

On Axel Braun's Venice Project 'Machina Mundi/ Reign of Reason'

Petra Schaefer and Axel Braun

'If one can no longer live forwards, one simply changes direction.'¹

In his visual essay, the Essen-based artist and photographer Axel Braun presents selected images from his artist residency at the *German Centre for Venetian Studies* in the summer of 2024. These stills are taken from video works that document, in slow motion, artefacts from the *Serenissima*. He moves the arm of his camera 'as slowly as possible', which results in a very calm narrative style.² By taking a cinematic approach to his presentation of such objects as the opulent tomb of the Doge Giovanni Pesaro in the Frari church (Fig. 5), he enables the viewer to contemplatively consider their historical contexts. For his video, Braun selects a detail of the two-storey seventeenth-century monument that presents the living Doge at the peak of his power, surrounded by allegories. But the artist shows neither the *Primus inter Pares* in the regalia nor the four women, who symbolise intelligence, nobility, wealth and erudition. As revealed by his photographic close-up, Braun is focussed on the columns of the object. He documents the figures of slaves, variations on the baroque *telamon* motif, whose black bodies contrast with the white stone. For his essay, Braun selects a still, in which tiny areas of black leg show through the torn garment.

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- 1 Leona Stahlmann: *Diese ganzen belanglosen Wunder*. Munich 2022. p. 354. The writer Leona Stahlmann, Artist in Residence of the *German Centre for Venetian Studies* in 2021, worked on this novel, which is set in the near future in a landscape of barren salt marshes that are already clearly showing the consequences of the climate catastrophe, in Venice, where she investigates the ecology of the lagoon.
 - 2 Cf. conversation between Axel Braun and Petra Schaefer, 26.06.2024. www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkRkDnsznXU. accessed on 20.10.2024.

This pictorial strategy forces the viewer to look more closely, because a fleeting glance is not enough for them to grasp the context. The artist's aim is that, in this digital age, the keywords in the title *Slave/Doge/ Frari/Venice* should provide us with sufficient information to be able to rapidly look up the meaning and interpretation. On the other hand, he can assume that Venice connoisseurs are already able to place this detail.³ The history of African slaves in Venice was researched earlier on the occasion of the Venice Art Biennale in 2003 by the US-American artist Fred Wilson, who has Afro-American and Caribbean roots and was born in the Bronx in 1954.⁴ As a representative of North America, Wilson flanked the main entrance to the Classicist USA Pavilion in the Giardini with two oversized copies of the *telamon* slave figures from the Frari tomb, in order to pursue the question of whether there had been a PoC community in the history of the former Venetian State. Inside the Pavilion, he worked associatively and presented a range of objects that had formal associations with the subject, including a black Murano glass candlestick in eighteenth century style. Despite their formal diversity, the contents of the work of the two artists have much in common. Braun, like Wilson, uses the centuries-old black community in Venice as the starting point for his critique of the way in which the role of African people has been erased from European history.⁵ Axel Braun takes up the threads of this post-colonial discourse in his study of the glass pearls from Murano that were created for the African Region, where they circulated and were exchanged for other goods (Fig. 6).⁶

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- 3 The Basilica of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in the Sestiere San Polo is one of the oldest and most visited churches in the lagoon-city, partly due to Tiziano Vecellio's painting *Assunta* on the main altar. The Doge's tomb mentioned here is located in the front part of the left aisle.
 - 4 Wilson Fred: Parla di me come sono. In: La Biennale di Venezia (ed.): Sogni e conflitti. La Dittatura dello Spettatore. Venice 2003. p. 594–595.
 - 5 Cf. conversation between Fred Wilson and Leora Maltz-Leca, 19.06.2023. www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_CoFFvvtJk. accessed on 20.06.2024.
 - 6 For more on the artistic investigation of glass pearls as a means of exchange and payment in colonialised regions, see the project by Frauke Zabel, Artist in Residence at the *German Centre for Venetian Studies* in 2023 www.dszv.it/new_alumni/frauke-zabel/ (accessed on 20.10.2024) and the collection of samples of Venetian glass pearls manufactured by Costantini Valmarana in the 1930s in the recent installation *Monte di Pietà* from Swiss artist Christoph Büchel in the *Fondazione Prada* at Palazzo Ca' Corner della Regina during the Venice Art Biennale in 2024. See the exhibition guide *Bollettino di ASTE Giudiziarie* 7, April–November 2024, Venice 2024. p. 11.

Fig. 1: Axel Braun, *Nothing is Impossible in a Place Where Dreams Become Reality* (Construction site of New Songdo City II), 2012.



Courtesy of the artist

In his visual essay, Axel Braun presents an array of exemplary photos that illustrate the diverse storylines of his project *Machina Mundi/ Reign of Reason*. Like individual objects in a huge kaleidoscope, they will come together in the final form of presentation, a three-dimensional mixed-media essay. Then Braun will combine photos, videos, archival documents and historical objects in a spatial installation, in which visitors can independently address individual subjects more deeply, in line with their particular interest. Hence, Braun's photos in this book are part of a wider context, in which he investigates different traces of the Anthropocene in Venice and the Venetian Lagoon. This investigation directs him towards the past. In the photo *The Fate (Madonna del Monte)*, 2024 (Fig. 9), he draws our attention to the silhouette of a ruin, set against the soft pink light of the dusk. But while Braun's evening image looks back upon the decay in the north of the lagoon, an earlier work from the overall project *DISTURBED HARMONIES [Anthropocene Landscapes]* turns to the future. His photo *Nothing is*

Impossible in a Place Where Dreams Become Reality (Construction site of New Songdo City II) from 2012 (Fig. 1) shows mudflats in glistening daylight that is simultaneously illuminating a sea of towering buildings in the background. Still a building site over a decade ago, this is now a dense residential district in the megacity of Incheon, just outside Seoul in South Korea. The coastal environment documented by Axel Braun no longer exists. Thus, in the eyes of today's viewer, this image is just as retrospective as the studies of Venice that are presented here.

Built on the Backs of Others

A Work-in-Progress Preview of the Case Study Machina Mundi/ Reign of Reason (since 2024)

Fig. 1: What Remains (Poveglia)



Nature at large will adapt to any form of anthropogenic devastation. Eventually, humans will suffer the most from the processes that their species has triggered. Humanity has repeatedly produced unprecedented creativity with impressive and often beautiful results. Unfortunately, the unintended consequences can be incalculable, and many achievements benefit just a chosen few, especially when they have been built on the backs of others.

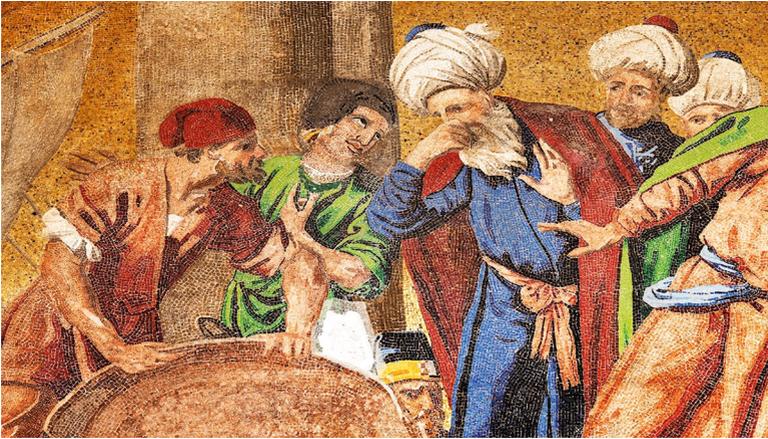
Beauty, brutality, science and atrocity are often densely entangled. Despite being one of the most admired examples of human creation, Venice is no exception. This case study approaches the city as a fragile relict of a glorious past. It is a sample that enables us to observe the fundamental structures and vulnerable points of global networks.

Fig. 2: On Othering: Good and Evil (Relief on the Facade of The Scuola Grande di San Marco, Venice)



We need the other to define ourselves. Societies distinguish between their members and those who are excluded. However, successful isolation from foreign influences has been an exception in human history. Empires, in contrast, follow an inherent logic of expansion. This makes definitions of belonging even more vital for those who aim to assert and sustain power. To oppress, exploit and extract, it is necessary to know your kin and to exclude the rest from the rights that you claim for yourself. At the same time, offering purpose and justification for the profiteers is crucial. Nobody wants to be the bad guy. Thus, it is common practice to define moral standards accordingly. Sometimes, that which is believed to be good is evil.

Fig. 3: *The Scam* (*Translatio Sancti Marci*, Mosaic, Basilica di San Marco, Venice)



Much has been written about the virtues and achievements of *La Serenissima Repubblica*. For centuries, the splendour of its material and non-material heritage has overwhelmed visitors with awe. Like Venetian art and architecture, its political and economic inventions have also been idealised and imitated worldwide. Nevertheless, the *Myths of Venice* are omnipresent in the symbols and allegories of the city's historical artworks. They result from repeated entanglements of fact and fiction that aim to consolidate power through cultural hegemony. Venice has never disguised its use of theft and looting to accumulate wealth. Instead, it proudly presented the bounty as a means of claiming ascendancy. At the same time, maintaining diplomatic relations with friends and enemies was a precondition for a successful mercantile network.

Fig. 4: Slave (Tomb of Doge Giovanni Pesaro, Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice)



From the early Middle Ages, the capturing, buying, shipping and selling of slaves was a substantial pillar of the emerging trade empire. While enslaving fellow Christians was already prohibited, pagan Slavs from the Balkans were among the first to be traded across the Mediterranean. At the time, there was strong demand in Middle Eastern and North African societies for subjugated workers and warriors. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, slavery became less accepted in Romance-speaking Europe, but the devastating effects of the plague resulted in a return to earlier standards.

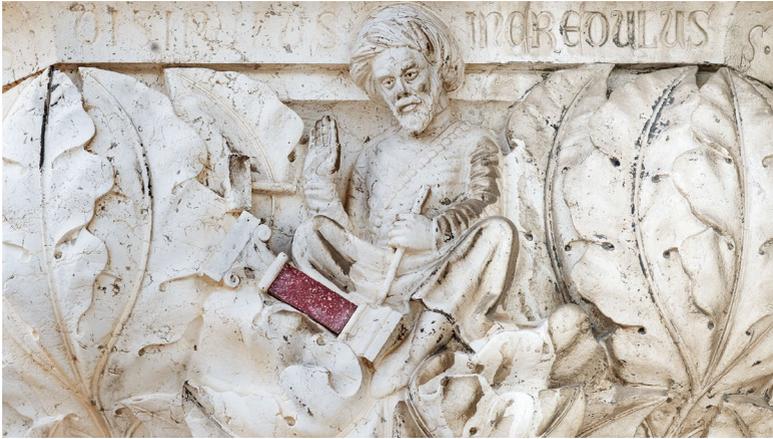
From the Renaissance onwards, artworks depicting African slaves and servants confirmed their owners' status. Nevertheless, numerous wills illustrate that it was a widespread practice to free slaves after their masters' death – which ensured them both the convenience of slavery during their lifetime and an unhindered transition to heaven.

Fig. 5: Trade Bead (Rosetta Bead, 16th century, Museo del Vetro di Murano, CI. VI inv. no. 6652)



Murano's glass workshops created a monopoly for Venice that endured for centuries. When the trade in luxury goods declined in the Early Modern Age, the industry was saved by a rising demand for glass beads. Beads were a traditional currency for many Indigenous communities in Africa, Asia and the New World. Thus, Europe's emerging colonial powers and their slave traders recognised the advantages of Murano's knowledge and production capacities. While Venice had lost its prominent position in world trade, it could still benefit from the networks that were being created by its successors. The most notable of these was the triangular trade that connected Europe, Africa and the Americas with logistical efficiency. For more than two centuries, Venice was the leading supplier of the glass beads that archaeologists occasionally find in unmarked tombs around the globe. In a time in which Christian values and the innovations of the Enlightenment were improving the rights of Europeans, there was no hesitation in dehumanising entire populations in other parts of the world.

Fig. 6: *The Incredulous Apprentice, Stone Mason's Capital (Palazzo Ducale, Venice)*



While its position on the lagoon provided security from its enemies, it imposed countless other challenges on the growing metropolis. Thus, Venice has always depended on the *Terraferma* and exchange with the outside world. Analogous to its expansion of power, controlling trade routes, battling enemies and establishing colonies became vital requirements. The city's built environment and material culture mirror these processes. Construction materials, knowhow and a workforce needed to be imported—sometimes through trade and persuasion and sometimes through theft and coercion.

Fig. 7: Pietra d'Istria (Montauro Quarry, Rovinj, Croatia)



Pietra d'Istria is just one example of this dependency. Without these exceptionally durable stones that have 'risen from the sea', the city would have vanished long ago. Almost every cultural practice that was mastered in the lagoon would have been unthinkable without imported ingredients, from wood and stone to metals and minerals. Thus, exploring and extracting were added to the list of the vital skills cultivated in Venice.

For centuries, humanity has understood itself as superior within the alleged duality of nature and culture. This has permitted the relentless exploitation of all available resources. Slowly, we are starting to understand the level of exposure of our species to the natural forces that we increasingly influence but cannot control.

Fig. 8: The Fate (Madonna del Monte)



The empire has been reduced to the crumbling remnants of its capital. The beauty and glorious history of Venice are its final assets. After centuries of trading the most exclusive goods, the city sells its scenery like a commodity. Will it eventually be choked by over-tourism or become an isolated resort that is only for those who can afford it?

Whatever happens, there are other, more substantial threats. The cultural skills that once facilitated the unlikely rise of a city built on water have developed exponentially during the last centuries and created an ever-expanding technosphere. Venice is an entirely built environment. It is increasingly facing the devastating consequences of human interference in the Earth system. The lagoon has become a scale model for the global challenges of the Anthropocene.^{7,8}

7 Axel Braun is the author of all the images. Reproductions of artworks appear with the permission of the related institutions and copyright holders. Some images are stills from videos and 3D animations and will be part of a mixed-media essay.

8 The project was realised during a residency at *German Centre for Venetian Studies* supported by the Commissioner for Culture and Media of the Federal Republic of Germany and the *Dr. Christiane Hackerodt Stiftung*.