

BEYOND THE PRESENT

Reflecting Future Orders and Disorders

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VENICE, AN ARCHIPELAGO OF ART AND ECOLOGIES

[transcript]

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*.