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to Research
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Mediterranean
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Reasons to Research in the Mediterranean Area

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Research and Reasoning in the Mediterranean Area

Marinella Ferrara

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A CRITICAL VIEW

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The Island of the Possible

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Possibilities, Active Citizenship, Civil Disobedience, The Act of Creation

Abstract

The text makes a case, through a discussion of active citizenship during the era of globalized capitalism, for the necessity of the existence of grassroots unregulated islands of activity such as the Autonomous Rog Factory. To some, the existence of this autonomous zone of activity represents nothing other than the usurpation of an abandoned space that, in the case of Rog, was slated for rapid demolition; for others, it represents a legitimate occupation through which active citizenship and political participation is manifested. What does an urban action such as the Autonomous Rog Factory create in the context of the freedom of grassroots action? And what perhaps does it prevent? Put another way: can we allow ourselves to neglect existing creative resistance merely in order to create an orderly framework of the known?

In the first chapter of his book *Means Without End*, Giorgio Agamben introduced the phrase *form-of-life*. As he explains it, it is “a life – human life – in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all power” (Agamben, 2000, p. 4). It is precisely the *possibilities* of life – and the power to choose between the possibilities – that offers the shortest description of what is being threatened by the potential demolition of the Autonomous Factory Rog, an alternative island in the middle of Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia.

The text makes a case, through a discussion of active citizenship during the era of globalized capitalism, for the necessity of the existence of grassroots unregulated islands of activity such as the Autonomous Rog Factory. Precisely the case of Rog clearly illustrates that in practice the concept of active citizenship is propagated by established political entities only to the point that the work and activities of these entities are managed and controlled. In this way, the government seeks to set boundaries on the ideas and initiatives of active citizenship. Deviation from regulations and civil disobedience are not recognized as building something, as creative rebellion, but are usually branded as unlawful acts. In the end phase, such a situation often metamorphoses into a battle between David and Goliath, and is converted – by the government authorities – into a one-sided set of demands, and, in the case of Rog, even the attempt to use violent force as a method of subordination.

1. From a Workshop to an Activist Project (a brief history of the situation at Rog before and during the occupation)

As reported on the website *Rog Factory* (2006), it all started in 1871 with the establishment of a leather workshop on the site. By 1922, the workshop had expanded to a leather factory and, despite a change in ownership, continued to operate until the end of World War Two. In 1945, with the change of the Yugoslav political system – the Rog Factory was nationalized. Its operations only continued for a short time before the government decided, during the period from 1951 to 1953, to reorganize the factory into a manufacturer of bicycles.

Thus the Rog Factory was born. The factory remained active until the collapse of Yugoslavia. In 1991, because of increasing logistical costs, the management of the factory relocated production from the center of the city to an industrial zone on the outskirts. For the next three years, all that remained in the original location of the factory was a bike store and service center. As early as 1992, the city authorities of Ljubljana took an interest in Rog's location, and, as the years passed, looked for ways, even seeking international consultation, to gentrify Rog and the property around it. In 1994, the seven-year period of denationalization of the Rog Factory began. During this time, the municipal government of Ljubljana took responsibility for the organization and condition of the Rog premises.

A local ordinance called for the protection of the main factory building, and stated that the wider premises were intended for both public and private programs. In 2002, the municipal government of Ljubljana bought the Rog Factory, but a year later plans for renovation once again stalled.

Despite these early intentions, the Rog Factory remained empty and in a state of collapse for fifteen years. The situation changed only when temporary users squatted on the property. Activists, students, and artists made the following announcement when they first occupied the Rog Factory:

“On Saturday, March 25, 2006, a new social program and an initiative for the temporary use of the currently abandoned Rog Factory was launched with the purpose of conducting non-profit and under-represented activities” (Tovarna Rog, 2006).

During the subsequent ten years, the temporary users of Rog managed to conduct a lively program of social, political, sport, welfare, and cultural activities (this, despite the fact that there was no connection to the electric grid, because the city, despite its promises, never signed a contract for temporary use). A group of individuals built and created, among other things, a social center, artist studios, workshops, gallery spaces, a skate-park, concert hall, dance studio, circus space, and library. In the past, a space for the political activities of the so-called “erased” (citizens of the former Yugoslavia who were denied administrative and citizenship rights in independent Slovenia) was created. Today, in addition to numerous festivals, concerts, literary readings, and performances that take place in the Rog Factory, English lessons are provided for asylum seekers and other efforts related to refugees and migrants are conducted (for example, the collection of aid and integration work). In other words, an exceptionally wide range of activities has been housed in the once abandoned factory.

Cultural anthropologist Rajko Muršič noted that in these ten years

“such a variety of activities did not develop because of ten dreamers who wanted to do these things, but because of the needs of the community for certain activities to be carried out, and the possibility for individuals to actually carry them out. To a great degree, we are talking about activities that are conducted autonomously, without social support, and without ancillary financial or commercial activities” (Pograjc, Vešligaj, 2016).

Municipal decision-makers did not recognize any of these activities as contributions to the city, but rather as a form of opposition to the planned gentrification of the area. After the unsuccessful search for a private investor for a public-private partnership in the renovation of the Rog Factory – the latter was to become a contemporary art center with stores, bars, hotel, apartments and garages – the municipal government of Ljubljana decided in 2014 to minimize the plan and carry out only the first phase of the project, mainly the renovation of the protected primary buildings. These would be transformed into the Rog Center, the goal of which would be the development of creative/cultural industries. A parking lot would be constructed in the basement, and the factory courtyard would become a multipurpose park (Projekti MOL, 2010–16).

The problem with the recommended plan is that the first phase already anticipates the demolition of the factory’s auxiliary buildings, the spaces in which most of the autonomous activities described above take place. This is what led both sides into a conflict that escalated on June 6, 2016 when,

following the orders of the City of Ljubljana, a group of private security guards entered the Autonomous Rog Factory in the middle of the night. Along with workers and equipment from a construction company, they attempted, in the words of the temporary users of the premises, to “demolish the living and functioning autonomous community with the exercise of authority, deceit, and violent force” (Uporabnice et al., 2016). The users of Rog resisted the demolition by erecting a living wall of people, and also seized the excavator with which the employees of the construction company had entered the premises. In the aftermath, both the yellow color and the purpose of the excavator were transformed: it was painted pink and became a symbol of resistance, of the creative freedom that replaces forceful destruction.



2. The Right to Occupy

The amount of media reporting increased with the conflict and this led to an intensified response from the public. It is interesting that a substantial segment of the public did not side with the weaker party, the temporary users of Rog, but rather on the side of the supposed owners of the area, the city of Ljubljana. The temporary users of the space were branded as irrational usurpers of private property. Of course this raises the question: is the property of the city of Ljubljana – as public authorities – actually private property? We are offered a response to this question by the abovementioned Rajko Muršič and the constitutional lawyer Andraž Teršek. Rajko Muršič observes that

“the occupation of these spaces is in truth not clearly illegal, as many people conceive of it when they use the phrase ‘illegal occupation’ [...]. The right to occupy abandoned spaces was written in old Roman law. It is based on the notion of responsibility for property, which in that time was less inviolable than it is today. If you do not responsibly care for your property, you do not deserve to own it!” (Muršič, 2012, p. 178).

Ergo: “since Roman times, the act of occupation was a legitimate expression of active citizenship and political participation” (Muršič, 2012, p. 178). An echo of this ancient Roman law found its way into the current Cultural Heritage Protection Act. Article 6 of the law states among other things:

“Other monuments owned by the state, the region, or the municipality may only be seized in the exceptional cases where such

seizure improves their preservation or public access to them, and thus ensures use that is in agreement with the social significance of the monument” (Zakon, 2008).

The legal foundation and Muršič’s observation regarding the replacement of a poor manager with public interest is supported by Andraž Teršek’s statement that

“the property rights of the municipality vis-à-vis Rog cannot be equated with private property rights, that is the property rights of individuals, and that the temporary users of Rog occupy the property above for the public good, which they fulfill with content and which the judicial authorities should protect” (Rožman, 2016).

Moreover, according to Teršak, the temporary users of the Rog Factory have

“a genuine political stance and are exercising legitimate political self-realization. This is the way that citizens of a civil society exercise their freedom in the public space – as an active political subject. This is possible precisely with the seizure of public property, the custodianship of the public good, and the reinsertion of content and spirit into it” (Teršek, 2016).

It is only at this point that the public interest is actually being carried out; a task in which the public government – at least in the case of Rog – was unsuccessful in the past.



Figure 2. Slovenian musician N'toko performing on the rooftop at the Autonomous Rog Factory, 2016. Photo: Voranc Vogel.



Figure 3. All temporary users participate directly and make decisions collectively at general assemblies, Autonomous Rog Factory, 2016. Photo: Voranc Vogel.

3. An Unregulated Island

Thus the occupation of public property, looked at from the legal perspective, is not even as controversial as it appears to many. But the case of the Autonomous Rog Factory extends beyond the legal, and poses additional challenges in terms of how to think of the situation: namely, that an island of autonomous grassroots activities exists in the center of a regulated city. This island is being created by active citizens from the pure need for such grassroots community action. At the same time, it is certainly also a form of rebellion against the interests of capital, as well as an expression of defiance against municipal policies that have criminalized everything that does not agree with the city's plans and vision: namely, the vision of a city cleansed of disorder. Everything that deviates from this vision is excluded, punished, and pushed to the margins. For example, it is expected that residents of the city will report when facades are covered with graffiti, because these walls "create an atmosphere of disorderliness in public spaces which reduces the sense of safety" (MOL, 2015). This statement and the position it reflects raise many questions: "In what kind of city do we want to live?" "Who does the city serve?" and, above all, "Because of whom does the city exist?". Thus, the conflict described above – if we recognize the legitimacy of both communities, the city authorities and the temporary users of Rog – would seem relatively easy to solve with respectful dialog and the search for ways of co-existence.

But, as Vilém Flusser cautions us in the book *Post-History* (2013[1983]), when there are two different answers in the same situation, we must realize that the reason is most likely that

two different questions are being answered (p. 35). Let's first look at the two answers: "With the renovation of the Rog Factory, we will clean up the area, and will provide the cultural and creative industry with 5,526 m² of additional space," and, "The grassroots active citizenship action in Rog has filled the gaps in the field of social, political, sports, welfare, and cultural activities for the last ten years." From the two answers, we can see that the first responds to a quantitative question: "Why is it necessary to renovate the facilities?" and the second responds to a qualitative question: "What does the renovation destroy?"

In the first answer, we are presented with a vast amount of renovated space for the use of institutions and self-employed individuals with the city government selecting content and thus determining the general framework of cultural operations through tenders. Of course, this is important and necessary for the cultural development of the city. But, as noted above, this does not excuse the exclusion of others who do not play by the same rules. These other players are equally necessary for the development of city culture. With the independent and alternative cultural work carried out by individuals, collectives, and institutions, new mechanisms of social operations are researched and established that institutional bodies usually fail to address. These new mechanisms create non-profit content for the public good, as well as a space for socializing, further exploration, experimentation, and also *just doing nothing*.

The essence is in the search for and establishment of alternatives through resistance against that which exists. When the city co-exists with autonomous spaces and allows creativity

and the search for alternative social conditions to take place in them, it is also providing a precondition for the introduction and development of the possibilities alluded to above. The possibilities of life. And this is actually crucial. It is crucial because we urgently need – especially now – to establish conditions in which we can begin to believe again that possibilities are even possible. We must forcefully oppose the convention that it doesn't make any sense to even look for possible alternatives to what exists. As Steven Duncombe put it: "The dominant system dominates not because people agree with it; it rules because we are convinced there is no alternative" (2014, p. 140). Thus when we reject a unique unregulated island community such as the Autonomous Rog Factory, we are actually rejecting the potential of other possibilities. We reject alternatives based on the assumption that they are simply not possible in the era in which we live. They are not possible because we doubt our own capability of even conceptualizing anything that deviates from the norm. Or worse yet: we reject alternatives because it is impossible, using standard measures of comparison, to compare them to that which exists. Consequently, we are not capable of comprehending them, and therefore we dismiss and thwart their work and creativity. We reject exactly that which is – according to Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben – necessary. Namely, in the act of creativity, there is always also an act of rebellion (Agamben, 2014). The action of the deed can only follow the preliminary idea: the idea of an alternative to what exists.

4. The Necessity of Persistence

Given all the potential possibilities, it would be deplorable to ignore the answer to the question: “What does the renovation destroy?” What’s more, the fact that autonomous islands, such as the Rog Factory, co-exist with cities opens up the possibility of new levels of culture, new levels of openness, and also a different kind of creativity in the area of looking for possibilities. Destroying or preventing the emergence of autonomous islands within cities leaves us left with the question of how to live if such independent unregulated islands are destroyed and not allowed to exist.

Put another way, we would be forced to confront a condition of lost possibilities: a condition when we had had the possibility of getting somewhere. However, unsure of where the road would lead us and because of the need for a feeling of security, we stopped the process with regulation. Rather than enabling the creative choice of various possibilities of life, we allowed the dominance of power that comes from the position of the apparatus and the power of function. It is precisely because of this that the persistence of individuals, such as the temporary users of the Rog Factory, is so essential. Their persistence prevents the loss of our possible futures.



Figure 4. English lessons for asylum seekers at Social Center Rog, Autonomous Rog Factory, 2016.
Photo: Lin Gerkman.

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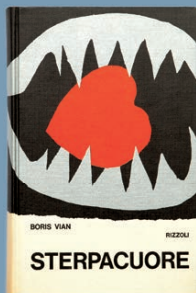


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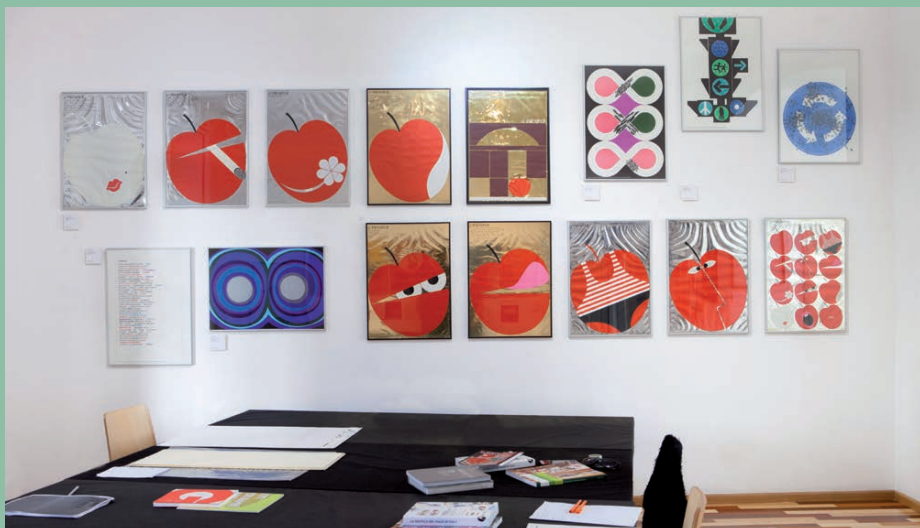
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