

The theater as a common good: artists, activists and *artivists* on stage

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Abstract

Based on interviews and ethnographic observation, this article analyzes the experience of political activists and artists during and after the occupation of the Teatro Valle, in Rome, an historical national theater. The occupiers experimented with new forms of management of the theater schedule and theater laboratory. At first their action focused on the job insecurity of artists and lack of funding for culture. Therefore, they switched into a commons-based principle incorporating a conceptualization of culture in the form of an “immaterial common good”. Thus struggling throughout the “commons” becomes a vehicle to radically criticize neoliberalism and private market, and to affirm new citizen expectations against political institutions. The paper aims to problematize both the artist and political activist approach. During the occupation of the theater, their practice led to the effective medley of their practices, interests and orientations: political stance and artistic experiments are combined in the occupied theater. After their eviction from the theater, according to our ethnographic observations during the weekly plenary assembly of the group, the political praxis appears to prevail upon the artistic side of the group. Without a physical place where to experiment the alternative proposal, the former occupiers still conveys the utopia of a Theatre as a symbol of an alternative institution through their plays.

Keywords: activist-artivist, alternative institution, collective action, immaterial common goods, subjectivity, theater, urban commons.

Introduction

This article retraces the experiences of the artists and activists that occupied the Valle Theater, the oldest theater in Rome (1700), from 2011 to 2014. At the time of the occupation (June 2011), the theater was inactive¹. Protesters decided to occupy the theater complaining about the job insecurity of artists, the lack of cultural policies in the city, and the general crisis of political institutions (Sen 2009, 78–86). The movement they created around the occupation put together the political and creative meaning, around the concepts of the commons, participation, direct democracy, and the struggle against political institutions and neoliberalism system.

¹ As the cultural institution in charge of the artistic scheduling was previously dismissed by the government, at the end of the scheduled season the theater was inactive. According to the occupiers, the theater was potentially targeted by private buyers.

In a first phase, characterized by a “cooperative artistic practice”, occupiers and sympathizers experiment with a form of shared theater among other citizens and spectators. By practicing creativity and leading an open political debate inside the occupied theater, these social actors attempt to offer some collaborative practices on how to take care of a common place and rethink cultural institution as a common good. By claiming the theater as a common good, they aim to create an auto-legitimized institution, alternative to the existing cultural/political institution as well as neoliberalism. I explored how the Occupy Valle Theater created a collective action cognizant of the common goods – as they theorize it – that aims at re-founding a cultural institution and proposing an alternative market and economy for the artists.

Included in our interviews with former-occupiers, we raised some research questions: How do their practices inside the theater construct a “struggle for the commons”? Who is legitimized to manage a national theater as a common good? Which kind of possibilities and limits emerge from their experience?

The second phase, after they left the theater, is characterized by a sharper distinction between the political and the artistic goals: without a physical place to experiment with a political and artistic project in opposition to the neoliberal system and institutions’ inefficiency, the collective group of the Occupied Teatro Valle switches from a “space of hope” (Harvey 2012, 109-112; Novy and Colomb 2013) to a more “utopic space” (Foucault, 1986; Bloch 1996). In this phase the difference between the two approaches, the artistic and the political one, is more pronounced: the *artivists*² are no more able to broadcast a political message, to modify or be modified by the spectators and citizens, as wished in the Augusto Boal’s *Legislative Theater* (Boal 1998; Babbage 2004, 30); the political activists, on the contrary, continue to express themselves by using their proper language and rhetoric, although losing the ability to disseminate messages to a larger audience of citizens: The group is stuck in an in-group vision, which is deprived of its practical deeds in a specific space.

The research³ is based on a participant observation during the six months (September 2014-February 2015) after activists were compelled to leave the theater (August 2014). I participated in their weekly meetings, observing how they perform and take the floor, what they learnt from their past experience in the theater, and how they plan to continue their actions outside. In addition, I led 10 in-depth individual interviews with some members that regularly

² This neologism tries to blend the artist and the political activist spheres. In Italy, the political-artistic experience of Macao in Milan, which currently makes use of the term *artivist* (see for instance Chiara Valli, 2015), is an example of the political/cultural encounter between the art workers and the antagonistic left-wing activists.

³ In this article I present part of the survey survey “Sustainable practices of everyday life in the context of the crisis: toward the integration of work, consumption and participation”, funded by MIUR-PRIN 2010-2011 and coordinated by Laura Bovone (Università Cattolica di Milano), in collaboration with the Universities of Milano (coord. Luisa Leonini), Bologna (coord. Roberta Paltrinieri), Trieste (coord. Giorgio Osti), Molise (coord. Guido Gili), Roma “La Sapienza” (coord. Antimo Farro), Napoli Federico II (coord. Antonella Spanò).

participated to the plenary assembly. The network of Teatro Valle occupiers led to other collective actions in the city: I participated in other meetings, workshops, and conferences which reflected a broader mobilization frame in Rome⁴. Since I was included in the group's mailing list, I collected the communication exchanges between activists concerning proposals, shared documents, debates, analysis, and, above all, the weekly meetings' reports. The research focused on the manner they intervened, also in the mailing list, noticing how they take the floor, the use of an artistic or rather political as well as technical language.

Theoretical aspects

Grassroots democracy has been a political crucial theme for more than 50 years. Particularly, within the term "autogestion" or "grassroots control" – as suggested by Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden (Brenner and Elden 2009, 16-19) in translating Henri Lefebvre's essays – in the 1970s several occupation experiences have shown how to put into practice an autonomous form of self-management⁵. Despite the central role of "work", which was still the crucial issue during the "workerism" period (*operaismo*) (Balestrini and Moroni 1997), other cultural claims and forms of assertion⁶ have emerged by the squatting self-management in the following decades (Ibba 1995), putting the social autonomy at the core of new urban issues (Mayer 2009; 1993; Martinez 2013). Unlike the Marxist so-called *whitering away* of the State and the implementation of "autogestion" (Lefebvre 1975, 5-22), in which grassroots control of occupied spaces is often related to the conceptualization of an alternative institution, the Valle Theater case study shows an attempt to switch into a self-legitimate common good-based management. By occupying and managing the national theater, activists and artists aim at "hybridizing" and "grafting" – as they suggest – the cultural and political institutions. Their critic against neoliberalism and cultural institutions, which they consider as a political patronage, finds a practical articulation through the concept of common good.

Furthermore, the political and artistic practices of the occupied Valle Theater are part of a new wave of urban common claims. They reflect, as David Harvey pointed out, the "profound impacts of the recent [...] privatizations, enclosures, spatial controls, policing, and surveillance upon the qualities of urban life in general" and new forms of sociability as "new commons" (Harvey 2012, 67).

⁴ Particularly, the research came across other occupying groups in Rome, like *Blocchi Precari Metropolitani* or Action. In order to avoid a straight-up fight against political institutions and police, these collective actions chose a strategic balance of power and a community-based legitimation. Squats include dismissing public buildings. The occupation uses a large number of activists and homeless migrants to prevent and discourage low enforcement intervention.

⁵ "Autogestion" can be translated as workers' self-management.

⁶ Generally interpreted as "new social movements": see Alain Touraine *Critique of Modernity* (1995).

An important part of the literature on social movement studies suggests an interpretation of collective actions in terms of mobilization of resources. According to this analysis, the agency is characterized by an institutional pressure, in which social actors take advantage of some “opportunities” and “facilities” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Charles Tilly 2001). Furthermore, collective actions are considered as playmakers in contentious politics (Tarrow 2012) as networks (Diani 2014), shaping, and penetrating or conditioning political parties’ agenda. However, this article aims at demonstrating how the *Teatro Valle* movement is a matter of subjective affirmation (Touraine 1995) and recognition (Frazer 2000), including personal ethics (Touraine 2015; 2007) and the idea of social justice. Social actors take part in the collective action as individuals, showing a “subjectivization⁷ of collective action” (Farro and Lustiger-Tahler 2014, 15-34). This agency does not aim at integrating the system but seeking alternatives and changes, asserting his own sense of justice, social rights and ethics (Touraine 2007, 81-87).

Everybody at theater

After 68 years, by a decree of law in May 2010 the Italian Theater Institution, E.T.I. (*Ente Teatrale Italiano*)⁸, was abolished. Historical national theaters like Teatro Valle in Rome belong, by now, to the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage. Officially, in May 2011 the theater activities run out. In a general perception of crises of public policies in the city and in the country, the uncertain future of the theater becomes a symbol of the national and local institutions’ decline. A group of artists, some of them with a political background as squatters or left-group,⁹ some without any political experience, and others again related to the theme of art and show business gathered in the theater. At the half of June 2011 they occupy the Foyer and the Eighteenth-century theater, located in the center of Rome, in the vicinity of the Senate. Initially, this action means to denounce the “intermittent arts workers” situation, also called the Fifth Estate (Allegrì and Ciccarelli 2013). The movement consensus assembles part of the local civil society, well-known actors, and intellectuals. From different orientations, social and cultural backgrounds, individuals and groups converge and take part in the change of the embryonic occupation project. Starting a dialogic assembly process around

⁷ The concept of subjectivity is referred to Alain Touraine “sociology of action”, in which the social actor defines himself by opposing his sense of justice and identity against domination, expressing himself in a reflexive manner as a subject able to produce changes and to affirm orientations, social codes, and values in an autonomous manner: see Touraine, *Critique of Modernity* (1995).

⁸ The ETI was born in 1942 as a public cultural institution related to the Ministry of Culture, no profit, whose work and positive role was recognized by the artists that occupied the theater.

⁹ They identify themselves as “antagonists”, activists of Italian Social Centers, and in some cases libertarian communists. In all cases they see themselves as radical left. See Antonio Famiglietti, “Radicalismo, cultura, politica e violenza”, in *Italia alterglobal. Movimento, cultura e spazi di vita di altre globalizzazioni*, A. L. Farro ed., (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2006), 33–76.

the notion of “common good”, a large support from citizens and artists backs the original occupiers’ group. According to our interlocutors, around 500 people take part in the first meetings. Political debates are combined with artistic contents: dramaturgical experimentations are nourished by the audience, which participates in the meetings. Activists, artists and audience alternate endless meetings with theatrical performances.¹⁰

The occupiers create artistic projects that collect the spectators’ approval and, in a certain manner, legitimate their political and cultural agency. They activate new forms of access that promote unknown artists and non-conventional theatrical projects. As it has been observed in other occupied theaters (Satta and Scandurra 2014), at first they consider the occupation as a symbolic form of protest. Then, their action aims to bring in other citizens and broaden the political spectrum. A young theater director and actor, artistically and politically active during the occupation, says:

Concerning the theater, we were trying to do a revolution, or at least we slammed the theatrical system, the official system [...] because we wanted to... The theatrical system is jaded, you can’t play, there are no productions, there is no spot. The institutional theaters are under lobbies’ control and aren’t linked with locals: so nothing new in the industry. We claimed for a different management of the theatrical institution, because the Teatro Valle is a f***ing symbol, it has always been a historical theater, well managed by the E.T.I. So we struck the symbol, we stayed into the symbol and we gave again a signification to it.
[Alberto, 38 years old]

By making the most of a broaden collaboration with different artists and competencies, the Occupy Teatro Valle leads several artistic projects: *Crisi* (tr.= crises) is a laboratory of writing attended by dramaturges and amateurs in which people can collaborate towards a synergic script. The outcome is interpreted by the actors and finally performed in front of the spectators. *Rabbia* (tr.= rage) is another project of theatrical work called “ecological circuit”, a sort of regenerating process, based on an open participation and co-working to handle all the steps of a show (training, production, planning, distribution). Other training projects, as *Nave Scuola* (tr.= training ship) or *Questo non è un Corso* (tr.= this is not a course), try to combine the playful, the creative moment, and the practice¹¹. The Occupied Teatro Valle implements some forms of “sustainability” for the artists and a different economic model:

¹⁰ In order to avoid cacophony and redundancy due to multiple speeches and codes of language, the assembly decides to establish the “right to speech” after being preset to three meetings. According to our interlocutors, this rule aims at facilitating the progress of an already started debate, avoiding repetition and bringing the assembly language to a following point. According to another interview, it is just “preferable to abstain” until the second meeting.

¹¹ For more details see the *Teatro Valle Occupato* web site <http://www.teatrovalleoccupato.it/> (accessed 12 December 2014).

A minimum granted income to all the people that worked in: a percentage for the author; a percentage was for a sort of welfare to cover the plays that didn't collect enough money. In addition, if a show had more [profits], the half part of it goes to the [acting] company. Being artists in the occupied theater, this point came out during the meetings: how to invite artists and treat them in a different way than other theaters do? [Silvana, 40 years old, theater actress and activist].

By experimenting new artistic models and connections to the spectators and citizens, as well as relationships with artists and theater companies, the occupiers aim at finding new alternatives to the current system. They implement, on practical, their political point of view of equity and social justice that comes out from the assemblies: concerning the economic treatment, the working relations, and the show business industry. They question the SIAE (Italian Society of Authors and Publishers)¹² monopoly, so they propose to pay directly the 10% to the authors and register them in the PATAMU¹³ platform, in order to protect possible unreleased works. Nevertheless, the theorized alternative welfare in the Occupied Valle Theater, as observed in other political and counter-cultural occupations (Membretti 2007; Membretti and Muddu 2013), cannot solve the major problem of the intermittent arts workers.¹⁴ Job insecurity and the logics of neoliberal economy remain inasmuch the Valle Theater cannot create permanent economies or a stable welfare. Our interlocutors do not comment this point as a failure but consider it as an evidence of their situation, as long as neoliberalism will run political institutions (Langeard 2013; Corsani 2012).

The regeneration of culture as a common good

Supported by some international awards that exalted the artistic and social role of the theater occupation experience¹⁵, the movement is aware of being politically important, so that it tries to be legitimated as an alternative institution. Inside the theater the movement produces not only artistic performances but also a strengthened network of different social actors. As a result, it creates the condition for a political space that questions the new possible civic engagement practices in the city.

¹² Italian copyright collecting agency

¹³ PATAMU is a copyright protect platform that offers free basic services and is based on donations.

¹⁴ See for the Italian case Alberta Giorgi (2013, 110–35).

¹⁵ In March 2014 the Valle Theater is awarded by the *Princess Margriet Award* of the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) in Brussels.

At the beginning, it [the movement] didn't mean to stay in the theater for 3 years...But very soon we and the citizens engaged in the movement were totally persuaded to keep the theater alive. So we took 'the Commons' as a reference, in order to transform the place and the space, and give it back to the city. [...] We occupied the Valle Theater in the aftermath of the victorious referendum about the water, which the motto was 'water common good'. So, more than an ideological discourse, theoretical, there was a discourse around the practices. Therefore, our idea was to transform this important space into the pivotal point of the city, beyond the logic of political partition and the non-transparent institutional model – a joint manager that is also a politician...and all things are hierarchical. And then, quite immediately, we wanted to create a horizontal structure, committed and democratic. [Flavio, 40 years old, editor and film maker, activist]

In addition to the antagonist left, many components of the left-wing activists related to associations, and third sector believed in the potential of the Valle Theater experience: among them, intellectuals, famous artists, politicians and legal experts. For instance, some of those that had taken part in the public debate on the national Referendum about the water¹⁶, supporting publically the idea of the Valle Theater as a common good, conceptualize this new civic participation as a cultural and political change (Mattei, 2011; Rodotà, 2012).

The theme of the common goods seems to take the cue from the article published by the biologist Hardin in the journal *Science*. According to Hardin (1968), natural resources that are not regulated by the state or by the private property are doomed to be extinguished. Hardin says "Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all" (Hardin 1968, 1244). Hardin's thought ignores the chance to manage a common good in a sustainable and collective way. He rather focuses on utilitarian and individualistic practices that take advantage of *laissez-faire* to selfishly grab all free common resources. Following his way of reasoning, the private property system "or something formally like it" (*Ibidem*, 1245) represents the solution to the risk of common resources depletion. Surely, this idea of the commons is overturned after the Elinor Ostrom's rebuttals (Ostrom, 1990, 1-5). Ostrom inaugurates an international debate in interconnected fields like juridical, politic science, and economy (Hess and Ostrom 2006; Mattei 2011, XXI-XII; Napoli 2014, 2011-33). In particular, Elinor Ostrom argues that neither the state nor privatization solved the problem of sustainable natural resources management of the planet (Ostrom 1990, 13-4).

The concept of the commons has recently been articulated with new political and ecological practices (Weston and Bollier 2013), relating and making sense of some collective actions and occupied spaces. From a more traditional analysis

¹⁶ The national Referendum that, in fact, repeals the law about the privatization of the water, in June, 11th and 12th.

– in juridical terms – of the collective use of lands and natural resources,¹⁷ the debate includes a wider range of immaterial applications based on new demands for new rights (Rodotà 2012). If the first formulation of common good needs an eligible “referred community” for managing natural resources (Cacciari, Passeri, and Carestiato 2012), the current concept of the commons includes the urban spaces (Garnett 2012) and is sometimes interpreted as transnational (Mattei 2011), and revolutionary (Dardot and Laval 2014). In other cases in Rome, we can observe that the civic engagement of citizens aims at taking care of the commons in terms of subsidiarity (Arena Cotturri 2010; Moro 2013), in order to strengthen the weak local political institutions, as has been observed in the case of a public school (Kirkland 1982; Farro Maddanu 2015).

Concerning the experience of the Occupied Teatro Valle, the concept of common good is used in a radical political way (Hardt and Negri 2009; Mattei 2011; Negri 2012; Harvey 2012;), in opposition to the subsidiary practice. In this sense, the autonomous management of the theater means to be alternative to the national and local institutions, and the neoliberal system. This position wants to emphasize the breakup from a collaborative idea of civic engagement that attempts, on the contrary, to support the institutions instead of acting in a re-foundational way, which is the case of the theater’s occupiers.

Culture is a form of commons, Harvey would say (Harvey 2012, 89-90), that is constantly subjected to the attempt of appropriation by the capital for its uniqueness. Then, the “exploitation of creativity” (ibidem 110) experienced by “cultural producers” is at stake. By constructing in a cooperative manner an alternative project to the market system, in the field of show business and the arts, the artists and activists of the Teatro Valle movement aim to reaffirm their wills to determine their social life, even and especially in a context of crisis of the political institutions’ role (Dubet 2002; Batra 2007; Touraine 2013; Touraine 2010), and city policies (Mayer 1994).

According to the group of ex-occupiers, citizens in Rome perceive the political institutions as decadent, which appear to be inadequate to face the demand of democracy and access into the representative system. The organization set up during the occupation – called *Fondazione Teatro Valle Bene Comune*, (Foundation Valle Theater Common good), FTVBC¹⁸, which counts 5600 members – is created from the will to start a new institution based on direct participation and the citizens’ responsibility. According to our interlocutors, the new legitimacy for managing the commons has to be cognizant of the cultural and ethical challenge that this kind of participation means:

¹⁷ For the Italian case see Angela Cacciarru (2013, 145-69); and Pietro Nervi (2009).

¹⁸ During the occupation and management of the theater (artistic plan and business) the collective group creates the Foundation with a specific charter that explain goals and meanings of this movement <http://www.teatrovalleoccupato.it/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/STATUTO-FONDAZIONE-TEATRO-VALLE-BENE-COMUNE.pdf> (accessed 5 February 2015).

I remember once during the members' assembly [TVBC], one member came to see me and argued about something, maybe a licit complaint...but she started very badly...She said: 'we are the association, we gave a lot of money; we could set an individual association but we decided to get a collective association, in order to give more money [...] and that means that we count as one instead of twenty', I don't remember how many they were...In conclusion, she was talking about money, about how much she gave. And then she said: 'we sent an email to propose an initiative and nobody answered'. So my answer was 'maybe you don't understand what to become a member of Valle Theater means. When you give your sum you don't buy a right. This money means that you are taking on responsibility of the common good. Giving the money is not enough to pretend something back, because this is the classical merchant model: I pay I pretend, no? No, it is not like this'. The commons, you don't pay and pretend. First of all you give: your time, your energy, your work. [Valeria, 44 years old, employed in communication marketing, activist]

The movement tries to overpass the old institution, replace it, and create another one by auto-legitimation or through a legal process. Nevertheless, it cannot resist to the come back into the scene of the legitimate (political) institution: after the police cleared-up the theater in August 2014, the experimental experience of the movement stopped, even if the group of ex-occupiers still elaborates projects and "imaginary institutions". According to the majority of the people that took part in the meetings after the end of the occupation, the goal is still to become a new institution, alternative to the "Rome Theaters" (TdR) institution. Ex-occupiers still aim to manage the theater avoiding the administrative and bureaucratic structure, and replacing it with a direct participated method that "speaks other languages" (fieldwork's notes): They auto-legitimate themselves as an effective institution. At the same time, they collaborate with the local institutions in order to "infiltrate" them and be considered as an essential counterpart. Even without the physical place of the theater, the Foundation (FTVBC) considers to keep its potential as a reproducible model. In the early months of 2015, the TVBC attempts to have an agreement with the cultural institution TdR and with the Rome's Department of Culture. With this agreement, the activists aim at managing the theater's Foyer activities and supervise the artistic scheduling for the next season, which is expected once the restauration work in the theater has ended¹⁹.

The issue about who has the legitimacy to manage the theater remains: if a common good needs a local community in charge, who is legitimated to manage the Valle Theater?

Artists and activists: the languages of a collective action

During the participant observation in the weekly plenary session of the movement, I collected notes and audio-records concerning the in-group

¹⁹ Occupiers accepted to leave the theater in order to let authorities (Municipality and TdR) run restauration works and secure the facility. The works are expected to be finished by 2016.

communication, strategies, speeches and other performances of the members. Generally, a moderator (rarely the same) introduces the schedule of the day, continuing from the previous meeting conclusions. Therefore the session report, which is written up by one or more persons and given back before the meeting through the mailing-list, is crucial. E-mails and social networks are useful for organizing events: They become, during some phases of the movement, an arena to debate and exchange advises, in which it is possible to detect different styles of communication. The excessive consideration of the google-group – called *La Comune*²⁰ – is criticized by those that think that “we do practices with our bodies, not with the mailing-list” (fieldwork notes, plenary assembly, February 9, 2015) and refuse the process of the reports. Nevertheless, by using this channel, members implement their collective identity and the narration about the movement: They add details and personal points of view concerning their engagement and subjectivity²¹. Furthermore, without a physical place to constantly exchange opinions, advice and proposals, internet let them share theoretical thoughts concerning juridical aspects, economics or art²². Among the members I encountered, there are high professional profiles, scholars, and academics or legal experts, sometimes used to media communication or political institutions. Furthermore, they are aware that performing art through their activism becomes an excellent media (Walz 2005, 71-74) to broadcast their political and cultural proposal.

According to our observations, the decisional and deliberative process occurs in the public open space of the weekly plenary assembly (generally attended by 30-50 people). The debate’s trend goes towards a consensual point, in order to “keep traces of all ideas, avoiding divisions” and to “put a limit to power relationship” (Luciano, 50 years old, television writer, and activist). After three invalid meetings without having reached a consensus, they eventually can recur to a final vote. For these reasons, the timing – who and when a person speaks, at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of the assembly – or the redundancy of a subject appear to be essentials to guide the members’ consensus. After the first speeches that recall the previous meeting – by way of the report – members start to criticize or agree with some specific debated points. We can observe one or two main orientations (even opposed) backed up by some recognized leaders that are more skilled at driving consensus. Nevertheless, diversification of profiles guarantees an open debate: Even if we noticed alliances and affinities between members, I was not able to detect organized currents inside the group.

²⁰ Reminding of *La Commune* of Paris.

²¹ The concept of subjectivity is referred to Alain Touraine “sociology of action”, in which the social actor defines himself by opposing his sense of justice and identity against domination, expressing himself in a reflexive manner as a subject able to produce changes and to affirm orientations, social codes and values in an autonomous manner (Touraine, 1995).

²² For instance *Titanpad* allow members to collaborate in an interactive manner, share and draw up simultaneously common documents.

These dynamics are not so different from other squatting experiences in Italy, like *Centri Sociali*²³: Some Valle Theater occupiers come from these same political radical actions. Experiencing multiple memberships in the social centers or movements like Action²⁴, these social actors reproduce a political rhetoric also based on cultural and counter-cultural contents (Rebughini 2000, Famiglietti and Rebughini 2008; Membretti 2007).

The plenary assembly, especially after the end of the occupation – therefore out of the theater – represents a crucial moment to affirm a collective subjectivity. According to the concept of “community of practice” – in which “community” has to be considered as a shared and mutual experience of membership (Wenger 2007, 73) – debating inside the group is a way to reinforce a shared identity as an “implicit” and “explicit” experience: the first one concerns the perception of being part of a group; the second is related “to do” something as well as “to say”, sharing knowledge and learning (*Ibidem* 48). Members build some shared meanings by a language related to the practices they experiment inside the group (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 54-55). By the time, out of the theater, even if we can observe performances and particular personalities, the space of engagement is now limited to the circle of *saying*. The political rhetoric prevails on the plenary assemblies, due to experienced political activists’ ability to create consensus. However, the weekly meetings still represent, at least during the debates, an extension of the shared experience between activists, artists and *artivists*. An actor that joined the movement in the time of the theater’s occupation tells me:

In the assembly I bring my artistic part, rather than a political speech. I bring some artistic terms, I mean...I don’t perform a show, but I learn how to communicate with the audience: these studies converge in the assembly. My goal is to make ‘common images’ in the assembly. I am from an enthusiasm for James Hillman’s work: according to him, imagining is very important. Then I brought my knowledge of these studies during the assemblies...or, better, I brought my thought concerning these studies...so, ‘to imagine together’, in order to share a common language with the others. Otherwise assemblies are monopolized by those that master ‘the discourse’, ‘the word’. So if the debate is too specific, technical, for example speaking about normative questions about work, people that don’t handle this language won’t understand. People can be seduced by the style [of speaking], but maybe won’t be aware of that. [Felice, 38 years old].

Observing plenary assemblies, I noticed intensely but fluid speeches. Members are used to understanding each other’s languages and perspectives. The interventions do not define always an orientation, a point. Sometimes they seem to express a reflexive moment, more personal. They talk about themselves around an issue, not just about the issue. They rarely speak in a definitive

²³ See Moroni, Farina, and Tripodi (1995).

²⁴ Occupying and managing buildings, this Movement claims for the “right to the house”.

manner, but always targeting a consensual process. The point, the main line is the report's outcome. Debates are open. Different forms of communication can be part of the general debate, being sarcastic, paradoxical, and absurd interventions. Even maintaining a sector-based analysis, technical languages, like legal language or politic science concepts can be submitted to all and questioned. In general, the language is shared by all members, maybe improved throughout the course of their several meetings: some concepts like "practices of management", "experimentation", "subjectivity", "commons", "participation" and "engagement at theater" are taken for granted by all the participants. This language though, appears to be inadequate when the FTVBC has to deal with the local political institutions (Bailey and Marcucci 2013) and TdR in order to find an agreement for managing the theater. The "formal" institution is perceived as "linguistically cold" and impenetrable to members' deed and claims. Some members – whom delegate to find an agreement with local authorities – noticed in astonishment: "when we talk about our practices, they [politicians and institutional representatives] snort [...] They don't pay attention...we are talking about how to manage with an alternative model, but they just want to know which kind of artistic schedule we propose"²⁵. According to the members, after three years spent experimenting with an alternative model for the theater, the Teatro Valle's experience is legitimated to establish a privileged relationship with the political institutions of the city. However, institutions like TdR do not seem to take into consideration the political claims and the wish to "embody a new institution" – as FTVBC wishes – but only the artistic project, the brand and the network of the Occupied Valle Theater.

Six months after the occupiers left the theater, the meetings still represent a critical space to express own experiences during the occupation. They are not just a political and strategic arena. Personal interventions recall some topic moments of the occupation in a cathartic manner, as a tale and a unique life experience. Thereafter, by leaving the theater, former occupiers experienced a trauma, due to the end of a political and professional practice. The shared language inside the group becomes crystallized. The further the meetings go in time, the rarer is the possibility to "return to the theater". From the outside, without the place, they do not feel recognized. Former occupiers question themselves about "who we are" without the place (Valle Theater), even concerning the name: "why should we call ourselves Fondazione Teatro Valle Bene Comune [FTVBC] if we are not in the Valle Theater anymore?" (fieldwork notes, 9 February 2015). Since the foundation FTVBC exists only on paper, it does not achieve the movement's purposes: without a physical space to implement the member's activities or concretize their artistic and political projects, the unity of the group shatters.

²⁵ Fieldwork notes: plenary assembly of 13 October 2014 and 12 January 2015.

Utopias without place: artists, activists or activists?

Encouraged by the popular success of the idea of the common goods, the case of Valle Theater represents an effort to embody a new cultural institution by auto-legitimizing the theater occupation. The FTVBC considers itself legitimate as an alternative to the “declining cultural institution”, which is, according to the members, a political institution removed from the citizens’ and artists’ needs. The FTBC tries to institutionalize what Harvey calls a “space of hope” (Harvey, 2012; Novy and Colomb 2013, 1835). The heterotopias concept of Michel Foucault describes the “other places” as at the same time linked and elsewhere to the society (Foucault 1986, 22-27), in which it is possible to experience a different temporal fracture from real time (as in the graveyards, in the asylums etc.), and from “social time” (Tabboni 1991). These places can be considered as illusory spaces in which a utopia is setup on the edge of society but related to it. Then, heterotopia can also be a space where it is possible to imagine the “other”, the “elsewhere” and the dream (Foucault 1986; Bloch 1996, 74-81).

As has been observed in other occupations or squats like the Social Centers (Toscano 2011, 234-8; Martinez 2013, 878-84; Pruijt 2013), by occupying the theater new social relations are created, economies, and socialization practices in opposition to the market, neoliberalism, and global financial system. But these “happy islands” can retreat into their own dimension, into a self-referential and closed identity (Owens 2009; Martinez 2013). Taking inspiration from Foucault’s concept, a space remains a heterotopia if it is not able to communicate with other spaces of social life and if social life does not integrate with it. The utopia stays suspended if it is not projected in a real place in which to transform it (Bloch, 1996, 79-103). The Valle Theater, as mission, tries to go beyond the logic of Social Centers or other occupied spaces, being receptive to the citizen participation and letting penetrated by other subjects, other ideas, in a more horizontal manner. One of the most important differences, also compared to other occupations led by *artivists* in Italy (Valli 2015), is the fact that the Valle Theater – a historical theater, architectural heritage, symbol of the theatrical institution – takes advantage of a broad movement cognizant of the commons.

According to Pruijt (2013) we can distinguish two different types of occupation: a “deprivation based squatting” (Pruijt 2013, 23-4) in which occupying is a way to face the housing crisis in the city, especially for migrants or disadvantaged people; and an “entrepreneurial squatting” (*Ibidem* 31-2), based on a counter-cultural perspective – a politically-oriented practice that aims at producing alternative social relations and artistic performances. Metropolitiz in Rome,²⁶ for

²⁶ This occupied space – a former factory far downtown – is home to many immigrant families, including Roma community, and also to the Contemporary Museum *Museo dell’Altro e dell’Altrove* (MAAM): See Francesca Broccia, “Metropolitiz. Strategie dell’abitare in un’ex fabbrica a Roma” (master’s thesis, Sapienza University of Rome, 2012). In October 2014 Metropolitiz hosted *Self Made Urbanism Rome (SMUR)*, a workshop about self-organizing and self-producing the city. SMUR is an International project that gathers architects, urbanists, academics, artists and political activists. See S.M.U.R. – Self-Made Urbanism Rome, *Roma*,

example, is a combination of both types of squats. It is another novel form of “self-made city” including contemporary arts and performances with the cohabitation of a self-organized multiethnic community. The Occupied Valle Theater is not a squat: It remains a symbolic place to struggle against a cultural/political institution and in this sense it is related to the idea of temporary “urban commons” (Harvey 2012, 72-3). The effort to rebuild an institution – as if they could personify the new institution – distinguishes the Valle case from other similar *artists’* experiences in Germany (Novy and Colomb 2013), which take part in the neighborhood regeneration of the city by becoming third sector companies or creating partnerships with national and local institutions (Mayer 2009, 265–272; Holm and Kuhn 2010).

Attempting a possible artistic production that combines art and politic, looks alike the Augusto Boal political theater experience in Brazil and the wills of the “Theater of the Oppressed” (Boal 1979), in which the artistic performance means to turn spectators into actors, and then subjects. But outside the theater that enabled these kind of cooperative practices, what model has been left?

The Valle Theater experience has strengthened the network with other occupation movements, linked as well with the struggle for the common goods. Talking about the occupation experience, members use a self-congratulatory verbiage, like a political redundancy in order to underscore their practices as an exceptional model. Political strategies become more and more important than the artistic projects, so that a distinction emerges between the two scopes: the artistic side looks for other contexts of creative expression. As for the political side, without a physical space like the theater, activists and *artists* lose their social practice that characterized the management of the theater. Basically, members are no more able to replicate the specific “situated experiences” (Wenger 2007, 14–5, 288) that contributed to the excellence of the Occupied Teatro Valle. Artists continue to express their subjectivity in other contexts (personal artistic projects), but the collective meanings of the group remain within the political rhetoric. The Valle Theater represented, for many, a space to combine an artistic as well as a political subjectivity. According to our interlocutors, the activists, artists and *artists* – each one with different recognizable modalities – found a balanced common point:

I think that the best thing we did in the Valle was the coexistence of these two parts [artistic and political], otherwise we stuck in this dichotomy: the selfish artist that cares only about his business, shutting himself in his world, just looking for a particular inspiration; in the other hand, at the contrary, a deep collectivism that seems like you cannot be as an individual, because you have to be as a collective body...and you cannot take a decision alone because you almost have to ask the group permission, even for a coffee with your fellows...you know...like two extremes. I think that the Valle [Theater’s] mission has always been to find a common point: sometimes it works, sometimes not [...] If there is a

città autoprodotta. Ricerca urbana e linguaggi artistici, C. Cellamare, ed. (Roma: Manifestolibri, 2014).

respect for each sphere, so you can cross the spheres [Silvana, 40 years old, actress and activist].

According to the debates in the assemblies, one side of the group aims at carrying out the practices and the model of management of the theater in other places, keeping the combination between art and politics²⁷. They want to keep the project alive and traveling. According to Owen Smith, since the sixties some groups of artists, like Fluxus, proposed a creative experience that continues to question a social engagement as well as an artistic practice (Smith 2005, 118). Smith says “Fluxus is a group of individuals who constitute an entity, or maybe better yet, a community, called Fluxus. This community is simultaneously the product of its constitutive members but ultimately is more than any one individual or individuals” (*Ibidem* 134). This artistic movement is conceived as a network able to produce a model based on new social practices by participating and sharing “a cognitive space and a communal structure” (*Ivi*). This artistic work expresses a political sense. As for other forms of expression, in the visual arts as well as in the performances, the power of the art has been conceptualized as a form of transformation of the existing (Zepke 2005). According to this interpretation, art is able to investigate social issues and make them intelligible (Reed 2005) through alternative networks to the market and broadcasting political, and social meanings (Raunig and Ray 2009; Raunig 2007). Among the forms of critic of capitalism, Boltansky and Chiapello individuate the “social” and the “artistic” (Boltansky and Chiapello 2011, 87–91, cited in Novy and Colomb 2013, 1831). If the first one refuses individualism and seeks solutions to solve social inequalities, even pursuing radical methods, this critic does not claim for the dissolution of the industrial manufacturing, technology and other activities that make the wealth of a country. Therefore, this form of critic does not neutralize the opportunity of capitalism. On the contrary, the artistic critic “even if it shares the individualism of modernity” (Boltansky and Chiapello 2011, 91) aims at criticizing the values and foundations of capitalism. The relation between art and politics, *stricto sensu*, overpasses the scope of this article. What we can offer as hypothesis is the fact that in the lack of material practices in a physical space (the Valle Theater), the different spheres, which were previously combined during the collective management experimentation and cooperation, now diverge. According to Giorgio, the ontological difference between artists and non-artists is, in fact, due to the nature and mission of the political institutions and the effects of the social system:

I think that, potentially, human being has a creative power, so there is an artistic side, each one in a different way. Unfortunately, our unaware life makes us resigned to not to be... [...]. In my view, some experiences and social relationships lead people to bring out an unexpected artistic/creative side of everyone. But that's because of our relationships! Because of the manner of living, how it is

²⁷ The experience of the *Volxtheater Favoriten*, the nomad Publixtheatre Caravan has been suggested by some artists to find an alternative solution: see Gerald Raunig (2007, 203–29).

organized. Rousseau said something like this: the institutions, the form of government [...]. Institutions lead citizens to develop some dynamics instead of others. So it's up to the collective human creativity to find the right institution, the virtuous one, rather than the vicious. [Giorgio, 38 years old, PhD student in law, activist]

According to other members, there is an unsolvable distinction, more related to the artistic production than to the ethics. The art, or better, the individual base that leads to the artistic creation concerns a self-referred sphere, solipsistic, individual, and individualistic. Nevertheless, there is no opposition with the collective, the common. Anyway, a difference emerges between what concerns the politics and what is intrinsic in the art:

I don't believe that art is politic and politic is art. I think that's bullshit: the art is art, the politics is politics. Nonetheless, you can put politic in the art because the art is part of...[the world]. But political art is not Brecht. Political art is also Star Wars that talks about the Empire, you understand? It's not true that art is automatically politics. This naivety existed and still exists among some...because they say 'if I do art I'm also doing politics': no! because you do art, but if you don't occupy a theater, if you don't manage it during three years, you didn't do politics. Nonetheless, you can send political messages doing art (Brecht...). [Luciano, 50 years old, television writer, activist]

The plenary assemblies are full of narrative forms about what to do and how to stay, politically, on the stage. The end of a specific practice leaves room for a political language. Progressively, the idea of "immaterial common good" turns into a straight political vision.

The presence of the "artistic world" in the group of ex-occupiers scales down. The *artists* represent the possibility to keep together creativity and a political scope, but there is still a distance between political meanings and the artistic career that is not solved by their embodiment. Artists evaluate the quality of the artistic proposal beyond the antagonistic lens, even when those projects are presented by the counterpart (the TdR). Direct democracy and active citizenship issues are obviously more related to the political aspects, so that the need to be recognized as a legitimate institution represents a political scope. However, the model of the Valle Theater lays on the special combination of the artistic agency with an antagonistic political view. The artistic aspect legitimates and emphasizes the political, never the other way around.

Conclusions

The concept of common good, as has been employed by the TVBC, becomes a motto that leads the practices of the occupied Valle Theater, in this sense diverging from other occupation movements and traditional collective actions.

By attempting to rebuild a new cultural institution and proposing their horizontal model of management, occupiers aim to create a space in which to experiment new social relations, new economies, and new forms of civic engagement. Taking care of a hold theater, a common heritage and symbol of a general decline of political and cultural institutions, means to be part of an antagonistic movement that criticizes neoliberalism, the state, and cultural urban policies in the city.

During the three years of the theater occupation, a combination between the artistic and the political approach emerges, enriched by the participation of other citizens that follow the movement and give it legitimacy. The end of the occupation represents a turning point: Deprived of a physical place where to experiment their practices, former occupiers shift into a reflective discourse about their experience. A political rhetoric dominates their language, isolating the artistic perspective. A distance between the artistic and the political scope emerges along the plenary assemblies: the combination between the two spheres can only be imagined like a “utopia without a place”. Members of the TVBC aim at exporting the Valle Theater’s model elsewhere in order to reproduce an alternative management of the “immaterial common good”. At the same time, as far as they think to be legitimated, they yearn for a return to the theater to re-found – in a self-foundational manner, as Cornelius Castoriadis would say – the cultural institution.

What remains of this experience? Social actors that take part in this movement, through different roles and forms of participation, express an affirmation of their subjectivity in opposition to neoliberalism, the retreat of political institution – as they perceive it – and the role of the state. By their agency, civic and artistic, the activists and *artivists* aim to produce new practices to experiment their alternative project of social life, individually as well as collectively.

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