

Processes of Institutionalisation of Critical Spatial Practices

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1. Introduction

projects are constantly confronted with their formalisation and are always positioned within their institutional frame of reference. This paper examines the critical power and transformative potential of the architectural project by exploring its relational dimension with the contingencies in which it is immersed: these latter constitute the immaterial and material context and the tangible contradictions through which the project becomes realised (Galli, 2023, pp. 72). Any project can not exist without the institutional order that allows its establishment, and, as discussed by Armando and Durbiano (2023), the power of any project is an instituting power; at the same time, institutions are the ‘political transcendent’ of the

project itself. Therefore, to discuss the political potential of spatial projects, there is a need to focus on their institutional dimension, or rather on the “potential vital dimension of institutions” (Esposito, 2023, p.4). Institutions are understood here as brimming with everyday practices that create them through concrete, tangible acts: these acts are media-

This paper proposes to look at ‘critical spatial practices’ in relation to institutions. It understands the institutional process as dynamic, vital, and always in motion, nurtured by what are defined as praxis instituent, which, through their enactment of dissenting stances, manage to challenge and deform what they encounter, transforming also themselves in a mutual relationship. Two practices, Stalker and Torinostratosferica, have

been observed using ethnographic methods of inquiry. The contribution is constructed with a twofold objective: on the one hand, by positioning itself in medias res, it adopts a pragmatic approach to examine spatial practices and civic demands, since these do not exceed institutional logics but are rather embedded within them. On the other hand, looking at the processes of instituting of their dissent and quest, it focused on the effects of their actions and projects, thus stressing what institutions could learn from the cases.

tions, and institutional changes occur through the transformative dynamics of the different actors and practices involved in such negotiations (De Leonardis, 2011).

Practices and institutions are thus intrinsically intertwined. This paper engages with the concept of *praxis instituens* proposed by Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito (2020, 2021, 2023), understood as an ongoing contested process that practices undergo while modifying institutional configuration, challenging and expanding themselves and what they encounter. What has lately been defined as the practice turn in architectural and spatial discourse (Doucet, 2015) builds on an overall resurgence of interest in critical spatial practices, broadly aligned with a renewed attention to everyday and spatial tactics.

The object of this paper are thus the everyday tactics exercised by two selected spatial practices that use their projects to challenge the institutional settings they encounter. By examining those critical spatial practices with a pragmatic lens and examining how institutions effectively respond to diverse civic demands, this contribution reflects on the processes of institutionalisation that such demands undergo. It presents and discusses how two selected Italian practices, *Torinostratosferica* and *Stalker*, despite and because of their critical stances, have successfully materialised their projects, demonstrating how dissent can be enacted. *Stalker*, a practice of dissenting architects and artists based in Rome, uses the city as a field of inquiry and exploration paradigm; and *Torinostratosferica*, a communication agency that has managed to realise a placemaking project in the city of Turin, regardless of a strong narration of being alternative to the Public Administration offices of the city. *Stalker* encounters mainly publicly or privately funded cultural institutions, broadly proposing cultural, social, educational, and artistic activities. *Torinostratosferica* claims to be an alternative to the institutional system they face, but this dissent is less evident in the achieved effects.

Given two different cases of being a *praxis instituens*, the contribution reflects thus on what institutional change is. To do so, section 2 defines the relationship between institu-

tions and critical spatial practices, discussing how such a critical attitude is vital for institutions; section 3 discusses the methodology employed and highlights the pragmatist approach that looks at the actions and the effects of the practices; section 4 goes in *media res* and presents the two critical spatial practices; while section 5 brings together all the elements discussed beforehand and suggests that processes of institutionalisation of critical spatial practices are crucial for institutions to exist. The paper ends with a concluding section (6) that raises additional questions and suggests further research on the issues raised.

2. Institutions and practices

This contribution holds a pragmatist position and understands institutions as endless in motion and never static. They are artefacts, joint engaged acts, crafted by people and yet independent of them, that endure standing together (Bojanic, 2022). Institutions do not precede the social construction of reality; they are part of it. Indeed, institutions and institutional facts exist as an intertwined set of systematic relations with other institutional facts, and nothing transcend precedes them (Searle, 2006). Yet institutions have a generative and vital potential that constitutes their dynamic dimension, as it is conditioned by what Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito has defined as *praxis instituens*, characterised “through a double movement of advancement

and retroaction” (Esposito, 2020, p.89)¹. Drawing from French political philosophers Claude Lefort (1924-2010) and Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997), Esposito suggests looking at the phenomenon of institutionalisation from the point of view of what is situated in the process of instituting itself, rather than on what is institutionalised: this institutionalising praxis is always conditioned by what already exists (Castoriadis), and, indeed, it is never created *ex nihilo* but always *ex aliquo* (Lefort). Therefore, in this institutionalising process, the subject does not exceed the praxis but rather exists together with it and together with what it modifies, modifying itself in such processual relation. By drawing attention to the active verb ‘to institute’, Esposito frames the processual dimension of institutions, which both proceeds and yet is forged by instituting subjects and proposes it as an affirmative project (Esposito 2020). In this paradigm, *instituting* is a process of stabilisation of certain critical stances enacted by practices. It holds its conflictual character and yet goes beyond the mere *institutionalisation*.

Looking at the sociologist contributions on the long-lasting research on what institutions are and why to study them (Durkheim, 1894; Goffman, 1968; Donolo 1997) the focus on the institutional dimension of the ‘social life’ of things has long been debated, proposing institutions as human aggregates that precede being together and that yet have an existence

beyond the individual: they are social and ritual facts. Thus, the emphasis is on the relational dimension between praxis and institutions, which also strengthens the understanding of their artificiality through the infinite possibilities of “doing, undoing, and redoing possible worlds”², which is a human practice (de Leonardis, 2011, p.58). Practices are also in the pragmatic sociology of institutions, the locus for this relationship. Yet, the force of the instituting power of practices proposed by Esposito is different because the meaning given to ‘institution of the social’ is different: this is not understood in its “weak meaning” of a political institution placed in society, but rather that society is itself instituted by the political (Esposito 2020, pp. 169-170).

The role of critique is thus vital and essentially political. Boltanski, retracing what he calls “the metacritical theories of domination” of the pragmatic paradigm (2011, pp. 51-52), suggests that institutions have both this ‘self-evident’ connotation (understood as ‘social facts’, they are therefore always in contrast with ‘natural facts’) and a certain negative allure, being the effect of domination. Boltanski stresses that to recognise the “factual character of institutions”, the emancipatory role of critique becomes crucial as it “asserts itself by establishing new forms of relationship between critical instances and institutional instances” (2011, pp. 157-158). The vital tension of institutions is thus fostered by both critical forces and by

‘those that confirm’ the institutional order. Critique, indeed, is defined by the French sociologist as the ability “to engage with reality and yet alter its contours” (Boltanski, 2011, p. 150). Such alternation is very close, as a conceptual movement, to the ‘challenge, expansion, and deformation’ undertaken by the *praxis instituens* proposed by Esposito (2021, p. 19)³ once declined in its political meaning when also the negative is encompassed in the possibilities to confirm institutions.

From a planning studies perspective, Willem Salet (2018) draws attention to the (public) normative aspects of institutions that ensure interactions between different subjects, enabling society to function. With a pragmatic take, he explores ‘purposive actions’ while also underlining the public value of an institutional perspective. Combining both experimental pragmatism and institutional trajectories, he suggests searching and experimenting “in action” (p. 63), which will foster “the enhancement, maintenance, and innovation” (p. xiii) that institutions need to fulfil their role in society. Such institutional innovation also occurs through conflict and contestation, and, therefore, dealing with dissent is again part of this processual relation. At the same time, from her deeply radical ‘practice turn’ position, Patsy Healey confirms this dynamic and relational view on institutions that are nothing but “the patterings which shape the discourses and practices [...] of social life” (Healey 2018, p.26).

Indeed, the emergence of opportunities and crises that arise from the observation of those patterns helps in understanding subversive and design strategies. Such a call for structural change that comes from the encounter between instituting practices and institutions, which could be 'planning friendly' as it gives time and space to include people and instituting practices in those "instituting processes", has recently been strongly argued by Italian scholars Li Destri and Saija (2023) and in the call of this issue itself.

This paper is positioned here, with a literature review that explains why it has been chosen to examine critical spatial practices within institutions to explore the transformative power and critical potential of two peculiar critical spatial practices.

3. A pragmatist approach to look at critical spatial practices

This paper engages with lines of inquiry at the intersection of the feminist materialist tradition of critical thinking and more-than-human ontologies and practices, which provide the research's general ontological backdrop. Indeed, all of these propose a way of looking at the politics of spatial projects by positioning the research within the observation of practices: neither reality nor knowledge precedes them; both are "incorporated into daily events and activities" (Mol, 2002, p. 32).

Therefore, on the one hand, this paper rec-

ognises architectural and spatial projects as intrinsically embodied with the political, economic, and social (institutional) context in which they are designed and realised. Their context shapes them, and they shape their contexts, in a mutual relationship. On the other hand, the same relationality applies to the method employed to examine critical spatial practices in relation to institutions: the pragmatist position adopted is inescapably intertwined with the method of enquiry itself. Thus, the way of knowing comes from observing the enactment of dissent exercises by two spatial practices, which are the object of the study; no assumption is given *a priori*. Ethnography has been employed as a method of inquiry: the focus is on how the practices enact dissent against the institutions they encounter. At the same time, these latter need the specific cases to emerge in their definition - what are these institutions in practice? - as the research follows the pragmatist tradition to explore the object of study. In addition to the focus on how dissent is exercised through critical spatial practices, the presented inquiry examines how these practices influence the institutions they mean to oppose.

Thus, the methodology is grounded in previous works that have expanded the understanding of spatial and architectural practices as situated social-material practices (Cuff, 1992; Yaneva, 2009; Lefebvre, 2018). These have contributed to expanding the attention of architec-

tural theory from “static object” to a “moving project” (Latour & Yaneva 2017, p. 103).

The two critical spatial practices observed and presented in paragraph 4 have been chosen to look at how their projects exercise the power of critique and dissent. Each one of them is a singular case of *praxis instituens* that interferes with the institutional dimension encountered and deforms it, an example of hands-on knowledge that fools the given order of things through everyday tactics (De Certeau, 1980, p. 4). Both Stalker and Torinostratosferica share a strong narrative that reinforces their drive to change the institutional system they face; they both claim to be an alternative to it. Nevertheless, and also because of such a strong declared position, they usually manage to bring their projects forward, constantly negotiating with institutions to realise them. The results of the critical ethnographies will further discuss their actions and effects, examining how the actors have negotiated their positions and profited from institutional vacancies at the normative, physical, and administrative levels. To present the relational *instituting* processes the two practices undergo, the paper conceptualises each one of them as a singular *praxis instituens* that, from its specific position, manages to deform itself and what it encounters. Thus, the term *praxis instituens* depicts the movement of the singular practice. What the practices ‘deform’ is nothing but the result of their critical stances brought to the

table within this process, their dissent. Dissent comes from the Latin *dissentire* ‘feeling different’ in sentiment and/or opinion and engages with the relational and dynamic tension embedded within institutions presented⁴. Dissent is how the practices, by engaging with institutions, manage to challenge and modify them. The two key concepts will be made empirical in the presentation of the two cases. The aim of the two ethnographies has been to follow the everyday actions within the practices to trace how these embody, realise, or contradict their discourses and state values. The empirical material presented in the paper is used to depict how dissent works in action. Ethnography has been employed to trace what the architects do and have done within their critical spatial practices: their daily routine, both individual moves and collective interactions, their self-narration and ways of communicating ideas, documents written and projects drawn, lessons given and lectures held. The research has been built on a prolonged participatory observation (Semi and Bolzoni, 2022), resulting in *thick descriptions* (Geertz, 1973) of each practice.

The ethnographies presented disentangle critical spatial practices in action, and the results presented here come from one and a half years of collaboration with Torinostratosferica and more than three years of immersion within the Stalker collective. The researcher’s positionality, which differs across the two cases presented, has, of course, affected the observer’s

point of view and, consequently, the narration of the cases and the results⁵. To make the engagement process as transparent as possible, a short paragraph for each practice will describe how the collaboration has been going and how it has been structured over time. The author's affection for the practices and her deep, strong relationship with them will open further discussion that might go beyond the scope of this paper, but a short reflection in paragraph 5 will clarify the limits and potentialities of such engagement.

4. Ethnographies of critical spatial practices

This section examines two critical spatial practices through a pragmatic lens to explore how institutions effectively respond to diverse civic demands and reflect on the processes of instituting these demands undergo. The two critical spatial practices (Awan *et al.*, 2011) have been chosen because they can negotiate institutional change from their specific oppositional positions, proposed as alternatives to the established institutional framework. Indeed, both cases exercise their dissent always from a position within institutions and never outside. Stalker and Torinostratosferica share a strong will to change the institutional settings encountered, and they both enact this dissenting will always through their projects. At the same time, the two practices differ very much from each other in the values and critical standpoints. Yet they share a strong narration

of the stubborn need to change the institutional system they encounter; at the same time, they infiltrate within the faults created by that system to realise their projects. Moreover, the practices share a certain apparent (and yet claimed) unstructurelessness. It has been decided to highlight some comparable aspects: general information about the collective structure and the projects carried out, a brief reconstruction of the evolution of the practice, and a focus on the self-narration of the dissent they exercise and its effects. Generally, each upcoming paragraph shows how the practice has exercised its will to change institutions and how it has succeeded or failed to do so. For each one, the aim is to depict the spaces of transition that the practices have created within the institutional terrain in which they operate.

4.1 Stalker: how to be ungraspable

The researcher has been following Stalker collective from September 2020 to February 2024. Being authorship, something this practice strongly escapes, resulted in a loose contract between the observer and the observed. Indeed, being part of Stalker is hard to trace: the collective is open to anyone who wants to join, yet Stalker claims not to be embodied in any person. The reconstruction that follows results from an intertwined ethnography that has used direct observations, unstructured conversations, semi-structured and more for-

malised interviews, secondary sources, texts written about the collective, and archival materials. The case presented is thus the result of an immersive, almost *militant* (Boni et al., 2020) ethnography deeply embedded and grounded in the practice. Stalker is a practice of staying in the places and contingencies it crosses. ‘Everyone and none is Stalker’ is a recurring motto of the collective. Therefore, to be able to trace part of their work, being in the presence of things seemed the way to tell part of their practice. As partial as this narration is, it is built from a specific perspective that encompasses the duality of being part of them and researching them simultaneously.

Stalker is a practice comprised of a variable group of three to twenty individuals that has existed since the beginning of the 90s. Throughout the years, they have proposed different projects: sometimes more performative and artsy, while others are more crafted and structural. Its founders are trained as architects, and for years, informally, Stalker has been known as the ‘Collective of Architects that Walk’ because of their great refusal to engage with the built environment, building buildings. The collective functions with variable geometry that changes over time, adapting to the projects they carry out based on topics, inquiries, and methods. They are active in the city of Rome and use it as a field of inquiry and a paradigm for exploration. Since 1996, the group has been registered as a cultural asso-

ciation, a status required for participation in public and private funding calls and for overseeing the projects carried out.

At the same time, Stalker’s work consistency lies also in a straightforward and intended cloudiness of belonging: “Stalker is not embodied in anyone, least of all in ‘us’ who have contributed to making it happen” (Romito n.d)⁶ or “Stalker is not just one practice but thousands of practices, and it is not our practice, nor that we have the patent of being Stalker...and I care to see it in this way. It is also true that we are the ones who have embodied it, and thus, it sticks to us. But all the effort is about getting rid of it” (Careri 2024)⁷. Yet, some people have been and are more present in the decision-making process and in everything that concerns what Stalker does and has done. This is particularly true for some personal actions and decisions undertaken by two of the ‘main’ founders of the group over the years, Lorenzo Romito and Piccio Careri. They are the ones who have mainly written and published reflections and shared publicly the experiences undertaken. They have been active from the very beginning and are still involved. They are also the ones presenting Stalker’s previous projects, using the images produced, and applying for funds using the association name. Together with them, Giulia Fiocca joined the collective in 2006 and is currently fully leading the activities, overseeing overall management and communication, and

usually signing applications to participate and obtain public funds (Fiocca, 2024).

Having observed Stalker's development of recent years, two parallel modes of operation could be defined: there is the practice currently led and organised mainly by Romito and Fiocca; and on the other hand, there is Careri's practice carried out within the course '*Laboratorio di Arte Civica* (LAC)'⁸ its research group at the University of Roma Tre in Rome.

Stalker has a flexible structure, with powers, tasks and resources distributed among those actively participating in the group. Therefore, the involvement of people and tasks varies. However, their *modus operandi* is still based on experience over time, as their actions are also directed by the political choices at the base of their manifesto or by personal inclinations and beliefs. Romito and Fiocca are currently the ones who manage the money, sign the projects, make decisions about the overall content of the researchers and the form of the actions, and invite guests and speakers. They know where they want the projects to go. They are also the ones invited directly to public talks or workshops, which they then choose to open to the broader group. At the same time, Careri does the same in similar but parallel contexts. The cultural association is still officially registered, but there are no recurring meetings, nor a clear structure with job titles and specific tasks. The group remains a welcoming environment for newcomers, "regardless of their

degree or residence permit" (Stalker 2020). Nevertheless, there is a Google account, and some people have access to it, while others don't; the same goes for the keys to Stalker's workspace, the No-Working.

In this working landscape, the institutions encountered are cultural institutions, publicly or privately funded, broadly proposing cultural, social, educational, and artistic activities that function as promoters, sponsors or partners of Stalker. Stalker faces a process of instituting that spans two domains: one concerns obtaining funds, permissions, stamps, and approvals for their proposals. The other strives to bring to the table discussion issues that are usually outside a more established and institutionalised way of thinking.

The cases of *Campus Rom* where the collective engaged in ten years of research with the Romani community⁹ on the paradoxes of informal liminal spaces and their living conditions, of *Porto Fluviale*¹⁰, an institutional exploration on how squatting movements could become formalised and officially recognised by public authorities without losing their dissenting stances, are examples of this re-semantisation of the topics of discussion: they urge to move the attention to marginalised groups, and they do so by proposing projects where they suddenly are the main actors, instead of the neglected ones. Among other projects, these are indeed representative of a *praxis instituens* that builds *ad hoc* alliances to pur-

sue its own projects. Their dissent moves also from a very pragmatic level of the action to a more discursive one.

For instance, in the case of *Tappeto Volante* (Flying Carpet), 20 Kurdish people without official residency permits crafted the art installation in copper and rope, and received, thanks to Stalker's management, payment from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which sponsored the intervention and fully funded its realisation. The installation travelled across the Mediterranean Sea and was displayed in 12 cities between the end of 2000 and 2008, each time involving arts foundations such as the *Fondazione Orestiadi* or *Fondazione Olivetti*, and public authorities such as the Italian Embassy in Jordan or the Italian Cultural Centre of Damascus.

For the case of *Savorengo Ker*, the collective engaged with building a permanent house in an informal Romani encampment in 2008. *Casilino 900* hosted more than 1,000 people in roughly 180 self-constructed houses and a poor, unregulated infrastructure system. The Romani community faced the struggle of not being officially recognised under Italian law or granted residence permits. They were officially invisible to the Italian state yet encamped by it. To challenge this ambiguity, the Romani community, together with Stalker, presented a project to realise and obtain a permit to build a house within the camp. The project obtained the approval of the city council and

the support of the *VII Municipio* of the city of Rome¹¹. The Department of Urban Studies at Roma Tre University founded the project. *Savorengo Ker* cost 8000 €, had a surface area of 72 m², and was designed in compliance with building regulations. All expenses were classified under the 'non-inventoriable consumable materials' category to allow the University to finance them. Its realisation was considered crucial to the Romani people, as it would provide a tangible claim to their rights. The house was realised together by the inhabitants of the Camp, also thanks to structural calculations, feasibility studies and technical drawings delivered by Stalker. Regardless of its fatal end¹², *Savorengo Ker* challenged institutions on a symbolic level - being the house built, it would have shown a possible way to let camps and their inhabitants be formally recognised by the Italian state - as on the practical level, since it offered an economical yet structural alternative to the containers made of sheet metal, proposed as a temporary solution.

Stalker has existed for almost thirty years and has found a way to enter and exit the institutionalised system they claim to be against. In their ungraspable, hybrid practice, they declare themselves very loose and open to every encounter along their rhizomatic, never linear path. However, their action is also structured as a response within institutional, legal, and political boundaries that are given and cannot be escaped. This way of compromising

each time, while still finding possible niches of action, is a way of resisting the paradoxes encountered. It has delimited and shaped their mode of existence and way of working, which has also been structured over time and is always situated within a given physical space. They have been enacting performances, building installations, promoting housing rights and alternative housing models, giving lectures, walking paths, and leaping over closed gates, publishing journals, newspapers, and books, triggering discussions, participating in global or local manifestations, and organising conferences and exhibitions. Their practice is multifaceted, and their actions are hard to delimit. Yet all their interventions are rooted in a specific context, and their triggers are always deeply intertwined with the ground they act in. Their research activities are intertwined with political gestures, activist posture, and civic engagement. The projects they develop are mostly deeply intertwined with broader political movements and activist quests; indeed, a strong embrace of local and global political stances shapes their projects and actions. Indeed, these are intertwined with, among others, the Right to Housing movements, and the ecological resistance in defence of the so-called '*Lago Bullicante*', an insurgent urban lake that is considered an environmental monument and yet is under threat by speculation within the urban fabric of the neighbourhood¹³. All their projects engage with the spatial di-

mension of institutions; they are considered a socially engaged practice that has, over time, consolidated a specific *modus operandi*, constantly negotiating spaces of transition within institutions.

4.2 Dissent as narration: *Torinostratosferica*

The upcoming paragraph is based on a commission from Torinostratosferica to explore the modes of existence of emergent urban agencies, and this paper is part of its outcomes¹⁴. The reconstruction is thus informed by an ethnographic account developed strictly within and around the practice itself. In this collaboration, which has been ongoing for roughly 1 year and 10 months, from November 2020 to September 2022, various activities have been undertaken. Torinostratosferica has presented itself through a series of structured conversations: questions that explicitly helped frame what the organisation is, what it does, its development over the years, and how it does what it does. Some of those activities were directly aimed at inquiring about the practice, and some others were meant as an exchange of knowledge or competencies between the research group and the organisation itself. Generally, all of them had a hybrid function.

If, on one hand, within critical urban theory stances, city branding and placemaking projects are discussed to be facilitators of neoliberal processes of exploitation within cities

(Rossi and Vanolo, 2011), at the same time, outside the academic discourses, urban agencies are raising attention to urban agendas for innovative approaches and good practices for multi-level governance within European cities. Torinostratosferica falls perfectly under this second case.

The agency, at the time of the inquiry and before changing its name and status, was a not-for-profit organisation born from the offshoot of a famous branding agency active in Turin for more than 20 years. The project Torinostratosferica originated from *Bellissimo*, a communication and design strategy agency, and it remains closely connected to the agency's expertise, resources, and market understanding. The two organisations share the same office space, and some employees also work for both. Some projects are also carried out jointly by the two branches, both under the same director.

Torinostratosferica was born as a proposal for a branding strategy for the city of Turin. After being rejected, it was initially developed as a collective brainstorming session to think about the city from a table of non-experts. Inspired by Richard Florida's (2003) writing on the creative class, it slowly developed from the strong assumption that 'the creative class' could carry out projects for the city in a more exciting way than technicians and political staff. Public institutions were seen as stiff, boring, and detached from the needs of ordinary people;

therefore, new actors, involved in the so-called city-making, are Torinostratosferica main interlocutors. At the request of their main sponsor, the bank foundation *Compagnia di San Paolo*, the agency has, since 2017, organised Utopian Hours, a festival that explicitly discusses the future of the urban with non-experts and non-academics. The festival is held every year and welcomes an average of 2000 visitors per edition and almost 50 speakers. The line-up encompasses mainly city makers and urban innovators to exhibit a "pop way of city making, with ideas which are fresh, new and crunchy" (Ballarini, 2021). The festival is curated to remain popular and easily accessible and claims an overall need to de-specialise urban questions and make them more creative (Florida, 2003). At the same time, after almost ten editions, its organisation has helped establish Torinostratosferica and given it recognition by the public, local authorities, and other urban actors, such as city architects and professors from the Polytechnic of Turin.

With the same posture, in 2020, Torinostratosferica developed a Place-Making project in an abandoned area in a wealthy neighbourhood of the city. The Precollinear Park was designed according to a certain do-it-yourself logic, but to obtain permits, the agency slipped into the City's Urban Department mechanism. The Precollinear Park was conceived during a brainstorming session and later developed as a placemaking project. The agency initially

began redevelopment of the place, leveraging three levels of vacancies: physical, administrative, and planning. Indeed, Torinostratosferica claimed an abandoned tramway line, which had been dismissed since 2017, was located on the border between two administrative districts, with undefined jurisdictional responsibility and no defined future destination. Thanks to these strategic vacancies, the collective, which had no experience in urban design and management, oversaw the project well. The *iter* followed can be considered the opposite of the ordinary tender procedures opened by local administrations to delegate public services to private actors. Following the abandonment of the tramway area, Torinostratosferica initially promoted its regeneration through informal public initiatives. Subsequently, municipal employees, sympathetic to the proposal, informally suggested that the association apply for a temporary concession under a specific communal regulation to allow the Precollinear Park to be officially recognised and instituted by the City. The project, which could be defined as a spatialisation of city branding, created for Torinostratosferica the conditions to enter into conversation with the city's main actors and stakeholders, beginning to be acknowledged as one of them. Public services and amenities, such as street lighting throughout the area and free water, which had been stopped since the tram ceased operations, were reinstated and, from a public space management per-

spective, looking at the effects on the space's use after regeneration, the use of the area has increased, being easier accessible once again.

Torinostratosferica dissent is strongly narrative and presented as oppositional towards a certain established order. Institutions, in case, are public administration offices and their bureaucracy. Torinostratosferica claims to have validated a potential method of city development, the so-called 'city imaging', which holds that a positive image of the city can affect the city itself. Its dissent is thus based on two statements: the power of imaginative processes and disenchantment with the public state. In the agency's *modus operandi*, there is a recurrent stubbornness, a certain arrogance, and the ability to obtain what they have decided to achieve.

Among the two critical spatial practices presented, Torinostratosferica is the least engaged with systemic challenges and critiques of the *status quo*, socially, environmentally, and economically. Its intentions of institutionalisation regard its own purposes rather than a collective aim. Yet the pragmatic ethnography carried out reveals two crucial points to reflect on based on what has been observed. First, as easy and straightforward as it can be, following established practices is a way to position the research and examine dissent in practice rather than in words. Torinostratosferica claims to be an alternative to the institutional system they face, but in practice, this dissent

is less evident in the proposed effects. Second, regardless of eschatological intentions, certain spatial projects manage to sneak into institutions and challenge and deform them for their own purposes. Torinostratosferica has undertaken a process of institutionalisation that began in an imaginary realm and culminated in real, mundane actions, and this stubbornness is something that any instituting practice could learn from.

Falling under what has been discussed as an entrepreneurial logic and a “political economy of representation” (Rossi & Vanolo, 2011), Torinostratosferica has shown, through its stubbornness, a practical path to realising its projects. In the grey zones and in the niches found along the way, in the ability to strengthen its network and the legacy created to be recognised. Their example clearly shows how they strive for institutionalisation, offering alternatives to a given institutional system that encompasses different levels of action: the consistency between their actions and their values is traceable in the effects of their efforts to become a *praxis instituens* and to make their project happen.

5. Discussion

This contribution argues that the transformative potential of critical spatial practices lies in their capacity to engage institutions from within, deforming them through situated and everyday tactics. Using the conceptual com-

panions of *praxis instituens* and *dissent*, the paper foregrounds processes of instituting, which are contingent and always negotiated. At the same time, these processes are ambivalent, neither neutral nor necessarily emancipatory, and they are not always straightforwardly different from processes of institutionalisation. Yet in both cases, the practices presented, Stalker and Torinostratosferica, demonstrate that institutions are not monoliths to be rejected or embraced, but rather relational entities continuously reshaped by practices that traverse them. In this sense, the institutional dimension does not merely constrain critical spatial practices but constitutes the terrain on which dissent can be enacted and materialised.

Holding a pragmatist perspective, the paper highlights how dissent operates through effects rather than intentions. Indeed, both practices explicitly position themselves as alternatives to institutional settings, yet their modes of engagement, degrees of compromise, and transformative potential differ significantly. Stalker’s ungraspable and hybrid practice exemplifies a long-term *praxis instituens* that sustains a vital tension with institutions by constantly renegotiating legality, authorship, and legitimacy. Its capacity to move in and out of institutional frameworks, by securing funding, permissions, and recognition while simultaneously challenging dominant narratives and normative arrangements, illustrates how

processes of institutional change may happen through deviations, tactical displacements, and re-semantisations of existing procedures. In Stalker's case, dissent is enacted through alliances with marginalised groups and the deliberate inhabitation of institutional paradoxes. The institutional transformations observed are therefore situated and deeply dependent on the relational ecology in which the practice operates, particularly within the specific urban and political context of Rome.

Torinostratosferica brings into focus a different configuration of *praxis instituens* grounded in narrative dissent and entrepreneurial stubbornness. The practice claims an oppositional stance towards public administration and bureaucratic inertia; the ethnographic account has observed that its process of institutionalisation emerges not as an unintended consequence but as an explicit goal, pursued through strategic alignment with powerful actors and an engagement with institutional vacancies. Torinostratosferica operates with entrepreneurial logics and institutional effects, yet it remains a *praxis instituens* that manages to institutionalise itself, being transformed and transforming what it has encountered in the process.

Regardless of their intrinsic differences in ontologies, scale, and politics, both practices participate in enduring the vital dimension of institutions. Their opposition and critique are effective if enacted through a factual engage-

ment of the normative, administrative, and material dimensions of institutions. Indeed, the relationship of transformation between institutions and practices is reciprocal and the result of continuous, never-ending negotiations.

Finally, the different positions held, the practices observed, and the relations established with them are part of such a relational process, which influenced the outcomes and the research itself. In Stalker's case, what could be defined as an almost 'militant ethnography' resulted in the authorship of the researcher and its 'authority' almost disappearing in favour of a co-construction of a shared program of research and action, built cohesively and sometimes even discussed in collective assemblies (Boni et al., 2020). But also, in the case of Torinostratosferica, the direct engagement with the practice influenced how materials and data were collected. Both cases are examples of an embedded position of the research within the observed process, which is inevitably once doing ethnography with the aim of avoiding as much as possible putting distance between the object of study and the knowledge behind it, avoiding creating a level of separation between the analysed practices and the discourses around them.

6. Conclusions

Institutions are situated and contested processes that are continuously in motion, always

Notes

shaped by the practices encountered. The two cases discussed, Stalker and Torinostratosferica, have been employed as examples of *praxis instituens* that, through everyday actions, critical stances, and the negotiation of oppositional quests, transform and shape institutions in a dynamic and vital relationship. The in-depth ethnographic observation of the two practices has served as an entry point into the theoretical discourses and has grounded the research in practice. Institutions need critique to remain vital, while instituting practices necessarily engage with existing norms, procedures, and material arrangements to become effective. The critical spatial practices presented enter vacant institutional spaces, on a normative, physical, or symbolic level, and realise their strong will to change institutions. Indeed, the transformative potential of their dissent becomes concrete when examining the effects of their projects. Regardless of the divergent political values and imaginaries, both cases demonstrate that institutions enter into relation with civic demands through concrete encounters in a mutually changing relationship. Institutional change happens across transformative dynamics of different intensities, driven by incremental and adaptive mechanisms.

¹ Original text in Italian, translation by the author.

² Original text in Italian, translation by the author.

³ The quote is translated from Italian by the author. It has been chosen to particularly use the English term 'to deform' as it keeps the ambivalent allure of the meaning, being a connotation of the change brought by the practices outside institutions that alter the given order of institutions themselves.

⁴ From the same author see also 'The Meaning of Dissent. Everyday Oppositional Practices in Brussels' (Gribling, 2024).

⁵ The research is indeed part of the author's doctoral thesis "Between Norms and Exceptions. An ecology of oppositional practices" discussed at the Politecnico di Turin the 27th of November 2024. The relation between the researcher and the single selected practices concerns questions of positionality. Indeed, the different degrees of involvement established between the observer and observed practices open methodological and epistemological questions that the thesis has partly tackled. This to say, that the clear differences between the two selected cases are, on the one hand acknowledged to be a constrain of the research itself. On the other, the aim to depict processes of instituting has been achieved through different levels of engagement which come as a direct consequence of applying qualitative methods and doing ethnography. The single paragraphs focused on the different positionality of the researcher that open the cases presentation of the paper have the purpose to bring the reader into the different contingent boundaries encountered in 'setting the setting' for each case. For the possibility of comparing different ontologies in doing anthropology see Viveiros de Castro (2004).

⁶ Original text in Italian, translation by the author.

⁷ Original text in Italian, translation by the author.

⁸ Literally translating 'Laboratory of Civic Arts' is an elective course launched by Careri in 2006 at the Faculty of Architecture of Roma Tre University, wherein students are offered to get to know the city through alternative methods.

⁹ The commonly called Romani or Rom are not at all a homogeneous community and vary in working competencies, religion and lifestyle. Within the ten years of research and activism Stalker has been doing together with the Romani community, several projects have fol-

References

lowed one another. For in-depth research on the Romani community and the particular and problematic Italian public policies concerning their rights, see the research of sociologist Tommaso Vitale (2009).

¹⁰ The project functions as a playfield of urban experimentation. In 2021, it was founded for 11 million euros by the Italian Minister of Infrastructure and Sustainable Mobility within PINQuA, a broader call funding “Innovate Housing Projects”.

¹¹ The ‘Municipi’ of Rome represent the administrative local entities of first level.

¹² After its inauguration, in a limbo between formal and non-formal, mainly due to the administrative setback received, Savorengo Ker was left unused and closed for three months after its inauguration. The experiment dramatically ended in circumstances which are still unclear, but in any case, resulted from months of tensions: Savorengo Ker got burnt, officially, by lightning on the 11th of December 2008 (Careri and Romito 2016)

¹³ For the actions and preservation of the Lago Bullicante see Procesi et al. (2022).

¹⁴ Torinostratosferica has been initially one of the promoters of the PhD research; however, the collaboration has officially stopped by November 2022 due to misalignments between the agency purpose and the PhD research objective.

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