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Letter to Salvatore Settis on the Island of Sant'Andrea

Giorgio Andreotta Calò

The following text was written in July 2023 in the form of a letter to Salvatore Settis. The Italian archaeologist and art historian was identified as an ideal interlocutor for the question posed in the text: *What is to be done?* Without explicitly requesting an answer, the text and the question argue the reasons for non-action and become a possible programmatic manifesto for the island of Sant'Andrea and the *Forte* (fortress) it houses (Fig. 1) – once a defence outpost of the City of Venice and today a symbolic place or, even more, a place to be defended for what it culturally represents for the city and its lagoon.

The text therefore overturns the perspective from which to consider and observe the *Forte*, as well as the action to be undertaken: the observation of this place, no longer in its function as a defensive structure but, rather, in the perspective of a space to be defended and preserved, in its current transitory condition. A place through which we can think and become aware of our actions against the ruined present, of the possibility of *not acting*, precisely where action has defined itself as consummatory and exhaustive, destructive. Somehow, *the* place that can defend us from ourselves.

By highlighting and cultivating its (and our) weakness and fragility, the *Forte* is transformed into metamorphic space. Like the shell of a moulting crab, it becomes vulnerable and open to possibility, only to transform itself into another space for the defence of new cultural values.

May Sant'Andrea therefore be a monument and a bulwark of a halting progression, of a gradual slowing down and decommissioning in favour of an ecosys-

temic re-appropriation of spaces, where the anthropic and the natural find balance and logic.

Venice, 2 July 2023

Dear Professor,

First of all, please allow me to thank you for your willingness to consider my letter. I will now attempt to briefly summarise my reasons for thinking of turning to you.

I would like to begin by briefly presenting myself and reporting to you who I am and what I am working on.

I was born in Venice and studied at the Academy of Fine Arts, where I now teach sculpture... in truth, only since very recently. I lived in the Netherlands between 2008 and 2016 and returned to the lagoon to take part in the Venice Biennale in 2017, and then established my studio in the city and made it the focus of my research interests.

Last December, the website of the State Property Agency announced the auctioning by tender of a 20-year concession for the use of part of the island of Sant'Andrea.

I participated in the auction as part of a small group – three people who share the same views, positions and objectives.

Our bid was accepted and, hence, we were granted the concession.

The section of the island that we are permitted to use is relatively small, as is the entire piece of land of which this section is part and which, in my opinion, is extremely interesting and valuable.

This is because the area that is not at our disposal plays host to a 16th-century fortress that was designed by Andrea Sammicheli and has recently been renovated. The same piece of land also contains other structures from later periods – up to the Second World War – but as these are not cared for they find themselves in a state of decay.

We have attempted, and continue to attempt, to obtain permission to also use the part of the island in front of the fortress so that we can build an outpost in this extraordinary setting, a place for thinking and debating that will enable us to counter the risk of this location also being swallowed up, sooner or later, by

the constantly advancing tourism that has already infected Venice in an irreversible way and is now assuming a new, green and sustainable guise, in order to generate profits in newly conquered areas.

This was the trigger that moved us to follow this path.

Once we had arrived on the island, we were asked:

What do you want to do?

I have been asking myself this question for a long time, but it was not until participating in the tender process that I was able to answer it – because this was a sort of call to arms and I entered the fray with little delay.

Only recently, now that I am often on the island again, did it become clear to me exactly how I should answer the question of ‘what is to be done?’ This answer was both simple – and paradoxical.

‘Nothing.’

We don't want to do anything.

What's that supposed to mean?

Well, I used to spend time on the island of Sant'Andrea years ago. It was one of the few abandoned free spaces that was worth investigating and could always be recognised because time had stood still.

When I returned to Italy and Venice in 2016 after many years in the Netherlands and experienced daily life in the city again, I was seized with doubt and had a real *crisis of presence*.

It was no coincidence that the work of art that I presented at that time at the Venice Biennale was shaped by this feeling and by the opportune reading of Ernesto de Martino's book *La fine del mondo (The End of the World)*.

The city that I had left just a few years earlier had changed drastically. In those few years, many of these places, these undetermined free spaces, in which I had been able to rediscover myself, had simply disappeared or changed into something else – mostly hotels and tourist facilities.

But Sant'Andrea had not changed during these years.

In my opinion, the unsuspected potential of this place is due to its original function: defence.

This is why the past few months have revealed to me the civic, ethical and militant mission that we must carry out here.

We must ensure that this place remains as it is. A defence post, but one with a

paradoxically reversed perspective: a final bastion that is to be defended. And we must be careful: If our answer to the question ‘WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO?’ is ‘NOTHING’, we will find ourselves facing an even more treacherous path.

Because *doing nothing* doesn't mean taking no action. Quite the opposite: It takes a huge effort to resist the temptation to transform this place, too, into something else. Perhaps such a huge effort is even alien to our human nature.

Instead of transforming the place, we should change our own perspective. As if undergoing a paradigm change, we should imagine that this place represents our last opportunity to take a really new look at our present. In order to ensure that all that is here, made by man and saved by its context (the isolated location, the wild nature, the absence of private property) – indeed, this very combination with its *unexpressed and unrealised potential* – can remain preserved. The privileged place where to project our imagination, in other words, our future.

Taking the idea further, I would like it to be able to consolidate to the point of becoming *forte* – strong, in the literal, original sense of the *fortress* itself – and to embody that place on Sant'Andrea.

I am just an artist and, as such, seek to give shape to visions. It would be naïve of me to imagine that my voice could achieve anything against the pressure of all the interests that converge here – public and private interests, each with their development projects.

So you can see, Professor, that whatever I was willing to pay I would simply not be able to find another place that gives me even a rudimentary sense of still being in my hometown and the surroundings in which I was brought up.

It is a real privilege to experience Venice as a normal citizen rather than as a species that is threatened with extinction. Today, I can find nothing as worthwhile as this.

I also require little to be satisfied. What is Sant'Andrea today, compared with the much larger area that has already been irrevocably conquered?

No more than a small, marginal island on the outermost edge of this voracious touristification.

This symbolises Sant'Andrea today and this says everything: Sant'Andrea symbolises Venice, a utopia, a cultural symbol that should not be allowed to perish. At the end of the day, I didn't summarise briefly, for which I am very sorry.

And I am also not completely sure what I am actually asking you to do.

In truth, I am probably asking you for *nothing*.

And I would also like to add that you are effectively *the author of your own destiny*: If you hadn't written this insightfully polemic book *Se Venezia muore (If Venice Dies)*, I would probably never have sent this email.

Hence, I am now sharing with you this idea, which is also associated with reading your book and has, to a certain extent, become manifest to me in my life today.

I would be delighted if you could offer me some idea or piece of advice.

And if you should want to offer criticism, that would delight me even more: I prefer honest argument to flattery.

I suspect that, if we are to build a movement centred on this site, we will require many years of work, huge experience and a self-confident stride.

And, above all, in order to defend an apparently regressive and nihilistic and yet, in my opinion, absolutely essential idea...

The ability to pause, contemplate and change direction.

I also have absolutely no idea whether I remotely have the character, the temperament and the time to do this. Either way, I do not have the slightest intention of backing down and will attempt to do my bit.

Given the wave of destruction that is consuming everything in its path, I cannot remain inactive.

In truth, *doing nothing* in the *fortress* is an act of resistance on behalf of a place that, thankfully, no one has consumed so far...

Giorgio Andreotta Calò

Fig. 1: Giorgio Andreotta Calò, Fort of Sant'Andrea, Venice, 2024, Walkways inside the bastion.



Courtesy of the artist