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SHE WAS TO SEE IT WAS SO: *TABLEAUX MOUVANTS* OF LIVING LANDSCAPE

Line, Volume, Light in Colour, Venice, 2016, © Rina Sherman

In the Outskirts of Venice II (2016–2017) is the second piece of my work in Venice in 'Cities & Elsewhere', a collection of slow cinema *tableaux mouvants*. It was filmed during a winter sojourn with photographer Philippe Ciaparra (2020), composed of daylong walks in the outskirts of Venice and explorations of the outlying islands. I carry both medium format photography[1] and high definition video[2] cameras on film walks with the intention to photograph and film, but I end up mostly filming with the idea that, in this way, I have both still and moving images, which is not entirely true... I film long barely moving still settings, punctuated by rare human movement, often only evoked in sound. The sporadic human presence is due in part to my shifting awareness about filming, combined

with extraneous difficulties with public photography and filming. Having spent most of my life filming people in real time in their lives, I'm becoming cautious about the fairness of everyday life as a subject matter, to be published subsequently as authored films, release forms and measures of precaution notwithstanding. In a contemporary culture saturated in many parts of the world with *self-phone-portraits* and the distorted wide-angle visual world emerging behind our backs, as well as laws designed to protect celebrities increasingly being claimed as every body's right, working in public space is becoming ever more problematic. Also, filming in the presence of a photographer concentrating on landscape work, may have had a dual influence; I would necessarily stop at the places

he stopped and would film them, working with duration, but trying to not prolong the interval of my filming beyond reason, knowing that he may be ready to move on.

As life comes about at a time and in space, the events that compose it, ensue in relation to one another. My piano teacher, Adolph Hallis, used to say, 'Life is melody, and melody is timing.' So it is, I was to see, in fieldwork with unscripted improvised filming and photography as my means of data recording. My work took a contemplative turn quite a way into my tenure in the field as I started to apprehend what was going on during spells when nothing apparent was coming about. Fieldwork comes to the full when you start perceiving phenomena in the lulls of time. In this way, slow cinema in the form of contemplation is not necessarily devoid of action. As you wait for 'something' to happen to film, you start noticing incidents and recognising figures, and you begin to understand that the absence of movement is movement. Once you see something in the nothingness, you can anticipate, or better even, find a point of entry into the movement that you're observing. Hence, you may become, to a degree at least, an author of the mise en scene of the reality you're filming. Objective reality does not exist and this is but one example of point of view in fieldwork. All this time, you're thinking of what you're filming, of other things, of those who inspired you to be there, to do what you are doing, to a degree in relation to them, but also in relation to what you are able to do, what your body is capable of, as well as working within the limits of your equipment. Who you are, the tools of your time, and your 'paysages originels',[3] the images, times and spaces that moulded your mind's eye (savannah, Amazon, 'jardin anglais', Table Mountain, Bauhaus…), come into play and shape the way you film.

I started filming in 16 mm in the early eighties, inspired by author and filmmaker Alexandre Astruc's (1923–2016) notion of *caméra-stylo* (Astruc 1948)—a lightweight instrument with which to write in moving images (and later, as today, in sound)—the precepts of *cinéma direct*[4], and the *ciné-gym* course (Sherman 2018: 317–344) that Jean Rouch and Michel Brault asked a member of the mime Marcel Marceau's troupe to design. The aim of the course was to train the body to be an extension of the camera and of cinematographic thinking. When filming in 16 mm, if you charged your 120 ft. reel (36.58 m) of film astutely, you could film for around 12 minutes. With that time span ticking by, more or less audible, you had to create a scene that justified 16 mm technology economy[5], you had to anticipate closure at an appropriate moment of the action and a cutting point for editing towards the end of the reel, knowing that you needed a minute or so to change magazines—if you had any charged, otherwise it would take 5 to 10 minutes[6]—and be at the ready to find a point of re-entry into what you had been filming. Today, whether one films in 16 mm or not, it has to be accepted that the limitless recording duration of the various digital film making tools (camcorder, hybrid photo cameras, cell phone…) that has been transforming filmmaking syntax for decades, has altered our way of thinking. A *plan-séquence*[7] is no longer a ten-minute scenographic statement.

I now film tableaux mouvants of any length of time, as they present themselves to me, depending on my mind-set at the given time, but also the place, the weather and the presence of others or not. I have a sense of these tableaux, once arranged in cadences, being contemplative stations that precede or follow performed scenes of oblivion I stage as I film that are plausible but

Arriving in Venice by Night, 2016, © Rina Sherman

may never happen. The tableaux mouvants *In the Outskirts of Venice II* are hybrid landscapes; between a topography of living stages and photo-cinema fusion. 6K photography makes it possible to record a chain of still images, barely revealing minute movement in long scenes. The still photograph is no longer necessarily entirely still; it is the recording of public landscape as a non-static art.

When crossing the Via della Libertà causeway that links Venice's centro storico with the Italian mainland, I am overcome with melancholy. I enter a world built on wooden stakes and water. It seems to have been there forever. Yet, here provenance and patina are signs of decline. Venice provides a matchless ever-moving light interval of colour, shape and line for with which to imagine arrays of tableaux mouvants. As a former high place of world power, Venice, the *floating* city, is an uncomfortable reminder of how domination inevitably wanes, and of how modernity is needed to sustain life in

the here and now. As I wander through the out-of-the-way alleys of the city, I wonder about the arrangements of the Renaissance underworld, with a single question maintained as a stream of consciousness throughout the piece: what were the lives of women like in the heyday of Venice? I come to realise that the men of the time defined what women were to be or not… A way out of these constraints, for some women, by choice or lack of it, was found in the status of the courtesan; the acceptance of a thinking woman in society comes at a price, as is evoked in Veronica Franco's impression (Rosenthal 1989: 227–257) of Venice in her poem 'Terze Rime' (Franco 1997: 205–206) quoted toward the end of the piece, *In the Outskirts of Venice II,* over images of the abandoned 'Ospedale al Mare' on the island of Lido:

> Poor female sex, you are forever troubled
> With evil fortune, held in base subjection
> And forced to live deprived of liberty!

The sea-side garden of the abandoned 'Ospedale al Mare' on the island of Lido, Venice, 2016, ©Rina Sherman

NOTES

1 Plaubel Makina 670 with a Nikkor 2.8/80mm lens. The Plaubel news cameras were first released in Germany in 1902 by Hugo Schrader. The first Makina was introduced in 1912—known for its strut folding camera with a coupled rangefinder. Bought by the Japanese Kimio Doi Group in the 70's, they reintroduced the Makina series, of which the 670 (accepts 120 & 220 film stock).

2 Panasonic Lumix GH5, a hybrid photo camera specialised for video, with a 12–35 'wide angle' for complex scenes and a 35–100 mm f/2,8 for studied detailed work. I have worked with the Lumix series from GH2 for years, which I've become used to for *caméra-stylo* film-writing—there are various other options.

3 The notion of 'paysage originel' was introduced into contemporary French debate by Olivier Rolin (1999) by setting it in relation to childhood in his book *Paysages originels*. It is also the way in which the origins (in the widest sense of the word) that forged the past, emerges in the here and now.

4 The terms *cinéma direct*, Direct Cinema and *cinéma vérité* are not interchangeable. It has to be noted that Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin early on preferred the term *cinéma direct* to *cinema vérité* to avoid the pretence of being able to tell an absolute truth. For a detailed explanation of the use of the terms, see *Michel Brault, The Cinema is What You Want It to Be* (Sherman 2013).

5 The cost of film stock, equipment, development, laboratory, editing, printing and screening.

6 The time taken to recharge or tend to technical issues, can be of good use, as it provides the opportunity to rest the body, to 'step out of the action' and think about what you've been doing and how to continue.

7 A *plan-séquence* or sequence shot, traditionally a ten-minute shot filmed with a wide-angle lens (10mm in 16mm filming), provided you have enough light, enables you to create a complex image, covering at once general, partial and detailed information—which is difficult if at all possible to do in text writing—by setting background and middle ground activity simultaneously in focus on different planes, and hence giving a deliberately constructed character to the scene.

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