

Jumping over walls

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN
FRANCESCO CARERI AND JORDI COLOMER

JORDI COLOMER: Francesco, I was reminded of you yesterday. We spent three days at the Terramar racetrack, a racing circuit opened in the 1920s near Sitges, south of Barcelona, which has been abandoned since the 1950s. Its cambers, which reach inclinations of 90 degrees, are the most extreme ever built in Europe, it seems that many race cars would fly off. There are photos of this time of splendour with futuristic cars and an audience with top hats fascinated by speed. These days, vegetation and sand are encroaching on the cracked concrete. Yesterday we saw a herd of sheep and goats with its shepherd in the centre of the circuit, whom we invited to go around the track. It was all a bit absurd. I thought of you and the story that you are always telling about Cain and Abel.

FRANCESCO CARERI: Yes, this story of Cain and Abel has become a true obsession for me. It seems to me that everything that has always interested me is condensed in a few lines: Cain, a sedentary farmer who kills his brother Abel, a nomadic shepherd – it is also the first murder in the history of mankind. Then, punished by God, he must wander, reincarnating both Cain and Abel in a new figure which contains the nomadic and the sedentary. The equation would then be (K)AIN + (A)BEL = KA, that is, the symbol of eternal wandering that traverses the continents from the Palaeolithic to the Neolithic. KA is also the symbol of the encounter with the Other, the different, the foreigner. After the fratricide, God tells Cain: I am going to give you a sign – I am going to “signal you” – to protect you, so that you are not killed when you cross borders and wander in unknown territories. I am sure it is the sign KA; walking with open hands raised towards the sky, Cain advances saying: I am disarmed, I do not want to kill you, I just want to pass through ...

I recently found an incredible image of this. It is engraved on some rocks at the Baltic Sea in Bahusia, in southern Sweden; in it many boats appear where there are people making this gesture of the KA with their hands raised. They are not warriors, they are families with children who show it to the strangers to be able to disembark in

their land. They are escaping, they ask for help, to be able to pass to a neighbouring territory. The whole history of humanity is encapsulated in this image. How many times will it have happened? And it does not stop happening: it is happening now at this very moment while we are writing to each other. Humanity has always been a pilgrim, a refugee, a foreigner in strange lands.

jc: Today, when we are talking, the new president of the United States of America has signed a decree to erect a wall along the border with Mexico, to perfect that wall, which already exists, and which is not the only one, nor the first one. Building a wall is something like the architectural zero degree of the border, a primeval gesture. Francesco, in your Roman outings with the university students, I think rule number one is that they must be willing to jump over walls, with all that supposes ... is that so?

fc: Yes, this new wall of Trump is an unworthy thing, but also the complex architecture of the existing wall – on which Teddy Cruz, who is an artist and architect, has worked so much – is a war machine that has functioned for years with disastrous success. To build walls, as you say, is a truly primordial gesture; just as primordial is the act of annulling them. Returning to Cain and Abel, the story – as recounted by Bruce Chatwin in *The Songlines* – imagined Abel returning home after grazing the animals, when he realises that Cain has built a fence to protect the agricultural fields. Abel does not understand what it is, because until then space belonged to everyone, without divisions. What he does not accept is that his brother has invented private property. When he decides to jump over the fence, Cain kills him. And that is the same reason why in the history of the birth of Rome, Romulus kills Remus: for having climbed over the *pomerium* (the wall) that Romulus had raised. Walls, then, are made to be jumped over. This is what I try to teach students in our itinerant lessons. The first thing I say is that it is better that whoever respects the taboo of private property should not come. If you really want to know the city, it will give you a surprise when you least expect it: you should go where you are not allowed. Without this force there can be no new knowledge, one cannot be satisfied only with the space that one is given to understand. This is something we understood very early on in *Stalker*, from the first explorations. Our first edited video – because the other videos are raw, without cuts or interferences, respecting the perception occurring during their filming – is a simple sequence of wall jumps in several of the cities in which we organised our first outings.

jc: I don't know if you are familiar with this masterful work on how to solve the wall-frontier theme by Venezuelan artist Javier Téllez, *One Flew Over the Void (Stray Bullet)*, made for Insite 2005. Téllez, in collaboration with the mentally ill patients of a hospital in Mexicali, designed an event to launch a bullet-man over the border between Mexico and the United States, between Tijuana and the Border Field State Park. There is a video of the action that is powerful and hilarious. It should be re-shown now, it would make a lot of sense ...

fc: Yes, I know it. The first time I saw it seemed to me something too ironic and spectacular, but it remained in my memory and, ultimately, it appeared to me in all its tragedy. A real monument to the jump over the wall. An anthology of such works on

this subject of trespassing would be valuable. And in this respect, we should also talk about your video *Medina Parkour* (2014), where you walk on the rooftops of the city of Tétouan in Morocco ...

jc: When I arrived in Tétouan, it seemed clear to me that there were two parallel worlds: a world at the street level, where intimacy and domestic privacy have their own rules, and another one on top, on the roofs, with different laws. On top of the city children and cats play at jumping over the walls that below so zealously separate one house from the other. Up there, people gather to talk, smoke, and eat, you can exchange glances, observe, and send greetings to people who are relatively far away, sharing that same moment. This is a semi-invisible activity, but everyone knows that the roofs are very lively. I did a workshop in the School of Architecture where each student showed us the neighbourhood where she or he lived, stringing together very lively walks through the city – talking and walking are two fantastic activities and very cheap. We ended up meeting on the roofs and there were always very interesting discussions. After three months of living there I was still a foreigner, but I already knew my neighbours, so I felt the courage to jump a first wall from my roof, to see how far I could go, emulating the children and adolescents who practice a kind of “parkour”, as in some European cities, but in freer, a less gymnastic style. The fact is that while I was jumping I saw my neighbour on the highest roof of our house, which proved that he was a regular visitor. He came to get me and showed me his technique and his favourite routes, so the video shows how I try to emulate him, jumping over walls from house to house ...

fc: When I saw your video, I immediately thought of our experience with *Stalker* in Tunisia, where we walked on the rooftops of the souk and saw people in the market through the holes in the vaults. Suddenly, we could not continue anymore, until a lady came out of her house and brought us a ladder. This is not a utopia: there are cities that are completely accessible via their roofs. In warm weather, the roofs serve for sleeping, to get some fresh air at night. There are also kitchens, gardens ... And in cities where this is not possible, bridges should be built. Bridges between one roof and another. In many Neorealist films filmed in Rome there are often scenes that take place on the roofs, between the clothes hanging on lines, among the water towers. They were places where different families from the building met, where social ties were forged, where schools of thieves were organised. Nowadays, if you see Rome from above it is difficult to see someone on the roofs: they are completely uninhabited.

jc: Your famous outing through Rome with the *Stalkers* (“il giro di Roma”) from 1995 always made me think of the wonderful film by Pasolini, *Uccellacci e Uccellini*, with Totò and Ninetto Davoli touring the periphery of Rome.

fc: Pasolini is a fundamental reference and it is no coincidence that a month after our first wandering we decided to pay homage to him in our first performance, “a blue asphalt street”, which began with one of his untitled poems. Many of the photographs of our first “giro a Roma” remind one of the small group of boys who spend their time in *Mamma Roma*, traversing fallow fields and large blocks of housing estates. The most beautiful thing about Rome is that Pasolini's image still exists and will always exist, even in the future Roman suburbs. *Uccellacci e Uccellini* is perhaps more clear

in this sense: Totò and Ninetto take a walk through a Rome that is in transformation, they walk and talk without interruption, on viaducts under construction, abandoned farms, and ancient Roman ruins, as well as their copies by Mussolini. There they also find inhabitants who are poor but with an ancient culture that has always learned to rebuild from the ruins. Last year we organised with Stalker, together with the Swiss Institute of Rome, a three-day hike that only traversed contemporary ruins. We went to see how international star projects have once again destroyed our city: Rem Koolhaas, Fuxas, and Calatrava have built projects for the World Cup or the 2008 World Swimming Championships, resulting in monumental ruins, such as the unfinished pool, which cost ten times more than initially estimated. The most incredible thing is that they managed to go unnoticed: a real monument to the plundering of the citizenry. The problem is that even today there is no one on the horizon who knows how to deal with these ruins for the construction of a new world. The contemporary, says Lorenzo Romito from Stalker, has this great capacity of not dying, of absorbing everything and the opposite of everything. Escaping and hiding is becoming increasingly difficult.

jc: On those walks through Rome you made some documents from which one can recreate the experience, imagine it, get closer, videos, photos ... but also that video “Savorengo Ker – La casa di tutti”, about the concentration camp for the Roma (gypsies) and your stimulus to create a new prototype of room built by the inhabitants themselves, in order to replace the inhuman “containers”, that ended in tragedy, ultimately burned down at the end. It’s a very exciting video. I wanted to ask you about your relationship to fiction and to the documentary and how you organise that production of documents.

fc: The issue of representation in Stalker, or better, that of the restitution of experience, would require a lot of space to be recounted; what’s more, it has been transformed over twenty years of working together. I’ll try to be brief. At first our approach was very pure, we were afraid of representation, we were sure that it could not in any case recount the original experience, it would be a substitute for it. If you wanted to understand Stalker, it was necessary to come and walk with us, to be part of Stalker. We did not want to succumb to traditional forms of representation and we wanted to avoid spectacle. Many of us were architects who did not want to draw, nor do architecture, nor painting or sculpture, and we were also opposed to fiction. We wanted the territory to self-represent itself through our experience. We had a photo camera and a film camera that was always connected. We produced an infinite amount of videos, many slides, and then created maps that looked like those of ancient navigators, with islands – the full spaces, the sedentary space of everyday life – and seas – the vacant spaces, the nomadic space of “getting lost” that we had called the present territories. In the exhibitions we mounted all this material together: on the maps we projected the slides and the video in real time, lasting as long as the excursion. Then when we started working with refugee communities and the Roma, we began to edit the videos, to give space to the encounters with people, and we moved towards a more documentary format. But in some cases we also made a kind of fiction, for example the video *Otnarat. Taranto in the inverse future*, which is imagined as if it were twenty years later. We never used theatre,

although it is a field I would very much like to explore. If I must tell you the truth, I still believe that Stalker’s most coherent artistic product is the collective experience, not its representation.

When I think of your works, the first thing that strikes me is that you really do believe in representation, that your work is always on the border between reality and fiction. You do not escape from fiction: you accept its rules of the spectacle, in order to move to the most classic of representations, to the theatre. In your career you have also started with videos constructed as fictions and then you have gone on to operate in real space, but always activating a fiction, always avoiding the “documentary”, always performing, in one way or another, expressly realising urban or architectural sets.

jc: Look, I think that the problem of representation, that aversion to it, can also be taken inversely, because what it raises, as you suggest, is the question of the distance between a “real” experience and how we can recount it later. The question of truth also raises its opposite. Declaring that one speaks from fiction is to recognise that the more false it is, the more true it can be. In this sense I think that organising a fiction can be a perfect excuse for creating a real experience. That is to say, it is a great excuse to be able to interact with the “real”, being carried away by the events. Any situation has that potential of fiction. We spoke before of *Uccellacci e Uccellini*. It is an avowed fiction, in which two actors who act, overact so much that they do nothing but interpret their own characters, Totò and Ninetto, they are nothing more than what they represent ... And how much truth there is in that film, one has the impression of watching a documentary, they are “telling” you a documentary ... fiction is not a “separate” thing, out of this world; rather, it is a way of being able to delve into reality. Marcel Broodthaers said that fiction “allows you to grasp reality and what it hides.”

In every representation there are tricks, of course. One of them and the most remarkable, I think, is to be open to improvisation, to incorporate the things that happen, that occur. There is something of walking in creating a fiction, things find their place in time. But you have to keep in mind that, in the end, and in any case, you will adopt a point of view to recount. It seems to me that neither neutrality nor the pure document exists, nor that this is an issue that can be avoided or ignored. Undoubtedly, the pure event exists, as you point out, and in reality it would be necessary to radically renounce every document. It’s difficult. Any document, from the moment someone is there to look at it, is a fiction. History – the story of events – is itself a fiction. But I would like to point out that fiction and spectacle are not synonymous. And in that sense I perfectly understand your aversion to editing, and the awareness of that danger of betraying something that happened to make it spectacular, into something else. I think we share a sympathy for the Situationists and their warnings. It seems to me that to avoid reducing something to the spectacular, it is necessary to name the elements that make it possible, and be conscious from the beginning. And also at the end: How things are shown and what relationships are established. We must be very aware of the means used to tell what we want to tell.

fc: I have seen the project for the installation for the Venice Biennale and it has made me think about many things. The history of this mobile city, a new itinerant Babylon, a nomadic tribe that moves through different parts of the world, will occupy the Spanish Pavilion, itself transformed into a strange labyrinthine theatrical space built with

stands and screens. They are objects that remind me of this theatre on the roof of Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles, a theatre that has both things in itself: theatre stages, like a staircase, and a screen, although those who sit there can only see the film or theatrical scene from the back, turning their heads or standing. Is this a deliberate reference?

jc: The Unité d'Habitation interests me a lot, for all the issues it raises as a model of social housing and its derivations in the famous suburban block, but above all because it was also inspired by the phalanstery by Charles Fourier – who has always fascinated me – and the idea of creating a community, with all its limits, flaws, and contradictions. This idea of the rooftop as a meeting place is – as we said before – something that has existed in Mediterranean culture, a place for conversations, encounters, and parties. Barcelona still celebrates the night of Saint John, the summer solstice, on the roofs, but it is now the festival that marks the exception, as does Carnival, the only day where access is allowed that the rest of the year is prohibited. At present we are witnessing the paradox that in all the cities of the world there are thousands of square meters of roofs, especially in the city outskirts, which are the result of the formal application of one of the principles of modern architecture, the flat roof, but in building them their primary use has been forgotten, they are closed and inaccessible. It is urgently necessary to rethink the spaces of the contemporary city, to jump over walls, to re-conquer them, and to imagine how to use them in another way ...

The theatre of the "Unité" that you mentioned, a stage with a wall, an object to be activated by its inhabitants, is somehow quoted, but I don't think it can be seen in isolation: I think the most relevant is that system of confrontational stands, face-to-face, and the relationships that they empower, and for that I had sought references in utopian theatre projects, most of them never constructed, such as Archizoom's "theatre of ideological encounter".

fc: Yes, this Archizoom project is fantastic, I did not catch the reference. I also wonder if with this device there was a willingness to transform the viewers into actors in this new space. Let me explain: if I sit and watch a screen under which other people are sitting watching a screen above my head, suddenly we all form part of a scene. We are looking above our heads but it will be impossible not to look at each other, reciprocally, not to put in the same image the video and other people: it works like a mirror. What happened in this fragmented theatrical *cavea* that has exploded? Is it an attempt to integrate real life into your work? Can we inhabit a set?

jc: Indeed, the idea is that what happens in the space is as relevant as what is recounted on the surface of the screen: in the surface of fiction the screens illuminate the set, are multiplied, and the limits are blurred ... In that situation perception is more alert. Any gesture takes on great importance.

This proliferation of stands that occupy the entire length of the Pavilion in Venice is part of this strategy of showing the spatial components of the moment of the "spectacle", to make them stand out. These confrontational stands, face-to-face, apart from Archizoom's project, are recurrent in many utopian theatre projects by which I was directly inspired: for example, Ilya Golosov's Great Synthetic Theatre Sverdlovsk, El Lissitzky's Meyerhold Theatre of 1929, The

Theatre Number 6 by Bel Geddes of 1915-1926. All of them propose overcoming the plan of the proscenium theatre, which delineates a clear division between actors and spectators. It is important to overcome this, because this plan is reproduced in our spaces of everyday life, the organisation of schools and universities, places of worship, parliaments ... In every case all these attempts to burst the *cavea* have in common the idea that the place of "the public" must be recognised. There is a lot to discuss about the use of language for naming those who attend a performance, a theatre, a museum, and obviously their roles ... I think it is important to talk about the place they occupy, physically, in space and to emphasise it, expand it.

El Público [The Audience] is, on the other hand, the title of a play by García Lorca, who set up an itinerant theatre called "La barraca" [The Hut] in the 1930s, in the context of the "Misiones ambulantes"¹. That is another element that intervenes in some of the videos, in that metallic construction with wheels, which has a flag, which unfolds a stage, and which we call "the pavilion", and from which the actress Laura Weismahr recounts, in a variety of places and in ten languages, "The City Coat of Arms", a short story by Franz Kafka on the role of the builders of the tower of Babel ... So, certainly, the theatre appears in many parts and serves to talk about many different things ...

fc: I also remembered that I had recently read that the Greek word "theatron" derives from the archaic "théasthai", which means – according to what Snell suggests – "to see the mouth opening", then to look with interest and amazement. Thus "theatron" does not initially indicate the theatre or its space, but the gesture of astonishment of the group of people who are witnesses of an action.

jc: Exactly, this is what it would be. Without the audience there is no theatre, even in the sense of theatre as a text, the audience is the reader. There may be no building, but the people who attend a performance are necessary. In this sense it is important which space is attributed to that audience – literally – and the space that constructs – that produces – the very presence of an audience. I agree, interest and astonishment, but the critical capacity is totally necessary, it is necessary to realise that you have your mouth open – in this sense I feel very Brechtian.

fc: I really like this idea of a movable Venice Pavilion with an audience that crosses the spaces participating

¹ [Translator's note: the "Misiones ambulantes" were a travelling educational and cultural initiative of the Spanish Republic]

in the eternal wandering. I have not yet seen the videos that will be projected, because as we write this you are wandering around the world (I would love to be with you!) with your itinerant community of Neo-Babylonians. I imagine a continuous walking, crossing borders, constructing nomadic cities, transforming into art this infinite movement of a migrant humanity that would like to return to a nomadic life. I see a proposal for an alternative nomadic life, but I cannot help but think of refugees forced into exile and kept away by our walls of well-being. When I met Constant in the last years of his life, when he was painting long lines of people escaping from war and hunger, I told myself that New Babylon was a project still alive, that one day it would be possible to realise it, not in the form of his models, but in those that the Neo-Babylonians choose. But the Babylonians we see today are the ones we see drowning in the Mediterranean every day. It is a terrible thing to think that the signing of the next agreement with Libya will put refugees in camps forever, as is the case in Turkey. Europe has decided to channel the problem away by funding new dictators. The idea is, essentially, to no longer see them on television. I am very curious to see how you resolve relating the nomadic utopia and the reality of this tragedy in the theatre of Venice.

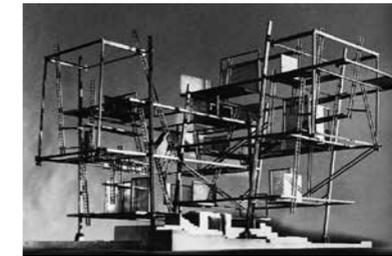
jc: In part, the project *¡Únete! Join Us!* for the Spanish Pavilion is derived from Constant's New Babylon and also from a project close in time (both started in the late 1950s) as well as in spirit: the *ville spatiale* by Yona Friedman. I was fortunate enough (like you met Constant) to meet Friedman – who at 93 is still in top form. The two projects describe – through drawings and models, texts, and collages – the idea of cities whose inhabitants are nomads, that pass through them and change the space – of environments – at the same time that they build it. For Friedman that clearly puts the question of the notion of use far above that of property. These projects, incorrectly called utopian, are the perfect platform for the imagination. What would life in New Babylon, in the *ville spatiale*, be like in detail? How would people gather together? What would they dance? Would they transport things? What, in what way? So I started to think about the seemingly contradictory idea of a "nomad city" and in the end we have brought together many people who are part of this movement, touring and occupying very different, fragmentary sites, a caravan winter parking lot, no-man's-lands in the heart of Barcelona, or the Parthenon in Nashville. Our society has created a taboo around the nomadic. Hopefully these videos, which are something like a documentary of an invented life, perhaps of the future, could serve to perceive in another manner those who have not been able to choose their destination, the forced nomads, obliged to leave their cities, their homes, devastated by bombs.



Javier Téllez, *One Flew Over the Void* (Bala Perdida), 2005. Made in collaboration with patients of Mental Health Center, Mexicali. Commissioned for inSite 05 San Diego, California, and Tijuana, Mexico, 2005. Courtesy of the artist & Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich



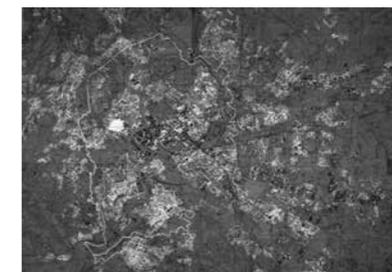
Totò and Ninetto, *Uccellacci e ucellini* (1966) film by Pier Paolo Pasolini



Constant Nieuwenhuys. New Babylon, model, 1959-1974



Yona Friedman. Ville Spatiale. Paris, 1959-1960



Roma, *Stalker attraverso i territori attuali* 5-6-7-8, October 1995