

BORDERS TO CROSS

Title:	The unanticipated success of two occupations of public space
Name workshop:	Arts and Culture
Projects presented:	1. Teatro Valle Occupato 2. The Community Lover's Guide to Berlin 3.
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Date and time of workshop:	30 Oct, 2013 9:30

During this session two initiatives were presented about reclaiming the public space through culture. Freely accessible public space is shrinking but this space is essential for negotiating differences and values. How to recreate an agora where true democracy can be practiced?

What triggered me is that the success of the two initiatives that we learned about was *unplanned* and *unanticipated*. Teatro Valle Occupato was an initiative by artists and entertainment workers to occupy a theatre in Rome for three days, in order to save it from privatization. Two years later they still exist. Exrotaprint, one of the initiatives included in the Community Lover's Guide to Berlin, neither expected to become as successful as they are today.

The occupied theatre in Rome currently hosts assemblies and theatre rehearsals and productions that are openly accessible to the public. It provides a community centred space where it is possible to experiment in freedom, independent from time and as such it has a self-educating and empowering function. It is the process of deliberation and creation that counts and not only the end product. Although many artists in Italy refrain from politics, in this theatre the unique chance exists to connect the artistic and the political. Exrotaprint is an association of renters that preserve an enormous historical building that used to house a printing facility for decades. The renters got the chance to utilize the building after the municipality of Berlin failed to sell it to commercial buyers. For many of the renters the building is used as their art studio but the association also organizes social outreach and accommodation of the people from the poor and otherwise neglected neighbourhood in which it lies. The question arises what exactly made these initiatives so unexpectedly successful. Was it the right timing? Was it the right context? It is possible for activists to have the success of their initiative in their own hands? Or is this contingent?

In reply to the first leading question, these examples illustrate the democratic innovation of occupying and preserving public space, thereby balancing between legality and illegality, a practice that is presently being carried out in many other places. Gezi Park and Tahrir Square are other famous examples that spring to mind. When public space is threatened it appears to mobilize people.

