

**The Occupation of Teatro Valle (Rome).**  
**A chronicle of an experiment in self-organization**  
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In June 2011, a group of artists, activists and cultural workers occupied the Teatro Valle, a theatre built in 1727 by the art patron Marquise Camillo Capranica inside his spectacular renaissance palace located in the historical centre of Rome. The occupation was meant to prevent the municipality from privatizing the theatre – one of first in Europe to be open to the general public in 1822. In August 2014 the occupants left peacefully the Valle following a relocation order by the municipality. In these three years the Valle became a legally recognised *commons* (*Fondazione Teatro Valle Beni Comune*)<sup>1</sup> experimenting with collective and grass-root forms of cultural production, urban governance and civic activism and sparking a new wave of *commoning* across Italy and Europe. Below, I assess the circumstances surrounding the occupation of Valle, the legacy of the occupation and the failed negotiations between the Teatro Valle Occupato community and the municipality.

### **The Context of the Occupation**

Teatro Valle was occupied on the day after the victory of the Italian water referendum when 27 millions Italians voted against the privatization of water utilities and a new left-wing coalition, made of some grass-root political and civic organizations and a splinter group from Partito Democratico (the main left-wing party) gathered around the *Movement for Water Common Good* led by MP Stefano Rodota', Ugo Mattei and other prominent lawyers. The movement opposed the programme of privatization and labour deregulation of the Berlusconi government and proposed a radical reorganization of the state based on decentralized forms governance and progressive welfare policies, including a European basic income and minimum wage. In 2010 Berlusconi's Minister for the Economy Giulio Tremonti closed down the *Ente Teatrale Italiano* (ETI – the national agency in charge with the management of some public theaters and cultural institutions) *de facto* sparking the privatization of the whole Italian theatre sector. In 2011 the *Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali* (the Ministry for Culture) transferred the management of the theater to the municipality. Rumors had it that the Valle was to be turned into an exclusive restaurant. In occupying the theatre artists and cultural producers contested the commodification and privatization of culture and claimed that culture is a common good to be self-managed and controlled by its community. The occupants invited Rodota', Mattei and other prominent lawyers to have their *Commissione Costituente Beni Comuni* (a constitutional reform project set up by Rodota') inside the theatre which thus, became a grass-root laboratory for the legal theorization of the notion of 'commons'. Two years into the occupation, the Valle became *Fondazione Teatro Valle Bene Comune*, the first foundation for common good in Italy and the first illegal

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<sup>1</sup> Although recognized by national law the Fondazione is not recognized by the prefettura in Rome.

occupation to be legalized through the tools of constitutional law<sup>2</sup>. The Teatro Valle Occupato had had least three legacies.

The first success of Valle was to have become a legally recognized 'common good' on the wave of the successful national campaign against the privatization of water. This horizontal *replication* of the principle of the commons from an ecological to a cultural good allowed for political alliances across different strata of the left, such as environmental organizations, NGOs and the cultural *precariat*, including technicians, actors and civic servants and sparked a series of legalized occupations across Italy. Besides, the institutionalization of the occupation into the legal form of *Fondazione* led to a self-perception of the movement as being constituent and borderless rather than oppositional and marginal. On the broader national arena, the notion of borderless and self-sufficient communities of artists and cultural workers challenged the self-contained austerity policies and xenophobic ideologies of the nation-state of Berlusconi and laid the ground for a new federalist discourse over Europe<sup>3</sup>.

In fact, and this is problematic, the notion of commons is place-bound. In place-based struggles – normally associated with the South – the rights of people and the rights of the land and objects blend into each other. Political subjectivities emerge from everyday practices of livelihood and are inscribed in the very physical environment. This is the strength of such movements. But when places cease to exist (legally or physically) political subjects disappear with them. In fact, since the beginning of the occupation, it was clear that Teatro Valle itself *was* the subject of the movement. After the closure of the theatre the movement struggled to exist as a unitary political subject. Sylvia, an activist of the movement, says: 'the experience of the occupation was not unitary but full of tensions and contradictions. But somehow, these were contained within the physical walls of the theatre. Outside the theatre these tensions, differences and contradictions become painfully evident'. In order to be sustainable cultural commons must exceed their legal and physical boundaries and expand into wider and diversified political networks and institutions.

The second achievement of Valle was to implement a form of collective welfare – a welfare of the commons. Against the invisible enclosures and abstractions of financial capitalism and the commodification of culture and tourism in historical cities, the cultural workers of the *Fondazione* took control of the cultural economy, making collective and consensual decisions on the daily running of the theatre including, programming, budgeting, funding issues and the conditions of membership and participation. In her famous study of

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<sup>2</sup> For an assessment on the legal aspects of the Valle experience, see Bailey, Saki and Maria Edoarda Marcucci, 2013. 'Legalizing the Occupation The Teatro Valle as a Cultural Commons', in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*. *Against the Day*. Spring 112: 2.

<sup>3</sup> Marco Baravalle. 2010. "The Diagonal of Commonfare". Former West. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia.

commons<sup>4</sup> economist Elinor Ostrom argues that commons are neither all-inclusive (as supposedly, for public property) nor exclusive (as for private property) but hybrids between collective and hierarchical social formations and between communal and private forms of value production. The economy of commons is sustainable as long as it combines different economic rationalities and contains nested levels of authority and decision-making, which allow for coordination between different communities and forms of value production. Yet, perhaps because of the strong juridical framing of the struggle, which bonded it to the material spaces of the theatre and its industry, there was little coordination between Valle and other forms of urban *commoning*. For instance, Valle took on board some public functions of the disbanded ETI (public outreach, international networks and multi-disciplinarity) and became welfare provider (accommodation, childcare, education) for the occupants and the local community. But how can this public wealth be accounted for, so that it does not end up being just outsourced labour for a privatized state? Besides, how do experiences of auto-production and cultural *commoning* square with the broader issue of the artists' rights to economic remuneration<sup>5</sup>? What kind of alliances can be drawn between precarious artists and precarious industrial and public workers in the context of increased labour deregulation across the social spectrum? The proposed collaboration between Valle and the municipality was seen as a chance for the *Fondazione* to embed its practices of participatory democracy and co-governance in the broader political economy of the city.

The third legacy of Valle and of similar artist' occupied spaces is to have expanded the boundaries of the political. Inverting the logic of traditional politics, in which theories inform actions, these artists-led movements have a practice-driven, performative and open-ended political praxis based on experimentation, ex-post conceptualization and a constant engagement on two fronts. One of struggle and critique of the hegemonic forces of capitalism; another of epistemological and discursive construction of a new post-capitalist imaginary, including new form of dramaturgy in which art and politics inform each other. Central to this new economic narrative is the notion of care – both of people and places – which is also central to other commons<sup>6</sup>. In Valle this is evident in the fundamental role that women, the youth, migrants and precarious workers have in decision-making and the daily running of the theatre. As well as for its activism, Valle established itself as one of the most successful art centres in Europe, developing a new form of art commissioning, which shies away from the traditional format of the exhibition, and is based on grassroots collaborations in urgent sites and moments of struggle.

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<sup>4</sup> Ostrom, Elinor. 1991. *Governing the Commons The Evolution for Institutions for Collective Actions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>5</sup> The SIAE, the Italian copyright collecting agency, used issue of artists' remuneration to discredit the experience of Valle and stir a national polemics.

<sup>6</sup> See also Silvia Federici 2011. "Feminism and the Politics of the Commons" in *The Commoner*.

## The end of the Valle experience.

The occupants' decision to leave the theater peacefully was consensually agreed in a long general assembly but it was nonetheless deeply divisive for the movement. To be sure, the occupants were not given much choice. As the police showed up to close the place the light and water were mysteriously turned off – an occurrence, which puzzled even the mayor. In a city in the grip of the *poteri forti* (strong powers – ie: the police and the general attorney), heavy bureaucracy and extreme corruption<sup>7</sup> the darkness, which the occupants found themselves in must have felt overwhelming. No wonder they did not put up a stronger resistance. But they agreed to leave peacefully only based on the proposal made by Teatri di Roma (the managing body of the municipality) to co-manage Teatro Valle with *Fondazione* starting in 2015. On the day of the dis-occupation the left-wing president of Teatri di Roma Sinibaldi committed himself in public to an experimental model of *Teatro Partecipato* ('co-managed theatre'). That is, the municipality would manage the theatre for six-months based on its traditional forms of *public* programming and management, and in the other half of the year the *Fondazione* would implement its own model of cultural production and governance.

But the negotiation on the *convenzione* (agreement) with Teatri di Roma proved difficult since the start. The municipality rejected the occupants' demand to continue to use the Foyer for their assemblies and public events after the relocation because it had to settle its debt on arrears on rents with the current owner of the Foyer – marchese Capranica del Grillo. Besides, the theatre badly needed to be refurbished before the start of the new season. But as yet, the refurbishment of Valle has not started. In the meantime, due to an imminent radical reorganization of the national theatre system, which will reduce the number of national theatres by a third, the ex-occupants and Teatri di Roma are rushing to make a joint application – which will incorporate the *convenzione* – to the ministry for Culture in order for Valle to gain the status of national theatre.

Many ex-occupants opposed the negotiation and saw the proposal of co-management as a straightforward form of co-optation of the commons by the state. Others saw this hybridization between two structures of governance and productive models as a possibility for self-transformation – a new instituting process rather than a process of institutionalization. In fact, Teatro di Roma promised to incorporate into its own structure the communal model of governance of the *Fondazione* (and its 5600 members), which would have continued to be self-determined in terms of governance and budget. The negotiating group within Valle saw this new organizational form of the common as being potentially reproducible in other institutional contexts. Acknowledging the potential conflict between the private logic of the

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<sup>7</sup> The previous mayor of Rome Gianni Alemanno is being investigated for *Roma Mafia Capitale*, a corruption ring involving the municipality, mafia institutions and ultra-right terrorist groups.

*convenzione* and the principles of sovereignty of the assembly, during the negotiation the ex-occupants held an open assembly to discuss the technical and political details of the agreement, including organizational functions and roles, costs, accessibility, public impact, price of the tickets and programming. To have opened to the public the discussion that was taking place *in private* between the ex-occupants and the municipality was a strong political statement: the Teatro Valle should continue to be a public place for the citizens to meet and to be involved in decisions concerning the public.

The occupation of Valle took place when grass-root movements and the traditional left joined forces against the incompetent, arrogant and corrupted Berlusconi government. But with the fall of Berlusconi the 'new left' converged into the Renzi's administration – which continues to support privatization, labour deregulation and austerity – and popular forces were co-opted by Grillo's populist *Movimento Cinque Stelle* ('five star movement') – which initially supported Rodota'. In such context, utopian projects such as Valle were doomed to fail. Indeed the *Teatro Partecipato Project* failed. The municipality did not meet its promises, the original group of the occupants dispersed and the theatre is now closed. Yet, the experience of Valle paralleled various similar occupations in Rome and across Italy, such as Macao in Milan, S.a.L.E Docks in Venice, ex asilo Filangieri in Naples and Cavallerizza in Turin. Walking in the empty Teatro Valle street by the theatre's sealed doors Laura, one of the early occupants, tells me 'it's always painful to return here'. But she adds that a group of artists who occupied a theatre in Zagreb contacted her and thanked the people of Valle for their inspiring legacy. 'Perhaps – Laura comments – what's happening to Valle is just a normal process of regeneration'. Culture will continue to play a central role in the political economy of Europe and the struggle over the cultural commons can only but intensify.