

'Venice as Method!'

Conversation with Francesca Tarocco (Director, THE NEW INSTITUTE Centre for Environmental Humanities – NICHE)

Cristina Baldacci and Christina Hainzl: *THE NEW INSTITUTE Centre for Environmental Humanities (NICHE) at Ca' Foscari University of Venice* has undertaken a process of profound reflection and a series of activities that address the climate crisis and the many urgent questions facing humanity today. What are the features of *NICHE* as a research centre devoted to environmental humanities?

Francesca Tarocco: *NICHE* is a research institute devoted to transdisciplinary environmental humanities and water studies, *Ecological Art Practices* and public engagement initiatives. It seeks to act as a bridge between knowledge silos in the context of environmental studies and takes the lead in drawing connections and comparisons between existing disciplines, in order to stimulate radically new ways of understanding ecosystems and our highly anthropised environment. We recognise that the environmental issues that face our global community are entangled with questions of human behaviour, convictions, religious ideas and values and that critical approaches to human-environment interactions – past, present and future – are essential. To address these issues, we have created twelve interdisciplinary research clusters, in collaboration with scholars and practitioners at *Ca' Foscari University* and beyond. These include *Waterscapes*, *Technoscience and Justice in Multispecies Worlds*, *Mediterranean Environments*, *Ecological Art Practices* and so on. The Centre has developed several main strategic aims. All are connected with advanced strategic research in the environmental humanities, but in different ways: (1) To create support for advanced strategic research; (2) To connect researchers across fields and

geographical locations, including support for multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research; (3) To connect our local science system to international research networks, which includes developing partnerships with scientifically strong environments in other countries and, thereby, creating the conditions for improving its international standing in selected fields of knowledge; (4) To foster collaboration and joint research with non-European scholars and institutions, with a focus on Asia, North America and Africa; (5) To take part in public engagement initiatives with the *Ca' Foscari University* community and local organisations in Venice as well as internationally. Cooperation, trust, fairness and accountability are our key principles. We have chosen to prioritise collaborations with both local and international practitioners, including environmental lawyers, artists and policy makers. Our goal is to work with our partners in a non-hierarchical and collegial way. We share our network with others and help younger practitioners to connect with relevant institutional partners. Importantly, our strategic partnerships are often informed by research carried out in relation to the Venice Lagoon and other wetlands, and fragile waterscapes and ecosystems.

CB and CH: Since NICHE is working in a very inter- and transdisciplinary way, what would you say could be the role of universities – and of research centres like NICHE – in the socio-ecological transformation process of today's society?

FT: In the past few years, we have focused on establishing a research environment whose purpose is primarily to promote and encourage scholarly and artistic activities in areas that are not normally restricted to a single academic department. We work with senior scholars as well as emerging and early-career researchers from around the world – from, for instance, the *University of Oxford*, *UCL*, *Duke University*, the *University of Augsburg*, the *University of Melbourne*, the *Rachel Carson Centre*, *New York University*, *Rutgers*, the *International Center for Cultural Studies in Taiwan*, the *Max Planck Institute for the History of Science*, *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* and the *Technical University of Munich*, and so on. We organise public events, screenings, gatherings, research seminars and lecture series. We have also worked towards establishing strategic partnerships and connecting with other groups, institutions, research centres and individuals around the world that work on topics related to environmental humanities.

These are some of the questions we ask: How can we come together, embrace the change offered by the current disruption, and build greater resilience? Which aspects of traditional practice have not served us well – as people, professionals and institutions? And how can we rebuild more sustainably, more equitably? What is the role of museums and research centres in bridging divides and bringing communities together and building empathy, understanding and belonging?

We firmly believe that the task of reconceptualising planetary change for the human imagination calls for a wide range of disciplinary knowledge and practices. Shared problems, places and scales must form the basis for collaborative work in the environmental humanities, in partnerships with natural sciences and in the creative arts. In fact, shifting the frameworks of environmental research to be more consciously inclusive and diverse can enable the emergence of concepts of the physical world that better include humans and take ethics beyond humans to consider more-than-human subjects.

At *NICHE*, we focus in particular on water and water methodologies in dialogue with a wide variety of new water justice movements that have emerged during the past 20 years or so. For instance, we recently hosted the *Confluence of European Water Bodies* in collaboration with the *Embassy of the North Sea*, *ILP Mar Menor*, *TBA21-Academy*, the *Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature* and the *Italian Buddhist Union*. These movements are transdisciplinary, multi-actor and multi-scalar coalitions that, for instance, challenge dominant water management approaches to rivers and lagoons. A few examples are ecological flow clinics, movements promoting dam removals, federations designing new rules for shared catchment governance, citizens' initiatives developing river-related environmental health projects and grassroots think tanks. These movements have the potential to revolutionise environmental debates, practices, laws and policies in the direction of new, equitable and nature-rooted water governance. However, they are often excluded from policy, and academia has so far paid very little attention to them. We need better tools for understanding these emerging water ontologies, normative frameworks and commoning strategies. At *NICHE*, we therefore aim to study, understand and support all those involved with water, waterscapes and climate justice as a way of contributing to a more equitable water governance that is at one with nature.

CB and CH: Why are environmental humanities as important as (natural) sciences in addressing socio-environmental topics? And how does *NICHE* build bridges between these two fields of research?

FT: How science historically emerges from interactions with the environment and, in turn, affects environmental history via societal practices, is a central question for many of our research clusters, in particular the Waterscapes cluster. This is investigating the dynamic entwinement of nature, episteme and agency on the basis of the study of territories that are defined by moving waters, such as the Venice Lagoon, the Kaveri Delta in India, the Mississippi River, the basin of Tenochtitlan (the former Aztec capital and present-day Mexico City) and the Mekong River. As water is indispensable for life, its regulation and control have always constituted a fundamental asset of power as biopower. We do not consider our cases in isolation but as local developments which, rooted in various cultural pasts, have become increasingly interconnected, eventually reaching a planetary significance and uniting to establish a concept, namely the scientific projection of the Anthropocene as a geo-anthropological system that embraces both geology and culture. However, this concept is empty if it is not brought back to its roots, that is, as human agency at the confluence of nature, scientific knowledge and technological-transformative labour. Water-related human activities, from agriculture to fishing, the extraction of energy, transportation and the supply of drinkable water, are deeply inscribed in the territories that we are considering here from the vantage point of 'Venice and the Anthropocene'. That is the title of a wonderful new eco-critical guide book that you, Cristina, co-edited (together with Shaul Bassi, Lucio De Capitani and Pietro Daniel Omodeo), in collaboration with the Venice-based independent publisher *wetlands*.

CB and CH: What aspects of the ecological turn do you still consider under-recognised in universities and educational institutions?

FT: During the past few years, some universities and educational institutions have started to increase their focus on human-induced changes (e.g. anthropogenic impacts, climate change) in ecological research. This shift in the ecological focus likely reflects the global influence of humans on the world's ecosystems. And the heavy focus on anthropogenic themes reflects, in turn, the increasing need to understand the role of human-influenced changes in complex ecological systems.

CB and CH: How relevant is Venice as an observation point for the climate crisis? And how much has this influenced the decision to open a research centre for environmental humanities on the Venice Lagoon?

FT: The delicate multispecies ecosystem that is Venice requires our full attention. Fortunately, the imperative to imagine differently and better is one to which many activists, artists and thinkers, as well as ordinary Venetian citizens, are now responding. Our Centre is very much part of this larger ecosystem. As the Founding Director of *NICHE*, I was very aware of this from the beginning and I am incredibly grateful to all the wonderful people who have helped us along the way. I also hope that *NICHE* can grow to become a partner for many other water cities that are similarly plagued by overtourism. Our focus on water in the establishment of research clusters has been a successful strategy. The international centrality of these issues has provided – and will continue to provide – multiple opportunities for collaborative partnerships with other universities, research institutes and diverse communities. The connection between *NICHE*'s location and its research focus is a vital aspect of its success. This unique city is a tool to think with. As I often say: 'Venice as method!'

CB and CH: How important are collaborations with other research and cultural organisations in Venice? And how has the Venetian contemporary cultural ecosystem been changing since *NICHE* was initiated?

FT: They are really important. We collaborate with many of the key institutions in the cultural ecosystem of Venice, including *Ocean Space*, with whom we created a joint fellowship to investigate the issues of *Rights of Nature*, and with *Fondazione Prada*, with whom we collaborated on the wonderful exhibition, *Everybody Talks about the Weather* (2023). Of course, Venice is also home to international cultural exhibitions, e.g. the Biennales of Art and of Architecture, and we have forged innovative collaborations with many artists, curators and practitioners. We focus in particular on working with artists and performers who have an interest in co-producing environmental knowledge and action. In the past few years, we have worked with the Samoan-Japanese artist Yuki Kihara, the London-based *Cooking Sections*, the Venetian artist Giorgio Andreotta Calò, the Australian curator Natalie King OAM and, more recently, with Sonia Levy, Elena Mazzi and Chiara Famengo (and the list goes on).

CB and CH: Indeed, ecological art, ecocritical art history and theory and 'green' curatorial and museum practices play an important role within NICHE research activities and knowledge dissemination, especially for public engagement and local community involvement. How much impact or agency do you think that art can really have in understanding and facing environmental challenges?

FT: As you, Cristina, know very well, since you are its principal investigator, one of the twelve research clusters at NICHE focuses on *Ecological Art Practices* through a series of events specifically addressing *Art Ecologies*. The cluster mainly questions the relationship between art and the environment, intertwining ecocritical approaches, radical imagination and creative sustainability. It aims to both create inclusive occasions for interdisciplinary exchange – among scholars and cultural practitioners working across the field of contemporary art practice and theory – and foster international collaborations with (art) research centres and commons. This is a key aspect for NICHE: We believe that artists should play an increasingly central role in contemporary society. Especially in terms of generating awareness and forms of agency, imagining new forms of living together that are as sustainable and inclusive as possible, taking care of each other – human and more-than-human – and respecting nature and its rights. NICHE is also very supportive of local communities and artistic projects that develop forms of activism. For instance, we are collaborating with *Microclima*, a research-driven non-profit organisation that deals with the natural world, cultural heritage and the public sphere. *Microclima's* latest endeavour, with the artist Giorgio Andreotta Calò and the experimental food platform *Tocia!*, is the preservation of the island of Sant'Andrea, one of the last islands in the Venetian archipelago (together with Poveglia and a few others) not to have become prey to real estate and overtourism. Thinking about a different Venice that is closer to the needs of those who live here and to the wellbeing of its ecosystem is still possible, especially when we think and act together.

CB and CH: There is something Janus-faced about thinking of sustainability and Venice. Venice as a place of cultural heritage threatened by decay and overtourism in the middle of the sensitive ecosystem of the lagoon. And, at the same time, Venice as a reference point for many sustainability events and projects, as a vibrant cultural and scientific scene that deals with the environmental issue. As one of the few residents and the Director of NICHE, you have

a long understanding of and personal experience with Venice: How do you perceive and deal with this ambivalence/paradox?

FT: When my partner and I moved back to Italy after many years in Asia, we knew that we could only live in Venice. We were lucky to find a beautiful home near the Basilica dei Frari. We feel lucky and privileged to be here, to walk everywhere all the time, and have learned to row and go by boat. We try to contribute to sustaining the city's civic infrastructure. But, alas, we sometimes have to run away when the city is overwhelmed by tourists. Yes, Venice faces a pressing and complex issue: overtourism. The city is often overcrowded, especially during peak seasons, leading to congestion in the narrow streets and on public transport. This influx of visitors puts immense pressure on Venice's fragile infrastructure by damaging historical sites and buildings, disrupting the daily lives of residents, and straining local resources and services. Additionally, the rise of short-term rentals and souvenir shops catering primarily to tourists has led to the displacement of local residents and traditional businesses, altering the city's cultural fabric. There is a pressing need for innovative, community-driven solutions in order to create a balance between the economic benefits of tourism and the preservation of cultural and environmental heritage.

CB and CH: What are NICHE's next main projects and objectives?

FT: We are very, very active and I am going to mention just a few things here. It is very clear that, in its programming, the Centre makes space for experimental and emergent forms of knowledge production, honouring and incorporating diverse forms of knowing beyond traditional, disciplinary, academic scholarship. For instance, we continue to work with Indigenous practitioners. In June 2024, we co-organised a one-week Indigenous art school in collaboration with the *Indigenous Art School of Santa Fe* and the US pavilion at the Venice Biennale – and in October we had a second iteration of the public programme of the US pavilion, organised together with *Bard College Center for Indigenous Studies*. We are also collaborating with the artist and activist Maria Madeira, who is represented in the Timor-Leste Pavilion at this year's Venice Art Biennale (2024). Together with Madeira and the curator Natalie King we have organised a three day symposium on sea, soil and solidarity in collaboration with the Portuguese and South East Asian national pavilions at the Venice Biennale. The Centre is also fostering and supporting the significant expansion of the programme of

the *UNESCO Chair on Water, Heritage and Sustainable Development*, which is led by the historian of science Pietro Daniel Omodeo. The chair is active within the *UNITWIN/UNESCO* programme, which promotes inter-university cooperation and networking to enhance institutional capacities through knowledge sharing and collaborative work. The chair also functions as a think-tank and builder of bridges between academia, policymakers and civil society. In May 2025, our annual lecture will be delivered by David Gentilcore, a global expert on water cultures. In previous years we hosted lectures by Serenella Iovino and Elizabeth Povinelli. In June 2025, we will host a conference on Geoanthropological Metabolisms, which will be organised by our Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Research Fellow Justas Patkauskas and will feature a keynote from the Japanese philosopher Saitō Kōhei. We have also started two new Public Engagement Series: one on *Art Ecologies* that you, Cristina, coordinate, and the Dialogues on Science and Society series, which is coordinated by the anthropologist Roberta Raffaetà in collaboration with scientists and policy makers.