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IMAGINART

Imagining Institutions Otherwise: Art, Politics, and State Transformation

Following the “social turn” in contemporary art, a number of political and cultural theorists have argued that art’s primary function is to “imagine reality otherwise” and incite social change. Still, despite this theoretical interest in art’s capacity to reconfigure society and politics, there is a dearth of empirical studies showing how this happens in the everyday practices of artists and political movements. Accordingly, this multi-researcher project undertakes a series of ethnographic studies exploring the role of artistic practices in reimagining and transforming societies from below. In particular, IMAGINART explores how artists are reinventing crumbling public institutions. Against the backdrop of state failure, transformation or withdrawal under (post)colonial, postsocialist, and neoliberal conditions, artists are creating “micro-utopias”: alternative spaces of collaboration and cohabitation in which to prefigure new forms of organized collective life. To explore these institutional experiments, IMAGINART focuses on the three case studies of Lebanon/the West Bank, Hungary, and Italy. In these contexts, artistic practice has figured prominently in recent protest movements against state repression, corruption, or neoliberal restructuring. What does it mean for political and social projects to present themselves as art and what agency does this enable and/or disable?

Within this broad framework, IMAGINART hosts a PhD subproject focusing on Hungary. Adopting the same ethnographic approach and suite of methods described in the subproject above, the candidate will investigate the role and significance of arts practice in imagining alternatives to nationalist-conservative hegemony in contemporary Hungary. In the face of authoritarianism in the country, cultural practitioners have largely disengaged with the Hungarian state’s institutions. Instead, socially engaged artists are experimenting with various modes of self-organization that have been termed “positive resistance” on account of the fact that they aim to go beyond critique and establish constituent power in its own right. Against this backdrop, the candidate will explore the ways in which artists are developing creative alternatives to established institutions in Hungary. In so doing, the subproject will broach a number of questions: what kinds of institutional spaces, relations, subjectivities, and practices of citizenship emerge from such propositional “positive resistance”? How do experiments with institutions in contemporary Hungary relate back to the socialist heritage of a complex cultural infrastructure? To what extent might experiments with institutions in socially engaged art affect governmentalities and processes of state formation?