point of view, but also imagining how it could evolve into practice-based research, artwork, or concrete action in the second phase after the conference, be it on the streets, online, or within peer communities.

The first conference we organised as the Disruption Network Lab was 'Drones: Eyes from A Distance' in April 2015. The event laid the groundwork for our curatorial vision of conferences as experimental formats designed to develop networks of trust. One of the many touching moments of that gathering was a keynote talk given by Brandon Bryant, a former drone sensor operator for the US

Air Force. His story worked not just as a critique of hidden military systems, but also as a powerful demonstration of how shifting one's perspective can catalyse collective social awareness and change. This encounter was transformative, both personally and professionally, and influenced much of the curatorial development of the Disruption Network Lab, especially in making programmes dedicated to whistleblowing, surveillance, and warfare. The 'Drones' conference served as a prototype for how cultural programming and discourse can model disruption, shaping future events and communities.

A year later, Disruption Network Lab organised the conference 'Bots: Tracking Systems of Control' at Somerset House in London. We invited Cian Westmoreland, a US Air Force whistleblower, who was working on an online portal called 'Project Red Hand' with Brandon Bryant at the time. The event also featured artists and researchers Joana Moll and Carmen Weisskopf from !Mediengruppe Bitnik, along with others. Later, in 2022, Westmoreland and Bryant took part in the 'Kill Cloud: Networked Warfare, Drones & AI' conference, which established the basis for the new Disruption Network Institute. This think-tank, launched on September 11 2023, specialises in research and investigations into AI and warfare. Lisa Ling's contribution, as whistleblower and former Technical Sergeant in the US Air Force Drone Surveillance Programme, was crucial to the start of this project. Together with Westmoreland, Ling developed the concept of the 'Kill Cloud', initially introduced in our anthology *Whistleblowing for Change* (2021). It was then expanded as part of the Institute's research and published alongside papers by other research fellows including Joana Moll, journalist Jack Poulson, or whistleblowing advocate Naomi Colvin.

At the heart of our approach is the cultivation of trust: between speakers and audience, curators and participants, and among the speakers themselves. As curators, organisers, and cultural operators, we carry the responsibility of creating and sustaining these networks. The presence of whistleblowers is especially important in a cultural setting because their radical act of telling the truth exposes hidden architectures of power, which in turn generates more empowerment when

shared in the context of social justice, art and activism. These networks of trust become means for transformation, making space for new kinds of political and artistic agency.

A Transformational Model: Activating Communities through Juxtapositions

The Disruption Network Lab conference events use a “montage” method inspired by Walter Benjamin’s work from 1928, where experts from various fields come together to collaboratively investigate pressing topics and sensitive matters. To activate communities and engage diverse audiences, we also employ a curatorial methodology rooted in James Clifford’s notion of ethnographic surrealism. These approaches allow for the creation of conceptual juxtapositions and networked connections, generating political and cultural awareness through the unexpected – a concept that I have previously connected with the meaning of disruption as cultural transformation.

When whistleblowers share space with artists, journalists, activists, and researchers, they combine perspectives in ways that push the boundaries of their own practices. These interactions are not only revealing but highly generative: they encourage shared reflection and foster new tactics for resistance. Through our programming, topics like surveillance, warfare, tracking, monitoring, or technological control are re-framed in cultural and tactical terms. Our events invite the audience into a dynamic interpretative space, promoting critical literacy, intersectionality, and agency through complementary ideas across different areas of expertise.

In this model, curating is not an outcome, it is a process. Speakers are co-contributors in a networked analysis of social, political, and technological systems. Activating communities through conceptual juxtaposition plays an important role in exposing systems of power and injustice and creating networks of trust. At the core of this work – exploring trust, intersectionality, and unexpected connections – is also curiosity. The best conferences, in my view, happened when I followed a curatorial path based on ‘open-eyed’ research, rather than reputational standards for artists and speakers, or the role that they play within professional systems

or the art market. Thanks to our experimental events and activities, we have discovered inspiring speakers, researchers, artists, and other practitioners who go by unconventional routes. Together we listen to suggestions from our communities and connect dots through interpersonal relations based on cultural affinities, individual interests, and shared visions of the world.



↑ Brandon Bryant, Conference “Drones”, April 2015.
Photo by Nadine Nelken, Disruption Network Lab.

A Methodology for Cultural Workers, Curators, and Community Organisers

Learning from nearly a decade of experimentation at the Disruption Network Lab, we propose a methodology for cultural workers, curators, and community organisers.

These tactics are not to be taken as static templates. They are meant to be adapted, re-imagined, and to evolve based on local contexts and needs.

The following principles offer a framework for building inclusive, politically engaged cultural programmes that challenge norms and reconfigure relationships across sectors.

➤ **Building Trust Through Juxtaposition**

Trust is cultivated by creating an in-depth dialogue within difference. Artists, activists, whistleblowers, investigative journalists, technologists, and researchers are invited to exchange practices and ideas, sharing knowledge across disciplines.

➤ **Creating a Transdisciplinary Programme**

Connect expertise from fields that rarely collaborate. For example, pairing investigative journalism with performance art, digital activism with anti-corruption work, or whistleblowing with queer theory can help challenge siloed thinking and stimulate new vision.

➤ **Embrace Complexity**

Leave connections open and avoid curatorial synthesis. Unresolved contradictions and the coexistence of oppositions create a space for public imagination, rather than trying to force consensus.

➤ **Experience Participatory Formats**

Use event formats that empower all participants. Community meetups, informal workshops, and roundtable discussions ensure exchange and sharing between speakers and the audience.

➤ **Build Conceptual Networks, Not Just Events**

Organise local meetups alongside international conferences. This hybrid structure deepens local engagement while maintaining global outreach.

➤ **Surprise or ‘The Unexpected’ as a Tool for Critical Engagement**

Encourage moments of dissonance without pushing for conflicts. When unexpected connections are made – such as linking whistleblowing with artists, for example – participants are encouraged to reconsider assumptions and discover new forms of solidarity.

➤ **Follow Your Instincts and Listen to your Audience**

The best events are the ones you would personally want to attend and that inspire passion in you. If the curators and organisers are enjoying the programme, the public will sense it and usually feel welcome and share your passion.



From the left: Joana Moll, Naomi Colvin, Jack Poulson, Lisa Ling, Tatiana Bazzichelli. Launch of the Disruption Network Institute's research "Investigating the Kill Cloud", November 2024. Photo by Maria Silvano, Disruption Network Lab.

CONTEXT

This text is one of the pilot studies of *Re-Imagine Europe: New Perspectives for Action*. In these contributions we explore and reflect on artistic practices and experimental approaches in the cultural field that can engage and activate audiences and communities to address ecological, social, and political challenges. The pilot studies provide an overview of practices of cultural organisations that can serve as models, recipes, or tools for transformation for current and future generations of cultural workers and artists.

Re-Imagine Europe: New Perspectives for Action (2023–2027) is a four-year transnational co-creation and circulation project of fourteen interdisciplinary art organisations across Europe. The project aims to equip and empower young Europeans through artistic practices to better withstand societal challenges triggered by rapid climate change.

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BIOGRAPHY

Tatiana Bazzichelli^(IT/DE) is the founder and director of the Disruption Network Lab, a non-profit organisation in Berlin that explores the intersection of politics, technology and society (disruptionlab.org). Her work focuses on whistleblowing, network culture, art, and activism. Since September 2023, she is the director of the ‘Disruption Network Institute: Investigating the Kill Cloud’, a new centre for empirical research into the impact of artificial intelligence on technologies of war, automated weapons, and networked warfare (disruption.institute). She is the author of *Whistleblowing for Change* (2021), *Networked Disruption* (2013), *Disrupting Business* (2013), and *Networking* (2006). She was a member of the Transparency International Anti-Corruption Award Committee 2020. From 2019 to 2021, she was appointed by the Federal Government and the City of Berlin as a jury member for the Hauptstadt Kulturfonds (Capital Cultural Fund) and then for the Kulturlichter Prize from 2020 to 2023, which rewards digital cultural education. From 2011 until 2014, she was a curator at transmediale festival, where she developed the year-round programme *reSource transmedial culture Berlin* and curated several conferences, workshops, and art projects.

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