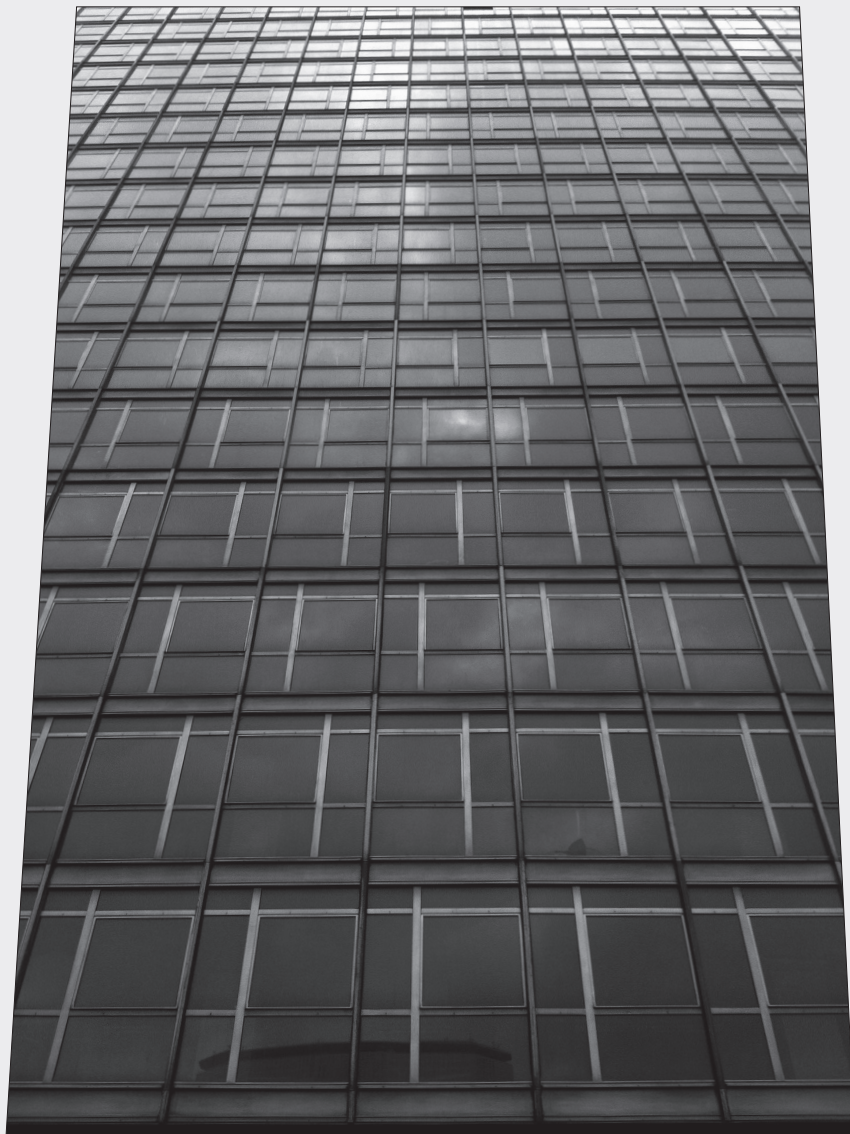


**“Messages of Rupture”:
An Interview with
Emanuele Braga on
the MACAO Occupation
in Milan**

By Cultural Workers Organize
Translated by Roberta Buiani



In May of 2012, cultural workers in Milan occupied an abandoned 31-storey skyscraper in the northern part of the city. Named MACAO, the new space was intended to give workers in Milan’s creative industries a space in which to pursue their labour without being subject to the financial austerity and precarious working and existential conditions gripping the city’s cultural sector. Cultural Workers Organize (www.culturalworkersorganize.org) interviewed one of the workers in the organizing group shortly after the occupation to find out more about this audacious collective gesture.

CULTURAL WORKERS ORGANIZE First of all, congratulations on the occupation! Since this occupation springs from the precarious conditions of cultural labour, can you give us an idea of some of the difficulties encountered by cultural workers in the creative industries in Milan?

EMANUELE BRAGA Over the last year we had numerous meetings to discuss the situation in Milan. One of the first structural issues that came out was the way in which creative work is increasingly precarious.

Professional training in communication, design, and graphics comes at a very high financial cost, and the educational process is a long one. Before you can enter the job market you have to go through a series of internships, and, often, this formative training is unpaid. Our meetings featured discussions, testimony, and talks that addressed these very issues, such as the way in professional training they try to make you believe that you can learn a lot by offering your labour for free. However, more often than not workers are often already highly skilled and don’t need extra training.

There is a real structural problem in the management of your time. We are used to constantly having to multitask: we need to wear ten thousand different masks in order to build a professional profile and achieve a sliver of economic sustainability. It is difficult to remain anchored to one sector only. You

have to learn to do many different things simultaneously. It is not uncommon to see such juggling in the Italian context.

In addition, Italy has a complete absence of welfare when it comes to this professional situation...On the level of everyday life, being in this precarious situation prevents you from building a family. There is no maternity leave. Daycare is not easily accessible and costs around 600–800 euros a month.

Our discussions, carried out in a horizontal manner and with a view to mobilization, addressed these issues. There is no structural condition to be free to build something—without becoming rich. There is no opportunity to build any skills that you care about. There are no social policies of redistribution for labour right now. There is continuous competition for livelihoods and for ways of supporting ourselves. And jobs are often tied to the fluctuations of the market.

In the context of the art market there has emerged another type of analysis. In many ways the professional profile of the artist is becoming a guide for the other professions. What I said before is true for the artist and now for all the other creative professions as well. We are increasingly realizing that rather than acquiring more rights, we are exporting models of inequity.

Then there is the relationship between this process and the artwork: today the art market often functions like the financial market, as the artwork is only an excuse to allow the collectors' market to realize exchange value. It often functions exactly like global financial markets: shares and derivatives circulate outside of national jurisdictions where they are not under the control of any taxation system, and are often disconnected from any material production. The production of an artwork is often the same: its value is not acquired thanks to the creative process, but because of those who evaluate it—this process is only a pretext to assess its value. Once it is assessed it exits any form of local jurisdiction and becomes a form of currency.

CWO How did this occupation happen? We understand that it was inspired by other occupations that have been recently real-





ized by other cultural workers in Italy. What was your initial goal? How did the occupation develop?

EB Around a year ago there was significant mobilization around these themes. We were trying to reflect on how, and in what context, to take up these themes. After the most recent referendum on June 12, 2011,¹ an opportunity arose. We wanted to raise the idea of direct democracy and protect certain common goods, like water services, from the State's propensity to privatize them—and therefore subtract them from the public-private binary.

Following the movement that formed around this crucial referendum issue, we tried to give substance to the notion of the common good as a third alternative to the management of local territories or goods by political parties or the market. For this we used an article of the Italian constitution, Article 43. Although underused, this article states that if there is evidence of public benefit, a good or property can be confiscated from both the current public administration and from private ownership. The occupations started with Teatro Valle in Rome, and, during the past year, in other locations where the principle was: if there is evident urgency or necessity for common ownership, then we can try to leverage this law and take ownership “from below” by confiscating the property from either the private sector or the public administration. This is a sort of creative legal practice. It is working pretty well and is defended by some well-known scholars of constitutional law.

The intention was to build a transversal movement that avoided official representation and political rule. It was to create some self-determined and independent territories of self-governance that would establish a dialogue with official institutions similar to the relations official bodies would establish. However, this is a contentious territory.

CWO Why an occupation? Is it a response to the conditions you are facing?

EB It is necessary to send strong messages of rupture. When there is no such message then it becomes very difficult to hope to change any paradigm. Thus, it is necessary to break the status quo both at the theoretical and spatial/territorial level. The occupation is extremely useful to provoke elements of rupture in regards to a traditional logic, and allows a new theoretical process to be put into practice. This is what really disturbs the status quo: if you occupy institutions, if you occupy spaces that have a great symbolic and real-estate value, then you disrupt the ganglia of the system.

CWO So you are seeking to move beyond a tradition of established politics.

EB We are certainly going through a period of great democratic crisis. We were told that the market was self-regulating—and it wasn't true. Now they tell us that the governments can self-regulate, that it is enough to install a technical government.² There is a desire to create new forms of agency and to create new forms of representation, because the forms of representation that we have right now are increasingly becoming detached from real life.

CWO How did you feel when you entered this space for the first time?

EB I don't know. It was very intense. Probably the best part of these movements is that you feel this lucid abandonment within this collective body, and you have a sense that responsibility is distributed among the collective, and therefore is somewhat removed from you. I think that this is a very important moment also in relation to the history of Fordist struggles. Our resistance against all mechanisms of power has lost the heroic narrative of the revolutionary act. The focus has been moved to pertinent analysis, to constructive possibilities, and to a management of processes based on meetings and assemblies and so

on. This is what really scares me, because we have realized that we were building an alternative process and not just doing a symbolic action. This makes things way more problematic.

CWO Why do cultural workers need this space and how do you conceive of the relation between autonomous space and production of resistance?

EB In the 1990s in Italy there was a big growth of *centri sociali*.³ Their scope was to serve as autonomous zones, islands where people could think differently, as an alternative to the system. The scope now has shifted at the practical level. We are no longer trying to create an autonomous island where we can do whatever we want. We want to interfere with the mechanism of production and create alternative models able to threaten the current mode of production. Symbolically speaking, we aim to send a message: "We are the new institutions, we are those who usually work everywhere, and we will remain and work everywhere." This attitude is much more threatening. We have to try and avoid isolating ourselves, because that period of the 1990s ended and the groups involved in those occupations are no longer a threat. They don't disturb the system any longer. They don't do anything new or constructive.

CWO So they are self-referential, in other words. How will you sustain the formative aspect of your occupation? What is the danger that this effort will get lost in the long run?

EB I believe that these are the initial points: on the one hand, capital is expropriating significant value from us in our workplaces. There we are forced to give away our time and our labour towards one direction and one end. Here, instead, we have a chance to bring some of the pieces from that work context, pieces which if they were left there would be used to achieve something else. For example: we could transfer both the public and private universities here. Professors would receive money

from their institutions but would create content here. We could invert the mechanism that regulates the workforce and have it serve our needs and those of what we build here—rather than the employers’ needs. This would be a first strategy: to use our roles in society to work here. We could also try and create other similar spaces and start discussing production in economic terms and in terms of circulating and redistributing income. We have a chance to really change the rules of governance and start a discussion on the topic of welfare and guaranteed income.○

Images by Cultural Workers Organize.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The national referendum posed by the Berlusconi government to the Italian people on June 12–13, 2011 proposed several measures, including the privatization of water services, the adoption of nuclear energy (which had been banned by a referendum in 1987), and the adoption of a provision exempting the Prime Minister and his ministers from criminal prosecution. The referendum resulted in a crushing defeat for the Berlusconi government, and is widely considered to have been a decisive factor in bringing an end to his time in power.
- 2 After the fall of the Berlusconi government, an unelected “technical government,” headed by economist Mario Monti, was handed the reins of the Italian state in November 2011 in order to steer the country through its fiscal crisis.
- 3 Occupied, self-managed social centres.

BIOS Emanuele Braga is an artist, choreographer, and activist based in Milano. He works on the artist’s role in the patterns of cultural production, and the relationship between artistic practice and urban transformation. He is active in Macao and a member of the collectives RHA ZE, Balletto Civile, Laboratori dell’Arte, and Isola Art Center.

Cultural Workers Organize (www.culturalworkersorganize.org) is a collaborative research project of Enda Brophy, Nicole Cohen, and Greig de Peuter tracking collective organizing initiatives emerging from precariously employed workers in the arts, media, and cultural industries.

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