

Article

Experimental Institutionalism and Radical Statecraft: Art in Autonomous Social Centres and Self-Managed Cultural Occupations in Rome

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Abstract: This article analyses experimental institutionalism in the city of Rome, focusing on artistic practices of the C.S.O.A. Centro Sociale Autonomo Occupato (Squatted Autonomous Social Centre) Forte Prenestino and the three-year occupation of Valle theatre, Teatro Valle Occupato. In scholarly research on art institutionalism, artistic practices in squatted spaces are often overlooked. While the 1990s European wave of experimental institutionalism transformed the concept of an art museum or art institution into a processed-based, community-oriented, and participatory platform, in Rome, the collectives of activists and artists used more autonomous endeavours, such as processes of instituting, to affirm how artistic practices' use of radical imagination can foster collective agency, creativity, and radical statecraft. In the following, radical statecraft is understood as a political act that reclaims and creates anew institutional infrastructures. Teatro Valle Occupato's experimental cultural institution of the commons at the 17th-century theatre Valle from 2012 to 2015, and the projects of artists and musicians of the European underground cultural hub C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino at the squatted 19th-century military fort in the working-class, peripheric neighbourhood of Centocelle, are crucial examples of artistic, cultural, and institutional experimentation, whereby artistic and cultural practices foster social relationships based on freedom, mutualism, solidarity, and the commons. In both cases, the contingency to grassroots politics forged the desire and imagination to either create anew or carve out a social space. By reclaiming spaces in which art is used as a means of radical statecraft, these practices reimagine society fostering non-market-driven social relationships becoming pivotal in the struggles against the neoliberal turn in Italy.

Keywords: art; autonomy; statecraft; activism; social imagination; art institutionalism; neoliberalism



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1. Introduction

The 1990s wave of curatorial practices happening within contemporary art institutions in Europe, which fell under the name New Institutionalism (Kolb and Flückiger 2013; Doherty 2004; Möntmann 2007), attempted to reimagine art institutions. Scholars and curators fostered projects within institutional settings of art that ultimately aimed at reinventing social relations. Similarly, in Italy squatters in the 1990s set up autonomous and self-organised cultural centres, and in the first decade of the 2000s initiated self-managed cultural occupations. An abandoned 19th-century military fort in the working-class neighbourhood Centocelle, on the outskirts of the city of Rome, was turned into C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino (Prenestino 2016). Today, thousands of people participate in the annual comic, wine, and food festivals. After forty years of struggle, C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino has now become a European hub for underground culture. In 2012, a group of artists, activists, and technicians entered and took over a 17th-century theatre in Rome's city centre. From 2012 to 2015, the occupants claimed the space as an institute of the commons, renaming it Teatro Valle Occupato (Teatro Valle Occupato 2022; Bailey and Marcucci 2013; Baranes 2014; Borchi 2017; Cerioli 2012; Furlan 2015; Giardini et al. 2012; Jansen 2015). In both cases, sociality

became a political tool and a means to reimagine the relation to the state (Wright 2000; Mattei and Mancall 2019). While the experimental platforms of New Institutionalism transformed art museums or art institutions into a processed-based, community-oriented, and participatory platforms, in Rome, the collectives of activists and artists used autonomous practices, such as processes of instituting, to push back against the commercialisation of cultural institutions, prioritising values such as freedom, mutualism, solidarity, and the commons. For these reasons, this article analyses them as strong examples of experimental institutionalism. In these contexts, creative expression is a powerful tool for achieving radical statecraft and autonomy, as it can inspire social imagination and shape social relations. By reclaiming spaces where art can be used for radical statecraft, occupations such as C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino and Teatro Valle Occupato hope to combat the growing influence of neoliberalism in Italy.

This article explores three critical narratives that offer insight into these complex issues. It takes a closer look at the history of Teatro Valle Occupato and C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino, highlighting the vital role that the community played in establishing them and the significant impact that artistic practices had on reimagining relations with the state. Additionally, the article provides context by examining two perspectives: the city's cultural policy shift towards neoliberalism and the shortcomings of formal institutionalism in the art sector. Finally, the article places these practices within a comprehensive theoretical framework to better understand the critical contribution of artistic practice towards radical statecraft in politics, art, and philosophy. In essence, this article strongly argues that artistic practice is an essential tool for radical statecraft, with the radical imaginary and experimental institutionalism playing a key role.

2. C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino: Fostering Freedom through Sociality

Rooted in the social and political practices from the end of the XIX century and from the 1970s, the new wave of social centres from the 1990s set up self-organised and autonomous social centres by occupying abandoned private and public buildings. Acting in unison across the country, the C.S.O.A. and C.S.A. Centro Sociale Autonomo (Autonomous Social Centre) created, self-produced, autonomously distributed music and arts. Due to a slow economy and a high unemployment rate, social centres became places for younger generations to put their skills to use. Furthermore, the social centres radically changed anti-institution politics, distancing themselves from party politics, instituting autonomous political and cultural practise.

C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino was occupied on Labour Day in 1986. Since then, Labour Day has become an annual event that marks the spaces' history and legacy, even after the momentum of the C.S.A.s and C.S.O.A.s died down in the second decade of the 2000s. Similar to protest movements in the U.S. and the U.K., the autonomous social centres in the 1990s were a clear expression of DIY culture. McKay claims that 'the turn to politics of Do-it-Yourself' can be seen as a consequence of Thatcherism and Reaganism, as they created the 'negative conditions that gave rise to DIY culture' (McKay 1998, p. 20). As activist and artist John Jordan claims, the power of DIY protest lies in 'its insistence on creativity and yet the invisibility of art or artists in its midst . . . ' (J. Jordan 1998 in McKay 1998, p. 131). In order to eschew the commodification of revolutionary art, DIY protest 'makes art completely invisible' and 'gives back art to its original transformative power' (J. Jordan 1998 in McKay 1998, p. 131). In the following, the historical background of autonomous social centres and the squatting culture in Rome contextualises the practices of art and music at C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino and how artists and activists reimagined sociality through the creation of an alternative sustainable pathway for counterculture.

Scholar Pierpaolo Mudu has written extensively about the history and importance of the autonomous social centres in Italy. As Mudu explains, as a concept the community centre is rooted in the socialist political outreach of the end of the 19th century. Known as the Case del Popolo (Houses of the People), these spaces were meant for people to gather and aggregate socially. For Mudu, the tradition of the Case del Popolo is quite evident in

the Centro Sociale Autonomo (C.S.A.) and Centro Sociale Autonomo e Occupato (C.S.O.A.) of the 1990s (Mudu 2004, p. 919). These politically driven social spaces play an essential role within the surrounding community. The C.S.O.A.s' origins are also rooted in the workers' movements from the end of the 1970s, such as *Autonomia Operaia*¹. Within this context, students, artists, intellectuals, and cultural practitioners connected to *Autonomia Operaia* squatted and set up self-organised social centres, which housed cultural events, such as exhibitions, meetings, and political assemblies (Spinelli 2021a).

In recent studies (Davoli 2021), the number of illegally occupied dwellings in Rome counts over one hundred. These spaces are used for various purposes, including housing and leisure. These numbers show how this informal network of occupations is used by a large part of the city's inhabitants on a daily basis. In a country with a high unemployment rate such as Italy, 'there are many resourceful young people looking for opportunities to engage in meaningful activities' (Pruijt 2013, p. 34). My interviewee explained that the 1980s and 1990s represented a long process of distancing from party politics, as younger precarious generations felt underrepresented. As Davoli explains, social centers can be 'the main points of reference for new forms of political participation and spaces of aggregation for cycles of protests that expand their range of action to new themes: environmentalism and anti-nuclearism, anti-globalisation, anti-imperialism, etc. From these years, the public space of political participation moves mainly outside the headquarters of political parties and trade unions' (Davoli 2021). Although the autonomous social centres were more appealing to a younger generation, they also represented a haven for an intergenerational cohort of local inhabitants, where freedom was expressed through a new form of sociality. As Mudu explains, 'Social centres' challenge the existing context 'by committing their networks to local-scale actions geared towards furthering socialisation processes and mutual aid—a goal that must be attained by working not behind society's back, but rather by looking beyond dominant social relationships' (Mudu 2004, p. 936). The Italian squatting scene marked a new wave of contentious politics in the mid-1990s. It differed from the anti-institution movements of the 1970s because 'it was only in 1985 that squatters occupied an empty building intending to use it for social, political, and cultural events planned during meetings open to all. This event led to a movement that quickly spread throughout Italy and occupied over 250 properties in fifteen years.' (Mudu 2004, p. 936).

The 19th-century abandoned military fort, known as Forte Prenestina², witnessed many gatherings before the fort became C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino. Centocelle has been and still is today a working-class neighbourhood. My interviewee claims that in 1986, when Forte Prenestina was turned into a self-managed cultural centre, there was a lack of accessibility to culture in the neighbourhood. The collective cleaned the spaces of the fort and set up a local cinema that ran year-round.

The C.S.O.A.'s tools are autogestione (self-management) and autoproduzione (self-production). In the city, where the forms of power reproduce themselves through social relationships and how people experience the time and space of the city, the C.S.O.A. promote alternative uses of space and behaviours. (Caporale 2006, p. 5)

Thanks to C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino, the younger local population could access spaces for leisure at affordable prices. The city was still witnessing a severely policed public space due to the Italian state's heavy repression of national terrorist groups during the end of the 1970s. The critical factor that likened the occupants and their community was the freedom to set up a space for their needs without compromise.

The 1990s wave of social centres tightened the relationships between the squatting scene and student protest movements for the first time, becoming pivotal for political and logistical support. The national student movement *Pantera* took over universities all over Italy by 1990. The students' political action was against the Ruberti reform. The reform facilitated new forms of privatisation by granting universities external and private funding. It also granted seats on the universities' board for private companies. It, therefore, fostered competition among the different departments, enabling more technocratic management,

favouring scientific and technological departments, and impoverishing the humanities. Pantera was a new and unique wave of social unrest. It collaborated with social centres. The social centres offered their networks and cultural production as forms of support and solidarity. Today, many former Pantera members are longstanding occupants of C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino.

In the 1990s, a large group of international artists started cleaning out the underground spaces of the fort as participants of the Festival delle Arti (Arts Festival). The critical aspects of this festival were openness, DIY, horizontality, and self-production, and over the years, the format of the festival became a core activity that is still used today. The initiators of the Festival delle Arti were members of Pantera and of Sciatto Produzie³, a collective of architects and artists, who had set up their studio at C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino. The collective was part of a larger cohort of artists, who often travelled to Eastern Europe in the decade following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Thanks to their ties with the Eastern European underground scenes, C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino internationalised their cultural events. The first edition of the Festival occurred in 1991, when Sciatto Produzie designed, printed, distributed leaflets with information on how to participate (Prenestino 2016). There were no specific requirements, as it was an open invitation to use the underground cells freely. In exchange, the artists would receive logistical support. They were asked to use the space in many ways to express the underground fully, and, thanks to their commitment, the underground spaces of the fort were gradually cleared and used. A member of Sciatto Produzie, Valerio Bindi, says, C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino's Festival delle Arti has always been 'a self-managed festival by artists' (Prenestino 2016, p. 60).

The politics of the social centres was also disseminated through music, that of the rap scenes, the so-called 'Posse', in cities such as Rome and Naples. 'The posses' lyrics denounced the gradual depoliticisation that Italy had suffered throughout the 1980s (Zammarchi 2020, p. 298). Bands often set up recording studios in social centres, producing and distributing their music through the centre's networks. Claiming themselves anti-fascists, the Posses were coupled with the growing number of Radio Libere (Free Radios) such as Radio Onda Rossa, and 'gave a new spin to the connections between music and politics, updating the themes that were discussed and promoting the need for new and strong youth-led anti-fascist and anti-racist movements' (Zammarchi 2020, p. 298). In later stages, social centres 'revolutionised longstanding conventional demonstration procedures and political communication codes by organising street parades with demonstrators feasting and dancing to the music produced by sound systems mounted on trucks' (Mudu 2004, p. 927).

In this context, Italian bands such as Assalti Frontali contributed to building C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino. Their music was a creative output of the movement's political claims. As scholar Stephen Wright explains, 'a D.I.Y. approach to the production and distribution of rap music in Italy was entirely in keeping the broader squatting movements' watchwords of self-management and direct action' (Wright 2000, p. 128). Concerts in significant squats, such as C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino, attracted over 5000 people. These events required ample enough space, a stage to host the bands, and organisational and technical skills. The concerts held at C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino financially supported the centre. Most of the experimental music distributed in Italy in the 1990s used the network of social centres throughout Italy.

Musical events, technological and virtual spaces, and publishing enterprises (books, music, videos etc.) are all tools serving the need for autonomy and self-organisation. It is a 'net autonomy', where every space is connected horizontally to the other, signalling new possibilities of 'antiauthoritarian' organisation. (Caporale 2006, p. 6)

The momentum of the C.S.A.s and C.S.O.A.s died after the violent repression of the movement and the Global Social Forum in 2001 that was held in Genoa to protest against the G8 Summit. The event left hundreds wounded and a victim, who was killed by a police gunshot amid an ongoing riot. After this tragic event, the anti-global movements in Italy

weakened drastically. However, my interviewee explained that C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino was never a threat to the public offices of the city and the region, not only because it was in a peripheral location but also because it was in a public building that the city and regional offices could not afford to restore. Like many large social centres in Italy, C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino needed to structure its internal affairs better through a decentralised working group structure. It could be described through the experience of the Leoncavallo in Milan, or as scholar Andrea Membretti puts it, as a 'flexible' institutionalisation, in other words, 'a gradual organisational consolidation, with the definition of ways of operating and interpretations of reality able to constitute a flexible reference framework, essential to overcome the many moments of crisis positively and to connect the multiple nodes of a constantly changing network' (Membretti 2003, p. 17).

The case of C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino is an essential contribution to artistic institutionalism in the city of Rome. Their current legal status sees that occupants can use the public space for cultural purposes, which is an informal legalisation of their ownership of the building. C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino still runs daily activities ranging from gym classes to guitar lessons, hosts a weekly farmers' market, and organises large festivals. The programming has been running for over forty years, and, today, it is a well-known European hub for underground culture. Within the context of this article, C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino's open-door policy and their readiness to offer space and logistical support are politically driven by their agenda but also by the D.I.Y. culture that typically styled and infused most artistic expressions in the last two decades of the XXI century, such as the free radios and the Posse. Within this context, socialisation radically changed and became 'the experimentation field of an actual idea of society and social relations, a space considered a meeting point between community and society, and between several communities' (Membretti 2007, p. 261). Assalti Frontali and the Festival delle Arti are seen as tools that brought these communities to reimagine society politically, using artistic practise as a means of radical statecraft.

3. Teatro Valle Occupato: Instituting Processes and Radical Statecraft

The 2008 financial crisis was coupled with grassroots and community-based initiatives around the commons, like the forms of community empowerment, such as the U.K. based Transition Towns⁴, or the social movement aiding indebted citizens due to the mortgage crisis in Spain, La PAH - Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca.⁵ In Italy, the crisis entailed severe national budget cuts, mostly affecting the cultural sector. As a reaction to the growing precarity in the cultural sector, artists and cultural workers took it upon themselves to reimagine how collectively run cultural institutions could make amends for the fragmentation of the social sphere. Between 2011 and 2013, theatres and public cultural spaces across Italy were taken over by groups of activists and artists, who set up self-organised, informal institutes of the commons. Inscribed within a national debate around the commons, a trait that was fuelled by a national referendum on public water in 2009, this grassroots network of activists, artists and cultural workers radically reimaged culture as a commons, initiating self-organised cultural centres such as Nuovo Cinema Palazzo and Teatro Valle Occupato in Rome, MACAO in Milan (Carozzi 2012; Cossu 2015; Cossu and Murru 2018), Teatro Coppola in Catania, L'Asilo della Creatività e della Conoscenza (The Nursery of Creativity and Knowledge) in the former state-run nursery school 'Filangeri' in Naples (Dockx and Gielen 2018; Micciarelli 2014; Ciancio 2018; Laino 2018), and Teatro Garibaldi Aperto in Palermo (Cuthbertson 2021).

The following recount describes how the political experience of Teatro Valle Occupato was not only contingent to the 2008 financial crackdown, but it also reacted against a growing neoliberalisation of the cultural sector by legally instituting the first Italian foundation for the commons. Contributing to the underpinnings of this self-managed cultural institution is a legacy⁶ of artists and activists from the field of art, theatre and performance, which includes C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino, whereby the precedent political experience of Nuovo Cinema Palazzo became an important step towards the conception of

instituting the commons, as well as a turning point in the legacy of art activism in the city of Rome. The following focuses on the artistic programming at Teatro Valle Occupato, named *Permanenze*, which specifically tackled the structural aspects of theatrical production in order to reimagine social relationships based on notions of commoning. Finally, it proposes a critical reflection on Teatro Valle Occupato's interstitial institutional approach to the visual art sector in Rome.

The 2008 financial crackdown impacted economies worldwide, impoverished middle to lower-income families, and made labour more precarious. In a post-financial crisis world, Italian debt increased, and in 2011, due to the risk of the bailout of the national bonds, former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi was forced to step down (Kington 2011). Between 2011 and 2012, the anti-capitalist movements, such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the Indignados Movement in Spain all impacted local politics in Italy. Nationally, a new political force was built around the effects of Italy's financial crisis. The Five Star Movement channelled diverse forms of dissent and did not leave enough leeway for a spontaneous, more anarchic occupation of public spaces, a common trait of Western occupy movements, such as Occupy Wall Street. In Rome, student protests targeted former minister Maria Stella Gelmini's reforms of higher education. The student movement *Onda Anomala* created momentum between 2008 and 2010 (Di Gioia n.d.). The movement took over many universities nationwide and was the first political response to the economic crisis. Meanwhile, after two decades of left-wing governance, the newly elected right-wing government led by Gianni Alemanno took a toll on the squatting culture in Rome. The head of the right-wing party, *Alleanza Nazionale*, issued a firm political distance from all forms of squatting in his political programme. During his five-year mandate, his government worked closely with police forces, publicly issuing a list of squatted spaces soon to be evicted. That same year the National Endowment for Theatre was shut down due to a series of government cuts, forcing many theatres to close, including the Teatro Valle in Rome. These series events following the financial crisis in 2008 comprise a contextual background. They played into the political grounding for the struggles that were carried out by activist groups coming from the sectors of arts and culture.

Another important factor was the national debate on the commons happening prior to the occupation of Teatro Valle Occupato. In 2009, the highly popular referendum that granted public access to water created a significant shift in the legitimisation of the commons. Scholar and Professor in Law, Ugo Mattei, and constitutionalist Stefano Rodotà had worked thoroughly in order to find judicial means for legalising practices of the common. In 2007 Rodotà founded a special committee within the Italian Ministry of Justice in his name. The Rodotà committees' main duty was to comply with the

'need to be able to count on a legal context of assets that was more in step with the times and able to define general criteria and directives on the management and possible disposal of assets in excess of public functions, and above all on the possibility that such disposals (and any sale and re-lease of assets) were carried out in the general interest of the community without prejudice to a medium and long-term horizon.' (Ministero Della Giustizia. Commissione Rodotà-per la modifica delle norme del codice civile in materia di beni pubblici-Relazione, Ministero Della Giustizia 2007)

Mattei has written extensively on the notions of the commons in Italy (Mattei 2011; Mattei and Mancall 2019; Bailey and Mattei 2013) and was a crucial player in the fight against privatisation and co-author of the referendum text. Mattei explains how the notion of the commons is based on '(the) integration between theoretical and social political praxis, because the full protection of common goods requires above all the full political awareness of their centrality' (Mattei 2011, p. 13). As he claims, 'the concept of the "commons" became a widespread strategy to protect the cultural and environmental commons from the threat of privatisation' (Bailey and Mattei 2013, p. 367).

The former occupation, *Nuovo Cinema Palazzo*, represented an important step towards the formation of Teatro Valle Occupato. The cinema sits in the heart of the historical

working-class neighbourhood in Rome, San Lorenzo. Occupied in 2011, and renamed Nuovo Cinema Palazzo, here the occupants came from diverse cultural backgrounds: students, actors, theatrical companies, and workers from the entertainment sector (Borchi 2017; Di Feliciantonio 2017). Before their eviction in 2021, the occupants decided to restore the old cinema and start a cultural programming that involved theatre, film screenings, workshops, and activities for children. Nuovo Cinema Palazzo received donations from other theatre companies and closed cinemas, such as curtains, chairs, and technical materials to build the stage. They self-financed the second and smaller stage and cleaned and fixed the upstairs gallery, turning it into an art gallery and reading area. The assemblies occurred each week and were open; anyone could participate. When Valle Theatre announced the theatre's closure, occupants from Nuovo Cinema Palazzo gathered in solidarity with the technicians who received redundancy. My interviewee claims that the occupation of Nuovo Cinema Palazzo repurposed the political action of occupation. She claims that while the housing movements occupied out of necessity, the cultural labour movements occupied to rethink society as a whole and to do so through cultural and political practices. Rather than acting out of a political void, these groups catalyse new forms of politicisation—in other words, a self-managed cultural occupation.

In 2012, the Valle Theatre was taken over by a group of actors, technicians, and performers who were primarily former occupants of the Nuovo Cinema Palazzo, who collectively decided to occupy the theatre and turn it into the Teatro Valle Occupato. Within the three years of the occupation of the theatre, Teatro Valle Occupato became a pivotal example of creative institutionalism from below and marked a milestone in cultural and political activism in Italy (Jansen 2015; Cerioli 2012; Furlan 2015; Teatro Valle Occupato 2022; Giardini et al. 2012; Bailey and Marcucci 2013). Rodotà and Mattei started a collectively driven process of institutionalisation of the Teatro Valle Occupato. The Fondazione Teatro Valle Bene Comune's constitution has hundreds of co-singers and was built around the idea that it should 'express the type of informal practices that the occupants associated with their idea of commons, avoiding any potential risk of bureaucratization and crystallization linked to the management of institutions'. Scholar Federica Giardini explains how '(A) Culture that is rethought starting from the politics of common goods, has to do with living conditions, water as well as art' (Giardini et al. 2012, p. 40). Rather than solely being an issue of governmentality (Ostrom 1990; Dietz et al. 2003), Giardini implicates a wider discussion around thought and action, implying that 'the sequence occupation-reappropriation-restitution of spaces, conditions, behaviours, does not speak only of participation, but of a new political beginning' (Giardini et al. 2012, p. 39). The programming titled 'Permanenze' is an example of how artistic practice reimagines social relationships based on processes of commoning, and the interstitial approach to visual art production within institutions, questioned ways in which art and culture were promoted in the city of Rome.

The artistic programming titled *Permanenze* happening at Teatro Valle Occupato between 2012 and 2015 questioned the whole structure of theatrical production by implementing long-term, co-authored laboratories on different topics, such as dramaturgy or dance. My interviewee claims *Permanenze* was meant to be a tool that led participants to take control of theatres' spaces. It blurred different critical moments such as rehearsals, staging, and performances, and it blended actors and audiences. As an example, performer Michela Lucenti and the performance group Balletto Civile led a three-day dramaturgy workshop on how to use the body within diverse spaces. The programming was free of charge and invited participants to creatively dwell in the space. These type of events became moments, amongst many others, in which audiences were invited to inhabit and cooperate with occupation.

Another exciting aspect of Teatro Valle Occupato directly impacted the visual arts sector in Rome. The occupation functioned as an interstitial instituting process. Occupants of Teatro Valle Occupato were also coproducers of performative and video artworks, commissioned by MAXXI, Museum of Contemporary Art of the XXI century in Rome.

Italian artist Marzia Migliora's performance piece titled *Capienza massima meno* (Migliora 2012) was part of a larger exhibition project (Palopoli 2012). Coproduced by Teatro Valle Occupato, the performance is a critical reflection on the notion of occupation, inviting participants to physically take over the museum's main hall. Clemens von Wedemeyer's project *The Cast* (Wedemeyer 2013) is a three-part film installation analysing the notions of the cast and casting within the production of theatre and film. The project was presented in von Wedemeyer's solo show (Ferracci 2013). Both projects referred to themes at the centre of the critical debate at Teatro Valle Occupato. By the same token, the members of Teatro Valle Occupato became coproducers of these works, developing an interstitial institutional approach questioning the very structure of how the arts and culture were promoted in the city of Rome.

Nuovo Cinema Palazzo and Teatro Valle Occupato occupants invested their efforts into cultural and artistic forms that reject market-driven logic, such as *Permanenze* and *Foundation of the Commons*. The idea of freedom transverses the majority of their activities: events, workshops, and rehearsal spaces were free; the public spaces they occupied were freed from decay or abandonment; and the occupants described their practice as a form of restitution, using the word 'freedom'. Occupants open these spaces to the citizenry through a politically driven, community-oriented practice by organising participative and accessible art and cultural programming, turning them into self-instituted artistic and cultural social centres that redefine social relationships through mutualism. Both of these political experiences are important contributions to the experimental institutionalism in the art field, whereby social relations are rethought through new forms of politicisation, processes of commoning, freedom, and mutualism.

4. The Failed Italian Art Institution and the Neoliberal Turn in Rome

Today, the Italian states' understanding of cultural management is deeply embedded with neoliberal market logic. In Rome, the consequence of a neoliberal turn in cultural policy is twofold: on the one hand, cultural institutions are experiencing a growing form of touristification; on the other hand, there is a general attitude of 'laissez-faire' in the cultural politics of the city. Furthermore, the lack of experimental institutionalism in Italy is due to multiple factors, the most important of which are linked to weak or quasi-absent state support and a highly complicated bureaucratisation that, on multiple occasions, engulfs the production and distribution system of the arts. The poor investment in the cultural sector and the weakness of the institutional settings of the art sector are coupled with a fragile independent art scene, which often mimics policies of larger institutions, with a need for more resources to do so. Although there have been fruitful alliances across the various facets of the sector, there is a general aptitude towards tiredness and frustration due to extreme precarity and lack of infrastructure, in which institutional experimentation, if any, is slowly suffocated. In the latest developments in activist practices, the cultural sector has often been a target, the collaboration between activists and artists has found a fruitful grounding to exit these institutional impasses. Here occupying is a political act that gives visibility to the city's weaknesses and, as mentioned above, offers a solution to those problems through a non-neoliberal market-driven approach.

The notion of touristification refers to a phenomenon that has been developing in the last twenty years, and it regards urban areas, such as that of Rome, that are also historical centres and tourist attractions. A concept such as 'tourism gentrification' indicates a heuristic device to explain the transformation of a middle-class neighbourhood into an affluent and exclusive enclave marked by a proliferation of corporate entertainment and tourism venues' (Gotham 2005, p. 1102). Due to the sharing economy's latest developments, historic centres have continued to be gentrified by the nascent short-term rental housing market (Mínguez et al. 2019), creating a more intrinsic and profitable market for tourism but a socially devastating void in the local urban context. On the one hand, it could be said that neoliberal capitalism is the very essence of a culture of capitalism, and, accordingly, tourism plays a pivotal role in constructing the culture of neoliberalism in Rome. Gemmiti explains

that it was 'during the period 1993 to 2008, under the left-wing leadership of two Mayors of Rome, first Francesco Rutelli and then Walter Veltroni, that the neoliberalism approach and a strong entrepreneurial style of government were particularly reflected in their urban planning strategies and implemented tourism policies' (Gemmiti 2019). The former leftist Culture Minister, Dario Franceschini, has often officially welcomed the 'touristification' of the city's cultural institutions, claiming that tourism, a highly profitable, privatised, and market-driven sector, could only help the financial weaknesses of the cultural sector if it was well regulated. This dubious and ambiguous claim did not alter the city's current decay and poor management. In this context, C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino and Teatro Valle Occupato render Rome's decay visible. They transform the remanent social void into aggregative spaces of solidarity and commoning.

Meanwhile, the city's 'lassiez-faire' attitude has decayed large urban areas. Professor of Urban Studies at the University of Rome, Roma Tre, Carlo Cellamare has written extensively about Rome's city's informal and self-governed spaces. Cellamare explains that 'political weakness and the absence of an administrative culture in the face of powerful forces in Rome's planning and economy are coupled with widespread social attitudes; these are roots in Rome's laissez-faire urban ethos and the 'sin and be pardoned mindset' (Cellamare 2014, p. 206). These social attitudes are essential for the city's policy-making and local administration. Therefore, he claims that Rome has its idea of urban development that involves a form of 'shared administration,' as he puts it, for which citizens participate in city urban planning. Unfortunately, co-participation often becomes a façade hiding 'an offloading of burdens and responsibilities to outsiders, a lightening of the citizen's load, but at the same time a delegation and subservience to the working of the property market and a relinquishment of the development of an organic programme and an effective political urban policy' (Cellamare 2014, p. 216). With their forms of self-governance, the autonomous social centres and self-managed cultural occupations become solutions to this 'lassiez faire' attitude.

A critical factor that contributed to the cultural sector's difficulties was the political interference in the museum system in Italy, an important and daunting aspect that Italy inherited from Mussolini's reform of the cultural sector before the Second World War., but that is still relevant today. In the 1990s, scholar Carlo Bertelli describes the negative impacts of these political dynamics, referring to how

the museum faces the problems of all the state museums in Italy, which is that in the administration of the Ministry of Culture, there needs to be a distinctive role for museum curators. Museums have no identity. Therefore, a numismatic expert can be parachuted to no matter what town, without any reference to the existence of any collection of coins in the prospective place of work.' (Bertelli 2009, p. 368)

Bertelli continues his critique of the museum system in Italy, claiming that depriving museums of acknowledged art and museology experts means that 'the proper research in the quicksand of contemporary art is left to dealers and politicians. Dealers do the research. Politicians take the decisions' (Bertelli 2009, p. 369). Finally, he claims that a museum deprived of sound research is left to be taken over by tourism.

In the past decade, there has been a developing interest in alliances between contemporary art museums, art fairs, and independent art spaces. The Independent⁷ at the M.A.X.X.I. National Museum of the XXI Century Art in Rome is a research platform and public programme entirely dedicated to independent art spaces. Since 2014, it has showcased and produced research on national and international independent art spaces. Art fairs and large exhibitionary platforms have welcomed the not-for-profit sector, as in the case of the projects such as *Terrazza* (Barreca et al. 2014) of the Quadriennale in Rome or *Artissima Lido* (Studio 2012) for the 2011 edition of the art fair of Turin *Artissima*⁸ or independent art fairs such as *The Others Art Fair*⁹ and *Art Verona*.¹⁰ In 2017, the Italian Ministry of Culture department of contemporary creativity set up a funding programme for the arts, targeting the visual art sector, modelled around a U.K.-based national funding system, the Arts Council. Another initiative that should be mentioned in this context is the

Forum dell'Arte Contemporanea¹¹, a three-day annual event happening within different local museums, inviting practitioners from various backgrounds to discuss issues related to governmentality within the art sector. Diverse opportunities and new policies for the contemporary art sector are due to the outcomes of the roundtables of this event.¹² The art advocacy groups are examples of another frontier of the independent art scene. A.W.I.–Art Workers Italia¹³ is a newly born art advocacy group that is part of a long legacy of artists' groups and initiatives (Norese et al. 2000; Stuart Tovini 2011; Pietronave 2021). They are at the forefront of local struggles for artists' rights and have quite outspokenly addressed the poor labour conditions for artists within the art sector, and the impoverishment and politically interfered institutional settings and infrastructure for the arts.

Even though the above-mentioned are praiseworthy examples, the not-for-profit and independent art sector in Italy still struggles to survive economically. Its vibrancy and continuous experimental emergence do not challenge the status quo. In her empirical research and data analyses, scholar Annalisa Zorloni shows how artists prefer to leave Italy to start their careers because of the 'scarcity of contemporary art museums, the scant attention paid to young artists by the public sector, unfavourable tax laws for dealers and collectors, and, above all, the predominance in the art world of a network of personal contacts'. As a result, the situation 'fosters opportunistic behaviour on the part of artists, who are encouraged to concentrate their efforts on building relational capital rather than on developing their talent' (Zorloni 2005, p. 70).

In conclusion, the informal context of urban expansion due to the illegal occupation of public cultural spaces in Rome re-purposes art and culture as enhancers of political imagination. C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino and Teatro Valle Occupato represent a solution to the 'laissez-faire' attitude in Rome's urban management, respond to the remanent social void of processes of touristification and neoliberal approaches to urban planning, by counteroffering new forms of sociality that challenge the formal institutionalisation of art. These factors play a role in the context of a novel understanding of experimental institutionalism.

5. Artistic Practise as a Means of Radical Statecraft

'Experimental Institutionalism' describes the need 'to work with the public, to turn them from the audience into collaborators' (Esche 2002, p. 68). In the following, experimental institutionalism will be explained through a series of concepts, such as 'instituent practise' (Raunig 2007) and statecraft (Kinna 2019; Cooper 2017; De Cesari 2021) radical imagination (Castoriadis and Curtis 1997; Spinelli 2021b), and 'horizons of the possible and impossible of political imaginaries' (Sheikh 2012, p. 217). This theoretical framework gives further context to the experiences of C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino and Teatro Valle Occupato, embedding them into a larger critical discourse on radical statecraft in the fields of art, political theory and philosophy.

Within the context of curatorial discourse and practice, between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, scholars and curators often referred to the term 'performative curating' to designate an experimental strand of curating occurring within art institutions across Europe, such as the Kunsteverin München in Germany, the Office For Contemporary art in Norway, the Rooseum in Sweden, and Situations in the U.K. Scholars also associate performative curating with the term 'New Institutionalism'. The former director of the Office for Contemporary Art in Norway (O.C.A.), Jonas Ekberg, introduced this term to describe a set of self-reflexive and critical projects organised within institutional settings (Ekeberg 2003). Their aim was to subvert discourses around art as an object and around the established sceneries that enhanced these discourses. Critical players of New Institutionalism, such as curator and Van Abbenmuseum director Charles Esche, also contributed to this strand of critical thinking. At the time, Esche directed the Rooseum in Malmö. He claimed that he found the adjective 'new' to be somewhat misleading and preferred the term 'Experimental Institutionalism' to describe the need 'to switch the idea from passive reception to people becoming active shapers of that institutional message'

(Esche 2002, p. 68). This phenomenon was important for several institutions and fostered a large number of innovative platforms. Although this tendency was explicitly related to art institutions, the discursivity around the inclusion of the audiences resonates well with artistic practices within autonomous social centres.

Within the spectrum of writers and scholars who have addressed issues of art institutionalism (Gielen 2010, 2013; Sholette 2011; Esche 2002; Raunig 2007), the notion of 'instituent practise' is particularly interesting for this context. Scholar Gerald Raunig develops his understanding of transformative artistic and political practice by criticising the notion of arts of governing in Michel Foucault. He proposes 'transforming the arts of governing not only concerning the institutions of the art field or the institution of art as the art field, but rather as participation in processes of instituting and in political practices that traverse the fields, the structures, the institutions' (Raunig 2007). The relations amongst the occupants and the urban environment in the abovementioned cases of Teatro Valle Occupato and C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino could be described through the lens of intituent practice, whereby they enhance a transversal approach that traverse different fields, different structures and institutions.

Although the role of artistic practice within the social realm as a means of statecraft is a critical endeavour that has not been thoroughly addressed by scholars of artistic research and experimental institutionalism in the art field, a few authors have made significant contributions to better understanding the nuances of the relations between art and activism. Scholar Simon Sheikh poignantly claims that 'all kinds of (art) works can be seen as (political) imaginaries, as setting up a horizon of the possible and the impossible, that directly or indirectly has to do with the current liberal democratic articulation of a post-utopian endgame.' By also citing the work of Castoriadis, Sheikh repeats how 'Change emerges, then, through the establishment of other imaginaries without predetermination, through praxis, and will that establish another way of instituting. This requires a radical break with the past in terms of language and symbolisation and, thus, of ways of doing' (Sheikh 2008, p. 70).

As I have written elsewhere, in his writings, Castoriadis elaborates on how social meaning is given only through the intersection of collective creativity and psychic reality (Spinelli 2021b). Translator and scholar David Ames Curtis comments, 'The imaginary is the creative capacity of the anonymous collectivity, which is manifest, for example, in the creation and evolution of language, family forms, mores, ideas, and so forth' (Castoriadis and Curtis 1997, p. 129). Although social and historical conditions forge social meaning, the individual is neither overwhelmed nor subsumed by them. Castoriadis explains how the etymology of autonomy, 'auto' and 'nomos', clearly refers to self-regulatory processes of individuals, processes in which the radical imaginary plays a key role. The radical imaginary gives form to the unconscious and turns autonomy into a 'social factor'. Standing between an instituting and instituted society, 'it opposes the social imagination, in the same way, rationality opposes irrationality' (Spinelli 2021b). Through this critical reading of social imaginaries, it is possible to claim that C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino's artistic projects, and Teatro Valle Occupato's practices of institutionalism foster radical imagination, opposing and going beyond the instituted neoliberal understanding of cultural production, instituting anew radically imagined forms of engagement. with a non-market driven logic.

The hypothesis for this article is that experimental institutionalism is a possible threshold in which artists practise radical statecraft through creative means. The notion of statecraft is very much used within the areas and disciplines of political theory and anthropology. Reasserting the importance of anarchist principles, scholar Ruth Kinna claims that 'Seen through the lens of contract and domination, the state is constructed as a sociological reality that cannot be reimagined but which can be anarchised through prefigurative action', and she explains that 'Challenging the state is a conceptual and creative process, which involves both rethinking political theory and reinventing practice' (Kinna 2019, p. 149). Drawing from utopian studies, scholar Davina Cooper deepens the question of how the state is practised in the everyday. She uses the notion of activist statehood to affirm 'a mode

of collective agency more typically associated with social movements. As such, it raises crucial questions about the relationship between public governance and transformative politics, including the powers rightfully drawn on in the latter's pursuit' (Cooper 2017, p. 347). Drawing on the notion of activist statehood, scholar Chiara De Cesari claims that it is not only through creative means but also through artistic practices that the state is reimagined (De Cesari 2021). These notions play into constructing a theoretical framework that revisits practices within the artistic context as a means for radical statecraft, as I have analysed in the artistic projects of C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino and their creation anew of a space of sociality and of the Teatro Valle Occupato, whereby artists and cultural workers reimagined and instituted culture as a commons.

6. Conclusions

Claiming that the experience of C.S.O.A. Forte Prenestino and Teatro Valle Occupato in Rome performs radical statecraft through artistic ways repurposes the function of art. Here, art is a means for sociality amongst artists, activists, and their audiences and supporters. The fragility of the institutional settings of art in Rome is due to a lack of funding, political interference in institutional management, and the weakness of the independent art sector. Within scholarly research, the collectives of activists and artists that use autonomous practices, such as processes of instituting, are unlikely referred to as potential case studies. Contrarily to this context, this article proposes a theoretical context to artistic practices that values their refusal of neoliberal tendencies, and their counteroffer of new ways of understanding social relations based on freedom, mutualism, and the commons. These values are ingrained within the methods in which art is thought of and made. By placing the notion of radical imagination within an argument on art institutionalism, these artistic and political experiments are positioned at the forefront of a critique of neoliberal cultural policies. The potential behind what should also be called experimental intuitionism of art within the context of grassroots activism in Rome has a unique nature, rooted in the social movements but also retaining a transversal relation with surrounding the political and social entities of the city. This transversality and embeddedness create a horizon of the possible and impossible and use the radical imagination of artistic practise to foster collective agency, creativity, and radical statecraft.

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Notes

- ¹ Autonomia Operaia was founded in 1977 by activist and scholar Antonio Negri and former members of the Italian workers' movements of Potere Operaio and Lotta Continua. The autonomous workers envisioned the struggles against capital from a more social perspective, and used the refusal to work as political action to reinforce the liveability and well-being of the working class (Wright 2015).
- ² Occupants of C.S.O.A Forte Prenestino, describe the fort as built around three different 'levels, with the height of the walls ranging from 12 to 15 metres. The first is that of the cells, which are the front of the Fort, from which the ramps leading to the central area start. The characteristic of the fort was that of its trapezoidal shape: it was the best design for both the control of the inside and the outside, towards which the longest side of the structure was usually positioned. The level of the central area is the intermediate one and is located at street level, let's say slightly lower. Finally, there is the highest level, the one with spaces for officers and warehouses, with vertical connections to the intermediate floor' (Gerundino 2016).
- ³ See http://www.ecn.org/sciattoproduzie/bio_txt.htm (accessed on 26 September 2022).
- ⁴ See <https://transitionnetwork.org/> (accessed on 23 May 2023).
- ⁵ See <https://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/> (accessed on 23 May 2023).
- ⁶ Within this context, it is essential to mention two experiences, The Rialto a non-for-profit space housed in a former educational complex in the heart of the centre of Rome, the Jewish Ghetto. The building was granted to the association by the former mayor

of Rome, Francesco Rutelli. The uses of these spaces were a form of cooperation between activists, who had occupied a former cinema, Cinema Rialto, and the city government. The group members of the association were fined and legally persecuted for tax evasion. Angelo Mai Occupato, and Angelo Mai Altrove is another occupied space that fed into the understandings of politicisation carried out by Teatro Valle Occupato (Taddei and Ruggia n.d.; Gerundino 2020).

7 See <https://www.maxxi.art/en/progetto/the-independent/> (accessed on 23 May 2023).

8 See <https://www.artissima.art/en/> (accessed on 23 May 2023).

9 See <https://www.theothersartfair.com/en/homepage/> (accessed on 23 May 2023).

10 See <https://artverona.it/> (accessed on 23 May 2023).

11 See <http://www.forumartecontemporanea.it/> (accessed on 23 May 2023).

12 An example of this could be the recent modification of the funding systems for current artistic and curatorial projects. The roundtable initiated a dialogue with the Ministry of Culture, having a positive outcome. Italian Art Council.

13 <https://artworkersitalia.it/> (accessed on 23 May 2023).

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