

# · Venetian impressions: Lines of flight from the terrace-city

Marco Baravalle

Ranjit Kandalgaonkar,  
A History From Below.  
Woodcut on Fabriano  
Rosaspina paper, 2021.



The terrace-city: quality food,  
shitty life

What if Venice really became a museum? You just have to understand the type – maybe like the Museum of Alexandria, the one Ptolemy had dedicated to the Muses, to study, to international exchange. A museum as a meeting place, a *dispositif* to foster cooperation of brains and not just tourist consumption.

Instead, everything seems there to be devoured or is allowed to be devoured.

The city of records, the Biennale of records, the civic museums that open for tourists and close when the tourists are not there (as happened in 2021). All boundaries have disappeared between the hotel room at 250 euros (the cheapest you could find), the vaporetto at 9.50 euros, the kilometre-long queue to see art, and art itself. In Venice, the dream of the avant-garde is reversed – art does not disappear into revolutionised life, but into the abstraction of capital (and so many still delude themselves that they have it in front of them).

The use value of heritage, of fields, of buildings has retreated somewhere, there at the back, behind exchange value, hypertrophied to the point of occupying the whole scene.

They want to put a ticketing system into the city. Venice with a ticket ... Will it have double sittings like restaurants? First round at 7.30 in the evening, second at 9? Venice, with the ticket (preferably pre-purchased), finally manifests as the fulfilment of a metamorphosis, becomes an event itself; but when 'event' ceases to be the name of something that breaks the routine, it turns into its opposite, into the name of the everydayness of extractivism, of the new normal of value extraction, fuelled by small and large rentiers.

Some imaginative architect in the 1970s designed modular cities inspired by the supermarket and the parking lot. Someone else later described the space of postmodernity as 'junk space', a global continuum of glass and steel membranes, escalators and air conditioning. The module that Venice imposes as the matrix of the global tourist city is the terrace. Chairs-umbrellas-tables-spritz-fingerfood-bill-chairs-umbrellas-tables-spritz-fingerfood-bill ... To infinity in space.

Slow food is enlisted: quality food,  
shit life

The temporality of the global tourist city is that of a flooded digestive system, a social gastric reflux, an inflamed colon defecating crowds of tourists (and in shit you struggle to live). Who better to govern (or rather guard) this eternal rumination than the current mayor, an entrepreneur of temporary employment and entertainment. If shit were gold ... And it is, for those who make money from it.

Where does tourism end? Where do those other things called city, culture, art, public space, politics begin? They are no longer 'other things'; those who do not understand this are deluding themselves. And they are deluding themselves that by evoking them, as in the past, something will change.

Lines of flight 1: the port and  
the hospital

What is a port? It is a junction within a *hydrarchy*. From above, hydrarchy is grasped as imperial control over the waters, a *dispositif* for putting the submerged part of the globe to profit, now more central than ever in an age of logistical capitalism. But hydrarchy, as historians of piracy teach, is also that set of patterns of

self-government, rebellion and lines of escape traced by seafarers, pirates, insubordinate women, runaway slaves, the poor and so on.

Porto Marghera, the industrial port of Venice that developed in the 1920s as one of the centres of gravity of the modern project for Venice, was for decades the main polluter of the Lagoon, but it was, at the same time, the working-class heart of the city. As the petrochemical industry declined and the tourist industry advanced, the centre of gravity shifted again from Marghera to the Stazione Marittima (i.e., that portion of the port located in the historic city), which, until 2021 (when the struggles of the No Grandi Navi committee convinced UNESCO and the government to ban the wreckers of havoc), housed cruise ships and carried out related logistics.

What would happen if the Marittima transformed from an institution serving extractivism to an institution of care? For *Le mostre della Laguna*, an exhibition curated by Sale Docks in 2021, Ranjit Kandalgaonkar imagined the Marittima being replaced by the (never realised) hospital that Le Corbusier designed for Venice in the early 1960s, shortly before his death. In his woodcut, the Indian artist depicts three levels. At the bottom are the typical Venetian ancestral foundations, pointed poles of larch or fir that sink into the *caranto* (a layer of solid clay under the surface slough), a necessary base for the Istrian stone walls that will support the actual building. The middle level is occupied by the outline of the present Stazione Marittima (until recently, as we know, a cruise port). At the highest level, on the other hand, the outline of Le Corbusier's hospital, conceived for the *sestiere* of Cannaregio and left on paper, is suspended.

The modern returns here not as the failure of a utopia, but as the utopia of care against the process of touristification that progressively empties the city of its inhabitants. This emptying, in recent decades, has been matched by a parallel demobilisation of healthcare institutions: the Civil Hospital is defunded, departments and services are closing, there is a shortage of staff; primary care physicians are in short supply; mental health services are closing. The relationship between health services and the territory is weakening. The buzzwords are privatisation and centralisation. Buzzwords that cost a notable number of lives during the pandemic.

The smeared lions: iconoclasm  
in the touristified city

A nocturnal crime: one evening in 2018, four university students (three of them enrolled at the local Academy of Fine Arts), on their way home, daub the mane of one of the two marble lions that stand guard over the little square of the same name, next to the Basilica at the northeastern end of St. Mark's Square. The 'social media sphere' is outraged; enraged stances of the authorities follow, from the mayor to the regional president. The perpetrators are identified, denounced, and the school threatens expulsion.

For Venetians, those two marble lions have a special sentimental value. For generations, in fact, it has been customary for children passing through to stop there, not to admire them, but to ride them bareback, once hoisted on their backs by their parents. Monuments to be used, not just contemplated.

Yet, in Venice, tourism continues to expel residents; fewer and fewer people, fewer and fewer parents, fewer and fewer children. Not only that, fewer and fewer residents (unless they work there) pass by St. Mark's Square and see it as a socially viable part of the city.

The bad conscience of institutions and the dullness of school leaders are well represented by the eagerness to punish the iconoclastic students and in the disinterest (or inability) to question the causes of iconoclasm. I do





Le Mostre della Laguna, exhibition, Sale Docks, 2021, Venice. Credit: Veronica Badolin

Venice

not want to suggest that the students were as clear-headed as the Black Lives Matter activists when they were tearing down statues of slavers and colonisers, yet the problem is not always in the monument itself – as a monument not only projects certain hierarchies onto the surrounding space but also catalyses its status.

#### Lines of flight 2: a night game of football

Gestures of careless iconoclasm strike cultural heritage (which in Venice is at one with the city) when the latter loses its meaning, when, all traces of resignifying use having evaporated, it disappears from the emotional maps of those who experience the city.

I arrived in Venice as a university student in the year 1999–2000 and lived the first two years in a students' residence (*collegio*). Still in the new millennium, the tenants of that residence handed down a tradition: at least once a year, usually at the close of a particularly lively evening, taking advantage of the darkness and strong in numbers, we would move to St. Mark's Square for a ball game.

St. Mark's is not a football field, but that tradition was more than the tailspin of a dying student spirit (*goliardia*). Our game was an act of occupation (albeit temporary), a performance of reappropriation of that space already completely taken away from life, expropriated by tourist extractivism.

Play, philosophers say, is a ritual that returns to use what is separated in the sphere of the sacred. Of course, to trace this radical character, one must look elsewhere than to the gambling industry, televised games or professional sports. Perhaps our epic runs on the wing framed by the Procuratie Vecchie, our (scalene) triangulations and shots spiked from the disconnections of the *masegni* (the stones forming the floor of the square), were so many acts of profanation of a space that tourist religion had sequestered, perimetered as its own sacred place.

Thus, through profanation, I gave meaning to that portion of the city. Thus, the square entered my emotional map. Thus, a youthful nocturnal ritual that common sense would probably categorise as a symptom of 'degradation' (*degrado*) is actually an act of love, care and resignification.

Instead, as if to confirm the disaster of Venice's neoliberal governance, in the days following the defacement by the students, photos circulated online depicting the two lion cubs surrounded by sinewy local police officers.

#### Rem Koolhaas and a slipper

OMA, Rem Koolhaas's architectural firm, designed the interior of Venice's most expensive shopping mall, housed by the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, a few steps from the Rialto Bridge. A space without quality, where the reference to the historic commercial destination (it was, originally, the place reserved for the trade of German merchants) and to trade as the key to the cosmopolitanism of Venice in the past, is a ridiculous anachronism. Today's Fondaco, if anything, serves a form of commerce that sanctions the dissolution of all relational opportunity in the oligopoly of brands. Above all, OMA missed the opportunity to draw the necessary conclusions from the reduction of architecture to the cosmetics of a financial transaction; rather, it pathetically seeks to legitimise the latter by alluding to its own intervention as a further stage in the 'accumulation of authenticities' that characterise the building's transformations since the fifteenth century.

It is, in any case, a place reserved for extra-rich tourists where Venetians (apart, perhaps, from the extra-rich) do not set foot; and let us gloss over the affair of the privatisation of the Fondaco, a public building sold to Benetton, and now managed by Bernard Arnault's multinational luxury company LVMH.

A few years ago I happened to see a photograph of a 'product of excellence' for sale in said mall. A slipper (cost, around 300 euros) on which a gondola was

embroidered. Only the gondolier was placed at the bow (instead of at the stern) and was rowing in the opposite direction to the correct direction of travel. To clarify the point: like embroidering a car in which the driver, placed in the engine compartment, was seated facing in the reverse direction.

I wondered why such a basically mundane image had struck me so much. Upon reflection I realised the reason: because there is no mistake, it is not *wrong*. Instead, it is a realistic depiction of what a gondola actually is today. As soon as it leaves the *squero* (the shipyard where it is manufactured), it ceases to be the fruit of an ancient craftsmanship (by the way, now an integral part of the tourist experience itself), to become a sign-commodity, no more and no less. If, as Wolfgang Scheppe states, Venice has become a real abstraction, a social mechanism in which 'abstract principles of exchange' dominate the concrete dimension, then the boat symbolic of the Lagoon does not escape such principles. The gondola *is* a several hundred euro slipper, good for the Saudis, Chinese, Russians or Americans who can afford it.

The gondola escapes abstraction only when it is *traghetto*; that is, at those two or three points overlooking the Grand Canal where, still, gondoliers shuttle from one bank to the other, carrying residents and non-residents, for a few cents and a few euros, respectively.

Lines of flight 3: a virus, an octopus, a brill, a cormorant, two dolphins

In pursuing the growth paradigm, capitalism bases its reproduction on infinite expansion. In the relentless retraction of the frontier of accumulation, wildernesses shrink, increasing promiscuity between human and non-human animals in spaces such as industrial farms and wet markets, encouraging contact with unknown viruses, spillovers and new epidemics.

The spread of the Covid-19 virus has dramatically highlighted the interdependence of bodies and, at the same time, opened the stage for different bodies. In Venice, these peeped out from the waters of the canals in the lockdown months, when tourism suddenly ceased, along with the movement of motor boats. It took only a few weeks to spot two dolphins at the mouth of the Grand Canal, opposite Punta della Dogana; a respectably sized octopus clinging to the *fondamenta* near Piazzale Roma; and I myself, one morning, witnessed a cormorant re-emerging from the waters of Fondamenta della Misericordia with (what seemed to me) a large brill in its beak.

A local biologist interviewed said that these sightings were due to the easing of anthropogenic pressure. When all space ceases to be occupied by human bodies, non-human bodies manifest. They do not, however, replace what was full with something more full; rather, they punctuate, emerge, appear, cross, float, surface, anchor, explore.

These glimpses of the post-human city are not glimpses of the future, so much as, rather, flashbacks of a history: the history of Venice itself in which only through skilful human intervention, the Lagoon was not transformed (as it would naturally be) into an arm of the sea, or, conversely, into a stretch of marshy land. What does this mean? That the Lagoon is not nature surrounding the city and, diametrically, the built-up islands are not artifice opposite to nature. Lagoon and city are one system; more, they are the same matter, they share one destiny. Only their skilful combination gave birth to that thing called Venice, only their final separation can decree its end. At the same time, however, built Venice and Lagoon have different properties. It is Venetian society that, for more than a

millennium, has governed the encounter between city and nature by constructing it as a history of managing a balance, as an internal dialectic of the same matter.

Today, the touristification of the city is a symptom of the crisis of this caring action; neoliberal governance embodies a new dualism of substance that not only undermines life (understood as the life of residents), but also undermines the Lagoon, which, as we have seen, is at one with the city.

The octopus at Piazzale Roma comes to remind us of two things. First, that non-human bodies still have not surrendered to anthropogenic pressure. Second, that their presence should not surprise us. Never more so than in Venice, we are made of the same matter.

Lines of flight 4: staying, or of radical permanence

The term flight here certainly does not allude to the abandonment of the historic city, but to that set of forms of life and imagination (in perpetual renewal) that escape or antagonise the neoliberal grip. One flees by inventing ways to stay, not by running away. Individual tactics, collective games, artworks, appearance of non-human bodies, but also – and above all – radical political organisation. Elsewhere I have written that the Venice Biennale should free itself from a certain regime of mobility that I have called *neoliberal nomadism* and build alliances with forms of *radical permanence*. A fortiori, this applies to the city as a whole.

Despite the tourist siege and the neoliberal policies that foster it, kids continue to throw balls at the walls of the churches that dot the *campi* and people continue to organise assemblies in public spaces, to set up paths of mobilisation and resistance. Such pathways are crucial because they are potentially *instituting*. They are, that is, capable of endowing the city with counter-spaces and alter-institutions (social centres, climate justice movements, committees, networks of occupied houses, student collectives, observatories, Italian schools for migrants, and so on) that not only propel struggles, but that, by existing, change the experience of this city. They draw a map and a set of city ways that allow those who practise them to meet, organise and breathe. The goal is not to create niches for oneself in a doomed system – the horizon is always that of the transformation of the present state of things – but it would be difficult to sustain this enterprise if one could not experience, here and now, that other desired city that, though only in flashes, already exists in the moment of its collective construction.