

The art of taking space: interdependencies in the contemporary art ecosystem in Milan, Italy

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the contemporary art ecosystem in Milan, Italy, with a focus on the interdependencies between independent art spaces and cultural institutions. It aims to understand the role of independent organizations within this ecosystem and to contribute to broader debates on urban cultural governance.

We argue that the contemporary art ecosystem is structured by power dynamics, and that the very notion of independence is normative and performative, since it both reflects and shapes power relations.

Drawing on two sets of empirical data collected through interviews and focus groups conducted with local key actors, we analyse the complex relationships between independent art spaces and institutions. Our findings reveal that independent art spaces are both recognised as integral parts of the ecosystem and engage in a range of strategies to either collaborate with, or maintain autonomy from, institutional actors.

This study contributes to ongoing discussions on cultural production and power in contemporary urban settings. Furthermore, it addresses a gap in the literature by focusing on the relational dynamics between independent art spaces and institutions, and more broadly informs research on urban development and governance.

Keywords:

cultural ecosystems, contemporary art, interdependencies, independent cultural spaces, Milan (Italy)

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Introduction

A wide range of terms have been used to describe subjects and cultural practices that position themselves as independent from institutional frameworks, each carrying distinct nuances that have been extensively debated in the literature. These cultures have been variously labelled as *independent* (Landau, 2016), *antagonistic*, *off*, or *underground* (Vivant, 2009, 2010), or described as *community-based* (Grodach, 2009). Cultural production, in turn, has been framed as *alternative* (Bertacchini et al., 2022), rooted in *subcultures* or *countercultures* (Berzano and Genova, 2015; Pattaroni, 2020), among other classifications. In this paper, we use the term *independent art spaces* to refer broadly to a diverse range of more or less formal organisations that operate in community-based venues, underground art scenes, and cultural production spaces. These spaces often position themselves as alternatives to, or in opposition to, mainstream cultural institutions and events and are situated at the margins of, or outside, the market.

A particularly distinctive aspect of this investigative zeal is the numerous attempts to map such spaces, highlighting a growing interest in understanding and documenting their activities. However, these mapping efforts are often based on heterogeneous definitions and inclusion or exclusion criteria, showing a lack of agreement on what exactly constitutes an 'independent [art] space' and reflecting the complexity and fluidity of such entities. Despite this lack of agreement, there is often a clear demarcation of what these spaces are not: they are not museums, foundations or public spaces; nor are they commercial spaces such as galleries or auction houses, as highlight, for instance, in the Italian Ministry of Culture's mapping programme (<https://luoghidelcontemporaneo.cultura.gov.it/>).

In the academic debate, the action of independent art spaces is framed within the local contemporary art system, focusing on many different elements, such as their critical agency to question and resist the logics of capitalism (Landau, 2016) or to produce postcolonial, feminist, queer discourses (Dumont, 2011). The capacity of such spaces to contribute to place- or community-making is analysed by many authors who stress their importance for social inclusion, cultural and social regeneration (Grodach, 2009); some research looks at the organisational, managerial or financial challenges of these spaces due to recent transformations (Blessi et al., 2011).

Often, the arena for independent cultural production or consumption is observed in its relationship (not opposition) to the mainstream or institutional cultural system, exploring the interconnections between the two, focusing either on elements of distance or on interactions and connections. For example, in a well-known analysis of off-culture and in-culture, Vivant (2009) shows how cyclical and systemic the movement of cultural creation is and how much cultural actors move within this framework, from off-culture to in-culture and vice versa. Similarly, Mar and Anderson (2012) developed the concept of *interspatiality* to explore the interplay of artists' processes, aesthetic objects, events, performances and dialogues.

The above-mentioned line of research has the great merit of bringing to the debate not only the existence of independent artistic productions and practices, but above all of exploring the complex relationships they often maintain with mainstream productions. It demonstrates that the contemporary art system is not polarised between two separate contexts - institutions on the one hand and independent organisations on the other. By looking at independent art spaces and their interconnections with the institutional arena, these works develop a situated analysis of the art ecosystem as a whole, and can reconstruct the working dynamics and complexity of an ecology in which actors develop many interdependencies, move between different subsystems and contribute to structuring the local cultural offer.

With this perspective, the paper explores the role of independent art spaces in the city's cultural production and governance, focusing the analysis on the interdependencies that develop in the complex contemporary art ecosystem of Milan, Italy. It contributes to the debate in the study of cultural production and power in urban society by shifting the focus of analysis from actors to processes of interdependence. In doing so, it enriches the knowledge of the functioning mechanisms of the art system, "places of 'collision' between business and critical approaches" (Ivanova and Nestler, 2020: 382). The art system is not only an important arena for the construction of collective meaning, but also a crucial economic segment for the competitiveness of cities and a highly financialised sector (Hutter and Throsby, 2008; Zorloni, 2013). Thus, it becomes a privileged entry point to explore contemporary cultural urban governance. Secondly, the paper fills the gap in the literature on the art scene and cultural production by focusing on the relational dynamics between independent organisations and institutional actors. Thirdly, it takes a critical stance in the debate on urban

development and governance, shedding light on those processes that reinforce the power of dominant actors at the expense of the marginalised ones. Focusing on the cultural and artistic sphere, the paper contributes to the discussion whether the arena of cultural production is an open, just and democratic ground or, on the contrary, subject to the logic of the market.

Towards a cultural urban ecology

In their seminal study on arts and cultural nonprofits in California, Markusen et al. (2011) introduce the concept of a cultural ecology, drawing an analogy with environmental ecology, a framework that has proved valuable in addressing (ecosystemic) environmental problems. Similarly, they argue that strengthening the arts and cultural sector requires embracing a holistic and interconnected perspective. Accordingly, they define arts and cultural ecology as “the complex interdependencies that shape the demand for and production of arts and cultural services” (Markusen et al., 2011: 8). More recently, the concept of cultural ecosystem has received growing attention as a framework for exploring local cultural dynamics (cf. de Bernard et al. for a wide presentation on the use of the concept). It has been employed to recognise the interactions and interdependencies among all the subjects involved in cultural production, supply and consumption, thereby challenging the tendency to reify the conceptual boundaries between groups implied in the concepts of ‘scenes’ or ‘subcultures’. For instance, Bertacchini et al. (2022) adopt the ecosystem perspective to examine alternative cultural production in Turin, Italy. They define a cultural ecosystem as comprising all actors engaged in cultural creation and their modes of organisation (eg. in groups, schools, fields...), which both respond to and interact with the local context, as well as with one another:

First, as community ecology primarily refers to the study of the number and identity of species found in a particular place and habitat, the ecological community analogy applied to alternative cultural production calls for a categorisation of the actors of this often-blurred field. [...] An ecological community perspective is suited to investigate how the [two] different types of organisation adapt to and co-evolve with spatial and social urban changes. [...] As community ecology focuses on species interactions, such an approach emphasises studying the structure of the relations between different types of alternative cultural spaces and the internal functioning of the community. (Bertacchini et al., 2022: 351).

Understood in this way, the concept of ecosystem offers a valuable approach for developing “a new framework for studying interrelated domains of cultural and creative activity that allows researchers to extend and connect their understanding across disciplines and scales (micro, meso and macro)” (de Bernard et al., 2022: 349). First, it enables the observation of the dense network of interdependencies embedded within a given context, characterised by a particular type of actor, a pervasive culture, a governance configuration, etc. Or, to use Bertacchini et al.'s vocabulary, to understand how the different components of the ecosystem fit together (2022). Second, the concept of ecosystem allows for a better understanding of the power relations that exist in a given environment:

Different contexts could present completely different power relationships between particular actors and communities. The need for a preliminary exploratory phase, in order to avoid uncritically deploying an unfitting expectation of what a CCEE [cultural creative ecology ecosystem] consists of in advance of a particular study, and from where most power will be exercised. It is crucial to pay open-minded attention to the specific power relationships within any particular CCEE (de Bernard et al., 2022: 347).

It is important not to assume the existence of either power asymmetries or non-hierarchical relations between actors. Rather, one must interrogate the specific resources available to different actors in different situations, thus, to examine interdependencies shaped by an unequal distribution of resources and needs. These resources may take various forms: financial, creative, relational, but also related to having a place to exhibit, an audience, visibility, etc.

The most important resources for cultural producers are those related to visibility, recognition and legitimacy. According to Bourdieu, these resources are so important that they lead to a struggle for recognition among cultural operators, who position themselves within the field of cultural production in order to impose their own dominant vision — that is to say, to fight to be recognised and considered by other members, and to be noticed and identified (Bourdieu, 1996; Bourdieu & Cerulo, 2010; d'Ovidio, 2015). This dynamic is well illustrated in the art ecosystem, where gallery owners possess the power to grant emerging artists visibility, validate their presence within the ecosystem, and confer legitimacy upon their work.

The focus on interdependencies (Markusen et al., 2011) within the cultural ecosystem enables an analysis of the complex power dynamics that unfold between all the actors involved. This perspective allows for a critical examination of the resources available to each actor, as well as the negotiations and exchanges that structure their relationships. Finally, as pointed out by Holden (2015), studying culture as an ecology rather than an economy provides a comprehensible overview that does not privilege economic value over cultural or symbolic value (Angelini and Castellani, 2019; Gibson-Graham, 1997; Hutter and Throsby, 2008; Pratt, 2010). An ecological approach to cultural production thus facilitates an analysis grounded in the interdependencies between diverse actors, while also recognising the multiplicity of resources at play. Crucially, it foregrounds the situated nature of these interdependencies acknowledging that they are embedded in specific social, spatial, and institutional contexts. The cultural ecosystem can therefore be understood as a socially produced space situated in a particular context, in which actors develop interdependencies that can vary across time, space and networks.

Cultural Ecosystem and Urban Governance

Cultural production and contemporary art are two key elements for cities, increasingly exploited as a tool for building urban cultural capital, a critical asset in the global competition between cities. Consequently, analysing the cultural and artistic ecosystem is not merely an intellectual exercise, but rather contributes to understanding how this crucial element of urban competitiveness, which concentrates many interests and resources, functions.

The ecological approach to cultural production sheds light on the power dynamics within cities by focusing on the interdependencies between actors in the use, exchange and negotiation of resources within the arts system, which are key elements of urban competitiveness. Furthermore, this approach considers the specific context in which these interdependencies occur, taking into account various aspects of local cultural governance.

In political sociology, governance is defined “a process of coordination of actors, social groups and institutions in order to attain appropriate goals that have been discussed and collectively defined in fragmented, uncertain environments” (Le Galès, 1998: 495). This concept has been extended to the field of

urban culture with the aim of understanding how the cultural sector is intertwined with urban policy agendas, reflecting the growing perception of culture as a driver of economic growth (Pratt, 2008; Scott, 2014), urban regeneration (Comunian and Mould, 2014) and, more generally, of the competitiveness of cities (O'Brien et al., 2023; Ponzini and Rossi, 2010).

Contextualised in Milan (Italy), the paper focuses on a specific subsystem of the cultural ecology (contemporary art), drawing a parallel with the work of Markusen et al. on California's arts and cultural nonprofits (2011). We explore the interdependencies between independent art organizations and cultural institutions, focusing on how key resources are negotiated, accessed, shared and governed.

Among the many resources in the contemporary art ecosystem, such as funding, visibility or audience, physical space emerges as particularly crucial (Gielen, 2010; Grenfell and Hardy, 2003; Markusen et al., 2011; Mencarelli, 2008). Recent research has shown that access to exhibition venues plays a vital role in the career development of emerging artists, particularly in the system of Milan, where it is very difficult to gain recognition without legitimization of gallerists or major institutions (Forti and Leonardi, 2021).

The importance of accessing a physical venue arises in part from the material nature of the artworks themselves, such as sculptures, paintings, installations, videos or performances, which require dedicated locations to be presented, experienced and circulated. Beyond this structural need, space becomes a condition for visibility and recognition, as if the vast array of resources (economic, cultural, symbolic, but also in terms of audiences, languages, styles, etc.) need to be transformed into spatial ones. The paper aims to explore the social dynamics that underpin the legitimization, governance, management and negotiation of space within Milan's contemporary art ecosystem. It shows how space, far from being a neutral container, operates as a scarce and contested resource, through which independent organisations negotiate their position in the ecosystem, revealing different strategies of recognition, compromise, and resistance.

Based on these premises, the following section contextualises the Milanese contemporary art system, followed by a discussion of the methodology used for the empirical exploration of the interdependencies between independent art spaces and art institutions. The results of the research are discussed in the fourth

section, where a number of different mechanisms at work in the negotiation of space resources are also offered.

The creative entrepreneurship of Milan, Italy

Milan has long been portrayed as a grey, grim, post-industrial city of the twentieth century, a narrative that has persisted with few significant and contrasting variations, particularly since the 1980s. One of the images of the city is epitomised by the famous slogan *Milano da bere*¹, which linked widespread affluence and opulent lifestyles to the city's growing fashion industry and its emerging role as a hub for marketing during the economic boom (Foot, 2001). After decades of depopulation, a new model of urban economic development emerged, aimed at creating a new attractive and creative urban image, following the well-known logic of the 'entrepreneurial city' (Harvey, 1989). Culture and creativity, alongside innovation, art, museums and festivals, became central to strategies aimed at generating local development and economic value, as the city itself was reimagined as an object of consumption (Zukin, 1996).

A major turning point was the 2015 World Expo, which repositioned Milan on the international stage and promoted it as an appealing destination for artistic and creative professionals (Tozzi, 2023). In this 'new city', contemporary art is increasingly recognised as an investment sector for significant national and international capital, complementing Milan's long-established creative industries, such as fashion and design (d'Ovidio and Pacetti, 2020; McRobbie et al., 2022), as well as traditional economic sectors linked to business, finance and tourism. As well discussed in many other cities (Florida, 2002; Tien, 2010; Van Aalst and Boogaarts, 2002), the rise of Milan's cultural economy has resulted in the growing prominence of large private cultural institutions, which now play a key role in the city's economic and tourist development, with all its associated criticalities, contradictions and tensions (Peck, 2005). An analysis of the contemporary cultural production in Milan reveals an ecosystem characterised by the predominant presence of large private cultural institutions,

¹ Literally 'Milan to drink'. It was part of an advertising slogan from 1985 which, among other things, read 'Milan is to be lived, dreamed and enjoyed. Milan to drink.' and became synonymous with the opulence and rampantism that characterised the city in those years.

in which the public actors occupy a comparatively marginal position (d'Ovidio, 2016; d'Ovidio and Cossu, 2017; Niessen, 2022a).

In line with this entrepreneurial and competitive approach to the cultural sector, several public initiatives contribute to Milan's contemporary cultural scene. On the one hand, the creation of creative districts has been promoted, encouraging the spatial concentration of cultural infrastructures (galleries, museums, and artists' studios) as well as artistic events, including festivals and urban performances. On the other hand, the city has introduced a cultural calendar structured around a series of thematic weeks. The most internationally renowned and commercially successful of these include those focused on design, fashion, and (modern and contemporary) art². Although these events are publicly coordinated, the main actors driving them and attracting international attention are mainly private. In fact, within Milan's contemporary art system, a wide constellation of museums and major cultural foundations, exhibition spaces and private training institutes not only complement, but often surpass the city's public cultural offerings.

Artists criticise the lack of structural institutional funding, which compels them to conform to market logics and restricts the opportunities for experimentation and avant-garde practice (d'Ovidio and Cossu, 2017; Cossu 2022). The Milanese cultural system is frequently criticised by alternative or antagonistic cultural fringes for being narrow-minded and unable to valorise local resources: "almost everything in art is private, self-organised" (Fucking Good Art, 2012: 25).

Indeed, for several years, the Milanese administration has pursued a policy centred on public-private partnerships, in which the public sector primarily acts as a facilitator of private initiatives (Anselmi and Vicari, 2020; Conte and Anselmi, 2022). This dynamic is also evident in the city's artistic ecosystem, where, aside from a few major events and exhibition spaces, the public sector appears to play a marginal role, both in terms of allocated resources and cultural governance. Public institutions, thus, seem to engage with the Milanese art scene predominantly when they recognise its potential for urban transformation. As d'Ovidio

² In particular we mention the 'Design Week', which encompasses both the 'Salone del Mobile' and the city-wide 'Fuori Salone'; the seasonal Fashion Weeks; 'Art Week' and 'Miart' (Milan's international fair for modern and contemporary art).

and Cossu (2017: 8) observe, “the city has adopted a policy of minimal intervention in the cultural sector, leading practitioners [managers of alternative cultural spaces] to denounce the total lack of institutional support”.

Recent studies on the independent contemporary art scene in Italy (Bertacchini and Borrione, 2021; Niessen, 2022b) highlight not only the difficulty these actors face in navigating the opaque and fragmented funding landscape, but also the broader scarcity of resources and the inefficiency of cultural policy tools, which are largely structured around competitive calls for proposals. This situation is compounded by the high level of precariousness that characterises artistic professions, further exacerbated by the absence of sustained support measures, such as artist income schemes. For example, the national “Italian Council” yearly programme, launched by the Ministry of Culture in 2017 to support artistic projects is based on intermittent funding cycles. Although intended to foster contemporary art, the scheme has been widely criticised for its lack of fairness and reliability.

In the Milanese context specifically, the combination of limited public funding and the city’s strong economic valorisation creates an unstable environment for the independent art scene, which remains reliant on the provision of direct or indirect resources from private actors (Bertacchini and Borrione, 2021; d’Ovidio and Cossu, 2017; Dubini, 2018; Forti and Leonardi, 2021; Niessen, 2022b).

In Milan, a model of urban governance marked by the weakness of the public sector, including in the cultural domain, has failed to establish the conditions necessary for structured support for workers in the artistic field. This has had an even greater impact on the independent art scene, particularly during successive global crises, from the 2008 financial downturn to the more recent public health crisis (Niessen, 2022a). As a result, despite the city’s promotion of a vibrant cultural atmosphere, the current independent Milanese art scene appears rather fragmented, precarious, uncertain and suspended between the pressures of survival and the constraints imposed by urban beautification policies and redevelopment processes, which often paradoxically undermine it.

Research design

With the aim of empirically exploring the interdependencies within the contemporary art ecosystem in Milan, the research unfolds in many steps. Conducting empirical research on a subject that defies definition poses great challenges to researchers. How do we research independent organisations if there is no agreement on how to define them? Although research recognises the existence of an independent sphere within the cultural ecosystem, there are no clear boundaries that can be identified a priori to distinguish between what is independent and what is not, due to the situated nature of the concept of independence. Based on these premises, and acknowledging the power structure of the ecosystem, the research started by exploring the artistic urban elite's view of independent art spaces, highlighting both contradictions and power dynamics.

A review of the literature on artistic elites in contemporary cities and the processes of artistic production and institutionalisation (Plaza et al., 2009; Poli, 2005; Tosi and Vitale, 2011; While, 2003; Zorloni, 2005, 2013) lead us to identify five types of actors: public art institutions, such as museums; private institutions, such as foundations or galleries; research and training institutions, such as universities and academies; specialised and trade journals; and finally, intermediaries, such as press agencies or incubators. A total of 14 semi-structured interviews³ were conducted as shown in table 1. The interviews, which lasted approximately one and a half hours, were both individual and collective.

Type of actors	Number of interviews
University teachers/staff and Academics (A)	3
Members and representatives of public institutions (P)	3
Members and representatives of private institutions or Foundations (F)	5
Journalist from specialised and trade journals (J)	1
Intermediaries (I)	2

Table 1: Interviews by type of actors and number

³ The interviews and the workshop were conducted in Italian; the quotations in this text have been translated by the authors. In the text, references to the interviews are marked with a capital letter and number (e.g. A2) when referring to a particular actor, as summarised in Table 1; extracts from the workshop are marked with the letter w.

The interviews pursued a twofold aim. First, they examined how elites define independent art spaces; secondly, they investigated the types of relationships – or interdependencies – that emerge between the interviewees and other actors within the ecosystem.

The interviews were guided by a common stimulus: the definition of independent art spaces adopted by the Italian Ministry of Culture in a national survey on the subject. The definition was as follows:

These are young non-profit organisations that have grown outside institutional and market spheres, operating locally with the aim of promoting and supporting languages and entities outside official circuits, stimulating the lively debate on contemporary visual culture. These places grow and self-sustain through initiatives and exhibitions.

[\(https://luoghidelcontemporaneo.cultura.gov.it/tipologia/\)](https://luoghidelcontemporaneo.cultura.gov.it/tipologia/).

In a second step, we engaged in a collective conversation with the so-called ‘independent’ actors, identified either through a list obtained through interviews with the artistic urban elite or through self-nomination in response to an open call.

The discussion was conducted with 16 independent organisations that had responded to the open call. They participated in a one-day workshop held at the University of Milan-Bicocca on 21st of October 2022, entitled ‘[Un]mapping Milan processes of (in)visibility of the independent art scene’.

After having presented the preliminary results of the research, participants worked in three groups to reflect on resources and interdependencies in terms of space, time and relationships.

Both the interviews and the workshop were recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic and grounded analysis. The results of our research are thus obtained through a comparative analysis encompassing data collected through interviews with representatives of the artistic urban elite and the workshop with independent organisations.

Independent art spaces and their interdependencies: the empirical results

The opportunity to be independent - according to the elite

The interviews with the actors of Milan's artistic urban elite highlight various aspects that are useful for describing and explaining what they understand by the concept of 'independence', allowing us to construct a multidimensional framework of eight interrelated dimensions within which independent art spaces flow in accordance with their biographies, as discussed below.

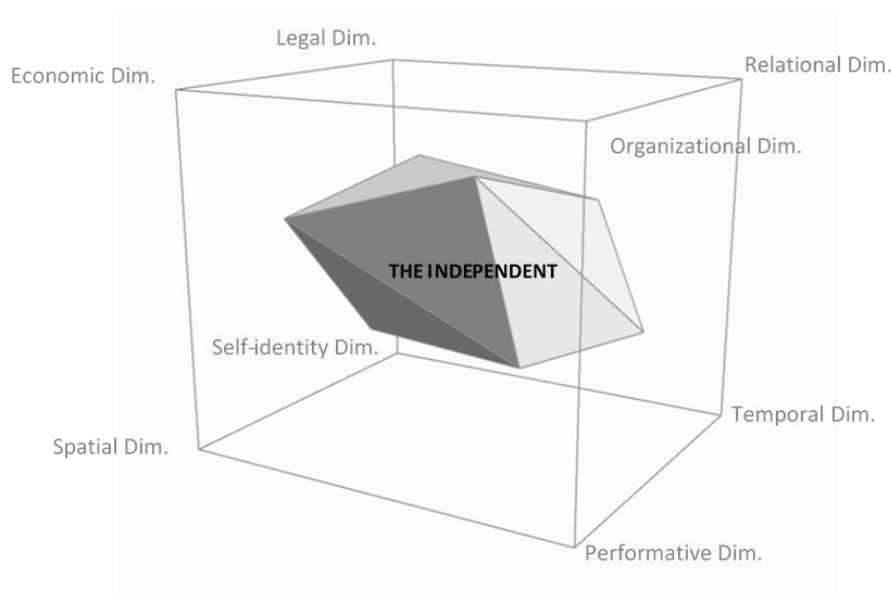


Figure 1: Dimensions of the independent. (Source: the authors). This figure illustrates the multidimensional nature of independence, which is continuously shaped by the interplay of multiple, coexisting dimensions and forces. The image does not aim to quantify independence, but rather visualise the various factors that influence how it is perceived and understood. The paper will further explore the spatial dimension, which emerges as particularly significant.

Independent art organisations, as described by the elite, prove to be difficult to define, yet they are recognised as relevant actors within the art ecosystem, sharing several common characteristics. Not all independent organisations have a physical or permanent space as they can also exist online or temporarily. If they have a physical location, it is typically characterised as hybrid, mixing creative work and exhibition activities, encouraging interaction and cross-contamination (spatial dimension). In terms of relationships,

independent organisations often operate in parallel, yet interdependently, with institutional circuits, constantly negotiating, in an often unbalanced relation their status as independent art spaces (relational dimension). They can be ephemeral - e.g. situated in the temporal interstice between education and the institutional labour market - or endure over a longer period of time (temporal dimension). Moreover, their lifecycle is expected to change more rapidly than that of institutions, quickly capturing emerging trends:

I think that the characteristic of movement, change and fluidity is a very beautiful characteristic [of the independent art spaces] that can be applied at all levels: to languages, to forms and to durations, because that's the beauty of this field here (F1).

The legal dimension of independent art spaces is often mentioned as a complex issue, since the Italian regulation does not officially recognise them. This means that, in order to allow programming open to the public, they tend to adopt a legal status in the non-profit sector or in informality. This is also due to economic constraints: since independent art spaces operate outside the profit market, their funding is often limited and comes from private, personal or public grants. These conditions also manifest themselves in the organisational dimension, where independent organisations often lack formal structures due to limited paid positions, leading them to adopt smaller, fluid and collective forms of administration. In terms of the self-identity dimension, independent organisations are defined by their recognisability, which incorporates the coherence and continuity of their artistic language, the audience they reach, their performative dimension and other intangible elements, including the biographies of those who animate them. In this context, social media (e.g. Instagram) play an important role in increasing visibility, as they are “capable of identifying new publics, emerging public needs and challenging artistic languages” (F2).

To sum up according to the interviewees, most of whom are highly visible professionals with stable working conditions and high salaries, precariousness is the main characteristic of independent art spaces. It is often framed as an opportunity on several levels: their reduced organisational structure supposedly grants them the “agility and flexibility to adapt promptly to the changing needs of the context in which they are embedded” (F3). The constant need for funding “fosters interaction and contamination between people and other organisations” (F1), which enhances the ability to build networks at different levels and gain access to

resources through negotiation and a shared commitment to collaboration and exchange. The precariousness or lack of physical spaces translates into “the freedom to navigate between different realities, to engage in temporary initiatives and to operate without the constraints of institutions”, allowing for “greater experimentation and autonomy” (A1). Moreover, the limited opportunities for a financially stable artistic career open up the “possibility of taking risks in the pursuit of innovation and experimentation” (F1), while operating in a local and national context often characterised by institutional stagnation.

Self-definition as independent: precarious and proud

The workshop with the independent art spaces (see Methodology) revealed a great diversity of intentions among them. Nevertheless, participants expressed a willingness to (self-)recognise as a collectivity, albeit a heterogeneous one. What seems to create solidarity is the precariousness that pushes for creative solutions, together with the pride of calling themselves ‘independent’. Despite distant political premises and equally distant horizons, since there are those who hope for institutionalisation and those who shun it (as also noted by Forti and Leonardi, 2021), independence has emerged as a will, a choice:

I hope there is always a somewhat utopian spirit, to move according to what is WILL, independence for me is primarily a manifested will, that each of us has a manifesto of intentions (w).

There is also a utopian, ideal dimension, which is more specific to art - “we bring high quality, always” - or a broader political dimension - “we do what we think needs to be done, as individuals in society”. Recognition therefore, has a value that is not exclusively economic, but collective and cultural:

We provide a public service, whether we see it or not, I believe that of the whole of culture... And since we provide a service, it is serious that it is not recognised by the public service, by the public institutions... because if tomorrow we break up and collectively stop doing what we do - which is legitimate - and only do it over dinner with our friends, so that we are more serene... If tomorrow we all stop doing what we do in Milan, which sells itself as a city of creative people... Do they give a damn at the public level? No? Then we are really worth like the 2 of spades... even if we have value at a collective level (w).

According to them, they generate culture, and create opportunities for thinking, meeting, and cross-contaminating. Aspects which they offer to a public in a city that benefits from them, yet does little to support or properly acknowledge it:

These spaces bring plurality to the city, the guarantee of plurality... a public service... and the guarantee that a form of self-determination can continue to exist (w).

In contrast to the individualistic view that emerged from the interviews, the collective confrontation with the independent art spaces made it possible to highlight the complexity of the ecosystem and the interdependencies that are crucial for understanding how the ecosystem functions.

Space matters

From both interviews and the workshop, physical space emerged as a scarce but essential resource, an infrastructure through which the organisation's identity is displayed and shaped. Space allows actors within the ecosystem to meet and interact; it can also function as a 'calling card', providing visibility and legitimacy if desired:

I remember a young curator saying exactly this: "the moment I was 'just' a person, with a first and last name - when I was simply myself in the art system- I had very limited impact". The moment she gained access to a space -an unusual one, a friend's garage - she could say: "I am X from space Y", and people started to treat her differently. It really acted like a calling card. Space is a new form of professional accreditation within the system (A1).

According to the interviewee, the identity embodied by the place – rather than an individual artist's name – becomes a form of professional accreditation. Once recognised, the name of the space can legitimise one's cultural production. This dynamic is confirmed by another interviewee, who describes how their editorial board selects which events to feature in a professional art journal:

Initially, we tried to be as inclusive as possible [...] there was no minimum threshold: whatever press release we received, we published it. But as we grew, we had to set limits. Of course, these thresholds risk excluding things we might regret ten years from now [...] But physically, it's just not manageable. Also, if we don't recognize the name of the organization, that sets off an alarm. The message is flagged, passed to two colleagues, and someone goes to see it (J1).

Here, recognition is triggered not by the content of an event, but by the hosting organization. In this sense, accreditation functions as a gatekeeping threshold, and being associated with a physical location adds value and perceived credibility to a project. Moreover, according to another interviewee, access to a physical space enables independent organisations to embed themselves within a territory, contributing not only to visibility but also to recognisability and identity formation. It anchors the independent art space to specific territorial resources that inform and shape its identity. It thus translates into territorial recognisability, that shapes both the organization and its surrounding context.

There's a big difference between an independent curator and an independent organization, and it lies in the space. That's what allows you to build a clear identity. I strongly believe that institutions are born in places and from places. Rooting oneself in a territory—having access to a space, a physical place — brings with it a certain recognizability. It always comes at a cost, of course, but it adds value. The most successful ones always have four walls. You rarely see the same level of recognition for hybrid platforms that don't have a roof over their heads (F4).

In sum, space matters because it enables recognisability, supports identity-building, and facilitates visibility - when visibility is desired. It also plays a dual role: it shapes the independent art organization and, at the same time, contributes to shaping the identity of the territory in which it is embedded. This reciprocal dynamic will be further explored in the next section.

Spatially (un)plugged in Milan

Access to physical space in Milan – an increasingly expensive city in the Italian context – has become largely unaffordable, especially in central areas where services, infrastructure and capital crucial to cultural production are concentrated. As a result, independent art spaces are often pushed to the urban periphery in search of more affordable alternatives:

[...] The fantastic map of the horror vacui - most of the spaces in our group are located outside the [tourist] map, outside what is commonly perceived as Milan [...]. Is it really necessary to have a space? And how important is it to have one within the city centre? What is our relationship with the space that surrounds us? (w).

During the workshop it became evident that many independent spaces are situated often outside the map provided by the Milan Tourist Board. This spatial marginality is not only the result of affordability constraints, but also of the city's policies:

Everything is very expensive in Milan, so it is very difficult to have a space. And if you don't have one, what can you do? Sure, you can find creative ways to manage, but even municipal calls for proposals don't really provide you with stable access to space, or the ability to concentrate and find resources to carry on your activities (P3).

The municipality issued a year-long open call, where you could register as a socio-cultural hybrid space in Milan. You sign up with a set of criteria, and if there are many of you and you're good, maybe something happens (w).

These precarious conditions are compounded by a broader policy discourse that pushes associations to adopt entrepreneurial logics:

The mantra has been that associations must become businesses, in short, either they do one job or they do the other (P1).

From the perspective of many independent actors, the necessity of maintaining a physical space is questioned not only due to unaffordability, but also because of the structural limitations and risks it entails. While a space may bring opportunities, it can also turn out to be a 'cage' with severe economic and structural limits:

Having a space can lead to positive opportunities, but it can also be a cage... this was the case, for example, during the Covid period... without subsidies, how much can it harm us? Are we independent because we are outside, or are we outside because we are independent? (W)

Obtaining a physical space may also require compromising artistic or political autonomy, especially when funding is tied to urban regeneration agendas. In Milan, this dynamic takes on particularly pronounced forms through a private-public governance model that facilitates the concentration of urban space in the hands of major institutional players. These partnerships prioritise the attraction and development of private capital, exacerbating existing spatial asymmetries and further marginalising smaller, independent actors. This reflects

a broader extractive logic in urban governance, where space is leveraged as a strategic asset for capital accumulation rather than as a common resource for cultural and social life:

There are two private individuals who are investing in the city, but they're doing so through urban agreements with the municipality. They receive certain advantages as part of these deals. A strategy that focuses on large-scale contemporary art investments could potentially gain greater visibility—perhaps as part of an urban regeneration project in a particular neighbourhood (P2).

What is offered to people who come to the art fair is the city itself... a territory where, in one week, you can have seven dinners at the seven most important, or coolest, or most inspiring institutions.. All in just one week -the week of the fair (P1).

Some interviewees noted that gaining access to physical space may integrate independent organisations into metropolitan development and rebranding strategies, contributing to building Milan's cultural capital:

These spaces play a real, tangible role in the city's growth. Not just classic growth, it is social growth and then also the attractiveness of the grow (P1).

On the one hand, efforts to gain access to the space may lead some independent organisations to becoming 'plugged in' into urban marketing, rebranding initiatives and regeneration circuits. On the other hand, other independent actors flirt with the ambivalence of partial invisibility:

I enjoy it- I enjoy being barely identifiable. At the same time, I find pleasure in hiding, in being fluid within the grid. But I also find it tragic not to be found (w).

While this ambivalence may make it harder for art-led gentrification to take hold in peripheral areas, the role of independent actors remains under-recognised. This perpetuates precarious access to resources - including physical space- and hinders the stability of the independent art ecosystem.

Discussion: Interdependencies within the ecosystem

The exploration of strategies employed by actors to navigate the challenges of being independent organisations within the urban context, led us to reflect upon the complex interdependencies that unfold within the contemporary art ecosystem. In particular, we identified three ideal-typical attitudes adopted by independent organisations in relation to institutions: *get me*, *give me*, and *don't mess with me* and that represent three mechanisms of interdependencies. It is worth noting that they are not static, rather, they

are fluid, overlapping and vary over time and situation, influenced by shifts in the organisation's identity and the scale at which these organisations operate or aspire to operate.

Get me. This mechanism reflects the aspiration of the independent art space to be seen, recognised as a legitimate actor within the art system and to scale up. Here, independence is understood as a transitional phase typical of the organisation's early stages and with the expected trajectory being one of gradual institutionalisation through, for example, the formalisation of long-term cooperation agreements. In this case, access to spatial resources is frequently negotiated, since, for instance, an independent organisation may be permanently or semi-permanently hosted within an institutional space.

Give me. This mechanism operates on the premise that certain aspects of independence are negotiable, requiring the independent art organisation to make strategic compromises to secure access to space. Central to this mechanism are time-sensitive and goal-specific agreements, in which temporary access to a space becomes a means for increasing visibility, reaching new audiences, or testing ground for experimental and innovative practices. These agreements often align with distinct and specific goals and aspirations of the independent organisation. While their temporary nature reinforces the autonomy, they also tend to reinforce a condition of precarity and economic fragility. An example would be the participation of independent organisations in temporary events organised by institutions.

Don't mess with me. This mechanism is based on the notion that independence is best ensured by maintaining a deliberate distance from institutions. While there may be mutual recognition between institutions and independent art spaces, interactions between them are deliberately limited to avoid co-optation or tokenism. This mechanism grants independent organisations considerable creative and discursive autonomy, but introduces a higher degree of vulnerability in terms of securing access to space and therefore permanence within the art ecosystem. Hence, venues are typically self-managed and maintained by the independent actors themselves. Where full self-sufficiency is unfeasible, alternative strategies, often situated at the fringes of formal structures (e.g. occupation), may be employed to secure access to spaces.

Conclusion: the city as an artistic ecosystem

The cultural ecology also depends on the benignity of the environment within which it functions. Just as with a natural ecosystem, the cultural ecology will be more fecund and productive when it has a great number of species interacting with each other: in the opposite case the result will be a cultural desert (Holden, 2015: 33).

The research reveals that Milan hosts a vibrant artistic ecosystem, despite a marked scarcity of resources - economic, spatial and temporal - many of which remain concentrated in the hands of private actors. It is the city itself that seems to benefit most from this diversity and cultural biodiversity, enhancing its attractiveness and its cultural capital. Following Holden (2015), it is clear that independent art spaces function as the humus of the art ecosystem by nourishing its foundations. However, in Milan, this fertile ground is steadily being depleted by a lack of supportive public policies and the predatory attitude of major art institutions, meanwhile, independent organisations are worn down by the continual pressure to devise creative strategies for survival and autonomy.

Our empirical research has identified three mechanisms of interdependence between independent organisations and institutions. These encompass the intricate, fluid strategies that independent organisations may adopt to navigate the complex power dynamics inherent in the Milanese artistic ecosystem, shaped by changing relationships and contexts. Recognising their interdependence, independent organisations engage in exchanges with institutions to secure varying degrees of access to stable resources via the 'take-me' mechanism, involving long-term commitments and a willingness to move towards institutionalisation. The 'give-me' mechanism involves short-term agreements that may require significant compromises in pursuit of specific objectives. Conversely, some independent organisations adopt an antagonistic attitude towards institutions (the 'don't mess with me' mechanism), seeking to safeguard their autonomy by maintaining a critical distance.

In conclusion, our research has revealed a core dynamic within the art ecosystem: the unequal but interdependent relationship between independent art organisations and institutions, in which space (its location and dimension) emerges as a highly contested and valuable resource. As space becomes increasingly

limited and costly, it gains strategic value, functioning as a medium of negotiation. Space not only provides visibility and access to audiences and local resources (embedded in a territory), but also the freedom to develop a sense of self-identity through experimentation with artistic forms and languages, while playing a pivotal role in shaping the trajectories and capacities of independent organisations within the art ecosystem. To guarantee the plurality of artist expressions and a more democratic art ecology in the city, a renewed political commitment is needed, one that recognises the right to participate in cultural production and that listens to the needs and desires of those who produce art in the city. In order to give the city a fecund and productive cultural ecology, it is necessary to co-create cultural strategies that take into account all the actors in the ecosystem and their interdependencies. Rather than pursuing public-private partnerships with powerful and aggressive actors, the city should follow a more civic-public partnership approach, which promises to be better suited to guaranteeing democracy and openness, including in cultural policies (Gilmore, 2023). Moreover, in the context of this asymmetrical interdependence, the ability to secure, sustain, and manage space hinges on the development of responsive, time-sensitive, and goal-oriented urban and national cultural policies.

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