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Disorientation and Where to Find Oneself

Barbara Nardacchione

45°26'16.8"N 12°20'09.6"E

The hand leads the body,
clearing a path, moving aside disoriented passersby.
It cuts through the anonymous horde
that funnels through alleys filled with standardized memories.
The crowd is like the tide,
peaking at specific times of the day.
Holding one's breath
steps, selfies, *sarde in saor*, faces, shadows, bodies, *folpetti*, postcards, masks,
*baccalà*¹
all to be faced in apnea.
Crossing, no,
evading places.

Disorientation is a feeling that emerges as a profound sense of disconnection from our surroundings. Venice, as we know, has become a symbol of over-tourism and Disneyfication in the eyes of the world. These phenomena, deeply ingrained, ignite in residents a rejection of their own city, 'crystallized in its

1 *Sarde in Saor*, *folpetti*, and *baccalà* are traditional Venetian dishes. *Sarde in Saor* is made of fried sardines marinated in a tangy sauce with onions, vinegar, raisins and pine nuts. *Folpetti* refers to small, boiled octopuses, typically served with olive oil, lemon and parsley. *Baccalà* is dried and salted cod, commonly prepared in Venice as a creamy spread called *baccalà mantecato* or as a slow-cooked dish known as *baccalà alla vicentina*.

form but profoundly transformed in the use and composition of the crowd moving through its alleys'.²

Venice, whose historic centre has suffered an unstoppable demographic decline for years, dropping below 50,000 residents last year for the first time. Venice, where the tourism monoculture overshadows all other economic sectors, closing businesses, month by month, that do not follow this direction. Venice, where finding a decent home at an affordable price has become a quixotic challenge.

The picture is not reassuring. And yet, by moving away from the everyday geography of this scenario, one realises the existence of a cultural and social foundation, a burgeoning substrate that, in recent years, has found a place of experimentation beyond the historic centre, shifting further, towards the estuary³.

45°27'31.6"N 12°23'17.8"E

Fabio, the captain, gazes elsewhere,
 in the vain search for the line separating the sky from the lagoon.
 We are immersed in a milky atmosphere,
 anchored still,
 moved only by a few motor waves rocking the group.
 Chiara, the researcher,
 book in hand
 'a nomenclature so dense here that even an ocean wouldn't match it'
 she says,
 'and it must be why we get lost'.
 Thus immersed, us, lost
 among *ghebi*, *velme*, *barene*,⁴

2 Salerno Giacomo-Maria: Per una critica dell'economia turistica. Venezia tra museificazione e mercificazione. Macerata 2020. p. 201.

3 An *estuary* is a partially enclosed coastal body of water where freshwater from rivers and streams mixes with saltwater from the sea. These dynamic environments are characterised by rich biodiversity and serve as vital habitats for numerous species.

4 *Ghebi*, *velme* and *barene* are Venetian words and key components of the lagoon's ecosystem. *Barene* are salt marshes, *velme* parts of the lagoon bottom and *ghebi* little canals that cross the *barene* and *velme*.

'we look around and see only mists, strange lights, half-seen horizons'.⁵

Fabio, the artist, the cook

arranges the ingredients

[bulgur, parsley, spices, tomato paste, ajvar, oil]

Together, we knead on the central table of the *R.A.P.T.U.S.*⁶

[bean miso, lemon, salad, pomegranate molasses].

Lagoon-style *çiğ köfte*.

Many artistic research programmes that look towards the lagoon emerge as opportunities for gathering, walks, field workshops. What is sought? There is no single answer: detachment from a standardised system through a change in perspective, a desire for reconnection and a deep understanding of the environment, as well as the need to create space for experimenting with shared practices.

In 2022, *Tavole Conviviali: The Cross between Food and Ecology* was born – a research programme led by *TBA21-Academy*, in collaboration with Marco Bravetti of *Tocia! Cucina e Comunità*.⁷

'Cooking is a revolutionary act.' This is the statement of *Tocia!*, a lagoon collective that explores the landscape through the act of cooking. Through its situated research, *Tocia!* has been inspiring many other experiences, successfully creating a network of militant chefs, researchers, artists and activists.

This collaboration led to the first cycle of a research programme aimed at fostering dialogue around food and its impact on ecosystems. It originates from the urgency to address central issues in the lagoon (and beyond), such as the scarcity of fish, soil and water pollution, the need to support alternative methods of food production and distribution and the observation and implementation of regenerative practices.

5 Barbaro Paolo: *Ultime isole*. Venice 2023. This excerpt was read by Chiara Famengo during an expedition held on 16.06.2024 as part of *A Diet of Resistance*, the third edition of *Convivial Tables* – the field research programme of *TBA21-Academy*, curated by *Barena Bianca*.

6 *R.A.P.T.U.S.* is the name of the boat on which the group sailed.

7 For more information on the research programme organised by *TBA21-Academy* see: www.ocean-space.org/research/convivial-tables.

‘Salinity’, ‘Toxicity’ and ‘Invasive Species’ are the themes introduced within the programme in a convivial setting, through interdisciplinary dialogue in informal contexts, such as a picnic during a foraging session on Sant’Erasmus island or around a table set up in an exhibition space.

45°26'13.9"N 12°20'43.0"E

A table

Among savage islands,⁸ emerged

in the second nave of the church

welcomes diners

[elderflower and sea fennel, *Acmella oleracea*].

‘Let us not assume that everything is edible

or ours to consume at will.’

[*Barena* wormwood⁹, sea inula, young fig leaves, marigold].

‘Let us learn how to transform certain elements

from harming to healing,

by roasting, stewing, pickling, poaching.’

[lemon balm, Vietnamese coriander, hyssop, Malabar spinach].

‘Pause, observe, listen, measure (yourself).’¹⁰

As often happens at the table, during gatherings, each person brings their skills, memories and anecdotes into play. The suggestions of one diner become inspiration for another, fostering an integration of knowledge about a landscape represented by a dish – whether bland, flavourful, digestible or indigestible. Dishes, like landscapes, are complex systems.

8 This refers to the exhibition *The Soul Expanding Ocean #4*: Diana Policarpo. *Ciguatera, Ocean Space*, Venice 2022. Commissioned by TBA21–Academy. Co-produced by TBA21–Academy and the *Centro de Arte Moderna Gulbenkian*, in collaboration with *Instituto Gulbenkian Ciência*.

9 Also known as *Artemisia* or sea wormwood, this is a perennial plant that grows wild in soils that have contact with salt water. It is mainly used in cooking to flavour schnapps and in the liquor industry as a digestive in bitters.

10 Excerpts from Marambio Camila: *Toxicity is Communal*. In: *Convivial Tables. The Cross Between Food and Ecology*. Entrée: the Pannier of the Venice Lagoon (online publication).

Over the years, the programme has increasingly recognised that ecological and cultural challenges, even in an artistic context, must begin from the collective: giving more space to the interconnection of disciplines and practices, bringing the social and civic dimension back into focus. In a condition of mutual learning, art, research and activism unite, moving beyond a purely artistic discourse.

A Diet of Resistance, the third episode of the programme, aimed to draft a *Manifesto* of actions and good practices through group work, emphasising how our daily approach to food reflects an awareness of and a stance on environmental, social and economic issues. Thus, once again, moving to the lagoon, to that ‘nomenclature so dense that even an ocean *wouldn't match it*’ – as Barbaro would say – exploring places, knowing their actors, sharing experiences and embracing a renewed sense of belonging from which understanding and care for the landscape and the ecosystem, as well as a critical and creative vision, can arise.

45°26'00.8"N 12°20'41.9"E

The table, like our feet
has its legs sunk
into the re-emerged landscape
of *salso* and *salicornia*¹¹
hardened by the July sun.
Gathered around
like around a wellhead
we share thoughts, sandwiches
[*nasone* tomato,¹² seaweed *caponata*,¹³ and plums]
and wine to celebrate
the lagoon dusk.

11 *Salso* refers to saline environments, while *Salicornia* are salt-tolerant plants that thrive in such areas and are commonly found in salt marshes and essential for stabilising soil and supporting lagoon ecosystems.

12 *Nasone* tomatoes are a specific variety of Italian tomatoes.

13 Seaweed *caponata* is a variation of the traditional Sicilian vegetable stew (*caponata*), which incorporates seaweed to enhance its flavour with a hint of the sea, complementing the dish's coastal roots.

And while the estuary and its islands are now the place to find oneself and recreate common perspectives, the hope is that these practices will also germinate inspiration for Venice and its historic centre, which must thrive on new visions and counter the rigidity of myopic ruling powers through the desires and actions of its inhabitants. Ecological challenges cannot exclude it. Manfredo Tafuri, speaking of Venice and tradition, says: 'What is called upon to endure in perpetual renewal, in constant re-founding, is not a form, but a way of being in relation.'¹⁴

14 Tafuri Manfredo: *Venice and the Renaissance*. Translation by Jessica Levine. Cambridge, Mass. 1989. p. 23.