In the Footsteps of Piranesi
Artistic Positions on Mile V and VI of the Via Appia Antica, Rome

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The *Via Appia Antica* (ss7), which is the oldest and longest 'avenue of the dead' in Europe, is situated in and near the southern part of Rome. From the first centuries BC to the first centuries AD, well-to-do families built their villas and mansions along this road, much like in a ribbon development. But also monumental tombs, built along this major road from Rome to Brindisi, were equally meant to be seen by travelers and passers-by. Serving as main trade route to the East, the Via Appia was always a showpiece of the nearby *La Città Eterna*. Over the centuries, this stretch of the road evolved into an exclusive residential neighborhood and cemetery at the same time. After many of the funerary monuments had fallen into decay and even disappeared in the foliage for centuries, they were recovered in the modern era.

In particular since the eighteenth century, the Via Appia Antica also attracted the attention of artists from around the world who represented elements of it in their paintings, drawings, etchings and photographs. I developed an interest in how they selected a specific angle, perspective or point of view for their representation of the funerary monuments along the road. I wondered what would happen when you try to figure out the coordinates of their position and subsequently take pictures from the exact same spot. What are the changes you observe? How does your new image of the monument and its surroundings compare to the images made in the past? Why did one take up that particular position way back then, and how did the monument's relation to its immediate surroundings change over time?

These questions served as a starting-point for my research on Mile V and VI of the *Via Appia Antica* in Rome. Along these two miles of the archeological project 'Mapping the Via Appia' – initiated by Radboud University Nijmegen (RU) and the Royal Netherlands Institute Rome (KNIR) – I have tried to establish the exact positions used by architects, painters, draughtsmen, archeologists and photographers for making their works of art. Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) is leading the long line of those who mapped the Via Appia Antica, followed by the Italian draughtsman Carlo Labruzzi (1748-1817), who joined the efforts of archeologists, and several anonymous draughtsmen who did the *Grand Tour*. Next came the early photographers in the mid-nineteenth century, followed by photographers from the 1950s and 1960s – who represented this famous 'memory lane' in a meanwhile radically changed urban landscape – and by creative reinterpretations by artist in the 1990s.

The Dutch research project in which I participate focuses not only on this 'avenue of the dead', which in fact was newly designed in 1850-1853 by architect/archeologist Luigi Canina (1795-1856) as if falling within the grounds of a preserved park, but also on its immediate vicinity, behind the low 'wall' put in on both sides by Canina. This wall structure also serves as my starting-point. The approximately 10 meter-wide stretch, which today marks the ancient road for a length of 11 miles (7 at the time of Canina), has determined the parameters of the (current) Parco Regionale dell'Appia Antica since the mid-nineteenth century. My research centers on a two-mile stretch of the Via Appia Antica and the funerary monuments within this zone. I start from these monuments (and their context), because it offers me a fixed base for measuring the vanishing points, the nature of the position/ angle (high or low), mutual points of contact, the perspective and the exact position of the monument vis-à-vis the road. It is an ongoing project, and I am convinced that my further research will lead to more unexpected findings and new points of view.

My research project does not focus on a monument as such or all the archeological knowledge about it, but on the exact spot taken up by artists for observing and representing the monument. By following in their footsteps, I try to find out which angle they chose and why, what they saw and did not see, or what they wanted to see, as well as which changes over time become noticeable. In a way any place or location would be suitable for a project such as mine, as longs as specific artistic representations are available. Still, precisely on the Via Appia Antica it is not so self-evident that place and memory of it converge in a natural way. This road is in fact a perfect example of a site that has been in motion for over two millennia, always adapting to new needs and the ravages of time. Behind the scenes of the

seemingly eternal monuments, paradoxically, a never-ending process of change has been unfolding. In this project I concentrated on the question of how this has played out along the Via Appia Antica, the road that like a green lung crosses southern sections of Rome and further. The different perspectives and in particular the often clashing interests regarding this ancient stretch of road – preservation versus opening up for specific uses – served to underpin my study of the historical vantage points. The places of meaning along this road eternalized in paintings, etchings and photographs prove to be part of a much larger continuum.

But how do to situate my project in the discussion of this symposium? More specifically, how does my research (method) relate to its concerns about method? My ethnographic approach, I believe, involves a method for enriching the (historical) context of the funerary monuments, if only by trying to follow in the footsteps of my artistic precursors. I thereby rely on the medium of photography, using the camera as a tool for meta-observation. As such this ethnographic method in part follows from the kind of research questions I am concerned with and the medium I work in. I thereby deploy the object-subject relation in a historical dimension. As an artist-researcher, or contemporary image-maker, I explore the challenges of my fellow-image-makers from the past by zooming in on the exact location of their creative intervention. The participating observer becomes an observing participant. This ethnographic gaze or attitude is not geared to breaking down cultural, social or political boundaries. Nor does it reflect a forced or trendy 'ethnographic turn' in my work.[1] My 'transgression', my crossing of cultural boundaries from an ethnographic perspective, involves a way of dealing with history. This method is realized in the history of the image, which is frozen in the single moment of making a photo, and as such this method coincides with the material and context. I am less interested in object-related (photographical or ethnographic) study than in (re-)establishing a perspective on how and why a particular 'artist' (or: artist/architect, photographer/archeologist, artist/researcher) once approached that object: which position did he/she take up and why? What did he/she see from that spot, and what do I see today? I act from 'within', as it were, from the angle of the investigated position, from the vision of the historical artist. In this respect, I play with the notion of 'looking and being looked at' – as an almost voyeuristic exchange of roles that occurs in the moment of photography. The ethnographic other in fact is the 'subject' of the historical artist. As a contemporary artist I study this subject as an 'object', an ethnographic other. This alterity or otherness is not outside of me, does not involve a colonial approach or representation of an exterior or alterity indigenous object.[2] Rather, the object 'fuses' as it were with the 'subject' because I put myself in the shoes (read: vision) of the historical artist. Only the constraints of time set limits…

In this sense my research is guided by the question of whether 'the artist transforms her own 'self' into the 'other' or whether the (observed and described) 'other' is transformed into a 'self' in the artwork'. The change of roles can take place through my camera's 'extra eye', and it is thus fixed (momentarily). The underlying concern is that in this way the changes of the place are revealed, or made more insightful at least – in a confrontation with time itself.

My approach is craftsman-like. Based on a historical image (drawing, water color, etching, photograph), I study the position of the old master in situ through observations, analyses and measurements. To me this is much more difficult with respect to an (early) master such as Piranesi than with respect to a photographer. For instance, Piranesi, for his comprehensive publication *Antichità Romane* (1757), relied not only on his detailed observations and studies on the Via Appia Antica but also on his unbridled imagination, and Labruzzi added to his pen drawings a more romantic perspective. In contrast, a camera produces an unaltered registration. The lens type or negative format of a photograph from the past may be hard to verify, but it is well possible to reconstruct the exact setting of most photos. Still, some nineteenth-century artists, such as the brothers Fratelli Allinari (as oldest photographic firm active since 1852) and Domenico Anderson (1854-1914) were all but 'lazy painters'.[3] They did their utmost to find the most spectacular or subtle angle to show what they wanted to show: the Via Appia in an infinite perspective, or the Via Appia as a convex road – formed by lava, which in the Iron Age flooded the ancient road from the nearby volcanic mountain range, the Colli Albani. Or just take the changes of time itself on the Via Appia Antica, as recorded in detail by, for instance, the archeologist and fairly good photographer Thomas Ashby (1874-1931), who in the late nineteenth century made photos of the 'walls' put in by Canina half a century before. More than

half a century later, in 1968, the changes of time were photographed again by Maria Grazia Cederna, wife of Antonio Cederna (1921-1996), who expressed his discontent with the pollution and decay of the Via Appia resulting from the urban developments in the 1950s in pamphlets such as 'I Gangsters dell'Appia'. These changes are still at work. The Via Appia, the 'Queen of Roads', has no eternal status: its special quality is precisely reflected in its permanent change.

My photography may be explained as a kind of re-photography of historical positions taken up by artists in the past. Re-photography involves the act of repeating earlier photographs of the same site, which automatically implies a time lag between the two images: a 'then and now' view of a particular scene. In my case the photography is very precise and involves a careful study of the original image and place.[4] Re-photography was initially developed and applied within photogrammetry. This branch of photography deals with the interpretation and measuring of visual materials in order to determine and describe the shape, size and location of objects, such as in ecological systems, or other phenomena which change slowly over time.[5] The procedures involved (or re-photography as visual method) were adapted to, and became formalized as, a form of photographic documentary and image-based research in the mid-1970s in the US, especially for researchers in sociology and communication interested in understanding social change. Today re-photography has a popular application in mobile applications or Apps (Timera).

While in re-photography the challenge is to link a historical photo as well as possible to a new one, so as to re-experience the historical or social situation in the present (such as a bombing), I am in fact concerned with the specific views of historical image-makers, their conceptual positions, their reasons for choosing a particular spot or angle to record a historical location. I am primarily interested, in other words, in the context of specific images and photographs.

All image-makers offer an interpretation of their time. Even when following in the footsteps of their precursors, they take up a new and also historical position. As such they are handmaids of time. They can only confirm that time, in their time, changed once again. This can be communicated in a romanticized fashion in a drawing, through the unalterable eye of the camera or in other ways. Regardless, their own footprints literally mark the always historical role of time, providing yet another new perspective in an ever wider continuum. Instead of existing as a static given, a place of meaning is overwritten all the time, thus taking on new meaning.

My approach is as follows. I study the original image or photo, observe the monument in situ, and try to determine the exact position of the artist. I look at the horizon, the vanishing points, the perspective of the road and the perspectival shortening of the monument, the cut (of the image), the points of contact (between different monuments). In short, I deploy some of the basic lessons in perspective from the 'art-academic tradition'. Next, I fix the scene by defining the GPS coordinates, make a photo of the original artist's position and a new photo from that exact same spot, and in this way I try to discover why and how at the time the monument in context was represented from this angle. Affective aspects of place thereby play a major role. As an artist, you need to get to know a 'given' place on your own.[6] By repeating the journey, visiting the same place again and again, recognizing the influence of the seasons or of the time of day, or the light falling onto the monument, you make a specific place your own, whereby gradually its unique identity will reveal itself, an identity that in this instance has been variously represented by artists in the past. All the time the context is the *Via Appia Antica*, the road in the immediate vicinity of the monument. This is no easy task, for you do not simply take a picture to find out from which exact position a previous image was made. Rather than with snapshots, or recordings of moments, my concern is with recordings of time, and this calls for careful attention and much patience. The digital or, in particular, analog camera functions as a *camera obscura*, as a closed black box, in which moments from different times briefly converge and instantly vanish again. Using an analog camera will even put more pressure on the method of detailed observation and analysis, given the technological constraints (a roll of film has only 36 slides).

The new photos seemingly record historical perspectives, but 'merely' reveal the changes of the place in context. And this is in fact my basic concern. How do you record or 'freeze' places of meaning within the quality of change? ('Freeze' is an intrinsically ephemeral notion of course: once, after a big rain shower, I saw the tropical summery *Via Appia Antica* suddenly change into an autumn-like, transient place…). At the same time, the so-called *genius loci* may well last in artistic method

photography. The atmospheric quality of place cannot be captured in a single moment; only in the passing of time more elements will reveal themselves. But where I as an artist try to 'capture' a place, and appropriate it (the beginning of an artistic translation), my focus as artistic researcher with an ethnographic attitude or gaze is in fact to let go of the place, so as to make it subject to study and analysis. 'Contact' occurs only when time and position/angle, through the extra camera eye, converge. Sometimes an unexpected gift of time renders new details visible. For example, I 'discovered' a stretch of the ancient road near the Casal Rotondo, which in a photo from the early 1950s was not visible, or through the eyes of the old master (or my camera's 'extra eye') you see how exactly the road seems to go on infinitely when looked at from a specific perspective.

After the many hikes along the Via Appia Antica, physical limits exceeded, I have gathered an array of data concerning the various positions of artists in the past, the coordinates of those positions, my photos based on these coordinates, descriptions of the historical images/photos, the motivation/ history of the artists involved and my observations about changes of the scene in relation to the present. I process all data in a database (Excel), which meanwhile covers 10 monuments, 77 positions/angles of some 35 different artists, as well as thousands of pictures. Together with historical prints, my own new photos serve as starting-point for my actual artistic processing. As a further expansion of the project, I will also conduct detailed studies of the historical context from which the old masters acted. It is a work in progress indeed.

The overall aim is not so much to 'eternalize' the *Regina Viarum*, but to contribute, on the basis of the varied documentation and many temporal perspectives, to the recording of time changing. The different masters can be said to work collectively on a report, a historical record of continuous change implied in the progress of time, and we merely follow in their footsteps, engaging in the very same endeavor. It situates contemporary research in a historical context and toward the future, of which we are part as well. The ethnographic method allowed me to broaden and deepen my artistic research.

The Dutch project 'Mapping the Via Appia', as set up by KNIR and RU, provided me with a context to do fieldwork as artist/researcher within a larger multidisciplinary academic frame. It is crucial, in my view, to pursue interaction and exchange between disciplines or research domains. I see myself as a contemporary pioneer who breathes new life into the romantic idea of the *Grand Tour* – as an artist who is a fellow-traveler of and in dialogue with archeologists, but who from her own research vision and conceptual development throws another light on scholarly research. My contribution to 'Mapping the Via Appia', rather than just being another autonomous art project, is part of a larger whole, an artistic part that in its own way contributes to the cultural biography of this specific area: the tangible past incorporated into the all-encompassing present; to follow in the historical footsteps that left traces in the present, and to 'activate' them, as it were, to render visible the changes of time. Thus my contemporary research adds yet another episode to the chronology of time, while my artistic 'digging' adds another dimension to the ongoing archeological digging. We are all engaged in excavation, unearthing stories, after all.

As a study, *In the footsteps of Piranesi* is an investigation of the actual positions or points of view of my artistic precursors. Although it is common to try to look into the minds of artists from the outside, I think it is more worthwhile to try and see what they saw – using their 'footprints' as literal basis of their (inner) perspective on the outside world. Turning upside down points of view is the expression of a principle, a certain method to re-conquer time, if only for a moment.[7]

Notes:

1. I refer to the critical standpoint from Hal Foster against the 'Ethnographic turn', which was taken by artists from of the mid-1960s. In: H. Foster. *The Artist as Ethnographer*, in 'The Return of the Real'. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996

2. I refer to Claude Levi-Strauss 'The Savage Mind' and the parody on colonial ethnographic research, as such described in 'The Ethnographic Burlesque'. In: C. Levi-Strauss. *The Savage Mind*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637, 1966, and: B. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett. *The Ethnographic Burlesque*. TDR The Drama Review: A Journal of Performance Studies 42,2,T158 (Summer 1998)

3. I refer to the term, used by Hans den Hartog Jager in an article for NRC, which at the time caused a stir criteria and filed suit to understand the rapidly emerging (documentary). H. den Hartog Jager. *Luie Schilders*, in NRC, 27.09.2003.

4. Re-photography is the act of repeat photography of the same site, with a time lag between the two images; a "then and now" view of a particular area. Some are casual, usually taken from the same view point but without regard to season, lens coverage or framing. Some are very precise and involve a careful study of the original image.

5. Since the 1850s techniques were developed for surveying and scientific study, especially in systems (Paganini, 1880; Deville, 1889; Finsterwalder, 1890) of photogrammetry in which precise measurements made from triangulation of points in numbers of photographic records are made in order to track changes in ecological systems. Re-photography continues to be used by the scientific world to record incremental or cyclical events (of erosion, or glacier flow for example), or to measure the extent of sand banks in a river, or other phenomena which change slowly over time. For example Sebastian Finsterwalder (1861–1951) was a German mathematician and glaciologist. Acknowledged as the 'father of glacier photogrammetry', he pioneered the use of repeat photography as a temporal surveying instrument in measurement of the geology and structure of the Alps and their glacier flows. The measurement techniques he developed and the data he produced are still in use to discover evidence for climate change. Following the 1878 work of Italian engineer Pio Paganini and others, Finstenwalder advanced methods for reconstruction and measurements of three-dimensional objects from photographic images. These procedures were adapted to, and became formalized as, a form of photographic documentary and image-based research in the middle 1970s. Re-photography has also been a useful visual method for researchers in sociology and communication to understand social change. Three main approaches are common – 1. photographs of places, 2. participants or activities, 3. functions or processes – with scholars examining elements of continuity. This method is advantageous to studying social change due to the capacity of cameras to record scenes with greater completeness and speed, to document detailed complexities at a single time, and to capture images in an unobtrusive manner. Repeat photographs offer "subtle cues about the changing character of social life" (Reiger, 1996, p. 7).

6. 'Given' refers to: not found yourself, but given by historical artists. At the same time it refers to what Christian Norberg-Schulz means by the atmospheric quality of a place and how it gives itself. In: C. Norberg-Schulz. *Genius Loci*. Towards a phenomenology of architecture. Academy Editions London, 1980.

7. Quotation from Shelly's biography, in 'Footsteps'. In: R. Holmes. *Footsteps*, chapter 3: Exiles, pag. 174 (Dutch version 'Ballingen')

See also: www.brusselsartsplatform.be