



**External  
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**Dallas Fellini**

**STRADA STATALE 696**

**May 27<sup>th</sup> – July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022**

**Exhibition Essay by Anna Daliza**

Credits: Originally commissioned by Trinity Square Video

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1.

As a starting place for *Strada Statale 696*, Dallas Fellini takes inspiration from family trips to Celano, their grandparents' home town in Italy. Embedded in those childhood memories is the profound sense of comfort of being surrounded by one's closest kin. To Italians, family is the most important thing, and among one's own family, there is a sense of unquestioned belonging. No matter who you are, a relative distant or near, if you are family you belong.

Fellini juxtaposes the memory of comfort and safety with its antithesis: the paranoia and fear of navigating the public domain, a social and cultural epicentre, the Italian piazza.

2.

*There are no women in the square*

*The men wear ironed shirts*

*Their hands are behind their backs*

*Who irons their shirts*

The piazza is an open space, usually at the helm of a church or important historical building. Often it is centered on a fountain or bronze statue. Cafes surround the open-air centre, and their bistro tables intermingle with parked vespas and bicycles. During the day, men sit together sipping espressos from little porcelain cups at one cafe which is more popular than the rest. Women pass through the piazza on foot carrying shopping bags. In the early evening, the men move to another cafe, the one with a TV that faces the street, to watch football and smoke cigars. At this same time, the wives are making dinner, and the kids are playing in the garden or the street.

Just after dinner is when the piazza comes into full bloom. It is where you go to see and be seen. Families traipse through the centre, usually dressed-up, eating ice cream from cups with little plastic spoons. Once again, the men find some way of breaking off into groups. There are always groups of men.

3.

The piazza is a stage. The actors know their parts so well that they perform automatically. The performance is the same every night. One night, a new actor appears. They don't know their lines or their blocking. Their presence alone is a disruption. The piazza is alert.

*A cross to bear*

*There are one million eyes*

*I am their enemy*

4.

I return to my laptop after filling a cup with coffee from my Bialetti, adding hot water and oat milk. Dallas Fellini's VR work has been playing on a loop all morning:

*The artist's body moves awkwardly, rigidly—dancing as if fitting themselves into narrow passages, avoiding invisible obstacles—in the foreground of a Google Maps Street View of a piazza in Celano, Italy. In the background, there are some benches and well-manicured trees, to the left there is a stage, and to the right there is a church. Some men sit around a table.*

*Playing over the video is a soundscape, generated through AI by using the Street View image of the piazza. Coupled with the ambient noise is a spoken poem made up of two voices: The first voice is the rather monotonous voice of the Duolingo Italian language learning app. The digital voice first says the phrase, then the artist repeats it, mimicking the process of learning the Italian language through the app.*

I minimize this tab and open the meeting link, and Fellini's smiling face replaces the body on my screen. I silently observe how different their voice sounds from when they made this work in 2020.

When I first took in *Strada Statale 696*, I was struck by the parallels between the challenges that I have faced and the experience the work depicts. Fellini admits that they wanted this essay to be written by someone who understands the feeling of being dissected by others in public space. No one understands that subjectivity the way a trans person does.

We talk about our mutual understanding, and the crossovers of our experiences, and quickly realize that we have many more questions than we have answers.

5.

The layers of Italian masculinity are at odds with each other. While in North America, and most of the West, Italian men are allowed to behave in ways that would elsewhere be deemed as too feminine. They kiss on the cheek (and sometimes even the lips), wear perfume, coif their hair, accessorize excessively, wear bikini briefs to the beach, and unbuttoned blouses and tight jeans in the evenings. Yet, they are in ways more hyper masculine than men in North America.

Fellini admits that they do not understand Italian masculinity, but knows with certainty that they do not fit within it. Italian masculinity is like the droning voice of the Duolingo app. It is the Rule, demanding imitation, and though Fellini strains to pronounce the words correctly, their version will never be exact.

*He walks in a circle*

*I am standing still*

7.

Italians get a bad rep for being intolerant, but what's really at the heart of that reputation is complicated. At first glance, Italy might seem like a country where homogeneity thrives. The peninsular nature of the landscape demands isolation, as it blocks Italians from cultural exposure to neighbouring countries. Yet, historically, Italy has been a site where cultures from afar have come to mix (the Romans, Ottomans, etc). That intermingling has sewn

diversity into the fabric of Italian DNA.

Now, after centuries of cultural preservation, each region is known and celebrated for what makes them unique: the best olive oil, mozzarella di buffala, or wine. Every village has a dialect. Three villages, one by the sea, another in the mountains, and the last in the valley, all within thirty kilometres of each other, might use a different word to say the same thing.

These markers of individuality are important to Italians. Which is why any deviation from “the way of things” is perceived as a threat. Consequently, many are perceived as outsiders.

## 8.

Dallas Fellini’s *Strada Statale 696* tells the story of an outsider. To me, the greatest tragedy in this story is that amongst their family, and in their childhood memories, the outsider remembers at one time belonging.

The outsider is not the artist alone, but is also the trans(gender) and queer Celanese of the past, whose oral history Fellini discovers from their Nonna.

Separating the artist from this history is a language barrier, made all the more complicated by the nearly-lost Celanese dialect which their Nonna speaks, as well as her worsening memory loss. If given the chance to travel back in time to 1940s Celano, the artist would surely have many questions for the people who their Nonna described as trans and queer. One question I would ask is this: How does one survive as an outsider in their own homeland?

*Strada Statale 696* is like an answer to that question. Satellite imagery, language learning tools, and virtual reality create a world which is tenuous and fragmented; Each element is untethered, like the history Fellini has learned from their Nonna. Unimaginable though it may seem that anyone could belong in such an environment, we witness the artist’s body,

strikingly disjointed, straining to fit within “the way of things.” We hear their voice repeating the foreign language effortfully.

*You can't run fast enough*

*You can't pray hard enough*

*I have to go home*

*Me and you, we are not safe here*

## 9.

When disappearing or not existing are the only ways to ensure your survival, you leave no legacy.

Dallas Fellini's work restores a legacy to those who had to decide between disappearing and not existing. The trans people of Celano's past are some of those who had to choose, but all outsiders, anyone whose identity is at odds with culture, must make a similar decision.

But aren't disappearing and not existing the same thing?

Fellini's VR work seems to present a third option. *Strada Statale 696* is a window into the experiences of trans people, past and present, struggling to belong. We witness on video loop their Sisyphean struggle, the strange dance, fitting and dodging, crawling and contorting, imitating, emulating, and scratching their existence into history. I don't know how else to put into words this third option, but I know it is the one we outsiders must choose, lest we survive only through fragmented memories, lost in translation, and swallowed by the earth.