

# European seaport narratives: mirroring history in contemporary media

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Giuliano Sergio

*Giuliano Sergio is an art historian and curator. His research explores the connections among Italian neo-avant-gardes, as well as contemporary photographic practices, and the changing conception and role of artistic heritage and landscape in Italy. In the following text, Sergio takes as a starting point a seminal programme of photographic commissioning in Naples in the late twentieth century that launched an enquiry into the changing fabric and image of the iconic Southern Italian port city. From there, the reflection moves into a discussion of the role that aesthetic representations can play in the present, as they engage with mutating coastal and hinterland landscapes, and seascapes. In addition, Sergio presents an exhibition by Claire Tenu, a video by Lorenzo Casali and Micol Roubini, and a work by Domenico Antonio Mancini.*

## Introduction

Port cities provide a privileged entry point for the exploration of our contemporary narratives, significantly capturing the major phenomenon of de-industrialisation. We have lost the screen of modernity, now we find the histories, the traditions and the large traces of modern ruins. We are rediscovering old cities, whose powers are charming and poetic. This charm is also the cause of two powerful new phenomena: tourism and gentrification. I am from Venice, perhaps the most beautiful port city in the world. The industrialisation of the last century was the main cause of its present gradual sinking. Today, nearly all the heavy industry is gone. While the erosion of the lagoon seems under control, Venice itself is sinking under the feet of tourists. How do we narrate these phenomena, avoiding the stereotype of

the city's beauty and escaping the magnetism of its decadence? Is a port city able to offer us a new image of itself? Are we able to recognise a new vision for its present and future? Investigating the relation between ancient port cities, modernity and its demise, I will take you to the other coast of Italy, to the southwest, to the city of Naples. In the early 1980s, people were aware that the traditional image of the city had been completely worn down by post-war reconstruction.

In Naples, everything started with the best of intentions: after the bombing of the Second World War, the municipality was looking for a solution to redevelop the city. In the 1940s and 1950s, architects and city administrators worked for years on three different urban plans. Real estate developers were able to manipulate the new regulations so that after two decades, building speculation had devoured all urban spaces in the historic centre, changing the image of Naples forever. Faced with this urban disaster, in 1981 the architectural historian Cesare De Seta decided to call upon a new generation of photographers and asked them to search for a new interpretation of Naples. The project, curated by De Seta, was commissioned by the tourist office of the city and appeared in several editions until 1985; it was probably the first photographic project promoted by a public institution to produce a critical representation of urban transformations in a postmodern Europe. For the first time, photographers were called upon to explain the city and its transformations without restrictions. Italian photographers such as Luigi Ghirri, Mario Cresci and Guido Guidi, Marialba Russo, Mimmo Jodice, and Gabriele Basilico, but also international photographers like Joan Fontcuberta, Lee Friedlander, Josef Koudelka, Charles Traub, and many others, were invited as intellectuals and artists to engage with the city, with complete freedom to construct their vision. Today, a series of catalogues of those photographic missions offers a precise idea of the extraordinary quality and novelty of the project.

*Fig. 1: Luigi Ghirri, Napoli '81, Sette fotografie per una nuova immagine*



*Fig. 2: Gabriele Basilico, Napoli '82, Città sul mare con porto*



Friedlander's sequence of 1982 is a striking example of its potency, alternating his unmistakable shots of street furniture with crowds of swimmers invading beaches. The year before Ghirri's icons had captured the magnificent decadence of the Archaeological Museum, a neoclassical theatre where the silhouettes of colourful visitors dialogue with the white classical sculptures in soft light. Jodice proposed a series of contemplative images, rereading the city in black and white through references to metaphysical and surrealist imagery. It was also via this Neapolitan mission that Gabriele Basilico engaged with the theme of the coastal city, which he pursued in France two

years later with *Bord de Mer*, created for the famous DATAR commission.<sup>1</sup> The American Charles Traub narrated the popular areas of the waterfront in a pop reading revealing the brash and vital dimension of the Neapolitan summer. Quite to the contrary, the refined black and white photographs of the Dutch Paul den Hollander captured the aristocratic roots of the city with views and quotes from the pictorial tradition as well as architectural compositions. Guido Guidi tried his first systematic guide explorations in Naples. The Neapolitan images are therefore the result of a moment of passage in search of the Romagna photographer, in which the use of the wide angle recalls the imagery of Eugene Atget.

The project does not only narrate the historical centre of the city. Antonia Mulas' series takes us to Secondigliano, in the popular districts of the Vele, to residential complexes born in the 70s out of a failed social utopia that the photographer describes in a poetic and merciless documentary register, recalling Walker Evans. Many other photographers such as Marialba Russo, Joan Fontcuberta, Josef Koudelka, Arnaud Class, and Vincenzo Castella worked with them in Naples.<sup>2</sup> Photographers were changing their mode of narration, avoiding both traditional reportage and cityscape representation. In many cases, they were integrating painterly strategies of narration. In particular, they were looking for images capable of reassembling historic layers in a visual composition where urban contradictions could be expressed in a new way. These fundamental changes in rediscovering the possibility of a late modernity in images would accompany photographers for years to come.

The multiplicity of visions called upon to collaborate in the representation of the Mezzogiorno capital was not due to the vastness of the territory to be documented, but to the idea that different languages would take on different aspects, offering a complex vision of the city. At the same time, the port city offers a variety of layers that make it a most complex and rich subject to represent. Thanks to its tourist, military, and mercantile role, the port city is a meeting point for different cultures, a filter and a bastion, a place in

1 Gabriele Basilico, *Bord de mer: mission photographique de la DATAR 1984-85* (Art&d'Udine, 1992).

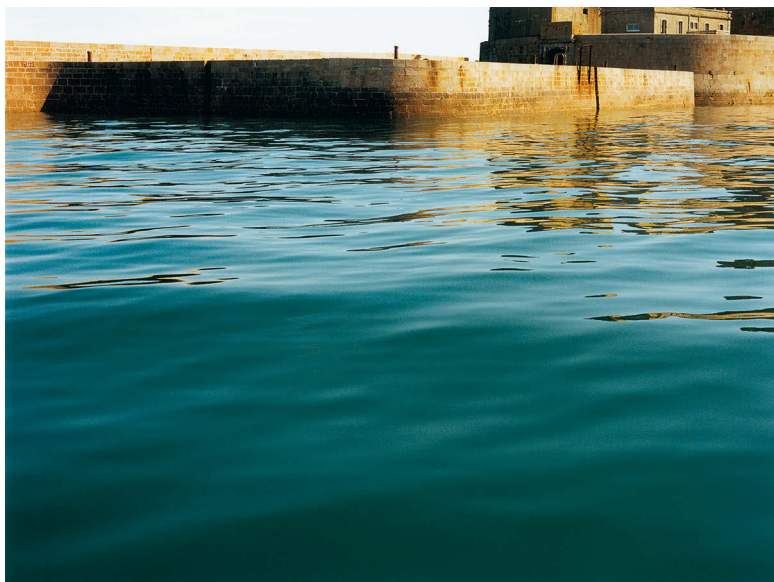
2 *Napoli '81. Sette fotografie per una nuova immagine* (Milan: Electa, 1981); *Napoli '82. Città sul mare con porto*, Electa 1982; *Napoli '83. Napoli d'inverno* (Milan: Electa, 1983); *Napoli '84. Fasti barocchi* (Milan: Electa, 1984); *Napoli '85. Cartoline da Napoli* (Milan: Electa, 1985).

continuous transformation. Naples, with its Greek origins, offered itself as an inexhaustible model to the invited photographers.

This historical shift in constructing cityscape narratives is particularly important because it supersedes the division between subjective artistic research in photography and its professional aesthetic as a technical and popular medium of communication. Reconsidering a utilitarian aesthetic in photography is fundamental to revealing the power of contemporary media. Nowadays, contemporary artists have completely integrated different aesthetics of communication, including painterly aesthetic. The combination of different elements offers an extremely wide range of possibilities in assembling public and private memories, a way of considering history as a visual and aesthetic issue. From this perspective, images produce not only information and documents for a deeper understanding of city ports, but also of the artistic heritage of the place.

### ***La ville que nous voyons***

*Fig. 3: Claire Tenu, Point de vue du noyé, Cherbourg, 2012, tirage argentique couleur, 123x166,8 cm*



A striking example of this strategy applied to a port city context is articulated by French artist and photographer Claire Tenu in her series *La ville que nous voyons* ('The city that we see'), 2013, demonstrating the potential of an aesthetic that blurs boundaries between the documentary and pictorial genres.

During a period of study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris, Tenu was invited by the Art centre Le Point du Jour to teach art classes in Cherbourg, a French port city on the English Channel. She started in 2010 and decided to consider her teaching experience as an artistic project: it was an occasion to discover the complexity of the town, starting from the common sense of the place. She asked her pupils which parts of the city they would like to see represented, contracting an obligation towards them. This engaged Tenu in a particular form of commission, in which the imaginary of the city's inhabitants with their grounded spatial references was added to her discovery and experience of the city. The connection to the school added a crucial component that structured her artistic approach to working in and for a city. She referred to the injunction of the art historian Giulio Carlo Argan, who stressed that 'the relation between the artists and the social world must be in the school', and that 'all schools must educate as to how to build the city as a sensible form of civilization'. Tenu further shared the art historian's warning: 'in our system urban planning is a non-compulsory complementary course in universities of architecture. The problem of urban unity, of the city as an evolving historical organism, is deliberately left aside because society is not meant to have a history.'<sup>3</sup> During her work in Cherbourg, Tenu's effort went in the direction suggested by Argan: following the wishes of her pupils, she 'discovered' the monument of Napoleon in the seafront square de la République; the iconographic traces of the military history of the city – from the First Empire to the Second World War – as a strategic French bastion built in the Channel. Following her cultural sensibility, she discovered the paths of the cliff the painter Jean François Millet walked in his youth – he was a native of a village nearby, on the coast – to reach Cherbourg. Claire discovered Cherbourg's iconography on another occasion. At the time she was staying in the city, its museum was closed for restoration and the director asked her to work on the pieces in the collection that were not being exhib-

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3 Giulio Carlo Argan, 'Urbanistica: spazio e ambiente', in *Metro: international magazine of contemporary art*, no. 16-17 (1970), 10-25, quoted in Claire Tenu, *La ville que nous voyons* (Cherbourg: Le Point du Jour, 2013), 16.

ited; many aspects of the visual history of the city emerged like a weave of different threads. She decided to organise an exhibition presenting her photographic work in the city together with other documents, such as historical postcards, drawings, engravings, and architectural plans from the museum's collection.<sup>4</sup> In her project, the educational and didactical aspects melt with the aesthetics: 'My proposition is voluntarily unfinished: addressed to the sensation and to the spirit of the viewers [...] What I'm presenting is a concrete illusion to share with.' The experience of the town is an illusion or a hallucination that allowed the photographer to cross between its history and our capacity of comprehension and imagination, to produce connections between images that offer subjective itineraries through the social memories held by architectural and urban space, nature and landscape. Tenu's Cherbourg project *La ville que nous voyons* is a poetic and subjective experience of the contemporary reality of the northern French city, depicting its economic hardship in the late twentieth century, and the loss of its strategic importance within the history of urban representation. The artist reveals the visual history of Cherbourg to its inhabitants through a visual iconographic maze, thereby proposing a possible redefinition of the city's image.

## ***Watna***

The port is not only a meeting point of people and stories. As a filter, it offers an interpenetration between territories. On the one hand, it opens to the vast surface of the sea, where all routes are possible, on the other, it allows access to the structures of rivers and canals that cross the hinterland, especially in northern Europe. It is precisely this area, crossed by slow and endless navigations, that is explored by Lorenzo Casali and Micol Roubini in *Watna*.

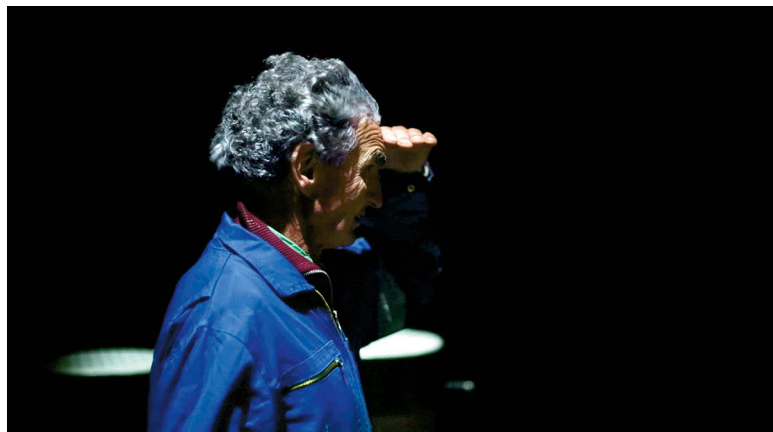
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4 Jean François Chevrier, 'Une Chambre d'échos', in Claire Tenu, *La ville que nous voyons*, 121-125.



Fig. 4: Lorenzo Casali, Micol Roubini, *Watna*, still from video, 2018

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*Watna* is the name of an old barge and the title of a video made by the two Italian artists. It is a project about the perception of time and space; a meticulous scanning of the variations of the central European landscape observed through the slow, steady and restless navigation pace of a cargo boat. The film portrays the lives of the two sailors, the Van Laak brothers, and their daily routine on the barge *Watna*, a workplace and home to its owners, as well as a means of transport. Launched in 1964, the vessel embodies an era now belonging to the past since small family businesses are increasingly supplanted by mighty navigation firms. *Watna* builds a continuous transition between social investigation and the experience of the landscape. The clues to the depths in which the video drags the viewer appear from the beginning: in a short initial interview one of the two boatmen recounts the responsibility of being captain when his brother is missing, and the difficulty of falling asleep ruminating about the next day's navigations. The video becomes a metaphor for human existence, for its precarious progress, an enquiry into the experience of the world, about our ability to represent ourselves in it, and to cross it. Thanks to audiovisual editing, the naive confession of the sailor extends to a question about the experience of reality and translates into an interrogation that combines knowledge and ethics, highlighting the horizon within which experience must be governed. *Watna* offers an opening between the micro-story and its socio-political projection, showing its implications, the

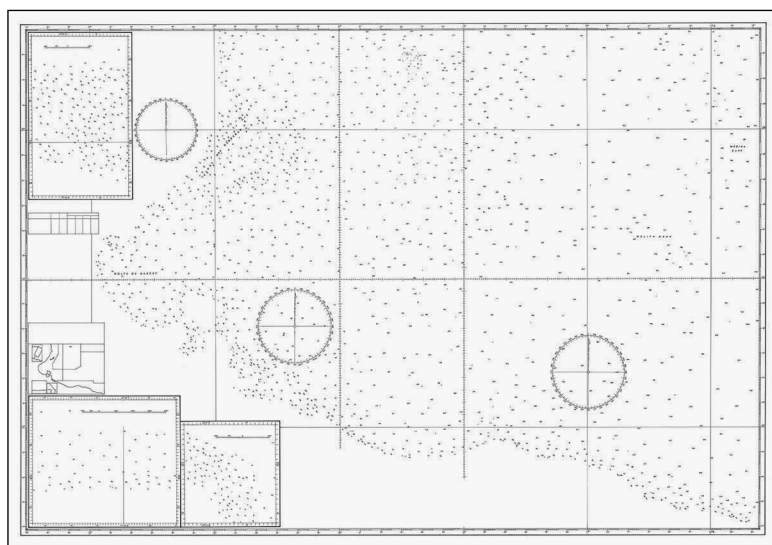
reverberations in an audiovisual texture that summarise months of shooting in two days of travel. The montage of sound and image expands the concept of landscape, transforming it into a phenomenological experience, a hypnotic and dreamlike opening that thins the boundaries between consciousness and the world. The authors do not give in to a surreal narration. The dreamlike plan is hidden by technical virtuosity; it emerges from the blurring, the mechanical evocations, from the overlapping of spaces and times. The video creates an indistinct territory where subjective experience finds the most paradoxical and objective documentation in an audiovisual recording. In this fusion of the internal and the external, common gender distinctions merge into a counterpunctal narrative. The landscape becomes a literary genre that develops the captain's initial story in visual and sound lability, a mobile, fluid, reflected narration: thanks to the alternate montage of open and close up views, everything is brought to the scale of the landscape. Cabin, hold and landscape are united in a single dimension. Radio newscasts, commercial songs, radio communications with the harbour authorities are the continuous background noise, together with the vibration of the engine that accompanies the crossing of canals and rivers, which carries men and things on their journey. A sailor eats while the ground flows vertically from the window; the barge rises in the system of locks, which will allow it to connect different port cities by channels. The big city is announced: bridges and factories appear on the horizon, chimneys and port structures open to welcome the boat. The red hold opens with its abstract cargo. That lunar load that has crossed the territory thanks to the care of the skinny cargo crew becomes an enigmatic metaphor: *Watna* talks about the disappearance of private experience and the historical use of landscape.

### ***Avviso ai naviganti***

As we see in these two examples, the revealing of a new aesthetic that mixes pictorial and documentary iconographies brings new possibilities of representing historical events, and in escaping rhetorical imagery and political distortions. This aesthetic geography made of atmospheres, of sounds and visual associations, of perceptions and memory, is in contrast to a symbolic geography designed by manmade maps designed to navigate the world. To conclude the discussion, I would like to mention in this vein the work of

Domenico Antonio Mancini, which appropriates and inflects cartographic codes to force them in a direction that allows the viewer to discover a different narrative dimension. The artist, refusing any subjective narration of history, wants to narrate the contemporary tragedy of immigration using our common tools of navigation. Starting with the idea of the Mediterranean Sea as an ancient network between civilisations and port cities as access points of cultural and economic landscapes, Mancini's *Avviso ai naviganti* ('Notice to the Navigators'), 2013 is a work that uses nautical charts and statistical data to build a visual representation of contemporary clashes, realizing a minimalist homage to the helplessness of victims of contemporary geopolitical struggles.

*Fig. 5: Domenico Antonio Mancini, Avviso ai Naviganti # 18 (da Capo d'Africa a Misurata), 2016, ink on paper, 92x135,5 cm © Galleria Lia Rumma, Milano – Napoli*



The artist studied the flow of immigration in the Mediterranean Sea in the early twenty-first-century. He copied by hand different nautical charts representing the coastline from Turkey to the Canary Islands. In the execution of the work – in the absolute lack of a creative and subjective sign – the artist makes an expiatory and revealing gesture. The long and meticulous execution by hand 'loads' the image with meaning, revealing the absurd claims of

a digital representation that has lost any capacity for historical, social, and political orientation, and provides no insights into its description of territories that are no longer habitable and shareable. Mancini's analogue copy articulates a paradoxical method of trying once more to distinguish the true from the false, to ask ourselves about the meaning of those signs that seem to have an inexorable clarity. Manual skill adds an intention, subtracting the medium from its existence as an anonymous and innocent digital simulacrum. In his charts, Mancini eliminates all graphic information about the earth, routes, and about the ports where normal ships are directed. The maritime space distinguishes itself from the land only by numbers, the digits indicating the depth of the sea. Between them, we can see some red numbers. These numbers usually indicate danger – functioning as a notice to the navigators about areas where the shallowness reveals rocks and shoals. Here, instead, they indicate the information at the artist's disposal regarding the accidents of refugees' vessels, coordinates of shipwrecks, and the number of victims. Mancini's work completely reverses the functional aesthetic of nautical charts with the removal of geographic and political notation. The void chosen by the artist in place of the conventional sign of history allows us to hear more loudly the immigrants' drama in our forgetful everyday life.

These three works underline how the connection between the territory and its representation is always political because it implicitly defines concepts such as access, boundary, and territory. This connection offers a narrative that affects our emotional and mental experience of the places and the way we want to live in them and plan them. Claire Tenu envelops us in a political and historical representation of the port of Cherbourg that oscillates between the Napoleonic glories and the poignant indeterminacy of our post-industrial present. In *Watna* geography becomes a space of memory: now that small rivers transporting companies are disappearing, this minor history opens its doors to poetry and we can collect the signs of an old experience of the hinterland. In the nautical charts of Mancini any division between land and sea disappears, the only geographical indication that describes the coastline is the tragic desire for the European hinterland, that desire for a landing that does not find a seaport to welcome it; the port then emerges with all the symbolic power of its geography. It reveals itself as a place of appropriation and belonging, its political function shows deep roots that intertwine history with politics and open the possibility to design a new idea of community.