

# Essays on Psychogeography and the City as Performance



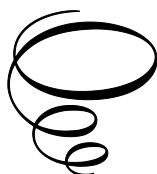
# Essays on Psychogeography and the City as Performance:

*Drifting Through Wonderlands*

Edited by

John C Green

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Drifting Through Wonderlands

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*John C Green*



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# INTRODUCTION

Our trouble is not that our cities, per se, are obsolete, but that they are no longer creative. This is the real problem of cities: to remain creative.

—Jane Jacobs

The techniques of representation in architecture are specifically related to techniques for representing the body.

—Beatriz Colomina

We live in cities, and our cities live within us.

In Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities* (1972) Marco Polo arrives in a city and learns that its origin stems from a collective dream shared by men across the world, of a naked woman running at night through an unknown city. Filled with desire, the men set out in search of the city and the woman, but, finding neither, they resolve to build a city that resembles their dream. The result is the City of Zobeide described as, "the white city, well exposed to the moon, with streets wound about themselves as in a skein."<sup>1</sup> Once built, the men wait in anticipation of the appearance of the woman of their dreams. She never appears. Time passes. The dream fades. The woman is forgotten, and this city of desire is eventually transformed by the competing needs of the marketplace. Years later the same dream is experienced again by a new generation of men, who subsequently arrive in Zobeide and set about reconstructing the city so that it more closely resembles their version of the dream. The original inhabitants of Zobeide are horrified at the transformation of their city and are left asking, "what drew these people to Zobeide, this ugly city, this trap?"<sup>2</sup>

A major theme of *Invisible Cities* concerns the relentless task of constructing and reconstructing cities. The image of the female body at the heart of the origin story of Zobeide is rendered in precise almost cinematic terms, "a woman running at night. . . seen from behind"<sup>3</sup>. Calvino's parable can be read as a meditation on the Vitruvian ideal of the *city as body*. A body that is witnessed as both a geographical reality and as lived (psycho-physical) experience, a duality that is both "outer" and "inner," biological and phenomenological. A performative space that shape-shifts in continuous dynamic relationship with the diverse histories and cultures of the humans contained within it.

How we effectively communicate our lived experience of a city is a question that is raised throughout *Invisible Cities*. In theatrical terms the arc of each of Calvino's narratives transforms Polo from the position of *spectator* to that of *actor*. As spectator he adopts the position of flaneur (in the vein of Walter Benjamin), witnessing the scenes that unfold before him in each city he visits and committing them to memory for future presentation to Kublai Khan. Calvino's description of these presentations before the Emperor resembles the non-hierarchical processes we might associate with post-dramatic experimental performance practices. Lacking fluency in the Levantine languages, Marco Polo resorts to an impressionistic score which combines, "gestures, leaps, cries of wonder or of horror, imitating the bay of the jackal, the hoot of the owl,"<sup>4</sup> together with the ritual presentation of objects collected on his journey. Spoken language is (initially) absent and the written text is replaced by a collage of lived experiences, physically embodied by the performer. As their relationship progresses, we see a similar evolution in Kublai Khan's role, shifting from bemused spectator to active participant. Their dialogue evolves as an esoteric sign-language and while, in the fullness of time, spoken language eventually emerges it proves to be a momentary eclipse of the established practice of physical performance. For Marco Polo, the spoken word is inadequate for describing the impact of urban landscapes on his individual psyche, it can only be conveyed through embodied action. He *performs* his experience of the cities he encounters, and it is this element that aligns *Invisible Cities* with the experiments in *psychogeography* originally conducted by the Situationist International movement (1957-1972) during the first phase of its existence, and subsequently adopted as a model for practice-based research into creative urbanism by a number of the authors in this essay collection.

Historically, Calvino would have encountered the Situationist's activism at first hand in Paris, where he briefly sojourned during the student uprising of 1968. The Situationist's original goal was to transform the everyday life of Parisians from their perceived roles as bland consumers of capitalism, in effect spectators of their own lives, into active participants imbued with the creative agency to affect change in the urban environment in which they lived and worked, transforming it from a site of routine consumption into a 'utopia' that eliminated the barriers between the city as function and the city as play. Initially the Situationists looked to the theatre of their day to provide the metaphor for their intended urban revolution. Commencing with an examination of the traditional design of theatre buildings, they noted the spatial divide that separated the actor from the spectator, rendering the latter passively immobile, held in thrall to the heroics unfolding onstage. In response they called for the abandonment of theatre buildings together with

the productions of plays, in favor of a democratizing theatre of the streets, collapsing the traditional duality between actor and spectator into a single figure identified by them as a *liver*. This is the composite figure of the urban creative who extends the traditional actor's psycho-physical exploration of character into the psycho-geographical exploration of the city, mapping states of consciousness and emotional responses gathered while walking purposefully through selected areas of the urban landscape. In this context, Calvino's Marco Polo may be read as a poetic realization of the urban *psychogeographer*.

Encountering a crowded thoroughfare in the City of Chloe where, "the people who move through the streets are all strangers,"<sup>5</sup> Marco Polo observes that, "Something runs between them, an exchange of glances like lines that connect one figure with another and draw arrows, stars, triangles, until all combinations are used up in a moment, and other characters come on to the scene. . ."<sup>6</sup> What is revealed to our Venetian flaneur in this moment is the rhythm of the city, the life of the street, the collective spark shared among strangers consciously performing for each other. In psychogeographical terms, Calvino's description elevates the act of walking to a level as consequential in creating a (fleeting) sense of community as the street parades, wall paintings, sculptures, soundscapes, video installations, and street performances that constitute forms of public art in our contemporary urban environments. Environments that, with innovations in design and building materials, architects are rendering increasingly performative in their own right. Where glass-fronted skyscrapers become giant screens, reflecting and projecting images of adjacent buildings, and passing cloud formations momentarily transform their facades into surreal landscapes worthy of Rene Magritte. Add to this the ubiquity of i-phone cameras and security cameras, and the urban body is now fully illustrated, a body of fragmentary sensory encounters, shapeshifting between the physical and the virtual; *cinescapes* in which even the humble bus shelter serves as a screen for projecting multiple realities.

One of the theatre luminaries who influenced the thinking of founding members of the Situationists was Antonin Artaud. In a public lecture delivered at the Sorbonne in 1933, Artaud famously invoked the impact of plague on the medieval city as a metaphor for the transformative potential of his ideal theatre. His remarks caused outrage and he later complained to Anais Nin that the audience "want to hear an objective conference on "The Theatre and the Plague," and I want to give them the experience itself, so they will be terrified and awoken."<sup>7</sup> Ninety years later we have experienced the terror and delirium of a plague on a scale that would have defied even



Artaud's imagination. The collection of essays in this volume were authored between 2020 and 2023 in the very eye of the Covid-19 pandemic. A pandemic that fractured cities, revealing the sclerosis in the major arteries of many of the corporate monocultures that have traditionally defined the topography of the urban body, marking the distinct territories of the financial, commercial, industrial, domestic and entertainment enterprises. It also exposed the raw vein of deep social inequality that has often lain festering, untended, confined to the shadows; the urban landscape as a psycho-physical wound, a contested site that provokes the question, "Who is the city for" which, in the context of this volume focused on the 'city as performance,' gives rise to another question, namely, "what role(s) does public art play in solidifying communal identity and sustainability within our cities?

Traditionally works of public art have functioned as transmitters of cultural identification and loci for community gatherings, but in the wake of the pandemic many have been exposed as sites of contention leading to questions about which communities are being represented, whose stories are being told? Such questions are at the heart of planning initiatives to deconstruct these corporate monocultures, transforming banks and office blocks into mixed-use accommodation, combining affordable domestic habitats with retail outlets, cafes, and restaurants, creating hubs for socialization supported by transportation that prioritizes public transport, pedestrians, and cyclists over cars. Such initiatives are in response to the evaporation of traditional (white collar) working patterns, formerly centered in office complexes, and the subsequent need to create work-place operations which offer employees flexibility and agency in choosing their working environments. A parallel movement is evident in the visual and performing arts reflected in the growing popularity of immersive productions created by the likes of *Punch-Drunk Theatre*, and the curators of galleries which seek to "immerse" spectators in the worlds of famous artists such as Van Gough and Mozart. Integrating techniques drawn from traditional theatre and gallery practices, performance art, club cultures, music concerts, new technologies and street culture(s) these live events create their own sensory worlds in which spectators choose when and how to navigate the physical spaces containing them.

The urban landscape, psychogeography and experimental/devised theatre practice(s) all share a condition of ephemerality, they are all works-in-progress. Therefore any answers to the questions posed above of necessity must be considered provisional and subject to continual research and discovery. What is not in doubt, however, is the vital need for cities to fulfill

their potential as centers of creativity, in order to continually nourish and sustain the urban body. A need articulated by Jane Jacobs in the late 1950s in the United States at the moment that the Situationist's were launching their psychogeographical experiments in France; a need which has been given a greater sense of urgency by the pandemic and its aftermath; a need which this collection of essays examines from multiple perspectives,

—John C Green

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## CHAPTER ONE

# CITIES AS A STAGE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PERFORMING ARTS IN PLACES / NON-PLACES OF ROME

DESIRÉE SABATINI

### **Urban and cultural spaces**

Cities are evolving rapidly thanks to the impact of digital technology applied to urban spaces (smart cities), to the growing participation of the community in requalifying the urban system (resilient cities), and to the development of performance arts in public spaces via a process of cultural requalification by the artists (site-specific performance).

In every project of requalification and development of urban contexts the cultural aspect and a capacity for creativity end up being a winning strategy for enriching urban culture. More and more often, creativity and innovation pave the way for the changes necessary today to appraise local identities, highlight its stratified nature and environmental memory, and at the same time reinvigorate social relations, promote communication, and give life to a new social class that produces creative experiences:

Several cities are acting as incubators of a veritable “creative class”, attracting the localisation of intelligence, expertise and workforce that foment the demand for particular declinations of urban quality that are indispensable for the development of new opportunities<sup>1</sup>.

The Italian urban setting of the 2000s does not rise from nothing: it is very much an inheritor of its preceding seasons, the '80s and '90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, marked by widescale urban transformations, with an ever-greater mobilisation of the populace from rural areas to the cities. A process of

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<sup>1</sup> M. Carta, *Next city, culture city*, Meltemi Editore, Milano 2004, p. 73.

social inclusion is delineated which, over the years, will go on to promote the participation of the inhabitants of the city, who today find themselves at the centre of processes of urban and territorial regeneration:

Drawing upon theories of planetary urbanism as a process that has led to a globalisation of urbanity and to the birth of new hybrid forms in which it is more and more difficult to ascertain a difference between city and non-city, the hypothesis is put forward that centre/periphery, urban/non-urban polarisations can be rethought by resorting to sensitive languages and to art – in its relational, engagée dimension – that is able to respond to the break caused by modernity, which has emphasised the dichotomies, via the many languages necessary to “regenerate the gaze” and rethink territories differently, acting as a device for knowledge, reappropriation, reinvention of urban and social space, giving life to hitherto unseen connections<sup>2</sup>.

The artistic practices of the period respond to the needs of a new community that must recognise its own identity in collective, social project. These are the years of the birth, in the United States, of socially engaged art which mutates the concept of community, in turn influenced by the concept of the perception of public space. As Meschini writes, the term “community” expands its meaning of union to also incorporate aspects of heterogeneity, to represent previously submerged histories; the aim is to attempt to transform the public space into a place that brings together the various representations of humanity:

The path leading to the creation of this new artistic modality/practice, capable of dialoguing with a different public to what classic theatre folk were used to, goes from redefining the concept of public art to an open acceptance that can comprise three different logics of the concept itself of public: that of public commissioning, that of the public understood as spectators and, lastly that of public space as a physical place of acknowledgement<sup>3</sup>.

## Independent theatres and experimentation

A change of paradigm comes about in the function of the city, a place of expressive freedom, remodelled into a performative space. Rome too is

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<sup>2</sup> S. Crobe, *Come le lucciole. Sperimentazioni artistiche e fermenti culturali tra margini territoriali e disciplinari* from *Atti della XXI Conferenza Nazionale Sui, confini, movimenti, luoghi. Politiche e progetti per città e territori in transizione*, Planum Publisher, Roma-Milano 2019, p.12.

<sup>3</sup> E.R. Meschini, *Comunità, spazio, monumento: Ricontestualizzazione delle pratiche artistiche*, Mimemis Edizioni, Milano 2021, p. 47.

transformed through heterogenous artistic experiences, the fruit of the phenomenon of the recovery of abandoned and neglected factories, offices, and housing blocks, both on the outskirts and in the centre of the city<sup>4</sup>. Multiple self-managed cultural realities are born that proclaim themselves through an active occupation of urban spaces and a direct involvement of the populace. Roman theatrical production of the late '90s experiments with its own scenic language in spaces not conventionally considered theatres, such as self-managed community centres stemming from the initiatives of municipal administrations<sup>5</sup> or self-managed occupied community centres originating from the will of the citizens<sup>6</sup>.

This counterculture proposal is widely accepted by the public as it is perceived as a cultural need that stems from the roots, close to the people, in a certain sense requalifying and regenerating spaces in disuse, making them open and active, always guaranteeing that they are welcoming and entertaining. This is a theatre that absorbs the fundamental experiences of the avant-garde theatre of the '60s and the experimental theatre of the '70s<sup>7</sup>,

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<sup>4</sup> The phenomenon of the dismissal, since the late '70s, of industrial areas depends on the economic mutation and shift "from a Fordist industrial model of production to a model oriented towards controlling global chains of value" in widely industrialised countries. cf. *Postfordismo e trasformazione urbana*, edited by E. Armano, C.A. Dondona, F. Ferlaino, Ires – Istituto di Ricerche Economico-Sociali del Piemonte, Centro Stampa Regione Piemonte, Torino 2016, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> An important recovery of an untraditional space for scenic use is the Teatro India, the second venue of the Teatro di Roma inaugurated in 1999, located in the industrial settlement of the old Mira Lanza factory on the banks of the Tiber.

<sup>6</sup> As reflected in a study on community centres conducted by Altieri and Manni, social theatrical non-places grow and create a sort of fidelity with their public: "It is undeniable that today, in Italy, the map of alternative youth culture has among its primary reference points precisely those urban spaces that are occupied and self-managed. In the field of live performance, the most basic contrasted data is enough to prove this increase. If in 1996 out of roughly 130 community centres informally censused in Italy "at least twenty regularly host theatrical shows, ten permanently offer courses or seminars, while as many contain out-and-out workshops", just eight years on, in a study of 170 centres, those proposing theatrical activities has grown steeply, so much so as to count, in the cities of Rome and Milan alone, at least twenty structures that do so". Cf. A. C. Altieri and E. Manni, *Il teatro nei centri sociali fra alternativa e nuovo mercato. Milano e Roma a confronto*, from M. Gallina, *Il teatro possibile: linee organizzative e tendenze del teatro italiano*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2005, pp. 324-25.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. F. Quadri, *Avanguardia? Nuovo teatro*, in *Le forze in campo. Per una nuova cartografia del teatro*, from *Atti del convegno di Modena, 24-25 maggio 1986*, Mucchi, Modena 1987.

carrying to fruition a trajectory that had previously envisaged performative actions in unconventional places and the need to overcome the idea of a show that is to be seen, proposing instead a participative performative experience. What arises at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a morphological mutation of the city characterised by innovation and by technology and which leads to the theatre of the 2000s, defined by Paolo Ruffini as 'Hyperstage' theatre, which definitively crystalises all preceding experiences:

Theatrical practice, as far back as the '70s, has constructed its habitat from adopted cultures beyond the humus of theatre, and in the last two decades the live dimension, inherent to digital technology, has produced a surplus of communication here and now, beyond the theatrical event, of which the character of the live encounter (not necessarily between actor and spectator) is emphasised. [...] The phenomenon which we call theatre can be recognised less and less as the genre of theatre, with its format, its history and its tradition; its constructive devices hail from diverse disciplinary fields, with a further, inevitable broadening of its codes and of its constituting devices<sup>8</sup>.

What are the causes leading to the propagation of performative arts in urban spaces? From a purely urbanistic viewpoint, the city of Rome has had a problematic expansion, due to the failed realisation of the objectives of the new urban planning scheme approved in 2005; as revealed by several urban studies<sup>9</sup>, the expansion of settlements towards the suburbs was meant to have been supported by an optimisation and promotion of activities in the historical centre, by a strengthening of the rail network and by a requalification of the suburban fabric. The absence of all this has led to the development of a new participative urban planning: the inhabitants look for forms of urbanity and public space through actions of social and artistic resistance, welcoming and asserting the need for new forms of cultural entertainment,

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<sup>8</sup> V. Valentini, *Nuovo teatro italiano*, from *alfabeta2*, n°30, anno III, giugno 2013, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> The case of Rome is considered an anomaly: "the judgment is without appeal: Rome has become the most unsustainable of cities, both from the point of view of ground consumption and that of mobility. With the link between centrality and rails having been annulled as strictly dialoguing objectives, the main outcome of the planning scheme is the subordination of the system of mobility in the location of residences and large-scale distribution". Cf. S. Annunziata, M. Cossu, *Roma oltre il Piano: forme di urbanità per la città contemporanea*, from *Atti della XIII Conferenza Società Italiana degli Urbanisti, Città e crisi globale: clima, sviluppo e convivenza*, Planum - The European Journal of Planning on-line, Roma 25-27 febbraio 2010, p. 7.

beginning in the city centre where a new type of resident can be found, made up of professionals, intellectuals, and youngsters:

The Historical Centre has become the part of the city in which a new form of citizenship is experienced, where the rules of cohabitation and relationships are questioned, where languages, cultural forms, identities are contaminated; activating paths that could find ideal conditions in the characters themselves of the historical city, in which what is constructed, the project, the urban infrastructure, is the expression itself of the morphological necessity to divide/share public and private spaces<sup>10</sup>.

The artistic experience of the Angelo Mai, an independent self-managed artistic space, stems from this commitment to “participative planning” undertaken in 2000 by the Rome City Council, the Faculty of Architecture of the Roma Tre University, and the citizens<sup>11</sup>. The collective made up of artists of varying disciplines is born four years later and as witnessed by Giorgina Pillozzi, artistic director of the Angelo Mai Open Art and Culture Workshop, the space “immediately became a sort of small-town square, a neighbourhood within the district of Monti, a place traversed by people who were not only occupiers, a moment of exchange”<sup>12</sup>. Two years later, the collective takes over and clears out an old run-down bowls club in Viale delle Terme di Caracalla, renaming it *Altrove (Elsewhere)*, but with it yet to be renovated, they are forced to be mobile when carrying out their artistic activity, guests in other theatrical spaces all over Italy, returning to their new self-managed space in 2009. The theatrical experience of these years leads to the constitution of the experimental theatre group *Bluemotion*, which in 2017 wins the Ubu Franco Quadri Prize<sup>13</sup>, an acknowledgement of artistic research that strives for sharing and hospitality, national refuge, and the ability to pursue the spread of culture<sup>14</sup>. In the motivation behind awarding

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<sup>10</sup> F. Balletti, S. Soppa, *Roma oltre il Piano: forme di urbanità per la città contemporanea*, from *Atti della XIII Conferenza Società Italiana ...*, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> To further understand the process of participative planning relating to the recovery of the Angelo Mai complex in the Monti district, recommended reading is A. Giangrande, E. Mortola, *Il caso dell'Angelo Mai nel Rione Monti di Roma*, Gangemi Editore, Roma 2011.

<sup>12</sup> M. Schirmacher, *Il Collettivo Angelo Mai di Roma trionfa agli Ubu. L'intervista*, from *Artribune*, 2 febbraio 2017, <https://www.artribune.com/artiperformative/teatro-danza/2017/02/collettivo-angelo-mai-roma-premio-ubu-intervista-giorgina-pillozzi/> (consulted on 22/07/2022).

<sup>13</sup> Italian theatre prize set up in 1977 on the initiative of the journalist and critic F. Quadri. Cf. [www.ubuperfq.it/fq/index.php/it/il-premio-franco-quadri](http://www.ubuperfq.it/fq/index.php/it/il-premio-franco-quadri), (consulted on 29/07/2022).

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

the prize what emerges in the bond between theatrical creations and civic fabric:

The Angelo Mai has offered itself to the city of Rome and to Italian theatre as a reality capable of activating a process of reappropriation of places as an alternative to the privatisation and liberalisation of the market, constructing a fabric of relationships that are passed on from the bodies and the exchange of practices and knowledge, showing new forms of habitation, of production and of management for Theatre<sup>15</sup>.

The distinctive trait of the theatrical work of this group is their willingness to conjugate aesthetic research with social action; experimentation on the stage coexisting, as such, with a relationship with an audience in search of experiences previously absent on the institutional theatrical circuit. This has led to numerous artistic residencies and collaborations with the majority of leading artists on the contemporary scene of the last fifteen years<sup>16</sup>. From 2008 to 2010 a network is born known as ZTL-pro<sup>17</sup>, Zone Teatrali Libere (Free Theatrical Zones), which promotes experimentation in independent productions in unconventional spaces and includes, apart from the Angelo Mai collective, Kollatino Underground, Santasangre/Underground, Rialto Sant’Ambrogio, Furio Camillo, and Triangolo Scalo Teatro<sup>18</sup>. This is an independent Roman theatre that recalls, in its use of space, the experimentation of the period of the *cantine* and of the avant-garde of the ’70s<sup>19</sup>; this is an artistic experience that constructs a network of professionals

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.angelomai.org/chi-siamo/>, (consulted on 22/07/2022).

<sup>16</sup> To give an idea of the artistic openness and experimentation, here are some of the many artists and companies that have performed in this period: L’Accademia degli Artefatti, Ateliersi, Balletto Civile, Eleonora Danco, Fanny & Alexander, Mariangela Gualtieri and Teatro Valdoca, Isola Teatro, Iacasadargilla, Living Theatre, Menoventi, Motus, Teatro delle Albe, Sonia Bergamasco, Charles Bradley, Vinicio Capossela, Alvin Curran, David Fenton, Agostino Ferrente, Fabrizio Gini, Claudio Giovannesi, Daniel Johnston, Giovanni Mastrangelo, Roberto Minervini, Marco Lodoli, Massive Attack, Teatro degli Orrori, Emanuele Trevi, Wu Ming, Giorgio Barberio Corsetti, and many others.

<sup>17</sup> The acronym ZTL alludes to the Zone a Traffico Limitato (traffic-restricted zones) indicated by the Rome City Council in order to regulate urban traffic.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. G. Graziani, *Zone teatrali libere. Un esperimento di produzione indipendente a Roma*, Editoria & Spettacolo, Spoleto 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Many contemporary theatre scholars question the relationship between tradition and avant-garde, between experimentation and innovation, and above all refute categories and denominations for theatre in unconventional spaces, as examined in this text; to understand this problem, of particular use is Silvia Mei’s essay in which she debates these definitions: “The pulverisation of genres, the loss of specifics, the



and spectators and creates a countertrend cultural proposal capable of maintaining, even if for only a few years, new spaces in an open, cultural city.

The operation set in motion in 2001 by the independent group Kollatino Underground with the urban regeneration of the abandoned basements of the former Giorgi technical school in Via Collatina transforms artistic and performative experiences into occasions for coming together for the neighbourhood. This cultural activity leads to the construction of new unconventional spaces dedicated to theatre and to the contemporary art scene, capable of gathering a local public that does not normally frequent institutional theatres. The particularity of the artists involved in this project is the determination with which they involve youngsters in their experimentation with the languages of theatre and of the cultural avant-garde. The Roman districts adhering to such cultural proposals grow over the years thanks to the participation of the younger population, and similar ventures take place also in the districts of Pietralata, La Rustica, Colli Aniene, Talenti / Tufello, Prenestino. So great is the relationship between suburban youngsters and the artistic activities of Kollatino Underground that in the coming years, beyond the theatrical productions themselves, hands-on training for professions within show business is generated: “The Kollatino Underground association has acted within the viewpoint of metropolitan creative activism, bringing together emerging artistic expressions that are vital, peripheral and unconventional, developing a permanent circuit of experimentation and research, becoming a place for the production, dissemination and distribution of youth culture”<sup>20</sup>.

The theatre groups Muta Imago Index and SantaSangre<sup>21</sup> have constructed their own artistic trajectory in this free social context, and today they represent the newest and most interesting contemporary theatre on the Roman scene. Characterising these artistic projects is the new possibility of

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quality of installations, the recomposed linguistic fragmentation in an expressive totality have imposed a resemanticization adapted to the breach of the borders of theatre”. S. Mei, *Disambiguazione. Come una premessa* from *La terza avanguardia. Ortografie dell'ultima scena italiana*, from *Culture Teatrali*, n.24, Annale 2015, Bologna, pp.7-11.

<sup>20</sup> <https://kollatinounderground.eu/chi-siamo/>, (consulted on 28/07/2022).

<sup>21</sup> The theatre company Muta Imago guided by Claudia Sorace and Riccardo Fazi begins its project of artistic research in 2006. The artistic collective Santasangre is born in 2001 and today is made up of the heterogeneous group of artists Diana Arbib, Luca Brinchi, Maria Carmela Milano and Pasquale Tricoci, Dario Salvagnini and Roberta Zanardo.

places/non-places, such as former bowls clubs or factories, transforming them into containers dedicated to accommodating all expressive languages for the creation of an invasive artistic experience that involves the public by way of unconventional communication.

An urban and artistic setting developed in the 2000s and throughout the following decade that has shifted its own artistic premises to concepts of access, participation and representation is the Rialto Sant'Ambrogio, an artistic space arising from the occupation of a building above the historical Rialto cinema in Via Quattro Novembre and which now has its base in a former school in the Jewish Ghetto. The urban regeneration throughout the period is founded on the activity of this space, which has been capable of proposing an alternative way of life in a central district in the capital by connecting culture, the recovery of public spaces and participative planning. The fundamental characteristic of this alternative space is certainly that of having known how to constantly grasp the needs of the locals, making them forget the formality of institutional theatres and offering them a place that is alive, capable of creating events that are original and unrepeatable, and as such unmissable. From each district of the city the citizens gather to witness concerts, installations, performances, videoart and shows, and at the same time the artists and theatrical companies have found a centre of propulsion, from the roots up, of new forms of interaction with a public in search of sharing, participation and reflection on reality<sup>22</sup>.

The other two artistic expressions belonging to the collective ZTL-pro network, Furio Camillo, and Triangolo Scaleno Teatro, share the aim of using theatre as a vehicle for the creation of a wider circuit. The theatrical experience of the Furio Camillo group begins as far back as the '80s and takes root as the only cultural reference point in the Appia area of Rome capable of embracing the demands of a vast and varied public, working on the mutability of the scene while never forgetting its strong bond with the

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<sup>22</sup> The theatre programme has been curated since 2004 by the artistic director Graziano Graziani, an attentive observer of theatrical phenomena of this period who has known how to analyse and historicise independent theatre with great accuracy, also in relation to postmodern theory: "Amid the imperatives of those theories there was the dismissal of spaces usually designated for artistic fruition, the aesthetic of fragments, a taste for patchwork as a form of anti-narrative, which indeed denied the possibility of a narrative. An adhesive of these elements is a taste for pop in its various forms, which reunites the artistic gesture by giving it a frame of glamour". G. Graziani, extract from an intervention on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2010 at a convention organised by the Zoom Festival, at the Teatro Studio di Scandicci.  
<https://grazianograziani.wordpress.com/tag/zoom-festival/>, (consulted on 29/07/2022).

neighbourhood. The group displays an attention to the territory that leads in 2003 and 2004 to a collaboration with the Rome City Council to accommodate independent theatre and guarantee that the public can come to know all of the city's artistic proposals, resulting in the festival *Grafie Teatrali* "hosting in its line up over 28 companies, both Roman and national, and premiering around forty plays, garnering great acclaim from both critics and public, and giving unique artistic and professional continuity to the Roman theatre of recent years"<sup>23</sup>. The work on the network carried out to date has brought about a heterogenous configuration of companies and artists that regularly collaborate with Furio Camillo, assuring the proposal of a theatre that today steps arrogantly into the streets of the neighbourhoods. It is sufficient to consider the company of street artists Materiaviva Performance, which brings together circus techniques and theatrical poetics<sup>24</sup>.

The company Triangolo Scaleno Teatro categorically detaches itself from the historical/theatrical matrices of reference and impresses itself onto the metropolitan fabric with the festival *Teatri di Vetro*<sup>25</sup>, created and directed by Roberta Nicolai: "Born in 2007, the event took place at the Teatro Palladium and in the housing lots of the Garbatella neighbourhood that played host to it, uniting a gaze towards theatrical research and choreography (with various spotlights on dance) with a strong popular vocation"<sup>26</sup>. The need to organise festivals answers to the people's demand for a cultural proposal that is able to reawaken the territory.

This independent circuit is not the entirety of the artistic realities present on the Roman scene<sup>27</sup>; many others have had shorter lifespans but have been of equally great impact for the urban space hosting them. This is the case of Rampa Prenestina, a building in the Prenestino-Labicano district which until the '70s was used as a storage space for the Teatro dell'Opera, later as a refuge for impoverished families. The Rampa is a walkable seven-level spiral looming over the urban space, invasive and hostile. From 2001 to 2002 a project of redevelopment through performative actions sets off a

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.teatrofuriocamillo.com/chi-siamo/>, (consulted on 29/07/2022).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. <http://www.materiaviva.it/>, (consulted on 29/07/2022).

<sup>25</sup> <https://teatridivetro.it/>, (consulted on 23/07/2022).

<sup>26</sup> G. Graziani, *Roma anni Zero* from *La terza avanguardia. Ortografie dell'ultima scena italiana, Culture Teatrali* ..., p.97.

<sup>27</sup> At the turn of the century, we also find the multidisciplinary collective Area06 made up, among others, of the Fortebraccio Teatro company founded by Roberto Latini and the Accademia degli artefatti; it is thanks to this collective that the Short Theatre festival was created in 2006, directed by Fabrizio Arcuri.

temporary artistic occupation by Residui Teatro, in collaboration with the Roma City Council and financed by the European Community Youth Programme. The project leads to the creation of an itinerant sensorial show, *De Babelica Generatione*<sup>28</sup>, open to the neighbourhood of the 6<sup>th</sup> Municipality of Rome and its inhabitants. The artistic research of the Residui theatrical group is characterised by the study of the relationship between recreational/theatrical language and urban spaces seen as inhospitable, rigid, incapable of transmitting a sense of belonging, instead creating within them conditions of sociality and of coming together. The show is the pretext for occupying the ramp and its lateral ditches that have been in a state of abandon for years, having become rubbish dumps in plain view. The dramaturgical research is as such enriched by the preceding work of recovery and re-appreciation of the area, thanks above all to coordinated programmes with local associations.

The creation and staging of the show are included in a process of urban development and of value appreciation of an area that, as the local authorities and associations hope, will become a great polyvalent centre for the youth of the district. This is a performative action intended to encroach upon the urban fabric, an experience open to the territory, in two complementary senses, with the inclusion of youngsters interested in the proposed artistic activities and a constant interaction with the neighbourhood and the city:

An emotive path that visits the possibility of inhabiting an impossible place, a road that twists upon itself and goes nowhere. [...] Residui Teatro puts pressure on clear poetical intention, aimed at transforming the urban fabric, through a visionary lens capable of producing a sort of parallel reality, that plunges to the depths of the roots in the present, and on a technical commitment that can sustain such research<sup>29</sup>.

The experimentation of this young group of artists is aimed at the transformation of a lost space, abandoned by the authorities and on the margins of social and cultural life, turning it into a place of theatre based on an individual relationship with the spectator, called upon to walk across the

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<sup>28</sup> *De Babelica Generatione, la spirale: progetto teatrale in uno spazio non convenzionale*, directed by Paolo Vignolo, choreography by Marta Ruiz, set design by Paolo Baroni, Residui Teatro company. The performance premiered on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2002.

<sup>29</sup> G. M. Tosatti, *Sui piani di una doppia spirale carrabile*, from tuttoteatro.com, Anno III, n.26/27, 6 luglio 2002, <https://www.tuttoteatro.com/numeri/a3/7/a3n2627bab.html>, (consulted on 03/08/2022).

space from top to bottom, for seven floors, interacting with an imaginary place and unreal characters. Transforming the gaze, changing viewpoints, mutating perceptions of places is what remains today of this experience of alternative theatre in urban spaces.

## Performing Media

The transformations of the last decade have changed the way the city functions. The experiences to date have shed their centrality within their districts of origin and the resulting artistic experimentation has moved towards a reappropriation of spaces designated for performance. At the same time, the community has increased its practice of urban regeneration via the process of artistic vision. Urban areas, streets, and squares, degraded as they may be, do not need cultural spaces attached to them but rather to be in constant interaction with the locals. In this context, public art was born alongside the valorisation of cultural heritage, which is to be exalted precisely for its peculiarity. We are witnessing the planning of the human landscape in which the urban experience comes about through performative actions actively involving the public with collective exploration and rediscovery, with so-called participative exploration. These are cultural and artistic movements that through social and interactive use draw from digital technology in order to propose a recreational and artistic trajectory for urban participation and innovation. The two Roman representatives that have most produced new forms of artistic participation with the aid of visual and sound innovations are Luca Ruzza and Carlo Infante.

Luca Ruzza founds the OpenLab Company in the late '90s alongside Laura Colombo, a creative laboratory composed of designers, engineers, and artists to create interactive projects “that explore the dynamic relationship between people, technology, and space through unique innovations. Projects tied to the performing arts, theatrical architecture, and stage design”<sup>30</sup>. What comes about is a transformation of the venues used, the construction of a new meaning of urban space experimenting with dramatic, post-dramatic, polyvocal, and post-media strategies that make emotive involvement possible. The digital scenography becomes the instrument of a hypertextual dramaturgy that has augmented space as its protagonist. The urban transformation is temporary, conferring upon the performative event the ability to offer uniqueness and an occasion for mutating the space which is imminent and immersive. In this sense, the performative installation

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.openlabcompany.com/about->, (consulted on 30/07/2022).

represents the means for an authentic participative experience within an everyday context growing from the dramaturgy of the lights and sounds of artistic experimentation<sup>31</sup>.

However, it is the artistic experimentation of Carlo Infante that further brings public art closer to the performing arts with his lengthy experimental work guided through an extreme attention to new forms of communication and the current cultural transformation. His artistic work moves within the concept of performing media, which has as its aim the proposal of an action that conjugates social interaction, cultural activity, and interactive media. Urban experience is born<sup>32</sup> as a virtual place that gathers all activities promoting the creative use of the city, to reinvent the public space, both on the web and on the territory. As such, Carlo Infante is able to perceive a change of paradigm in the communicative atmosphere identified by the presence of digital technology, with a new structural and linguistic repertoire typical of digital media, intended, as such, both as technique and as artistic expression. From this compositive, artistic principle comes *Paesaggi Umani*<sup>33</sup>, a project that integrates different events of psycho-geographic nomadism, urban happenings and performing media storytelling. This is a hybrid nomadic performance that unites writing, narration, action, and recreational and participative activities:

The definition we give these explorations is “walkabout”, to create habilitating conditions through peripatetic conversations tending towards dynamizing the connecting confrontation between participants in an exercise of empathy. To be more precise: this is a format of cultural innovation that is connoted as participative exploration, utilizing radio and web media to solicit those truly interactive dynamics from which performing media storytelling feeds, in which the narrative is inscribed into the action. This allows the innovation to be interpreted outside the conventional inertia of social media, using it with criteria to express a

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<sup>31</sup> Among the Roman productions by the companies involved in this experimentation are: *magiche lucigrafie* (2006); *codice ripetitivo #1* (2009); *sonic island* (2010); *criminal economies* (2013); *visual improvisation #0* (2014). Cf. <https://www.openlabcompany.com>, (consulted on 20/07/2022).

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.urbanexperience.it/>, (consulted on 30/07/2022).

<sup>33</sup> The initial project begins in the art academies of the Marche region, more specifically in Macerata in the early 2000s; later in 2008 it moves to Rome and becomes a permanent project, and in 2020 it included in the triennial project *Contemporaneamente Roma* by the Rome City Council.