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Muntadas: Dérive Veneziane

Oriol Fontdevila
CAL CEGO CONTEMPORARY ART COLLECTION

Work description and biographical note for Cal Cego Contemporary Art Collection
Antoni Muntadas
Dérive Veneziane: The Edition, 2015
Film | Color PAL | Sound | HD 16:9 | 38
Fotograph | 30 original photograms from the film | 38 x 21 cm

'One day, cities will be built for dérive.' This quote from Guy Debord concludes the thirty-eight minute-long *Dérive Veneziane*, Muntadas's 2017 nocturnal boat trip along the canals of Venice.

The fact is that Venice had been an object of fascination for the Situationist International since 1957, when first the artist Ralph Rumneyand subsequently Debordhimself chose the city for the pioneering implementation of their idea of psychogeography: essentially, the intensive use of dérive as a way of moving through the urban environment and generating an alternative – and, indeed, anticipatory –understanding of it. As Asger Jorn, another artist from the same circle, was to put it, psychogeography is 'the science-fiction of urbanism': wandering with no definite aim and losing oneself in the urban maze was taken up by the Situationists as a way of awakening the imagination and thus generating significant analytical engagements with the urban environment.

Sixty years later, the dérive that Muntadas undertook in the same city has a markedly more sinister character than those of his predecessors. In the dead of night, in the silence and solitude of the canals recorded in this video cannot fail to evoke the association that has subsisted, at least since Thomas Mann, between Venice and death, and between the gondolas drifting through her and coffins. As Mann observed of this condition in *Death in Venice* (1912), 'The strange conveyance, handed down without any change from ages of yore, and so peculiarly black – the only other thing that black is a coffin – recalls hushed criminal adventures in the night, accompanied only by the quiet splashing of water; even more, it recalls death itself, the bier and the dismal funeral and the final taciturn passage.'

Muntadas's dérive can be read as a self-reflective action, one that in effect takes itself as its theme: throughout the video, a series of statements in which Debord set out to define the concept of the dérive appear as subtitles at the bottom of the frame. Thus, if Debord could see Venice as a whole as an advanced manifestation of the city of the future based on dérive, in the dérive recently undertaken by Muntadas a meditative attitude predominates, one that seeks, perhaps, to test out the currency of the philosopher's observations. Whatever the case, Debord's words are captured in the elegiac tone that has come to pervade the imaginary of Venice, and no longer resonate with the revolutionary potency they might once have had.

Dérive Veneziane is the first part of the trilogy *Estrategias del* desplazamiento [Strategies of Displacement] (2017). It concerns itself with three locations where water is clearly central to the definition of landscapes which can unequivocally be described as 'amphibious': Venice, a floating city; the Guadiana River, which appears and disappears on several occasions along its course; and Finisterre, a historical emblem of the boundary between the terrestrial and what lies beyond. This series, in which the entire itinerary taking in the three settings can be seen as a reflection on human existence, has been described as one of Muntadas's most intimate projects.

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Antoni Muntadas (Barcelona, 1942)

In an interview for *Sites* magazine (New York) in 1982, Ronald Christ commenced by asking Antoni Muntadas if he should call him Antonio or Antoni. 'Well, Antonio is Spanish but Antoni is Catalan,' the artist replied, going on to admit that he had resorted to using 'just Muntadas as a practical solution.'

Christ then sketched a relation between the Antonio/Antoni duality and the similarly dualistic utterances with which the artist was entitling many of his projects at the time, such as *Emissió/Recepció*(1975), *Personal/Public* (1979-1981), *Watching the Press/Reading Television* (1981) and even an early version of *Media Sites/Media Monuments*, on which Muntadas was then working and which was the reason for this get-together with the art and literature theorist Christ. 'So,' Christ asked him, 'the dialectic in your titles is a resonance of you background?'

Muntadas replied in the affirmative – 'yes, this division is a little schizophrenic,' – and, on the subject of the Catalan/Spanish duality, added: 'But, you know, in the language of my native city there is another peculiarity. In Catalan you can make a distinction between *mitjà*, which means "tool", and medi, which means "context", whereas medium or media refer to both.' This duly prompted Muntadas to formulate a maxim about his work that can be deduced from that differential feature: 'I work with the *mitjà* on the *medi*.'

The comment was equally enlightening for Christ, who attributed to the artist an expanded conception of the notion of *mitjà*/tool, as distinct from the reductionist approach that had come to hold sway in most of North America as a result of Clement Greenberg's formalism and Marshall McLuhan's technological determinism. In contrast, Muntadas's perspective appeared to be a particularly genuine way of understanding the *medi* and the *mitjà* as distinct yet related entities, as entities in tension: since the mid 1970s, Muntadas has been focusing on how social media are naturalized as a result of the action of the tools. Hence, too, the artist's coining in 1976 of the concept of media landscape, which has served him through the years as a way to refer to the object of analysis of his work.