

Monitor Yin Yang

Variations on a Territory

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Un tiempo de yin, un tiempo de yang: ¡allí está el Tao! Visto desde tal perspectiva los últimos siglos del arte constituyen un agudo desequilibrio, que contribuye necesariamente al equilibrio total, y que en consecuencia debe ser estimado en su negatividad aislada, pero también en su aspecto positivo, tanto por el papel que cumple en el ciclo, como por representar la persistencia de la necesidad de mediación, que es la esencia de lo humano.

H.A. MURENA, “Negro Mas Negro Que El Negro”¹

All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music. For while in all other kinds of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it.

W. PATER, “The School of Giorgione”²

1.

Monitor Yin Yang, the artwork by Matías Duville made for the Argentine delegation to the *61. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Biennale di Venezia*, is an interdisciplinary project featuring video, installation, sound, and an expansive drawing. Over the years, Duville has worked in a range of media, however, this is his first drawing made on a monumental scale using salt and charcoal in a scene that can be traversed as a territory. The result is more of a complete environment than an autonomous object. At the entrance, the gallery is lit only by the glow from CCTV monitors, the anonymous gaze raising a series of questions: Who is observing? What is their role? Should we feel unsettled or protected? The adjoining gallery brings a change of scale: stretching out in an immense space before us is a sheet made of tons of salt and over it, a drawing in charcoal lines. The light glares down from above, making the floor and its reflection the focal point.

2

1. "One time for yin, one time for yang: that's Tao! Seen from that perspective the last few centuries of art represent a heavy imbalance, that necessarily contributes to overall harmony, and that consequently must be assessed in its isolated negativity, but also its positive aspects, both for the role it fulfills in the cycle, and as a representation of the continuing need for mediation, which is the essence of humanity" (translated by KM). Murena, H A. *La metáfora y lo sagrado*. Editorial Tiempo Nuevo S.A, 1973, 52.

2. Pater, W. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*; first published in 1873 and revised in 1893, edited by Hill, D.L. University of California Press, 1980, 86.

With every step, the salt crunches and crumbles accompanied by a soundscape: frequencies superimposed like successive veils, some fluttering lightly and atmospherically at altitude, others vibrating low like submerged waves.

The monitors and the drawing present two simultaneous ways of regarding a territory. On the one hand, the surveillance is purely visual, watching a landscape whose tacit value takes on strategic connotations, from a hidden vantage point. On the other, the drawing outlines a scene and a path for the bodies that will traverse it. The monitor thus projects a set of polarities. The 'Yin Yang' concept first appeared in the *Shijing* (Book of Odes), one of the oldest texts in Chinese history, dating back to 1000 - 600 BC, as a mountain with two sides, one shady, the other sunny. That duality is the foundation of a philosophy of complementary opposites whose constant interaction produces the life force known as *Qi*. By combining both spaces, Duville has created a material focal point for *Qi* as an energy source, highlighting its dual nature that is simultaneously fragile and powerful. The fossilized drawing evokes nostalgia for an ancient landscape, a remote plateau or an abandoned proving ground. The blurriness of the line is also reminiscent of charred remains, the residue of

combustion or an explosive chain reaction. The Yin and the Yang are on the ground, in the shadow and the light, in waste product and energy, in ruins and the promise of a future.

2.

Salt is an inorganic crystal derived from evaporated sea water and subterranean rock; it enhances the flavour of bland things, disinfects wounds, melts ice and corrodes metals. For centuries, it was one of the most sought after commodities in the world and Venice held a monopoly on its trade in Europe. Until refrigeration was invented, it had a unique quality: it could stop food from going bad. Duville uses vegetable charcoal, an organic material. It is made artificially, through the controlled burning of wood without oxygen. It is associated with the materiality of the medium, which is lightweight, opaque and volatile. It is potential energy, capable of producing heat, light and pollution.

Salt and charcoal are resources that are a major part of the social and economic history of trade, their stories are interwoven with those of the forces of civilization, conservation and destruction. At some point around the year 1000, in China, a group of Taoist alchemists attempting to create a potion for immortality discovered that

the combination of saltpetre, charcoal and sulfur, when placed in a flame, caused an explosion. Thus gunpowder was invented. In the same century, Mongolian nomadic hordes led by Genghis Khan, who conquered the largest contiguous empire the world has ever seen, transported meat between their horses' hides and their saddles, the salt in the animal's sweat prevented bacteria from forming and cured the meat, making it ready to eat with no need for fire. A long time before, around 225 BC, in the Chinese province of Sichuan, the emperor Li Bing ordered the quarrying of salt from the ground for the first time. Following frequent, inexplicable explosions, workers believed the site was inhabited by demonic spirits from the underground world. Today we know that these accidents were caused by pockets of natural gas. Similarly, in medieval alchemy, *nigredo* meant a step of death or decomposition before the generation of something else: charcoal could be a symbol of just that. The semantic significance of these materials is not what it once was. Since the decline in the prominence of the salt industry, salt domes have been used for other purposes. In the United States, Texas and Louisiana have salt domes that are currently being used as federal oil reserves. In Carlsbad, New Mexico, in what was once the Permian Seabed, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), is located

in an old salt dome that since 1999 has acted as an underground deposit for nuclear waste that will be toxic for thousands of years.³

Duville uses the rhetoric of mediums and media in space. He too is exploiting them but through drawing and as symbols. The first consequence of this decision is to confer a unique temporality upon the territory. The residue of seas and forests, salt and charcoal represent different forms of time: salt is geological time, it is permanence and stability, it has a suspensive effect; charcoal, in contrast, is coded in human time: it is work, transformation and movement which it concentrates and consumes as energy.

3.

Like early maps, which weren't designed to last as they recorded routes that were communicated orally or through gestures, Duville's work is not a faithful or fixed representation of the location and outlines of a space; it simply suggests a provisional path forged through accident and error of the kind made by objects petrified at impossible vanishing points and geographies that subvert the force of gravity. Like a tattoo, the forms of the drawing perch

3. Scoles, S. "Radioactive Real Estate: Finding a Forever Home for Nuclear Waste." *Undark Magazine*, July 10, 2024. <https://undark.org/radioactive-real-estate>

upon uneven ground that seems both frozen and igneous. Confronted by the chromatic opposites of black and white and the contrast between the glare and shadow, the viewer's gaze, looking downward, defines the path as they go. The graphics that appear along the way suggest araucarias or mountains, car-meteorites, horizons or mesas, wheels ploughing furrows at top speed, sunsets, fish, paths disappearing into the distance, a keyboard over which grass has grown like a beard, and a black hole that looks like a throat. It might be one single scene, or many. Almost everything in Duville's imaginative world might be another thing.

While an aerial perspective evokes the draughtsperson/cartographer, a creator of worlds, as a territory that becomes apparent as one walks through it, the drawing blends into the space, shifting its implied frame. If a landscape suggests a supervised mediation between humanity and nature, and, like money, a reserve of potential value, Duville distorts the relationship further, ignoring its boundaries and making the drawing almost impossible to contain.⁴ In *Monitor Yin Yang*, the artifice of the landscape is placed at the mercy of natural

4. See Mitchell, W.J.T. *Landscape and Power*. 2nd ed. University of Chicago Press, 2002, 14-16.

forces, as though in an inverted colonization in which nature occupies the human world.

Perhaps that is why the work seems to persist in its pursuit of the impossible, as though we were in an era of immanence, on the threshold of extinction, a point of culmination, comparable to trying to use words to conjure the vestige of a scent or dictate a dream now forgotten in the waking world. Some migratory birds are able to sleep while in flight. Frigate Birds and Albatrosses are able to put one hemisphere of their brain to sleep while the other remains awake. This allows them to survive long ocean crossings when they would otherwise have nowhere to land. Perhaps Duville's territory arises out of an attempt to imagine how a bird dreams in mid-flight.

4.

We generally think of a territory as a space defined by borders, something politically organic, available for integration with human activity. Part of this conception is derived from conventional forms of observation, from above, separated from horizontality and removed from the lived experience. However, there are smaller, more precarious forms of territoriality. A habitat can arise out of a trace, a rhythmic groove, a repeated sound or the call of a voice that, when

heard, organizes the life around it.

In what ways do Duville's lines create territory? The divisibility of the particles with which he draws means that they function as a thread that is also a trace. Said trace is a mark on the surface but it is also interwoven and suspended in three dimensions, like a thread. His lines are granulated, gaseous, sooty, ghostly, blurry, rupestrian, macabre, dry, candid, cold, crunchy and provisional. This is the distinctiveness that ensures that they cannot be differentiated from the surface, that one creates the other. The salt and charcoal enhance these reverberations. Between the figure and background is a push and pull from which sporadic but identifiable forms arise, the kind one sees in clouds.

The intrinsic qualities of a line are in fact similar to those of a voice. Plutarch illustrates this with the story of a man who plucks a nightingale and, upon finding very little flesh underneath, says, 'You're just a voice and nothing more'. The materiality of a voice, like that of a drawing, slips away and flows through the space, denying its origin. Mladen Dolar argues that a voice is a threshold, something that is not purely aesthetic or purely meaning (neither music nor language), but something that transcends them both,

unclassifiable.⁵ Duville's line functions in this way: it is a presence without substance, something personal, ephemeral and pregnant, like a memory. It is possible that *Monitor Yin Yang* shows that materials, in addition to having their own specific eloquence, must also be modulated with their own tones and inflections. Learning to draw is no different from learning to play the violin, says Tim Ingold.⁶ The violin was in fact known as a 'cantabile instrument' due to its similarity to the human voice. Like the voice, like the violin, Duville's line is somatic: the instrument is a body unmediated by any technologies. By interrogating the relationship between subject and method, Duville presents *Monitor Yin Yang* as a whole dissolved into form and content. A territory, as Pater would say, 'in its musical condition'.

5.

This musicality gives *Monitor Yin Yang* its integral power, its zone of fragility and strength. In the drawing, the subjects do not evolve but are circular and generative. One passes from one motif to the next while the materials, like sequential melodies, are intertwined with the images with no beginning or end.

5. Dolar, M. *A Voice and Nothing More*. MIT Press, 2006, 3.

6. Ingold, T. *Lines: A Brief History*. Routledge, 2016.

Duville improvises with discipline. ‘We are dealing with something that is intuitive and scientific. This takes it out of the realm of pure emotion or pure science. It’s a combination of both’⁷. The phrase could easily apply to the drawing but it was in fact employed by the musician Richard Abrams to define the kind of music played at the *Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians* (AACM) in Chicago: free jazz, which is both spontaneous and methodical, a product of the restricted freedom of the call and response. As a sound aesthetic, it promotes maximum individualism while still establishing a dialogue of collective improvisation and the experience of shared creativity in which the improviser is hearing the music for the first time, just like the audience. Drawing and jazz are open, blurry genres, they make the shared pulse race with their intimate, visceral nature.

In *Monitor Yin Yang* this dimension becomes apparent as visitors wander through a drawing they discover at their feet. The senses merge, establishing emotional connections, while the territory comes together and falls apart again. In this context, sound as a physical phenomenon takes on a sensory, sonorous quality: making

7. Richard Abrams, quoted in Lewis, G. *A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*. University of Chicago Press, 2008, 122.

a collective mark on the landscape is also an organized practice in which the artist, the audience and the materials themselves are all involved. The overall effect, thanks to this choreographic game, is to produce variations, which are added to by each walker, all of whom are exposed to the same traversed, observed, ground. Duville has created a space of cohabitation and friction, focusing on the need for a material medium through drawing and mediation through sound as conditions for survival. *Monitor Yin Yang* ultimately encompasses an uncomfortable paradox. At the end of the world, a fate long feared, we insist on seeking life and beauty, a loop of desire that has no climax, the tension of a fleeting melody that feeds off of this refusal to come to a resolution.