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 Postdoc subproject focusing on fieldwork in Italy, where cultural forms of protest against neoliberalization and the retreat of the state have figured prominently in public life. With the state abdicating many of its functions, diverse groups of citizens and artists have taken things into their own hands. As part of this development, cultural practitioners have established experimental institutional spaces in a range of urban contexts. By means of the methods described in the subprojects above, the researcher will explore these experiments, focusing on sites in Rome and possibly other cities too. In so doing, they will pay particular attention to the complex political dynamics of socially engaged art in Italy. Despite their role in assuming functions that are being vacated by the state, artists’ projects in these contexts have also been accused of being complicit with urban gentrification and having been coopted by powerful interests. This raises a number of questions: how are artists negotiating their ambivalent position with respect to the state, capital, and civil society? What kinds of spaces, relations, subjectivities, and practices of citizenship emerge from within artists’ institutional experiments? To what extent might creative engagements with institutions affect social welfare more broadly, governmentalities, and processes of state formation?