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WASTE TIME, GAIN SPACE

Stalker in conversation with Patrick Döblin and Isabelle Fehlmann

With their walk around Rome in 1995, the Italian collective Stalker initiated a practice, both architectural and artistic, that rejected common approaches to design. Instead of conceiving of new structures on the drawing board, they chose to challenge existent spaces physically by acting. Ever since their defining four-day exploration of the outskirts of Rome, Stalker has been walking the cities of Europe and beyond. They are particularly interested in the potential of neglected areas that usually fall outside the contemporary, economically prospering city, namely areas they call *territori attuali*, actual territories.

On a cold and snowy day in March 2018, we invited Stalker to give us insights into their practice by guiding a group of students from the Chair of Professor Christophe Girot at the ETH on a walk through Zurich. Two of Stalker's founding members, Francesco Careri and Lorenzo Romito, were on board.

Francesco, you mentioned that in order to transform space it's better to use your body than to sit in the studio and draw. How did you come to this realization?

Francesco Careri [FC]: It started more as an artistic practice. In 1990, during the occupation of the university La Sapienza in Rome, we created a Zen garden in the courtyard of the Faculty of Architecture. This marked the first intervention in space done by me and Lorenzo. At that time, the teachers of the university were architects that never built anything; it was the era after Aldo Rossi.

They weren't able to get commissions?

FC: No. But they were also not interested in getting commissions since they were anti-capitalist intellectuals and thus in opposition to the system. But they did fantastic drawings and considered themselves artists. As students, we were able to adapt to these conditions but for us it was not enough. We started studying the radicals of the Sixties and Seventies and the way they took political protest to the streets—through manifestations and performances. At the same time, I was riding the Land Art wave. I was interested in Robert Smithson, Richard Long. What followed next was an illegal garden by the river, *Al Quantara*.

Lorenzo Romito [LR]: To be precise, it was not exactly a garden. After the occupation of the university, we were better connected with the students, architects, and artists. I proposed to this growing group of people to get together at the riverbanks of the Tiber. There was a derelict factory there that had been pretty much reclaimed by Nature.

It was more of a terrain vague?

LR: It was a complete *terrain vague*. We then took advantage of the fact that people were changing their shutters, replacing wooden ones with plastic ones. So we took these discarded shutters and cleared a path to a very wild Nature right on the banks of the Tiber River. We then invited friends, artists, landscape architects, and landscape designers to create interventions and installations along this path. That was in 1993/1994. One intervention was called *Vivilerive* (live the banks) and another was *Al Quantara* (Arabic for “the city on the bridge”), which was very successful. There were a lot of people visiting and enjoying the wilderness that was so close to their homes. And we realized how important it was to open the gate to these “actual territories,” time-space dimensions that lack contemporaneity. We came to realize that the path was the most important thing and even better than the installations. But the most interesting events were actually achieved by Nature’s spontaneous reappropriation, how it interacted with the ruins or the way a broken chair was elevated by the growth of a tree.

The realization of the path’s importance is what triggered the decision to start walking. We decided to walk under the premise of never leaving the city proper while at the same time never entering the contemporary city. Not everyone understood this idea, however, so there ended up being just seven people taking this four-day walk, but many more joined for shorter periods.

Can you tell us more about these “actual territories”?

FC: The actual is what is going on right now in this place, the *hic et nunc*. We realized that the spaces that we were perceiving were constantly

changing. Our work of art was to be set in this specific situation, in a place that would be a different one upon returning to it a few days later. Actual territories also have to do with what Foucault called “the becoming-other.” The actual is what you are not conscious of, it is your becoming-other. Those territories were unconscious of what they were, they were in a state of change, of becoming something different. We also called these actual territories “urban amnesias” because people had completely erased them from their mental maps of the city. When you drive on a highway, you connect two islands that you perceive as a unified territory only retrospectively. But you don’t get to know anything about the spaces in between. They appear to you as voids. You don’t recognize the chicken, the agricultural fields, the shanty towns as part of the city. You experience these areas as empty space. Back then, there was a discussion in architecture about empty spaces that had to be “filled.” Empty spaces, like the ones in Berlin after the fall of the Wall, were regarded merely as potential in the development of the city. Most architects didn’t acknowledge the value of those places as they were. We wanted to point out that these spaces were not empty at all but in fact full of ephemeral things that were valuable to the society.

As Peter T. Lang wrote in his article about Stalker, your first walk initiated a veritable shift in perception regarding the image of Rome and its territories.¹ How do you explain the fact that areas which were previously unknown or unappreciated were suddenly cast in a new light?

FC: The fantastic idea was to connect all these spaces into a unified territory. Because everyone knew the terrain vague in their front yard. But no one knew that there was a system, a whole layer of terrains vagues or actual territories or however you want to call these spaces, which you could reconnect by walking—the walk itself acting as the thread of a necklace. The city is fragmented but the *dérive*, the walk, unifies these fragments.

¹ Peter T. Lang, “Stalker on Location,” *Loose Space. Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life*, ed. Karen A. Franck and Quentin Stevens (London: Routledge, 2007), 195.



Stalker exploring Rome's "actual territories"

Photo: Lorenzo Romito, 1995



After your first walk in Rome, many more followed in other European cities. Did you take the same approach in other places?

FC: After Rome, we went to Naples, Milan, Turin, Paris, Berlin. But we went with the map of Rome in our minds. In the beginning, we were deliberately looking for industrial areas, train tracks, infrastructures, a river. These were good starting points for our walks; once there, we always discovered a path. The aim was to never access the city itself, to never walk on asphalt or sidewalks. Then, all of a sudden, we might begin to recognize the actual territories. Sometimes we encounter a kind of gateway, like a hole in the fence. Sometimes there is already a trail which we can follow to its end.

Lorenzo, you once described *Stalker* as a practice rather than a certain number of people. How would you describe this practice?

LR: I always talk about the “having place” idea of *Stalker*. Essentially, the practice is about making yourself available to something happening between you, the others, and the place where you are. I always try to interpret possible, creative ways to inhabit some uncertain, uncomfortable space. This dimension of leaving behind the everyday opens up enormous possibility. To me, *Stalker* is the practice of opening up this kind of dimension and possibility. And when it does take place, it’s magical: people start gathering and things happen beyond the will of anybody. But in the end they assume some sense and harmonize into something no one expected.

How do you manage to maintain the evocation of this magic under changing circumstances?

LR: Well, of course you have to put a lot of energy into it. Getting off the streets is the best start. You need to trespass something, to be somewhere else, to get rid of your preconceptions of space and everyday behavior. Once you get out of these routines it’s easier. But it also requires a core group that is able to put this energy in and share it with the others.

It worked well during the Zurich walk. Before we took off, you mentioned the journey's motto: "Waste time, gain space."

FC: That's right. We invite people to waste time in the sense of losing the feeling of time, not carrying a watch, not having appointments, not knowing the place of arrival—getting lost in time.

LR: We love to manipulate this kind of time-space relationship. In society there is often a refusal of the idea of wasting time and energy, a refusal of going off track. With *Stalker*, the concept of "having place" cannot be committed to, cannot be planned. That's why we play with this term and instigate what I want to call "availability," which doesn't work well in the English language. The term we mean is better captured by the French *disponibilité* or Italian *disponibilità*. It is about being available and open to unexpected events.

And it also places you in the very present moment. Nowadays, we are constantly planning things and concerning ourselves with the future. But with an approach of *disponibilità*, you find presence in a place where time and space begin to coincide.

LR: Absolutely. We also call this presence "actual"—presence as possibility, presence without any prejudice or expectations. This is also a strategy of escaping contemporary society, escaping contemporary architecture, escaping contemporary art. Contemporaneity is a power device that narrows society's gaze and pushes people into endless productivity, always doing what needs to be done, never taking time to think. But actually, school comes from the Greek term *skholé*, which means the opposite of work: free time. So, if we don't have free time, we can't actually add to our knowledge.

An important technique that you use in order to trigger this feeling of getting lost in time is that of spontaneous performance. During the walk in Zurich, we were doing a lot of this. The performances were usually of a very playful or poetic nature. One of the most striking ones was the "dancing trees" performance, which amounted to a veritable procession with several acts. It started with a student reciting a poem by Yeats that ended with the line "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" By chance, Lorenzo then discovered a pile of big branches nearby and proposed a dance

of trees so everyone took one of these branches and we proceeded walking like this, at one point densifying into a spontaneous forest on the street. We ended up on a field where we collected them into a pile that resembled a teepee. Why are these playful acts such an important element of your walks?

FC: Already in the original walk with Stalker, I did a performance with flour called the Karnak. From the beginning, the performances were part of the walk. I called them “celebrations of the territory.” It was like a sacred act, a ritual. We also use performances as a means to connect a group, especially when you don’t know all the participants. You don’t always need it, though. It depends on the territory and what else there is to explore.

Our group especially enjoyed the initial ritual when some members of Stalker started to bind participants together with the rope and then, one by one they all slowly disentangled themselves and started to walk by still holding onto the rope—like a Seilschaft, or rope team. But you were also using this object in a different way: to create spontaneous spaces by enclosing them with a rope.

FC: This is an example of transforming spaces with your body and very simple means. It is also a way to create sacred spaces: When you close the circle, you create a space within a space, like a temple. You create an inside and an outside. Outside is Nature or chaos while inside is your community, your sense of being.

LR: By acting in places, by naming places, by ritualizing a certain way of inhabiting spaces, I think we are trying to give new meaning to a narrative that could again be shared between people—because sacredness is nothing less than the mythological narrative that creates the mental map we retain of sites. There is an urge for mythology. And we have been trying to create a new mythopoetical narrative in order to contrast the reduced and banal rightwing narratives.

How do you generate new narratives through the practice of walking?

LR: Think of the adventures of Ulysses. Even though they probably didn't happen exactly as they are told in Homer's *Odyssey*, his efforts brought to light a narrative that created the basis for a new society. And I think what is challenging now is working on the narratives that could generate new societies. We started thinking about the transformation of space, landscapes, sites, not by planning physical change but by transforming the way in which these are perceived and inhabited or the rituals and behaviors that occur in these places. We call this gestural architecture and behavioral urbanism. We start by behaving differently and the space follows.

FC: Creating new mythologies. Renaming places. These are the first steps of reappropriation. After the first walk in Rome, the mayor recognized these abandoned areas by calling them parks. So now you can say that Rome is "full of parks"!

Did the transformation of these spaces into "parks" by calling them thus also change their use?

FC: People are not only occupying buildings but also using these spaces in new ways by creating allotment gardens, for example. Especially the migrants who usually live in small houses use the public spaces, the "parks," a lot. There are many films by Pasolini in which you can see the protagonists walking the peripheries of Rome. You can see how they use the territory and the solitary buildings in the landscape. When we did the first walk, these areas were fenced. Nobody went there, but today there is a new wave of reappropriation.

The first part of our Zurich walk took place on mainly unbuilt land. The dynamics there were much better than during the second part, in which we wove through a dense urban fabric. Is this due to the fact that open spaces, terrains vagues, engender more creativity than the city itself?

FC: I don't agree with that statement. As you remember, we were also trying to reach the roof terrace of a high-rise building. This attempt failed due to the fact that the final door was locked, but imagine if it had succeeded or if one of the residents had opened the door

and let us in to his or her flat. The experience would have been a completely different one.

In Zurich, property prices are exorbitantly steep and thus barren land, undefined spaces, or actual territories are a rare luxury.

FC: That's exactly why performance is important. If the reality is not interesting enough, you have to provoke it.

Speaking of rendering the reality more interesting, a journalist once noted that your initial walk was reminiscent of Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* from 1979. In it, three men are exploring the "Zone," a seemingly post-apocalyptic, mysterious area abandoned by humans and sealed off by armed forces. The group has carried the film's title as its name ever since that first walk. When we gathered for the walk through Zurich, you mentioned one rule—the only rule—by quoting the film's main protagonist, the Stalker: "Never go back the same way you came from." Are there other parallels like this, aspects of the film that you retrospectively implemented in your practice?

FC: The book that provided the literary basis for Tarkovsky's film is Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's *Roadside Picnic*. It portrays the idea of our walks in so far as you can stop your car at the edge of the road, cross the barrier, and start to walk or have a picnic. When you walk these urban voids you really achieve a sense of freedom. In such moments, I feel like Tarkovsky's Stalker when he enters the Zone. This is life for me.

But in contrast to your walks, the protagonists of the film pursue an actual goal. They are striving to reach the center of the Zone where all of one's wishes come true. In contrast, you usually do not aim for specific destinations.

FC: But the protagonists of the film never actually make it to the end. They never access the room they are looking for. The Stalker accompanies the poet and the scientist, but he goes there mainly to be at ease, to be at home. The first thing he does when they enter the Zone is leave them in order to experience the Zone on his own. But there are no portrayals of this moment. This is a very intimate moment.

LR: In the beginning, we didn't know the film. It was by chance that a journalist mentioned it when we were telling him about our plans to explore abandoned neighborhoods. Chance is an important feature; the ability or readiness to let things happen to you. This is why tourism is one of the worst types of pollution. Because it doesn't give you a chance to make mistakes. In contemporaneity everything is predetermined; it doesn't provide you with possibilities.

In the film, the Zone itself figures like a protagonist. It influences your decisions, the way you perceive things. It acts. In other words, space plays an active role.

LR: Spaces are active, indeed. We have lost the consciousness of that.

But at the same time, the Zone and perhaps also the abandoned spaces that you have been exploring are highly ambivalent: they can be friendly, you might feel at home in them, but at the same time they could involve danger.

LR: It is like Hölderlin said: "But where the danger is, also grows the saving power." The fact that nothing is stable, that everything has a double meaning, and that the responsibility of making choices and shaping new ways of living is left to the individual, this is a very strong political discourse against contemporaneity—I still like to call it contemporaneity because, differently from neoliberalists, it is the cultural-aesthetic dimension that engages us as artists and architects. Neoliberalism is easy to criticize. We criticize neoliberalism but then we try to sneak in the backdoor of neoliberal universities, neoliberal museums, and art collections. But I think we ought to escape. And the best way to escape contemporaneity is to profane its boundaries by trespassing them.



Jacques Tati, *Trafic*, 1971, Film Still.