

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

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Streetstories

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***Streetstories* Instagram as Drift**

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Abstract

Streetstories is an artistic practice that has emerged over the past five years (2020–2025), rather than being deliberately designed. It arose out of necessity — an embodied practice that consists of walking, discovering, capturing, and posting as Instagram Stories frames of rather insignificant dislocated things.

It celebrates the notion of chance — the spontaneous act of photographing seemingly unimportant textual objects found while walking on the street and sharing them. This project embraces the following principles: artistic practice as a minimal gesture of everyday life, resonating with Perec's concept of the significance of insignificant (Highmore, 2018) and the idea of chance. It serves as a gentle reminder to frame the minimal messages and symbols that are spontaneously encountered.

In an age of constant speed and endless scrolling on social media — where everything can be filtered, polished, altered, or AI-generated to attract attention and engagement — *Streetstories* represents a conscious, perhaps radical choice to frame, share, and archive unimportant textual traces or small objects that catch my eye while walking. While presented exclusively through Instagram Stories, the project intentionally resists the platform's aesthetics of curation and enhancement on which I reflect in this paper.

Keywords: Instagram, Chance encounters, Embodied practice, Urban trace, Significance of insignificant

Figure 1

A screenshot of Streetstories (2020-2025). A playing card found on the street. Photo by the author.

**What is *Streetstories*?**

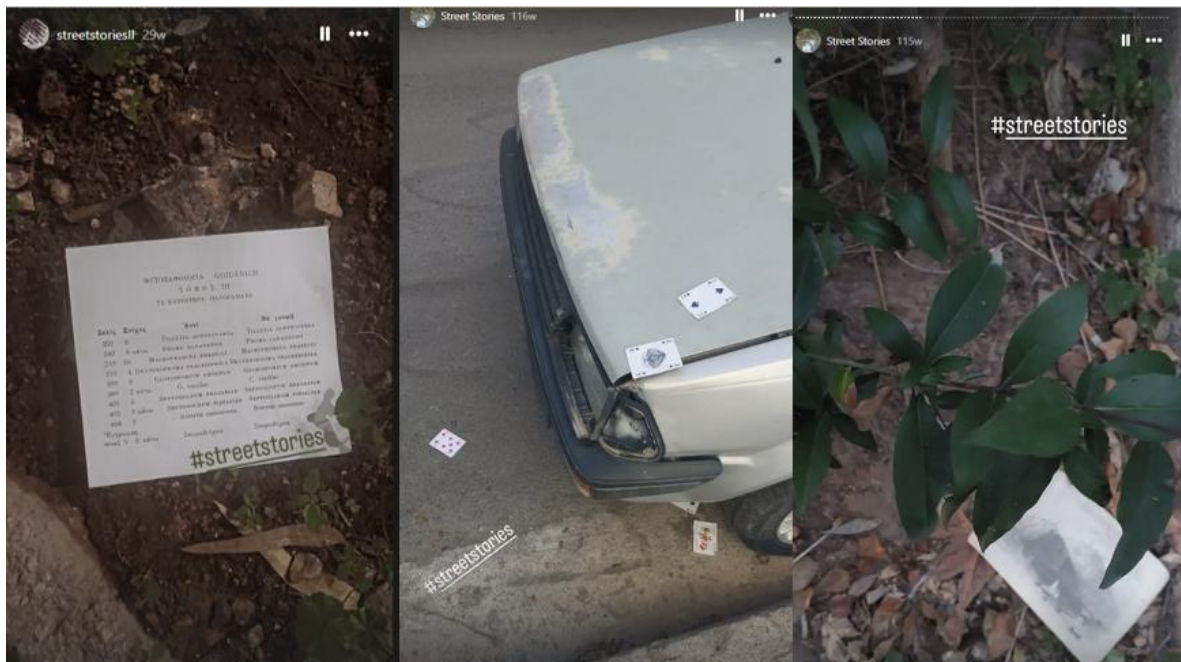
Streetstories is an ongoing artistic practice born from curiosity and chance, shaped by unimportant paper traces found in public space. During COVID, when walking became the primary way to engage with the unpredictable and break the lockdown routine, *Streetstories* first emerged through the discovery of scattered playing cards. The project began as a form of urban divination: a generative fortune-telling practice in which found objects became messages, symbols, or fragments of unseen narratives. These encounters framed the street as a space of serendipitous meaning, where the residue of everyday life could be read like a shuffled tarot deck. Over time, *Streetstories* has grown into a sustained exploration of the mundane and discarded, documenting ephemeral textual fragments, packaging, notes, signage, and other overlooked materials encountered while walking (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8 and 9).

The project continues to evolve in real time, at its own pace, leaving the decision of the next post to the moment when the street reveals itself — like an urban fortune-teller. It unfolds without scheduling, production, or design, shaping itself through the consistency of its practice. The random elements that are lost and found have established their own rules for what *Streetstories* is and what is not. Instagram in *Streetstories* case, functions as a heterotopic digital space — ephemeral, accessible, and attuned to the temporal rhythms of walking and witnessing. It becomes an invitation to create an algorithmic ritual celebrating unimportant, mundane traces within a medium often dominated by spectacle.

No filters or visual corrections are applied, countering the hyper-aestheticised “Instagram gaze”, to use a widely now used term that was introduced by Feldman and that was critiqued by Jurgenson (2019,). Instead, *Streetstories* embraces Manovich's (2017) concept of vernacular visuality: image-making grounded in immediacy, awkward framing, and the refusal of spectacle. Through this approach, Instagram becomes a heterotopic digital space — ephemeral, accessible, and attuned to the temporal rhythms of walking and witnessing.

Figure 2

Streetstories screenshots (2020-2025). Photo by the author.



Presented exclusively through Instagram Stories, the project resists the platform's aesthetics of curation while embracing ephemerality. Each story lasts 24 hours, reflecting the transient nature of the depicted object, which may drift away with the wind, pedestrian steps, or the morning street cleaning.

The practice draws on De Certeau's (1984) concept of walking as a spatial tactic, where the pedestrian inscribes meaning onto the urban landscape. The found objects, captured spontaneously and without intervention, function as what Foucault (1986) termed heterotopias: real yet othered sites that disrupt normative spatial and narrative logic

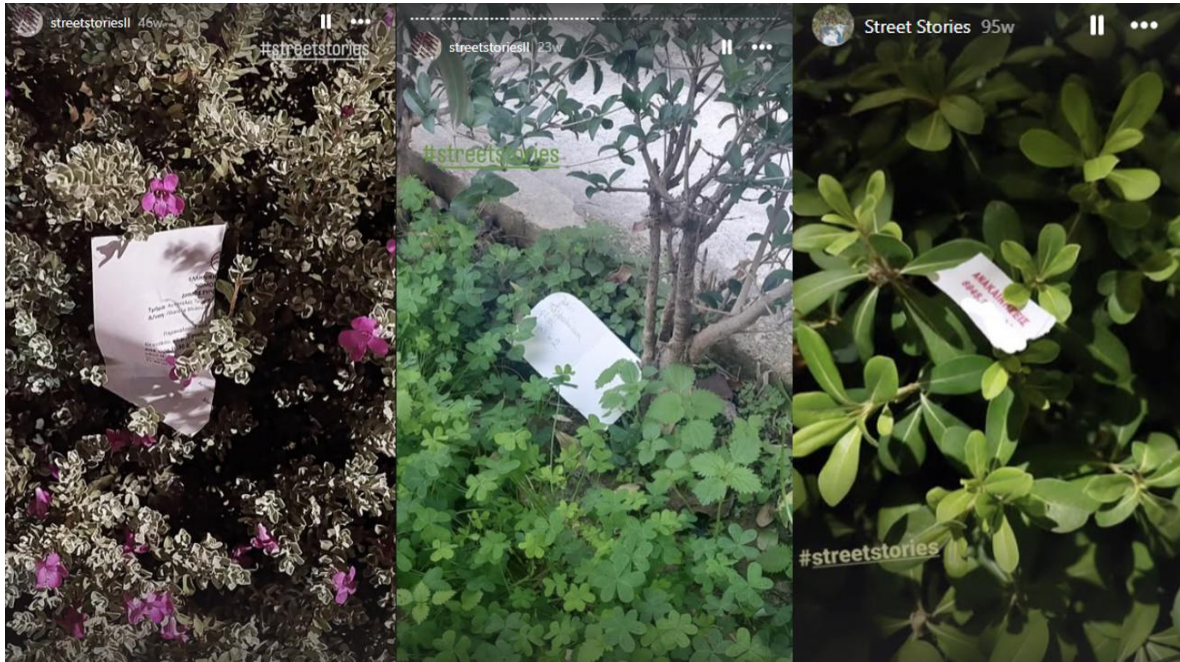
From Instagrammism to Drifting

The question of why people post, share, view, or like content can be examined from various perspectives: digital and social media marketing, human-computer interaction, media philosophy, or sociopsychology. Unquestionably, social media are powerful tools for companies' and professionals' visibility and marketing (Kietzmann, 2011). Researchers have identified several reasons why individuals spend time on social media: social interaction,

information seeking, passing time, entertainment; relaxation; communicatory utility, and convenience utility (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Posting on social media is usually a way of curating a persona and a brand — not only through professional profiles but also through individual ones. We are often asked to self-censor to maintain a certain image based on an “imagined surveillance” (Duffy & Chan, 2019, p. 119-138).

Figure 3

Notes grown on trees. Streetstories (2020-2025). Photo by the author.



Jurgenson (2019) criticises the hyper-aestheticised “Instagram gaze,” while Manovich (2019) recognises Instagram’s influence in shaping a whole lifestyle. Data analytics can categorise images people post on Instagram based on characteristics such as colour, contrast, shapes, and objects, using automated algorithms of pattern recognition on the frame of pixels or through metadata (e.g., time of day, location, demographics). Manovich, however, brings a social dimension to this analysis, introducing the concept of *Instagrammism*, which categorises posts as casual, professional, or designed. Instead, *Streetstories* embraces what Manovich (2017) calls “vernacular visuality”: a mode of image-making grounded in immediacy, awkward framing, and the refusal of spectacle. Through this, the project re-appropriates Instagram as a heterotopic digital space — ephemeral, accessible, and attuned to the temporal rhythms of walking and witnessing.

What is worth capturing? Chance, Algorithms and Digital Embodiment

From a phenomenological perspective (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; 1968), embodiment is not merely about having a body but about acknowledging that every small gesture or act,

such as taking a picture as an embodied act. According to theories of embodied cognition (Clark, 2008), every conceptualisation is a metaphor or a name given to an already recognized embodied experience. *Streetstories* deliberately exclude any visual representation of my body; embodiment exists through the frame as a memory of walking, discovering, and capturing.

Figure 4

Streetstories screenshots. *Streetstories (2020-2025) Photo by the author.*



I came to see the act of capturing as inherently performative, with every document, photograph, or digitised artifact serving as evidence of absence — a double absence: first of the original object or action being captured, and second, of the person who performs the act of capturing it. The #streetstories algorithm:

1. *Get out of the house.*
2. *Go where you are supposed to or just walk.*
3. *If you see something “worth capturing.”*
4. *No adjustments, no filters.*
5. *Upload to Instagram Stories.*
6. *Add #streetstories.*
7. *Continue.*

This raises the question: *what does chance have to do with algorithms?* While recent technological advancements in AI and social media connect this idea to digital media and virtuality, it was not always the case. Historically, algorithmic or generative art was a way to integrate chance into the artistic process (Lejeune, 2012; Norrena, 2003), incorporating unpredictability and spontaneity into creation.

Figure 5

First Perspective of view (POV) trend examples. Photos from Pexels.com by Alex Garcia ¹ (on the left and Taryn Eliot² ton the right.



In resonance with rethinking — or, in fact, remembering — the connection between algorithms and embodied or ritualistic practices (Pasquinelli 2019), *Streetstories* pose a question about what embodiment means in relation to digital media. While the sense of embodiment in computer science is often achieved by repressing the body or part of it through a virtual avatar in different POVs (points of view) to convey immersion (Figure 5). *Streetstories* states that the act of photographing and posting is already an embodied, performative activity implied through the frame. Every frame is a first-person perspective of the one who takes the photo; we see through their eyes.

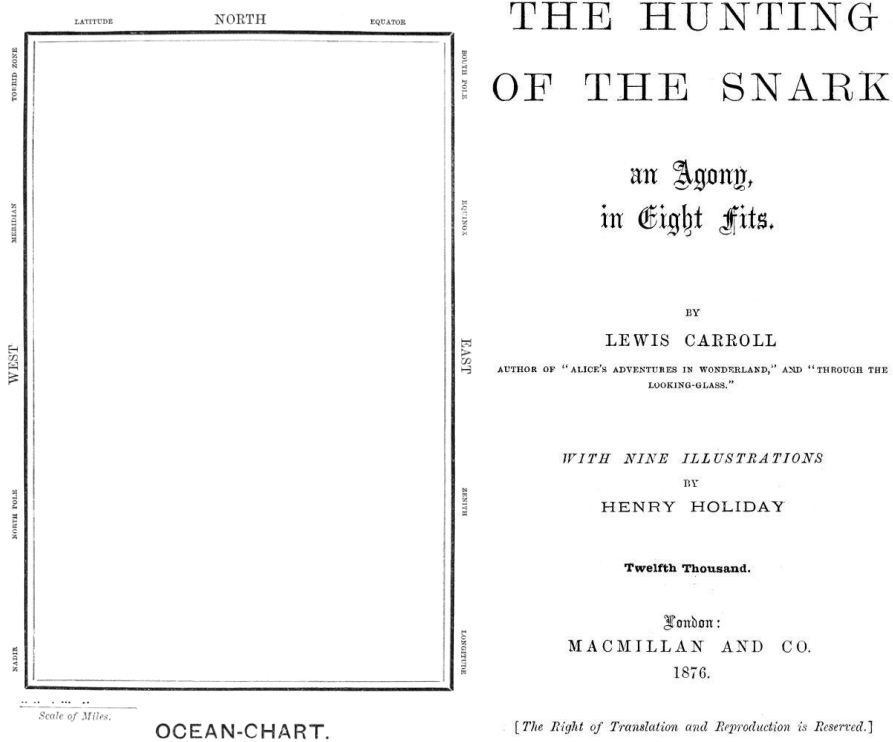
As the author, and a researcher with many years of serving the design and development of tools for archiving intangible practices and dance (El Raheb 2019 & 2021) with *Streetstories* a take a chance to articulate an everlasting question: *What is worth capturing, what is worth sharing and archiving?* Every digital medium opens new opportunities for capturing aspects of embodied experiences such as dancing or simply drifting in the city, but there are always elements left undocumented or completely altered by the rules of the medium and the capabilities of the capturing technologies. Perhaps, what the body senses or perceives is equally important from what is the length of the step, the place or the specific locomotion.

¹<https://www.pexels.com/photo/person-wearing-pair-of-sneakers-2089774/>

²<https://www.pexels.com/photo/selective-focus-photo-of-a-person-s-hand-holding-a-mojito-drink-6790339/>

Figure 6

*The Ocean Map illustration as described by *The Hunting of The Snark*.*



The Significance of the Insignificant

“Contrary to the buildings which almost always belong to someone, the streets in principle belong to no one (...) Only frequently are trees in the streets” (Perec, 1997, p. 47).

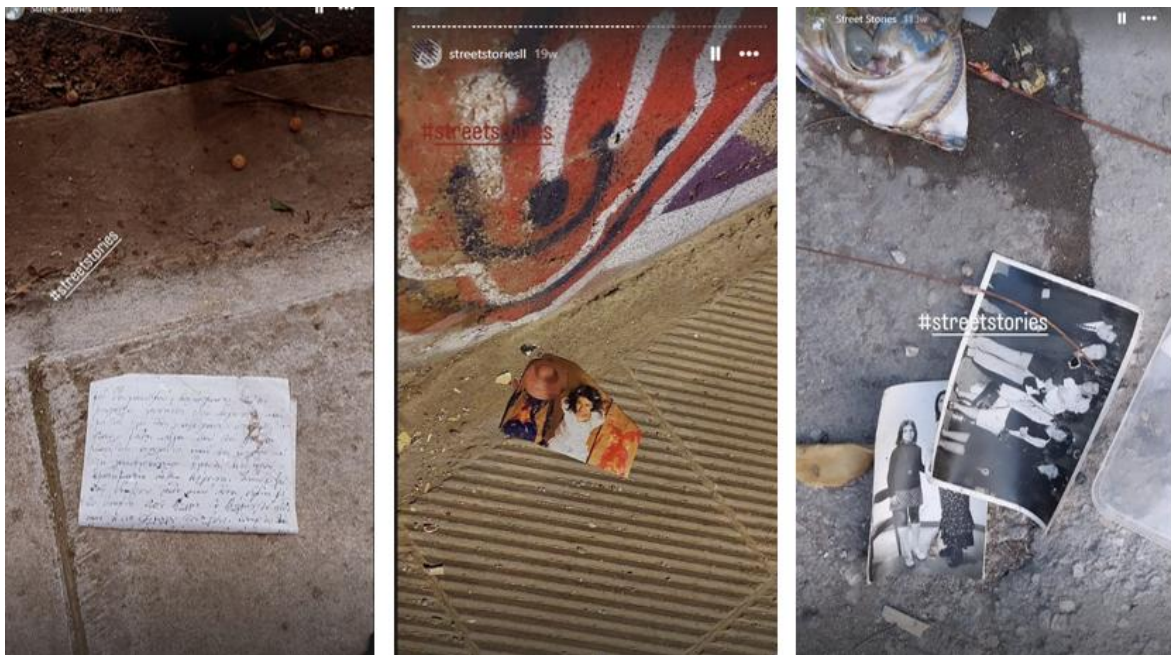
Perec’s *Species of Spaces* (1974) explores two key ideas: redefining our understanding of space and place and recognising the meaning of absence and void. He opens with the “Map of Nothing” from Carroll’s *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876), a perfect blank map (Figure 6). *What if we think of the Instagram frame — or any digital screen — as such a “map of nothing”?* Every small trace captured in *Streetstories* becomes a memory of something lost or found, a fragment of what was or could have been. It turns the digital image into a metaphor for potentiality rather than mere virtuality.

Streetstories challenges the very platform it inhabits. While Instagram is typically a tool for marketing and visibility, *Streetstories* instead captures and archives the unspectacular — the mundane, discarded, or once-cherished objects that unexpectedly reveal themselves.

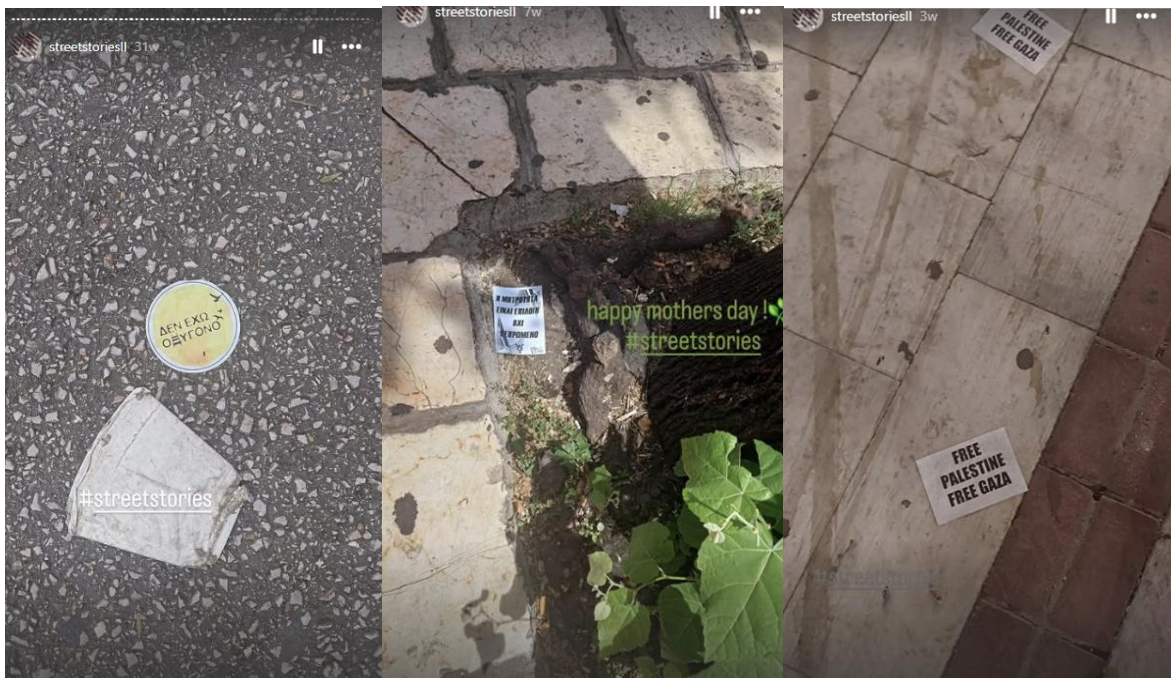
These traces can be read the lens of Object-Oriented Ontology (Harman, 2018), which treats all objects — real or fictional, large or small — as equally significant. In this view, objects always withdraw; we never grasp their full essence, only fragments of their being. Yet *Streetstories* diverges from Harman’s metaphysics. It aligns more with Perec’s interest in objects as traces of human presence and memory.

Figure 7

Streetstories screenshots: Handwritten letters and photos found on the street of Athens. (2020-2025). Photo by the author.

**Figure 8**

Streetstories screenshots: (2020-2025) Photo by the author.



Each *Streetstory* marks evidence of someone's existence — a forgotten card, a piece of paper, a small toy. Each post records my discovery at a particular moment and place, without the need for further context. Sometimes these traces express intimacy or playfulness, such as a note reading: "Hmm... For my whole life. I miss you. I love youuuuu.

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