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## Mario Peliti – On Venice

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*Christina Hainzl, Photos by Mario Peliti*

Venice finds itself in an ambivalent situation. It is threatened by rising sea levels and a falling population. The city's cultural heritage, just like its role in contemporary art and culture, is a unique attraction. But is it not precisely this ambivalence, this fragile situation, that makes Venice even more attractive?

It is the attraction of potential loss and also the awareness that we will never remember everything, that makes us strive to preserve the things we know,<sup>1</sup> writes Judith Schalansky, 'we should probably count ourselves fortunate that humanity is unaware of the amazing ideas, the moving works of art and the revolutionary achievements that it has already lost, whether these have been wilfully destroyed or simply gone astray over the course of time'.<sup>2</sup>

This article addresses the architectural photographs of Mario Peliti and their contribution to opening up Venice's urban ecosystem as a thinking space.

### The Venice Urban Photo Project

Taking place in the dawn, passing through winter, spring, summer and autumn, Mario Peliti's *Venice Urban Photo Project* presents a mosaic of Venice in over 20,000 photographs. Against the backdrop of Venice's pressing problems with *aqua alta* and overtourism, Peliti portrays Venice in the form of structures and materials: stone, concrete, iron, glass.

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1 Schalansky Judith: Verzeichnis einiger Verluste. Berlin 2018.

2 Ibid. p. 17.

Mario Peliti's *Venice Urban Photo Project* now comprises well over 20,000 photographs. He has been photographing the architecture of the city of Venice since 2006. In doing so, Mario Peliti follows a strict methodical concept. Depending upon the season, the pictures are taken shortly after dusk or when the sun is not yet shining or the clouds are generating a certain diffuse, grey light. The photographs are devoid of people and taken in black and white. At the same time, however, Mario Peliti avoids powerful contrasts and concentrates on shades of grey.

Peliti's photographs were presented in a comprehensive exhibition entitled *Hypervenezia* in the Palazzo Grassi in 2022.

During my frequent visits to Venice in the spring of 2024 while I was working on this book, I repeatedly came across the project. Whenever I mentioned that I would like to present it in the book, I was told about the extent to which memories had been awakened by a visit to the exhibition, particularly by people who live in Venice. Upon looking at the pictures, they recalled long forgotten or repressed moments.

There are a number of important aspects to Mario Peliti's extensive photographic oeuvre. Besides generating the above-mentioned sense of connection amongst Venetians, he also succeeds in creating a vision of the city at a number of levels.

## **An Archive of the Urban Landscape**

One level is a process: the creation of an archive, a documentation of the urban landscape of Venice today.

From the perspective of Cultural Heritage Studies, precise documentation – particularly of endangered aspects of cultural heritage – is extremely important. Despite all our modern methods of reconstruction, preservation and revitalisation are largely dependent upon the documentation of the original condition. Peliti's photographs make a major contribution to this documentation.

Late in 2018, an agreement was signed between Mario Peliti, the *Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione (ICCD)*, and the *Superintendence of Archaeology*,

*Fine Arts and Landscape of the Metropolitan Area of Venice.* With this agreement the photographer has freely granted the Italian State the right to use and reproduce the images from his collection for institutional cultural purposes and university publications within the European Union. In a conversation with Mario Peliti, he also explains that the sheer quantity of photographs would make it impossible for him to manage them himself.<sup>3</sup>

Peliti, an architect who, in his roles as a gallerist and publisher of a number of books of photographs, has worked with internationally renowned photographers, is an expert in approaches to urban photography. He is well aware of the challenges, sensitivity and preparation that are required to realise such work.

### **Abstract Architecture – An Inventory of Gazes**

The second level is the development of a specific (pictorial) language: Mario Peliti is creating a visual memory of Venice that consists of not only the visible images of the buildings of the city but also the story of their development over time.<sup>4</sup> There are no people in this story, and only rarely is there any indication of anything else at all. We see the picture and add to it in our imagination. In this sense, Peliti enters into dialogue with the viewer. The systematic observance of these pictorial criteria leads to a certain abstraction of the architecture. The lack of human beings encourages us to focus on the form and the structures. Flaking walls and masonry damaged by salt, fog and wind come to the fore.

Peliti's works are sometimes positioned close to the oeuvre of Bernd and Hilla Becher. This establishes parallels in terms of methodical concept. Bernd and Hilla Becher's works focused on form. And form and buildings are also important to Peliti, who originally studied architecture. Further areas of comparison are the adherence to certain lighting conditions and the softness of the contrasts in the black and white photographs.<sup>5</sup>

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3 Hainzl Christina: Conversation with Mario Peliti. Venice. 29.04.2024.

4 See also: Rossi Aldo: *The Architecture of the City*. Cambridge, Mass. 1984, quoted from Pedrina Bianca: *Architektur fotografie II*. Vienna 2024.

5 Polte Maren: Schwarz-weiß- versus Farbfotografie. Zu einem Experiment von Bernd und Hilla Becher. In: *Bildwelten des Wissens. Kunsthistorisches Jahrbuch für Bildkritik*, Vol. 8.2/2017. p. 7ff.

Peliti was a close friend of Gabriele Basilico, who photographed numerous urban landscapes, including in Beirut, Milan, Moscow and Shanghai. Besides formal similarities, their works converge in other ways, particularly in terms of their intention and approach. Gabriele Basilico once described this approach as follows: 'I work on the visible, but sometimes there are things that we do not see immediately and the role of the photographer is specifically to highlight them.'<sup>6</sup>

In the catalogue to *Hypervenezia*, Alain Fleischer mentions the influence of Charles Marville's photographs of Paris on Mario Peliti's Venice project.<sup>7</sup> Not only do both photographers share a similar interest in urban landscapes and architectural details, but there are also parallels between their photographic approaches to the cities of Venice and Paris.

In the 19th century, Marville was the official city photographer of Paris and his works document such phenomena as the modernisation of the city. The urban landscapes in his pictures, unlike those of Peliti, also contain occasional people.<sup>8</sup> Just as Paris was undergoing a transformation at that time, Peliti documents Venice in a period of social, ecological and economic change.

## **The Urban Fabric as a Source of Social, Economic, and Cultural Sustainability**

Peliti's photographs of Venice without human beings also encourage us to reflect. In his famous book *If Venice dies*, Salvatore Settis repeatedly points out that cities have to be inhabited in order to develop identities. It is precisely this that has knocked Venice off balance. Whereas the city still had 174,808 inhab-

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6 Bauret Gabriel: 1994- 2015. In: Calvenzi, Giovanna (ed.): Gabriele Basilico. Back to Beirut. Rome 2023. p. 152.

7 Fleischer Alain: The Arpenteur of Venice. In: Mario Peliti. *Hypervenezia*. Venice 2022. p. 415.

8 Charles Marville. Photographer of Paris. Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum New York. 2014. [www.metmuseum.org/de/exhibitions/listings/2014/charles-marville](https://www.metmuseum.org/de/exhibitions/listings/2014/charles-marville). accessed on 18.10.2024.

itants in 1951, the number had fallen to 56,072 by 2015 and is now apparently below 49,000.<sup>9,10</sup>

Urban landscapes have the potential to regenerate themselves in social, cultural and economic terms. For those seeking to sustainably and adaptively reuse our tangible cultural heritage – whether buildings or architectural fabric, squares or gardens – not only technical constructional measures but also social and ecological aspects and their repercussions are highly relevant. Such restoration work is generally regarded as sustainable, although each example must be considered on its own merits. The process is also often unsuccessful.<sup>11</sup> And the relationship between people and the environment was similarly suppressed for a long period.<sup>12</sup>

## Changes

In his works, Mario Peliti also illustrates changes in the cityscape. Besides numerous new and remodelled buildings, the island of Giudecca (which is part of the city of Venice and actually consists of several islands) has changed hugely in recent years. The former industrial facilities have largely been transformed into residential and public space and schools. Tourism is also reaching Giudecca, but not to the same extent as elsewhere in the city. The area is also affected by rising sea levels, but the social fabric is more stable. In order to reach Giudecca one is obliged to take the boat because there are no bridges connecting it to the other districts of Venice. In other words, the water of the *Canale* that isolates the island also acts as a dividing line that results in a different form of urban development.

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9 Settis Salvatore: *If Venice Dies*. New York 2016. p. 8.

10 Venezia scende sopra i 49 mila abitanti. *Venezia Today*. 03.04.2024. <https://www.veneziatoday.it/cronaca/venezia-scende-sotto-49-mila-abitanti.html>. accessed on 03.10.2024.

11 Vafaie Fatemeh/Remoy Hilde/Gruis Vincent: Adaptive reuse of heritage building. A systematic literature review of success factors. In: *Habitat International*. Vol. 142. December 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2023.102926> accessed on 19.10.2024.

12 Baldacci Cristina/Bassi Shaul/De Capitani Lucio/Omodeo Pietro (eds.): *Venice and the Anthropocene. An Ecocritical Guide*. Venice 2022.

Peliti's photographs document and question these developments, challenges and coexistences. They can lead us to not only see buildings, squares and spaces, but also reimagine their impact on the fragile relationship between people and the environment.

Fig. 1: Mario Peliti, *San Marco, Giardini Reali*, 2016.



Courtesy of the artist

The Giardini Reali date from the Napoleonic era. After being largely forgotten for many years, the restoration of the gardens began in 2014 and they were reopened in 2019. Besides its historical importance, the project is also one of many, largely civic and private initiatives that are returning greenery to the city. The gardens and the park also fulfil a key social function. They are a place of exchange and recreation as well as cultural heritage.

*Fig. 2: Mario Peliti, Castello, Arsenale, 2021.*



Courtesy of the artist

The Arsenale, which is now best known as an exhibition location of the Venice Biennale, is one of Europe's largest industrial complexes and was a ship-building yard long before the age of industrial mass production. It traces its origins back to the 11th century. Parts of the Arsenale have been rezoned for public use and another part is the home to the control centre of the *M.O.S.E.*, the controversial system that is designed to protect Venice from flooding and is Italy's most expensive public project.

Fig. 3: Mario Peliti, *Castello, Giardini della Biennale*, 2020.



Courtesy of the artist

The Venice Biennale is the oldest in the world. Each year, alternating Art and Architecture Biennale address different current issues. Built on former marshland, the pavilions are located inside (and outside) the large park of the Giardini, offering nation states the opportunity to present themselves. But is a national approach still appropriate at a time of global ecological and social challenges?

*Fig. 4: Mario Peliti, Dorsoduro, Giudecca, Fortuny, 2016.*



Courtesy of the artist

Giudecca was previously an industrial working-class district. But the larger companies have long since moved away or closed their premises. Only the textile producer *Fortuny*, which has been famous for over a century for its pleated silk prints, combination of styles and incorporation of Venetian elements into its fabrics, still remains.

Fig. 5: Mario Peliti, *Dorsoduro, Giudecca, Fondamento del Rio di Sant Eufemia*, 2019.



Courtesy of the artist

Separated from the centre of Venice by a broad canal, Giudecca is somewhat cut off from the city's streams of tourists. This is leading to its increasing importance and growing popularity as a residential area. Venice is affected by flooding every year. The second highest floods in November 2019 clearly demonstrated how rising sea levels are threatening the city.

*Fig. 6: Mario Peliti, Dorsoduro, Giudecca, Campo Junghans, 2016.*



Courtesy of the artist

Campo Junghans was Venice's largest housing project in the 1990s. It is located on the empty site of the *Junghans* watch factory in Giudecca. Heavily influenced by Venetian architecture, the restructuring of the complex created apartments, playgrounds, schools and a theatre.

*Fig. 7: Mario Peliti, Castello, Riva dei Partigiani, 2021.*



*Fig. 8: Mario Peliti, San Polo, Campo San Giacomo de Rialto, 2017.*



*Fig. 9: Mario Peliti, San Polo, Campo San Tomà, 2018.*



*Fig. 10: Mario Peliti, Dorsoduro, Rio Terà ai Saloni, 2014.*



*Fig. 11: Mario Peliti, Santa Croce, Veritas, 2021.*



Fig. 7–11: Courtesy of the artist

