

Resisting the Tourist Gaze. Art Activism Against Cruise Ship Extractivism in the Venice Lagoon

Emiliano Guaraldo
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Abstract The essay situates Venice's struggles against the cruise ship industry within a larger framework of resistance against planetary extractive capitalism, emphasising the role of local art-activist initiatives in denouncing the social and the ecological degradation caused by the cruise ship presence in Venice. In the first part, the concept of extractive tourism is introduced and analysed in relation to the case of Venice and the cruise companies' economic model. The operations and infrastructure of cruise tourism produce extractive relations that entangle and exploit tourists, local communities and the natural environment. The Author examines how mass tourism has aggravated the environmental and social issues of the city of Venice and its lagoon. In the second part, the essay presents a number of artistic projects, specifically by visual artists Eleonora Sovrani, Gli Impresari, Banksy, and Elena Mazzi. These artworks can help us visualise the failures of the current urban development model of the tourist economy, while also exposing the nefarious effects of extractive capitalism on the well-being of the lagoon ecosystem and the human and non-human subjects cohabiting in it.

Keywords Venice. Extractive tourism. Cruise ships. Art-activism. Banksy. Elena Mazzi. Eleonora Sovrani. Gli Impresari. Contemporary art. Environmental justice. Capitalocene.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Cruise Ship Extractivism. – 3 Art Activism Against the Extractive Gaze.



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1 Introduction

At the time of writing, the socio-environmental activist groups fighting against the presence of cruise ships in the Venetian lagoon have just won an important battle. After decades of struggles and mobilisation, the Italian government has now officially banned cruise ships from entering the Giudecca canal, de facto halting, at least temporarily, the cruise industry's operations in the old city (Giuffrida 2021). This decision follows a year of forced cruise absence caused by the pandemic and a drastic reduction of tourist presences in the city (-72% in 2020).¹ During the first phases of the pandemic, the city and the Veneto regional governments have unconditionally supported the Venetian tourist and cruise economies² and have actively worked towards the reopening of the city for 'business as usual', purposely missing the chance of re-imagining a future for Venice that does not depend on managing massive flows of tourists. The first cruise ship of 2021 was met by national and international outcry and a large protest was organised by the Comitato Grandi Navi - the main anti-cruise ship activist network - in early June,³ while UNESCO threatened to strip the city of its 'World Heritage in Danger' status.⁴ The Italian government acted soon after. With the legislative decree Urgent Measures for the Protection of Waterways of Cultural Interest and for the Safeguarding of Venice as Well as for the Preservation of Jobs approved on July 13th, 2021 (Consiglio dei Ministri 2021), the Italian government recognised *some* of the waterways of Venice as "national monuments", and as such deemed worthy of being protected and preserved (Consiglio dei Ministri 2021, 7). In the same decree, the Italian government agreed to compensate the cruise ship companies through a series of economic relief initiatives, a strategy discussed also by other national governments, but eventually not implemented, for instance, by the United States (Levin 2020; Moskowitz 2020; Yeginsu, Chokshi 2021).

The *Urgent measures* decree is not a definitive solution for the progressive ecological degradation of the lagoon ecosystem: it does not terminate the problematic relationship between Venice and the *grandi navi* and it does not offer any form of alleviation for the socio-ecological problems caused by overtourism. Proposed long-term so-

The Author wants to thank the artists mentioned in the essay for agreeing to meet and be interviewed, and for providing images of their work.

1 <https://www.regione.veneto.it/article-detail?articleId=11045375>.

2 <https://bit.ly/3GHAYhP>; <https://bit.ly/3GLuKhc>.

3 <https://bit.ly/3GG1RoX>.

4 <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/venice-avoids-in-danger-unesco-designation-1234599834/>.

lutions involve rerouting cruise ships to the Malamocco-Marghera channel, which, in change, may significantly impact the lagoon ecosystem in other ways, altering its morphodynamics and provoking the release of sedimented chemical contaminants from the petrochemical complex of Porto Marghera (Parnell et al. 2016, 911; Teatini et al. 2017, 5643); or expanding existing cruise terminals outside the lagoon such as the ones in Trieste and Ravenna.

The harmful environmental impact caused by the cruise industry has been documented extensively both on a global level⁵ as well as in the Venice lagoon (Avena 2010; Camarsa 2003; González 2018; Tattara 2013), with significant effects spanning from threats to local biodiversity (Hall, James, Wilson 2010; OSPAR Commission 2008), contribution to general air pollution,⁶ water contamination levels,⁷ and structural damage to the built environment (Parnell et al. 2016). On top of the environmental damage, cruise ship operations provoke a series of ‘side effects’ that substantially re-shape the socio-economic structure of port cities by establishing relationships of labour and economic dependency, and by exacerbating pre-existing phenomena of gentrification, displacement, and social precarity. The emergence of tourism as an economic monoculture translates as an unsustainable increase of the cost of living for the resident population and, as the tourist economy quickly fagocitates the urban spaces for tourist consumption, the local community experiences an overall impoverishment of its quality of life. For Venice, the transformation provoked by these phenomena has been referred to as *disneyfication* (Gorrini, Bertini 2018, 361; Hannigan 1998; Rosin, Gombault 2021, 77; Settis 2016), *museification*,⁸ and *gentritouristification* (Cristiano, Gonella 2020, 7).

In this essay, inspired by environmental justice scholarship on extractivism and overtourism,⁹ I intend to situate Venice’s struggles against the cruise ship industry within a larger framework of resist-

⁵ Farreny et al. 2011; Higgins-Desbiolles 2020; Hill 2015; Jennings, Ulrik 2016; Vidal 2016.

⁶ Caric, Klobucar, Tambuk 2016; Celic, Valcic, Bistrovic 2014; Eckhardt et al. 2013; Howitt et al. 2010; Maragkogianni, Papaefthimiou 2015; Murena et al. 2018; Oceana 2004; Simonsen, Gössling, Walnum 2019.

⁷ Jones 2007; Perić, Komadina, Račić 2016; Perić, Mihanović, Račić 2019; Ytreberg et al. 2020.

⁸ For Salerno, the museum city can be identified as “the commodity-city exploited by the tourism industry as the theme-park city. The inhabitants progressively represent, like in a theater, the simulacrum of their lost urban life for the enjoyment and fruition of tourists” (Salerno 2018, 489). In this context, Venice is subjected to a mutation which turns it into a *tableau-vivant*, a *mise-en-scene* targeted for touristic consumption, until eventually the museum city absorbs completely the living city (Salerno 2018).

⁹ Barca 2020; Gago, Mezzadra 2017; Mezzadra, Neilson 2021; Salerno 2018; 2020; Svampa 2019.

ance against planetary extractive capitalism. I do so by bringing in to the light local art-activist initiatives that denounce both the social and the ecological dimensions of the degradation caused by the cruise ship presence in Venice. I believe that the work of the artists included in this essay – Eleonora Sovrani, Gli Impresari, and Elena Mazzi – can help us understand the failures of the current urban development model of the tourist economy, while also exposing the nefarious effects of extractive capitalism on the well-being of the lagoon ecosystem and the human and non-human subjects cohabiting in it.

2 Cruise Ship Extractivism

Understanding the conflicts caused by the cruise ship presence in Venice, and the involvement of local, regional, and national political bodies, requires disentangling the way extractive economies, local ecosystems, and communities are interconnected. Recently, Giacomo-Maria Salerno has proposed an interpretative lens for the processes of touristification based on extractivism and neo-extractivism scholarship (Salerno 2018; 2020) as a way to understand tourism capitalism through the critical tradition of colonial and resource exploitation. Extractive tourism stimulates different interconnected processes: the creation of relations of dependence that favour the emergence of economic monocultures, where the intensive exploitation of a resource tends to destroy itself – the so-called *voracity effect* (Strulik 2012; Tornell, Lane 1999); an impoverishing form of developmentalism in which infrastructure and jobs are produced but wealth is not redistributed, but rather centralised in the hands of few; social disaggregation phenomena that lead to a passive society striving for wealth accumulation produced mostly by rent and passive income; and finally a tendency for non-democratic decision making, authoritarian political discourses, and the emergence of oligarchic forms of power (Salerno 2018, 498). In this sense, the intensification of mass tourism has configured Venice as a site of extraction, not of raw materials or carbon fossils, but of its cityhood, natural environment, and social vitality.

As pointed out by Salerno, because of its history, Venice is subjected to a specific form of urban extractivism, one that manifests as a progressive erosion of the commons through processes of displacement and dispossession that run parallel to the environmental degradation of the lagoon. In a historically formed city such as Venice, the creation of the commons is not an ongoing process, but rather the product of a long sedimentation (Salerno 2018). As in the case with the resource and the fossil extraction industries, what we face here is a form of economic organisation and mode of appropriation and accumulation developed in accordance with external market forc-

es (exports, neo-colonial extraction, international tourist markets) (Svampa 2019). This, according to Salerno, produces a progressive “erosion of the common dimension” on top of which said economy is based upon (Salerno 2018, 498), through a process of “spatially orchestrated dispossession, aimed at dismantling autonomous, collectively produced and managed forms of commonwealth and value regimes” (Sevilla-Buitrago 2015, 5 in Salerno 2018, 498). Because of the extractive nature of urban tourism, the goal of a touristic city is

evidently profit maximisation for some. Thus profit-seeking also represents the driver of urban transformations to receive tourists and this does not automatically imply well-being for all. (Cristiano, Gonella 2020, 9)

In Maristella Svampa’s formulation of neo-extractivism,¹⁰ a concept “developed in Latin America to make sense of the developments and the reach of extractive capitalism in the 21st century”, and an analytical category with “descriptive and explanatory power, as well as a denunciatory aspect and strong mobilizing power” (Svampa 2019, 5), this stage of capitalism is seen as a way of

appropriating nature and a development model based on the over exploitation of natural goods, largely non-renewable, characterised by its large scale and its orientation towards export, as well as by the vertiginous expansion of the borders of exploitation to new territories, which were previously considered unproductive or not valued by capital. (7)

This becomes particularly evident in the case of Venice, where the logic of the tourist monoculture requires an ever-expansive movement and a constant appropriation and repurposing of the spaces left intact, or even abandoned, by the previous economic forces. Consider for a moment the cases of the Certosa island, Alberoni beach, and the *ex-gasometri* area in Castello, where spaces of common usage and abandoned industrial infrastructure are being sold to international groups and may be turned soon into exclusionary spaces such as high-end restaurants, luxury resorts, and private yacht clubs:¹¹ a striking example of what Svampa sees as a “recolonization of nature and of dispossession, visible in the process of land grabbing”, and of what Salerno aptly defines as “internal colonialism”. In the recent past, this pro-

¹⁰ Svampa and others individuate the current phase of extractivism as an evolution of previous regimes of colonial capture.

¹¹ <https://altreconomia.it/dallisola-di-certosa-alloasi-degli-alberoni-che-cosa-succede-ai-beni-pubblici-di-venezia/>.

cess has interested Sacca Sessola, an artificial island created in 1870 using the waste material produced by the port construction works in Santa Marta. Today the island is owned by Marriott International, which has also decided to erase the memory of the island's origins by renaming it Isola delle Rose.¹² Not unexpectedly, these processes are met with social conflict and are countered by a growing number of socio-environmental activist collectives and initiatives that make use of established tactics of political mobilisation and citizen participation, and new, creative, site-specific modes of resistance to the deterioration of the lagoon environment and the impoverishment of the urban experience (Vianello 2016). Like other communities currently fighting against extractive injustice worldwide, Venetian activists also demand "other ways of building society and inhabiting the world" (Svampa 2019, 4) while dismantling the narratives spread by the government and economic stakeholders according to whom the cruise industry's presence in the city is financially beneficial for all. Comparably to what is happening in other geographies, Venice is the host of numerous artistic projects that address and negotiate environmental conflict in ways alternative to planetary neoliberal eco-governmentality, "formulating a lucid analysis of ecological destruction and proposing egalitarian structures of living" (Demos 2016, 10).

In the last ten years, along with the birth of the Comitato No Grandi Navi in 2012, a myriad of activist groups, collectives, and individual artists have produced socially and environmentally engaged artistic events and citizen participation initiatives. The Venetians' opposition to the cruise industry has become an exemplary campaign of socio-environmental activism. It has disseminated information about the nefarious impact of mass tourism on the city and its ecosystem, while piercing the bubble designed to maintain the leisurely allure of cruise tourism and uncovering its green washing efforts. The No Grandi Navi protests show a high degree of performativity and include tactics such as staging blockades of the cruise ships in the Giudecca canal, experiments in citizen participation and horizontal democracy,¹³ raise-funding events, and direct communication with the cruise industry workers.¹⁴ In the recent protest organised on June 5th 2021, for example, the first post-COVID cruise ship was intercepted by a swarm of *barcattivisti* who on board of *barchini* (the small boats typically used in the lagoon) surrounded the ship, urging the tourists on the deck to face the social unrest caused by this form of tourism. The hundreds of protesters - a mix of families, senior cit-

¹² <https://www.jwvenice.com/it/isola/>.

¹³ <http://www.nograndinavi.it/ecco-i-risultati-del-referendum-autogestito/>.

¹⁴ An updated list of the initiatives can be found on the website of the Comitato: <http://www.nograndinavi.it/>.

izens, locals, and international residents – that had gathered on the Fondamenta delle Zattere were yelling anti-cruise slogans, lighting flares, and holding banners. At the June protest, the *barchini* flotilla was in turn disturbed by the appearance of two boats purportedly operated by cruise ship terminal workers holding large “Welcome Back” banners oriented towards the tourists. This interaction was not an isolated episode as the port workers also hung similar banners around the San Basilio area and posters throughout the city.¹⁵ The port workers’ provocation and counter protests show how the public spaces of Venice have become a contested space where the tourists’ attention is sought by both the socio-environmental activists and the cruise companies.¹⁶ This conflict is common within extractive economies, since

capitalist modernity has naturalized class and other inequalities as necessary evils that allow for the supposedly greater common good of economic growth, it has tied working class survival to the infinite expansion of the forces of production. (Barca 2020, 43)

The aesthetics and the politics of the swarm mobilised against the megafauna of the Capitalocene, the ‘extractive monsters’ roaming the oceans or drilling the permafrost around the world, have been observed in other instances of resistance against the extractive operations of capital, for example in Latin America (Dietz 2019; Urkidi, Walter 2011)¹⁷ and during the 2015 Seattle protests against Shell where

kayaktivists hoped to block the Polar Pioneer drilling rig temporary stationed in Seattle, preventing it from leaving port, or at least to delay its departure, and create a media firestorm to help shift public opinion against extreme forms of petro-capitalist extraction. (Demos 2019, 39-40)

It is important to note that all these activist practices, including the No Grandi Navi struggle, do not limit themselves to simply halt or slow the socio-ecological devastation, instead they formulate horizontal and “counter-hegemonic visions of modernity” (Barca 2020, 1). In particular, the No Grandi Navi movement and the artistic activism associated with it

¹⁵ The port workers’ posters urged the national government to resume cruise ship operations as soon as possible.

¹⁶ For an exhaustive critical study of the spatial politics of Venice see Araya López 2021.

¹⁷ The definition of cruise ships as megafauna of the Capitalocene was suggested by Serenella Iovino during a personal conversation.

have acted as a catalyst for the convergence of different actors and mobilization efforts and as a focal point to address broader issues related to Venice decline as a 'lived city'. (Vianello 2016, 184)

The artists involved in this project have understood that cruise workers and tourists are also objects of the extractive violence of cruise ship capitalism, and as such they need to be included in the imagining of possible alternative futures. It is understandable, in this sense, that the cruise-terminal workers 'welcomed' the return of the cruise giants: the COVID crisis had stopped all cruise operations for more than a year, during which the workers of the terminal and their families suffered the threat of economic loss on top of the health-related anxieties of the pandemic. But, at the same time, the pandemic revealed the extreme precarity of cruise-related jobs:

beyond the mainstream narrative of the creation of jobs, advocated by governments and unions, often in spite of the actual working conditions data, the professed benefits to the local economy often conflict with the well-being of local dwellers, the built environment, and the surrounding natural environment. [...] As an economic monoculture, a touristified destination is very vulnerable to external events. The narrative of job creation is extremely precarious, as is the touristic destination itself. (Cristiano, Gonella 2020, 2)

According to Marco Armiero, the Titanic is a fitting metaphor of the Anthropocene because it conflates technological hubris, class inequality, and apocalyptic narratives (Armiero 2015). Cruise ships, on the other hand, can be seen as metaphors of extractive capitalism. They function as extractive devices that operate simultaneously on different scales, inside and outside of the physical space of the ship, putting local communities, tourists, and workers in conflict against each other, and deeply transforming the environment and the political and economic landscape around them. As a "highly rationalized form of mass consumption" (Miles 2019, 523), the object of extraction of cruise ships is simultaneously the ecosystem in which they operate and the flows of tourists they host onboard. Seen inwards, the physical dimension of a cruise ship becomes a space for the maximisation of profit through processes of value extraction where tourists on board become "captive consumers" (Weaver 2005, 168). Outside of the ship, a larger project of infrastructure expansion and commodification of tourist destinations progressively transforms those cities into dominions of the tourist economy, a status from which it becomes increasingly difficult to escape. On the other hand, to exist and function, cruise companies must rely on a vast infrastructure of ports, harbours, and industrial production that is often built by national governments under the premise of job creation or reallocation of industrial spaces.

Part of cruise tourism's profitable model lies on the designed narrative that cruise consumers are "leading the good life", where the ship becomes a space for meaning making and belonging (Miles 2019, 525). To maintain this narrative, and to keep cruise tourists from being exposed to the negative effects of this form of tourism, cruise companies hide the environmental and social impact of their operations as much as possible. Most cruise companies publish a yearly sustainability report, with statistics and goals for a 'sustainable' way of doing cruise tourism. In these reports, they list the environment-friendly activities they promote onboard, such as waste recycling, water conservation, energy saving and so on. For instance, in its most recent sustainability report, Costa, one of the major vectors operating in Venice, emphasises its efforts in promoting sustainable and inclusive models of tourism (Costa 2019). Costa, similarly to other companies, has declared to comply with the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. In the report, Costa stresses its participation in climate action initiatives, and it pledges to a 40% emission cut by 2020 and to adopt responsible consumption and production guidelines and to lower food waste (Costa 2019, 16-17). Climate change action and sustainable development goals are used by cruise lines both as a marketing tool, and as a form of obfuscation of the persistent ecological damage they cause on the local ecosystems where they operate. The *Costa Academy* formation programme includes for sales departments a training in how to "intercept the value attributed by guests and potential consumers to social and environmental issues" for commercial purposes and to "spread awareness about Costa's efforts" (57).

Cruise consumers are actively shielded from directly facing the socio-environmental damage of the cruise ship industry and even the health hazards to which they expose themselves, because cruises are "temporary floating utopias" and

spaces devoid of social context beyond that defined by the ability to consume: a space that firmly establishes the principle that human activity or endeavour must always be defined through a specific image of the economic. (Miles 2019, 525)

In the Capitalocene, cruise ships become prospecting machines that project an extractive gaze outward while manufacturing an endless series of moments of consumption on board. The images of Venice taken from the deck of the cruise ship construct an experience of the city and the lagoon that can be infinitely reproduced for temporary tourist consumption, cruise after cruise after cruise. The production of these images is not a disembodied process, as it becomes possible through processes of gentrification, contamination, labour precarity, displacement, and loss of biodiversity disseminated in time and

space. In this sense, the extractive dynamic at play in Venice is not as visible and self-evident as the operations of the so-called “planetary mine” (Arboleda 2020) and it requires a creative effort from the local community to visualise such processes for the rest of the world to see. Venice as a site of extraction makes visible the extent and the pervasiveness of the extractive operations worldwide, even when they take place far away from minery mega-projects and petro-chemical plants.¹⁸ Cruise ship capitalism’s adoption of the neoliberal eco-management practices (carbon offsets, sustainability goals, etc.) as marketing tools reveals the ineffectiveness of said practices in protecting local communities and ecosystems from irreversible damage, while allowing cruise ships not only to exist and expand, but also to market themselves as ‘green’ as long as they operate within the parameters set by intergovernmental organisations.

3 Art Activism Against the Extractive Gaze

A few months before the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic, journalist Alessandro Calvi boarded a cruise ship in Venice for a tour of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea to write a short piece about the experience. As a Venetian, boarding a cruise ship from the Tronchetto terminal and moving slowly through the city “on the monster’s back” had a different significance. Calvi wanted to “invert the perspective and to see what it feels like” to experience Venice that way (Calvi 2019):

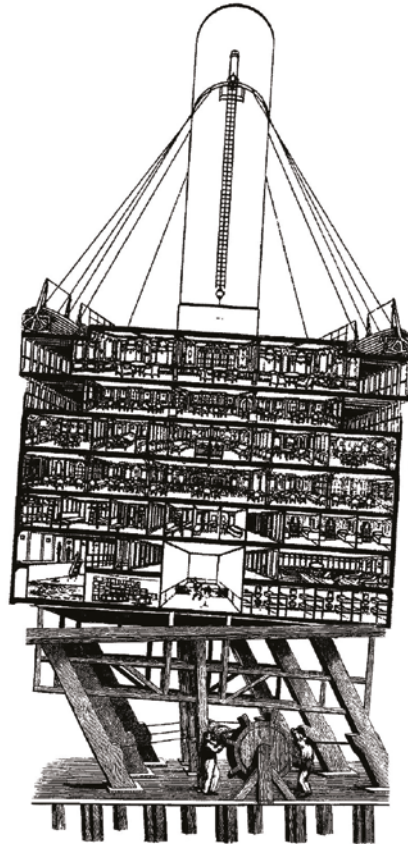
On the bridge everyone takes pictures, [...] they wave goodbye to a city that does not wave back. [...] Venice seems nothing more than an embellishment that is partially non-essential.

For Calvi, it is not Venice what he sees from up there, but rather something “too small to be true, a children’s toy”.

But Venice from the back of the monster is not a spectacle, it’s simply not Venice. [...] It cannot be really Venice, this thing that is being forced to spread apart, crushed by the manifestation of a willpower that has nothing of the scale of humans.

The megalophobic dread caused by the sheer scale difference between the cruise ship and Venice can fully manifest only when the visual arrogance of the cruise ship is experienced first-hand, when all the possible significance of Venice and its lagoon is reduced to a

¹⁸ In the case of Venice, the Porto Marghera petro-chemical complex is just a few kilometers away.



La Grande Macchina

Figure 1 Gli Impresari, *La Grande Macchina*. 2014. Print. Venice, S.a.L.E Docks. Courtesy of the artist

brief, meaningless, touristified encounter. The spectacle of Venice reduced to a scale model, “difficult to tell apart from the Venices that were created in the United States” to quote Gianni Berengo Gardin (Berengo Gardin in Calvi 2019) is the form of “visual bullying” that thousands of cruise consumers participate in every year. In Gli Impresari’s *La Grande Macchina* [fig. 1], the cruise ship becomes a theatrical machine: a scenic device, operated by two labourers. In Gli Impresari’s vision, the cruise ship is not a vehicle. Its section reveals living quarters and working spaces. In this enclosed and isolated bubble, value is produced by bare existence and capture. A visual refer-

ence to the sections of the ships used in colonial and the Atlantic slave trade, *La Grande Macchina* allegorically places the cruise ship within a spectacle of theatrical nature, a contraption that is both a gaze-projecting machine and the stage of a farce or an opera. *La Grande Macchina* was produced in a limited number of prints that were sold in a fund-raiser for the legal expenses of the Comitato Grandi Navi and, as other artworks considered in this essay, it was part of the 2014 *You Are Not Welcome* exhibition hosted in the S.a.L.E. Docks occupied art space. In their multidisciplinary artistic practice, *Gli Impresari*¹⁹ focus on the relationship between modernity and visual culture. Quoting their artistic statement, their collective practice consists mainly of sculptures and installations - often activated by performances - inspired by a complex and varied imaginary, ranging from the marvellous effects obtained through theatrical machines, to the mediatic power of the first cinematic projections. The inevitable link between the political and economic system and the representation modes within society becomes the object and subject matter of a new aesthetic production; through a dialogue with the past, they attempt to foster a reflection on the concept of technique and spectacularization within contemporary society. In *La Grande Macchina*, the collective reflects on the two simultaneous visual domains of the cruise ship: the contained reality of the cruise ship experience, and the orchestrated projected gaze on the lagoon and the city.

In 2019, global street artist Banksy proposed his own take on the optics of cruise ships in Venice. During the first week of the 58th Biennale of Art, Banksy set up a small stand, like the many stalls selling watercolor paintings of Venice in Riva degli Schiavoni, not far from some of the most visited landmarks of Venice. [fig. 2]²⁰

Banksy's performance titled *Venice in Oil* forced the tourists visiting the city to encounter the monstrous cruise ships in a different way. In Banksy's stand, views of the city inspired by Canaletto's paintings are invaded by a giant ship, but unlike *Gli Impresari*'s vision where the taxonomic section of the ship reveals the inner workings of the spectacle, here the cruise ship is diffracted and scattered, violently occupying the city, disclosing an implicit multiplicity of horizontally dispersed observers. In these anthropocenic versions of Canaletto, the body of Venice is crossed and hidden by the inhuman scale of the cruise ship. The paintings force an interaction with the tourists, some of whom may have come to Venice to board a cruise ship,

¹⁹ *Gli Impresari* is a collective based in Venice and is composed by Edoardo Aruta, Marco Di Giuseppe, Rosario Sorbello.

²⁰ https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cronaca/2019/05/23/banksy-espone-a-venezia-contro-le-grandi-navi-cacciato-dai-vigili-_30a61a55-2b9a-4ee8-9766-3d81cba70659.html.



Figure 2 Banksy, *Venice in Oil*. 2019. Performance. Venice, Riva degli Schiavoni. Source: <https://streetartnews.net/2019/05/banksys-street-stall-in-venice.html>

reversing their experience of viewing the city from the deck of the ship. Banksy's *Venice in Oil* and Gli Impresari's *La Grande Macchina* point towards the same tension between two fundamentally different modes of visually experiencing the city and, possibly, the planetary environment. These modes of visibility roughly adhere to the two ways of representing a city as models of Leibniz's distinction between scenography and iconography, as notably pointed out by Jonathan Crary in his seminal essay *Techniques of the Observer*. Crary displays two distinct ways of representing Venice: Jacopo de Barbari's 1500s vertical, aerial view of Venice, a pre-Copernican, synoptic, and totalising apprehension of the city as a unified entity;²¹ and the mid-18th century views by Canaletto, which disclose a field occupied by a monadic observer within a city knowable only as the accumulation of multiple and diverse points of view (Crary 1990, 52). A third, oblique view is finally introduced by the cruise ship. The exclusionary gaze of the cruise ship strips Venice of its cityhood and reconfigures it simultaneously as a theme-park and as an extractive field, "nothing more than an embellishment that is partially non-essential" as Calvi puts it (Calvi 2019). From the deck, the cruise ship's prospecting gaze extracts economic value from the sedimented bodies composing Venice

21 For artist and theorist Hito Steyerl we live in an age of "growing importance of aerial views: overviews, google maps, satellite views. We are growing accustomed to what was once called the God's eye view" (Steyerl 2011).

and its lagoon – the “super-organism made of other organisms, their lives porously connected with its life” (Iovino 2016, 67) – and its fixed accumulated capital over centuries (Salerno 2018).

An alternative visual interaction between the city and the cruise tourists is also at the centre of Eleonora Sovrani’s work. Sovrani is a multidisciplinary artist who uses video, détournement of advertising material, and public poster campaigns as forms of art activism aimed at debunking the cruise industry’s marketing narratives and green washing efforts. For her graduation project, Sovrani embarked on a cruise ship as staff to document the cruise ship experience from within the “belly of the monster”. Her 2012 video *Loveboat*, was produced using authentic video footage recorded during her time working on the cruise ship, mixed in with bits from the homonymous 1970s show, advertising material, stock photos and pieces of the orientation and safety videos presented to the consumers on the ship.²² In the artists’ words:

During a cruise voyage most of the events onboard and onshore are organised with the main aim to produce self-referential pictures; landing places become a sort of extension of the cruise ship, and they lose their own quality of place. The result is a kind of ‘voyage to nowhere’, based on repetition, placeless and timeless perception.

The sense of a deterritorialised experience of consumption is also a result of the fact that cruise vacations have been increasingly marketed as travel destinations by themselves, in a process that has been defined as *destinization*. In *Loveboat*, the cruise ship is shown as a giant experimental laboratory of neural capitalism, where tourists are encouraged to barely exist in an eternal cycle of leisure activities and mindless consumption. A Verhoeven-esque dystopian feel is produced by the contrast between the glitchy texture of Sovrani’s video and by the oppressing droning soundscape alternated with soothing advertising messages: “This is what your dream will look like. No matter who you are, you will be far from boundaries and far from land”.

As part of Sovrani’s work with *We Are Here Venice*,²³ one of the most active and recognised advocacy groups fighting for Venice’s future led by environmental scientist Jane Da Mosto, the artist designed a series of posters with the intention of breaking the bubble that surrounds cruise tourists. The posters confront the tourists with a reality that has been actively hidden from them. Spread around the city, they include information about the impacts of mass tourism on

²² <https://vimeo.com/58413615>.

²³ <https://www.weareherevenice.org/about/>.



Figure 3 Eleonora Sovrani, posters for *We Are Here Venice*. 2019-20. Venice, different locations. Courtesy of the artist

the environment, public health, and social life of Venice. For a second poster campaign, Sovrani decided to reproduce images of the endangered vegetal species inhabiting the salt marshes (the *barene*) of the lagoon such as the *Zostera Marina*, *Salicornia*, *Spartina*, *Limonium* and *Salsola Soda*. These plants have defined the lagoon-scape of Venice for centuries and may soon disappear if decisive actions are not taken to protect the ecosystem of the lagoon. The artist in this case wanted to make the tourists aware of their temporary habitation within a unique amphibian ecosystem where humans and vegetal and other non-human forms of life have coexisted for centuries. For Sovrani, having the tourists perceive the damage they participate in, and the many forms of life affected by their actions is a valuable effort to hinder the cruise industry's green-washing capabilities at their root [fig. 3].

An even more direct form of artistic intervention and direct communication with the tourists was staged by Sovrani in her most recent performance action that took place at the Marco Polo airport in 2019. On that occasion, the artist produced and distributed fake advertising material to the tourists traveling to Venice to board a cruise at the Tronchetto terminal. The flyers portrayed a stock photo of a couple in Venice and mimicked genuine cruise company advertisements:

“GET READY FOR YOUR VENICE ADVENTURE(R)!

Feel what is like to breathe* in one of the most polluted cities in the world, as you walk on shore, or while you relax on the pool deck of your favourite cruise ship.

*Respirator masks are highly recommended!

AIR ON CRUISE SHIPS CAN BE WORSE THAN IN SOME OF THE MOST POLLUTED CITIES OF THE WORLD”.

In this case, Sovrani intercepted tourists before they had even entered the environmental bubble of the ship, allowing for a possible circulation of this material on board. Sovrani's direct approach achieved a level of engagement that other forms of activist art in Venice cannot attain easily. Her performative and informational art interacts directly with the subjects of extractive tourism: no longer seen as mere demographics, or flows and numbers to be managed, nor treated as passive cargo of the extractive operations of mass tourism, the tourist becomes an active participant in Sovrani's art. The exchange between Sovrani and the tourist can spark curiosity, awareness and even opposition towards the hidden costs of the cruise economy.

The role of technology is an important aspect of the 2014 video project *Lacuna: Land of Hidden Spaces* by multimedia artist Elena Mazzi. According to the artist, the project intended to investigate



Figure 4 Elena Mazzi, *Lacuna*. 2014. Video. Courtesy of the Artist

the possibility of responding to the increase of environmental issues affecting Venice. Through the application of an interdisciplinary methodology, the artwork explores technological innovation and its implications. Considering local context in conjunction with new environmental goals is beneficial in redefining their broader effectiveness and functionality. The video combines and intertwines the different 'actors' of the project: a prototype of a solar wall made with mirrors (a reference to Archimedes' inventions), the ancient tradition of engraved glass in Murano, and the fragile environment of the Lagoon, now in peril [fig. 4].

In her practice, Mazzi is interested in analysing through an anthropological lens the relationship between human communities, the



Figure 5 Linear Mirror. Excerpt from *Lacuna*

environment they inhabit, and the mutations provoked by external economic forces. For instance, in her 2021 project *Silver Rights*, Mazzi's focuses on the bond between indigenous communities in Argentina and the land (*mapu*),

a bond eroded and denied by colonising forces that have mutated over the centuries to gradually establish themselves in recent decades through neo-extractivist practices; a settlement process resulting from the convergence of investment policies and commercial agreements between South American governments and foreign multinationals, including the Italian Benetton.²⁴

The three parts of the video *Lacuna: Land of Hidden Spaces* tell us a story where the reflective surface of mirrors is used to convey resistance, materiality, energy production and fragility. In the first frames of the video, a cruise ship is navigating the Giudecca canal and is greeted by three mirrors. Mazzi is referencing the trope of Archimedes' burning mirrors used during the siege of Syracuse (212 BC), according to which the Sicilian mathematician destroyed the besieging Roman fleet using mirrors to amplify and weaponise sun rays. The mirrors of *Lacuna* (a wordplay that simultaneously refers to the lagoon and an empty space) are held in opposition to the cruise ship

²⁴ <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/402385/elena-mazzisilver-rights/>

presence in the lagoon like the banners and the flares used during the anti-ships protests. The mirrors defend Venice from the cruise ships by reflecting back their extractive gaze and by symbolically shooting sun rays against their dark, vampiric presence over the lagoon. But mirrors, as glass, are also part of the pre-industrial economy of Venice. For this project, Mazzi collaborated with a solar energy company that built Linear Mirror, a prototype of a solar thermal device composed of several mirrors that direct sun rays in order to produce emission-free heating [fig. 5].

Following a seventeenth-century Murano tradition, the mirrors of Linear Mirror have been engraved by an artisan with drawings depicting plants from the local salt marshes. The engravings include autochthonous vegetal species of the lagoon that may disappear if pollution in the lagoon worsened further. The current high contamination levels in the water are caused mainly by the toxicity produced by the petro-chemical complex of Porto Marghera, which is responsible for the “presence of over seven and a half million cubic meters of toxic and poisonous sludge” (Iovino 2016, 59). Mazzi contraposes the vital energy, represented here by solar power, to the lagoon’s loss of biodiversity but, instead of celebrating solar power technology or energy transition as ways out of environmental disaster, she chooses to bring into the light an artisanal, pre-industrial, pre-extractive form of production that has almost gone extinct. In *Lacuna*, Mazzi combines the life-enabling properties of the salt marshes and their ecological functions of water filtration and photosynthesis, with a conceptualisation of solar energy that is horizontally defined and distributed. “The peculiar technique of engraving on mirrors, a typical local craft tradition that is rapidly being replaced by badly blown glass items, easy to sell to tourists” is another casualty of the advancement of extractive tourism. Mazzi concludes the video with images of the *barene* and the unique forms of vegetal life living on them. *Lacuna* was exhibited together with the Linear Mirror prototype, a critical herbarium, a comic strip and a recycled-glass sculpture. Mazzi’s interest for the artisanal modes of production, of which Linear Mirror embodies its contemporary form, and for the vital functions of the *barene* re-centres the efforts of opposing the cruise industry towards a co-emergence of lagoon agencies. This continuous exchange, which is put in danger by the presence of the cruise ships and by mass tourism, involves both human and non-human subjects, entangled in the life and the labours of the lagoon. “How can we burn down the ships besieging the lagoon if the artisans do not produce the mirrors anymore?” the artist may ask. The process of disneyfication of Venice has also repurposed the mirror making artisans into manufacturers of touristic goods.

The practitioners mentioned in this essay are operating within activist-led artistic initiatives and in spaces alternative to the mainstream contemporary art industry. Their work has been exhibited in

the S.a.L.E. docks autonomous art space,²⁵ which, since its inception in 2007, has become an important venue for promoting activist and socially engaged art projects in the Venice lagoon. Thanks to the political decision of S.a.L.E Docks – and of Marco Baravalle, its prominent theorist and curator –²⁶ to establish a space of artistic conflict against the neoliberal art markets, the art-activists of Venice have contributed to sustain a decade of protests against the socio-ecological exploitation of the lagoon operated by the cruise industry and supported by the city and regional governments. As of now, the protests and the activist practices of the Comitato No Grandi Navi and many other organisations have resulted in a fundamental (temporary?) victory, demonstrating a way to success for socio-environmental activism worldwide. Besides the tourist industry, the activist art in Venice has contrasted and resisted what Clorinda Peters has defined as “the aggressive atomization” of neoliberalism in contemporary art: a process that represses the production of a social and political subject as an agented part of a collective (Peters 2015, 150). Instead, the actions of these artists, together with several others, emerge as an art assemblage comprised of

living subjects, physical space, material infrastructure, technological devices, cultural forms, and organization practices that simultaneously stage dissent against the status quo while prefiguring ‘alternative worlds’, (McKee 2017, 101)

and that has harnessed “a utopian discourse that stems from the engagement and the stimulation of the social imagination” (Peters 2015, 154).

25 Located in the Magazzini del Sale, S.a.L.E. Docks is an activist-managed, independent, contemporary art space: “an open laboratory of radical imagination, cultural production and research in arts and politics” (<http://www.saledocks.org/about/>).

26 See Baravalle 2021a and 2021b.

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