Introduction

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Venice is an extremely rich and varied yet fragile ecosystem and a multi-faceted artistic and cultural archipelago, which goes far beyond the historic centre that is so extensively photographed by tourists and broadcast on the media. It includes other islands – such as Murano and Burano, which are also mass tourism destinations, Giudecca, Sant'Andrea, Lazzaretto Nuovo, which has become an ecomuseum dedicated to knowledge about the lagoon, and Lazzaretto Vecchio – as well as the mainland districts of Mestre and Marghera.

This book was therefore born out of a need: to observe the Venetian artistic and cultural ecosystem beyond the stereotypes that make Venice a museum city, an icon of natural and man-made beauty in the eyes of the world. And its aim is to present the complexity and dynamism, as well as the contradictions and range of powers, which animate the contemporary city.

Venice is an archipelago that, like other archipelagos on the planet, is endangered by rising sea levels. This led to early ecological concerns, on the basis of which cultural institutional organisations and independent bodies and groups have sought to raise public awareness, adopt strategies focused on care and respect (between the human and the non-human) and find more sustainable approaches to coexisting in a highly anthropised environment.

The ecological crisis and the international growth of mass tourism, together with neo-liberal policies, all of which are interrelated aspects that also profoundly affect the arts and culture, have contributed to the exploitation and weakening of Venice as a living city that now has fewer than 50,000 inhabitants. Despite this, the city and its lagoon are far from resigned to their fate, particularly due to the initiative of its residents, commuting workers and students and institutions that deal sustainably with education and culture.

La Biennale di Venezia (referred to in the book as the 'Venice Biennale'), the oldest cultural institution devoted to contemporary art and one of the largest recurrent art exhibitions in the world, is, for better or worse, the first subject to be addressed when thinking about the artistic and cultural sustainability of the city. Founded in 1895, not least in order to revive Venice as a city of art for a tourist audience, the Biennale is still a major event at which social, societal and geopolitical discourses are negotiated by and through the artistic contributions. In terms of media coverage alone, the Biennale's importance is enormous, influencing the programmes of museums, cultural institutions and people working in the creative sector. The sensitisation of the public to important issues is far reaching, although the highly topical contributions often fail to influence the city's cultural policy deeply enough to bring about real social, civil or ecological change. At the same time, the location of the Biennale, the city of Venice itself, symbolises the effects of the climate crisis. There are few other places where the threat of disappearance, of possible destruction, is so clear. The discrepancy between giving maximum attention to important issues and the threats posed by human activity are immediately apparent and have made Venice a powerful symbol of the Anthropocene.

This is why the book uses selected examples and a range of different formats (academic papers, critical and visual essays, artist's writings, conversations...) to explore how cultural institutions and practitioners are dealing with the socio-environmental situation. As always, however, no matter how much a book intends to offer as complete an overview as possible, it can never be exhaustive. Our intention was to give a voice to various cultural actors operating in Venice, chosen from different backgrounds, roles, methods and intentions, in order to construct a plurality of opinions and experiences. We are pleased to have brought together such a wide spectrum of perspectives, even if they do not necessarily always reflect the opinion of the editors.

The book begins with two 'visual narratives of Venice'. The first, *Mario Peliti – On Venice* by Christina Hainzl, highlights Peliti's methodical documentation of Venice's urban landscape through over 20,000 black-and-white photographs that are devoid of people and taken under specific lighting conditions. This extensive archive serves as a visual memory of Venice's architectural forms, reflecting the city's social, ecological and economic transformations. By portraying Venice's structures in abstraction and emphasising its fragile relationship with its environment, Peliti's work invites reflection on the city's past,

present and uncertain future amidst challenges like overtourism and rising sea levels. The second visual narrative, *Venice Does Not Exist: Deconstruction as an Aesthetic Tool on Screen* by Alice Ongaro Sartori, explores the representation of Venice in contemporary video and media art. By deconstructing its iconic imagery, the works reveal new perspectives on the city's identity, shifting from mere representation to reflections on the Anthropocene, issues of identity and environmental transformation. Using filmic and digital media, the presented artists challenge conventional perceptions of Venice, creating alternative narrative approaches that expose the fluid, often invisible structures that shape the city's ever-changing essence.

These two initial visual narratives are followed by a section exploring 'ecologies of care and regeneration' across Venice and its lagoon. In *Alternative Venice. A Look at the Last Twenty Years of Artistic Autonomy, Activism and Research*, Cristina Baldacci offers an account of some of the most effective – even when apparently unsuccessful – independent art and curatorial practices since the 2000s, which, through their reflections and actions, have sought to answer a fundamental ethical-political question: *What is to be done?* These self-managed initiatives express a form of specific *resistance* (according to the philosophical meaning that Jean-François Lyotard gives to the term) against the neo-liberal cultural hegemony. They become a space for care and possibility in an attempt to regenerate, and not just preserve, both the environmental and socio-cultural biodiversity of Venice. A major example in this regard is the letter that Giorgio Andreotta Calò wrote in 2023 to Salvatore Settis, a personal artist's text that has been translated into English and is published here for the first time. Andreotta Calò reflects on the acquisition of a concession on the island of Sant'Andrea that he obtained together with two comrades with the aim of preserving the natural and historical state of – rather than transforming – that special environment. Emphasising *doing nothing* as an active form of resistance, Andreotta Calò envisions the island as a last bastion against Venice's growing touristification and commodification. Drawing on the island's defensive heritage, he calls for a paradigm shift in perspective, where preservation becomes a radical act of cultural and environmental reclamation. In *Coexistence and Care: Notes on Curating Three National Pavilions at the Venice Biennale*, Natalie King tries to answer the question of whether the Venice Biennale itself can become a space of resistance from within by presenting the international art exhibition as a platform for transnational solidarities. She analyses her work as the curator of three national pavilions, Australia (2017), Aotearoa New

Zealand (2022) and Timor-Leste (2024), reflecting on slow curating, care and coexistence as essential curatorial practices. Drawing on Édouard Glissant's concept of the archipelago, the text frames the Venice Biennale as a space for relational networks and collective reflection amidst ecological and geopolitical challenges. Adrian Praschl-Bichler is also concerned with ecological issues arising from the Venice Biennale. In *The Architecture Biennale as a Platform for Socio-Ecological Interventions*, he explores how the international architecture exhibition accentuates architecture's role in addressing environmental and social challenges. Drawing on Warwick Fox's theory of responsive cohesion, which prioritises ecological sustainability and the broader societal context in architectural design, Praschl-Bichler discusses the ethical responsibility of architects. Several innovative projects from recent Biennales are presented as case studies that showcase how architecture can promote sustainable development, reduce resource consumption and support social inclusion.

The subsequent section addresses another important issue for a planet that is rapidly changing under the effects of the climate crisis, namely 'practising new imaginaries and methodologies', particularly in the lagoon context. In *The Expanded Enquiry: Reflections on an Interdisciplinary Approach Between Anthropology and Multimedia*, Matteo Stocco and Rita Vianello explore how interdisciplinary collaboration between anthropology and multimedia art can create new research methodologies for the Venice Lagoon. By combining anthropological interviews with video, photography and an interactive web platform like *Metagoon*, which was initiated by Stocco himself, they document the lagoon's sociocultural and ecological transformations. This approach promotes participatory research, cross-media storytelling and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage through visual and narrative tools. Barbara Nardacchione delves into other forms of collective practices that combine environmental concerns and food and emerged from Venice's transformation under the pressures of overtourism and the consequent need to find space for cultural and ecological renewal inside the lagoon. In *Disorientation and Where to Find Oneself*, she presents the initiative of the *Tavole Conviviali* (*Convivial Tables*), through which artists, researchers and chefs study and experience the lagoon's ecosystems via collective gatherings, food-based practices and interdisciplinary dialogue. By fostering a sense of care and reconnection with the environment, Nardacchione demonstrates how the lagoon becomes a site for reimagining Venice's future through shared practices of ecological awareness and cultural resistance. Axel Braun's exploration of Venice is more historical. With his project *Machina Mundi/ Reign*

of Reason, on which his visual essay is centred, the artist observes Venice as a fragile relic of a glorious past and a symbol of human ingenuity, exploitation and ecological vulnerability. Through a mixed-media installation combining photographs, videos and archival materials, Braun deconstructs Venice's historical and post-colonial narratives, spotlighting its entanglement with the slave trade, resource extraction and global trade networks. By exposing the overlooked role of African individuals and the environmental impact of human activity, his work positions Venice as a case study for the broader challenges of the Anthropocene. Petra Schaefer introduces Braun's visual essay by contextualising his project within the artist residency programme made possible by the *German Centre for Venetian Studies*.

The practices and knowledges of Venice and its lagoon remain at the forefront in the fourth section, where the two craft techniques that have made the city famous throughout the world for centuries, printing and glassmaking, are analysed from the perspectives of 'then and now'. In *Venetian Art Prints from Their Beginnings to Today's Sustainability Initiatives*, Viola Rühse examines the rich history of Venetian printmaking while underlining its contemporary focus on sustainability. By exploring efforts by institutions like the *Scuola Internazionale di Grafica* and Fallani's screen-printing workshop, Rühse highlights the adoption of eco-friendly techniques and the preservation of artisanal traditions. These initiatives support sustainable tourism and underscore the significance of printmaking in safeguarding Venice's cultural identity amid challenges such as mass tourism and rising rents. At the same time, Matteo Silverio's article *Glass: Millennia-Old Excellence between Innovation and Sustainability* traces the evolution of glassmaking from its ancient origins to Murano's renowned craftsmanship. It draws attention to recent efforts to merge traditional glass artistry with modern technologies through projects like *Glass Matters* and the creation of *rehub*, a startup focused on recycling glass waste into a sustainable, mouldable material for design and architecture. These initiatives aim to balance heritage with innovation, promoting environmental sustainability and transforming Murano into a global model for the circular economy.

The final section of the book is dedicated to conversations with cultural professionals in Venice. They provide a diverse selection of opinions by explaining, 'in their own words', how cultural institutions and art organisations can act for a better future. As a methodological approach, we decided to maintain a certain

uniformity in the questions, varying them from time to time depending on the course of the conversations, to allow each of the interlocutors to answer according to their expertise and to get as broad a picture as possible of their different ways of thinking and acting. Karole Vail, Director of the *Peggy Guggenheim Collection*, focuses on the museum's commitment to sustainability, inclusivity and cultural preservation in Venice. Vail addresses initiatives like *Art 4 a Better Future* (2023) and collaborations with European conservation projects that aim to reduce the environmental impact of exhibitions. Stressing the role of art as a catalyst for change, she advocates for museums to serve as platforms for dialogue and education, while also addressing the broader challenge of Venice's overtourism and the city's need for more balanced, sustainable development. Bruno Racine, CEO and Director of the *Palazzo Grassi – Punta della Dogana | Pinault Collection*, explores the role of contemporary art museums in addressing ecological and social challenges. Racine highlights efforts to incorporate sustainability into exhibition practices, such as reducing transportation and reusing materials, while underlining the importance of public art and artist engagement. He also reflects on Venice's dual role as a cultural hub and a site of ecological vulnerability, accentuating the need for cultural institutions to support local communities and promote awareness of pressing global issues. Markus Reymann, Co-Director, *TBA21* and Director of *TBA21–Academy's Ocean Space*, describes the organisation's commitment to fostering interdisciplinary research and ecological transformation through art. By using oceanic thinking as a methodology, *Ocean Space* facilitates collaboration between artists, scientists and local communities, promoting embodied research and cultural practices of care. Reymann emphasises the need for regenerative approaches in art institutions, advocating for sustainable material flows, collaborative governance and deeper community engagement in Venice and beyond. Francesca Tarocco, Director of *THE NEW INSTITUTE Centre for Environmental Humanities (NICHE)*, discusses the centre's role in fostering transdisciplinary research on environmental issues, with a special focus on water studies and ecological art practices. *NICHE*, like the *Platform for Sustainable Development (SDGs)* in Krems, aims to bridge academic, artistic and community knowledge systems in order to promote socio-ecological transformation. Finally, Marco Baravalle, a founding member of the workerist collective *Sale Docks*, brings to the foreground the importance and difficulty of working on the margins, in an 'alter-institutional' context. Referring to the teachings of bell hooks, he explains how the margins are a space of productivity and resistance that is essential if we are to ensure social and cultural (bio)diversity and to better understand what happens at the

centre of the (eco)system. As an activist working in the arts and culture, his position challenges conventional norms and promotes collective thinking and engagement in the construction of the (art) commons.

The book is the result of a collaboration between the *University for Continuing Education Krems* and *Ca' Foscari University of Venice* through their respective research institutes specialising in environmental humanities: the *Platform for Sustainable Development (SDGs)* in Krems and *THE NEW INSTITUTE Centre for Environmental Humanities (NICHE)* in Venice. This collaboration started in 2024 with the work of the research cluster *Ecological Art Practices* at *NICHE* in bundling research that combines internal and external perspectives on the city. Indeed, *Venice, an Archipelago of Art and Ecologies* seeks to outline a panorama of possible perspectives and ideas that deal with the ambivalent situation of the city. The book deliberately includes very different approaches that, at first glance, might not appear fully in focus, but, on closer inspection, reveal themselves to be relevant and strongly interconnected. This collective endeavour is therefore driven by an underlying question: How can museums and cultural institutions, but also independent organisations and artist collectives, play a supporting role and become concrete actors in the socio-ecological transition?