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 the interconnected art scenes of Palestine (the West Bank) and Lebanon. Adopting an ethnographic approach, the candidate will explore how artists and cultural practitioners in these contexts are developing visions of the future and reimagining disintegrating public institutions. In terms of method, they will use participant observation and interviews to analyze the social networks, dynamics, and discussions that shape artistic micro-utopias. In addition, they will use discourse and visual analysis to examine these communities’ media output and artistic works and practices. In so doing, the subproject will address a number of questions: how are groups of artists and civil society stepping in to take over the functions of failing or absent state infrastructures? What kinds of micro-utopias are emerging from these developments? To which new subjectivities and citizenship practices are these experiments giving rise? How do they acquire funding? And what impacts are they having on societal resilience, governmentalities, and state formation?