

'From the Margins'

Conversation with Marco Baravalle (Researcher, Curator, Activist and Founding Member of Sale Docks)

Cristina Baldacci: There is something Janus-faced about thinking of sustainability and Venice. Venice as a place of cultural heritage threatened by decay and overtourism in the middle of the sensitive ecosystem of the lagoon. And, at the same time, Venice as a reference point for many sustainability events and projects, as a vibrant cultural and scientific scene that deals with environmental issues. As one of the few residents and as a researcher, curator and activist – as a co-founder of the *Sale Docks* independent art space, which was initiated in 2007 by the occupation of an abandoned salt-storage facility in the city centre – you have a long understanding and personal experience of Venice. How do you perceive and deal with this ambivalence/paradox?

Marco Baravalle: Yes, I think, to a certain extent, that this is a classic paradox. In other words, places where certain types of exploitation or extractivism are more evident can also spark resistance and draw attention. A classic example here in Venice could be the *Comitato No Grandi Navi* (Committee Against Big Cruise Ships), which aimed to stop cruise ships from passing through the city. Luckily, we succeeded: The cruise ships no longer pass through Venice.

Seeing a cruise ship passing through, from the point of view of someone walking in the street, is so visually striking – it highlights the disproportion between that kind of vulgar extractivism and the materiality of the city – that it almost becomes natural to feel indignant about such an imbalance. And this indignation makes it easier to organise a reaction. In fact, the struggle against big

cruise ships has been going on for about thirteen years. The way it started is also very interesting.

The first time we thought about organising a demonstration against the big cruise ships, we didn't yet have the idea of forming a committee. It wasn't because we had technical knowledge about the environmental and urban damage that was linked to the cruise industry. Nor was it tied to broader ideas about extractivism or climate change. It actually started because some residents in the Santa Marta neighbourhood – particularly some elderly people – were deeply annoyed by the fact that these enormous cruise ships docked right in front of their houses, disrupting their TV signal.

Do you see how this type of paradox works? Maybe it's not even a paradox; it becomes a natural consequence. When there's extractivism – when there's clear evidence of disregard for the balance of the city – people find ways to react, even if everything starts with something as seemingly trivial as a disrupted TV signal.

CB: How relevant is Venice as an observation point for the climate crisis? How can we think of a more 'sustainable' cultural model starting from Venice and its lagoon?

MB: First of all, let me say that I am among those critical of the word 'sustainability'. We use it a lot and that's okay, but I would say that sustainability can be a concept to which we can only draw our attention in tactical terms. I really think that neoliberalism is so responsible for the climate crisis and the ecological crisis that the solution of the problem would be to radically transform the system; that is, to get rid of it. It will never become sustainable. You can call this anti-capitalism or post-capitalism, which is a term that probably has more currency in the art and academic fields because it sounds a little more moderate (although it isn't). In Venice, there is a quite important academic and scientific community working on climate change. Venice has two universities, and it's a coastal city. So, like every coastal city, it's at the forefront of climate change. It's therefore quite logical that institutions and universities also address the topic.

CB: What are the main actions that need to be taken and that you have been pursuing as an art curator and cultural activist? For example, referring to one of your most recent activities, as a member of IRI-Institute of Radical Imagi-

nation, you co-curated – together with Emanuele Braga, Gabriella Riccio and Federica Timeto – the book *Art for Radical Ecologies* (2024). Did you conceive it as a kind of ‘manifesto’ for climate and social justice?

MB: The book is structured somewhat like a manifesto. It contains sixteen articles that discuss the positioning of art workers within the struggle for climate justice. It’s not an art book about climate change; it’s about the positionality of art workers who should take some responsibility in these types of struggles and it considers art institutions as – hopefully – active participants in this fight.

The way the book came about is interesting. It’s not a traditional collection of essays. It emerged from a process that lasted a year and a half, beginning in Venice. It began in Venice because, during the summer of 2022, and then again in the summer of 2023, we organised two *Art Workers Assemblies* to reflect on the intersection between art activism and climate change within the context of the *Venice Climate Camp*. The assembly brought together artists and non-artists. That’s how it began: We gathered for the first assembly, discussed, collected materials, regrouped online several times and then met again in person a year later to continue the discussion. In mid-October 2023, we convened one last time in person in Milan, during the *World Congress for Climate Justice*.

The book focuses on art, but its foundation wasn’t an art space, museum or biennial. At its core are two climate camps and a congress of activist organisers. We co-wrote this ‘manifesto’, which is composed of various articles about positionality, the subject of the struggle, and the role that art institutions should take in this context. Only after a year and a half of what we might call militant investigation and assemblies did we invite various figures from both inside and outside the art world to theoretically engage in the form of a few articles. The contributors included, for instance, Françoise Vergès, the decolonial feminist, and Manolo Borja Vilel, a museum director, as well as a number of artists and activists.

What I focused on most in the book – and this was also the subject of the article I wrote – is how art can serve as a space where historical materialism and new materialism can intersect, rather than running parallel or working in binary opposition.

CB: In its long history, the Biennale has certainly constituted a major cultural and economic opportunity for Venice. But, at the same time, it has also contributed to profound and not always exclusively positive changes in the Venetian artistic and cultural ecosystem, especially in these more contemporary times that are subject to the neoliberal demands of the global art system. How has the city's cultural ecosystem changed since *Sale Docks* was initiated?

MB: Well, that would require a long answer, but I'll try to sum it up. We occupied *Sale Docks* in 2007 for a reason: As precariously employed art workers, we were witnessing the growing role of contemporary art and culture in the city's economy. We looked at this from a class perspective, trying to update the post-workerist theory of the 'social factory' and imagining a way to self-organise against the exploitation of our work and the occupation of the arts by neoliberalism, whether in the form of private investments or neoliberal public policies.

But what were we witnessing? On the one hand, we saw that the Venice Biennale was growing, in terms of both the number of visitors and the number of national participations. This meant that, despite the usual discourse about the outdatedness of the model of the Venice Biennale – because it is still based on the representation of a world divided into nation states – this model still works. In the marketplace, it really works. Every state, every government wants to be at the Venice Biennale; everybody wants to see the pavilion of this or that country. And also, under Paolo Baratta (President of the Venice Biennale from 1998 to 2001, and again from 2008 to 2019), the Venice Biennale grew significantly in commercial terms. As a company, it worked quite well, and it still does.

However, what we underlined is that the 'Biennale complex' (that is, not only the official exhibitions or the Film Festival but also, and especially, the hundreds of events that flourish around the Venice Biennale every year) is created by a multitude of precariously employed workers whose destiny seems to interest no one – cannon fodder for the cultural industry. We also denounced how, despite the 'radical art' shown at the Venice Biennale, the event fuelled real estate rent rises due to the business of renting spaces for official and unofficial collateral events, contributing to the gentrification of a city already in acute crisis due to the dramatic decline in residents.

On the other hand, we saw the beginning of something that has now become an everyday matter in Venice: the city being used as a window onto the art of the many global billionaires who are investing their fortunes in opening art spaces, museums or foundations. From Pinault to Thyssen-Bornemisza, Berggruen and Victoria Mikhelson, the daughter of Leonid Mikhelson. From my perspective, we are living in a city where art equates, more and more, to capital. I really think that this is a problem because, when the distance between art and capital disappears, it is as if cultural biodiversity is being killed – like a silent killing. It is a killing that you don't perceive if you don't have alternative ways of viewing or practicing artistic production. You end up thinking that this way is the only way, that it is only through individual superstar artists or individual superstar curators, and only through the philanthropy of global billionaires, that you can invest in art projects in Venice.

The recent case of the *Scuola Piccola Zattere*, for example, which was opened by Victoria Mikhelson, is very problematic because the money comes from gas and oil. Her father is one of the biggest private investors in the fossil fuel industry, with very strong ties to Russian imperialism and war. He is one of Putin's closest allies and an investor in Russia's military enterprise in Ukraine.¹ And now his money is being invested in Venice through his daughter. Of course, they will propose projects about queerness, ecology and, why not, decolonisation. In my opinion, this is an example of what real decolonial activists call 'toxic philanthropy'.

CB: Have you tried to offer a counter-model to this alleged scenario with your commitment within *Sale Docks*? It cannot be denied that major private investments in art and culture have also produced long-term virtuous relationships and beneficial effects for the city's community.

MB: *Sale Docks* is our attempt to prove that it's possible to do things differently. So, we're not simply criticising the system. Since 2007, we've been experimenting with an actual alternative. Instead of being supported by global financial capital, we rely much more on grassroots solidarity. We are a space that is not managed through a rigid hierarchy. There is no director, or curator, but there

1 Konstantin Akinsha: How Money Stained with Ukrainian Blood Feeds Contemporary Art in Venice. In: Desk Russie, 2024. desk-russie.info/2024/12/23/how-money-stained-with-ukrainian-blood.html. accessed on 24.01.2025.

is an open assembly that is really 'open': If you want to come next week, you can come. It's a project that I would call a situated project, and I mean 'situated' in the way that feminist theory does. It does not mean 'local'. It means that *Sale Docks* does not pretend any neutrality; it addresses the contradictions in which it operates and which are local and global, sometimes at the same time. To be fair, we're not pure either. But we try to experiment with art as an actual critical tool and, even more, as a small part of a transformative project. This transformative project includes, for example, the action for transforming Venice into a more liveable city from a social and ecological point of view.

CB: How important are collaborations with other research, cultural and activist organisations in Venice?

MB: *Sale Docks* is a collective endeavour. There's no way that you can do something like this alone. *Sale Docks* is not only a collective; it is part of a history. It has its own organisational culture which has its theoretical roots in Italian workerism of the 60s and 70s – and it has its political roots in the 70s, with the Italian *Autonomia Operaia* movement. Luckily, we are not fetishizing the past. I think that we are very different from movements in the 70s, from many points of view. But we are an expression of a certain culture. And again, *Sale Docks* started as a collective and is part of an ecosystem of occupied and activist spaces in Venice. It is extremely difficult to experiment with art in such a way that it has a truly transformative impact when you are working alone, simply because the system tends to make you invisible and put you at the margins. Of course, there is a very important reading of margins, which is the reading that bell hooks gives. I agree with bell hooks when she says that margins are spaces of productivity, because you can perceive the centre from the margins, whereas the margins are not perceived by the centre. From the margins, you have a wider picture of reality and a greater possibility of organising resistance. But margins are also difficult to leave. When you are marginalised, you are marginalised from a cultural and financial point of view. So, if I had made my choices alone, I would probably have been completely excluded.

CB: It's interesting to see how countries that are still culturally and artistically (and, hence, also politically) at the margins enter the system of the Venice Biennale trying, at least in the beginning, to find a different way, one based on care and solidarity. Just to offer a recent example: As NICHE, the Centre for Environmental Humanities at Ca' Foscari University, we collaborated

this year (2024) with the pavilion of Timor-Leste (that was curated by Natalie King and represented the work of the artist Maria Madeira). It was Timor-Leste's first participation at the Venice Biennale and, for the pavilion's public programme, we built a cultural dialogue and alliance together with other pavilions. This can also be a way of rethinking the Biennale model in more 'sustainable' terms and, hopefully, broadening the discourse; it can become an effective way of making biennials agents of change in a time of planetary crisis. You have been concerned with another sore point of cultural work, which, in Venice, is closely connected with the Biennale as a recurring but also 'seasonal' event exhibition: precariousness. In May 2023, together with *Sale Docks*, *IRI-Institute of Radical Imagination*, and other associations, you initiated an assembly of art and cultural workers whose name is emblematic: *Biennialocene*. What are its main objectives and actions?

MB: That story started in 2023 with a request from the German pavilion of the Venice Architecture Biennale, which asked me to propose a curatorial project. That year, the pavilion, titled *Open For Maintenance*, focused on the topic of labour, and I decided to involve both of the collectives with whom I am working: The *Institute of Radical Imagination* and *Sale Docks*. We proposed what we called 'a performative investigation on cultural work in Venice'. The German pavilion accepted it. What we basically did was interview the group of Venetian art workers – from the cultural entrepreneur up to the migrant woman who works as a janitor in the museum – who have precarious jobs. This is everyday life for most of the young art workers in Venice: art handlers, curators, performers, museum guards, culture mediators and so on and so forth. We then transformed all the information gathered during the interviews into a dramaturgy by writing a very simple theatre piece. Afterwards, we staged this dramaturgy as a performative assembly in the public realm, in the courtyard of 'Le Casette', a social housing development on the island of Giudecca, which is one of the last examples of such working class social housing in Venice. Some of the performers were the workers themselves, those who did not fear retaliations from their employers. For those who were worried about what their employers could do if they discovered their participation, we hired professional actors. Not wanting to stop with just a performative investigation, we wanted to go one step further because of the presence of *Sale Docks* in Venice. So, the performance, which was attended by many locals, ended as an invitation to an actual assembly held two weeks later at *Sale Docks*. We expected no more than a dozen people to show up but,

against all odds, around a hundred people joined us. The assembly was very intense and, I would say, well attended. Since then (June 2023) we have been meeting regularly, mostly every month in the context of the *Biennialocene*. What we decided to do as a first step to keep the group together was to co-write. We often use co-writing as a strategy to boost collective work and facilitate the coming together of different people. So, we decided to co-write something that, after five months of collective work, we titled the *Metropolitan Charter for Cultural Work*: twenty-five articles in which we list a series of urgent issues that art institutions should address in order to fairly treat their workers. Of course, it wasn't simply an exercise. What we have been doing since then is to propose the 'charter' to cultural institutions. We are not expecting them to adopt it out of the blue, but this is a way to prepare the ground for a confrontation to begin.

CB: It is also a way to create more awareness in art and cultural institutions, to promote a greater sense of responsibility. I mean, you have written another 'manifesto', haven't you?

MB: I don't know if it's a manifesto, it's more a practical tool. We have also been collaborating with an independent union called *ADL- Associazione Difesa Lavoratori* (Association for the Defence of Workers) and with a national collective of workers, most of whom are employed in museums and in the management of Italy's cultural heritage. This group is absolutely great and is called *Mi Riconosci?* This also tells you about how we don't really care about the ownership of the projects we initiate. Of course, the work of art, the performance, was a collaboration between the *Institute of Radical Imagination* and *Sale Docks*. But now, in its second phase, *Biennialocene* has become an open assembly where, once again, different groups of people can simply come together.

Long story short: What I want to underline is the unique fact that we are talking about a work of art, a performance, that is also an investigative process, which, in turn, leads to the creation of an independent self-organised assembly of workers. So, it has an immediate social impact. We really thought about it because there was a space opening inside the Venice Biennale, even if the Biennale as a foundation had nothing to do with it. Indeed, the commissioner – a national pavilion – was still part of the context of the Biennale. The big question for us was how to avoid simply legitimising the Biennale with our supposedly

‘radical content’; how to use it to boost our process of self-organisation beyond its temporal limits.

CB: It was also an attempt at creating *Institutional Critique* – although this is now a historicised term and probably no longer suitable for the context – from within the Venice Biennale, from within the institution itself, wasn’t it?

MB: I think that it’s something different compared to the experiences of the first and second waves of *Institutional Critique*. What we tried to do was to establish a double space. We tried to be against the institution from within and, at the same time, to reinforce existing autonomous spaces (*Sale Docks*) and create new ones (the *Biennialocene* assembly). I’m absolutely fine with critically addressing institutional spaces, at least some institutional spaces. I want to be clear: I do compromise. I don’t think that purity is the answer but I’m not willing to accept any institutional commission when there are unclear economic and political implications (e.g. toxic money, apartheid or genocide politics). I would simply say: ‘No, thanks!’ But, although I don’t think someone would ask me anyway, let’s imagine that it could happen. On other occasions, I think that it’s still important to work in the field that we call the art field, but with some goals in mind. What goals? Counter-hegemony, counter-visibility, the undercommons. This counter-hegemony is still possible as long as the institutional space is not the only space in which you present your work. Let’s say, using a pirate metaphor, that you can be an ‘institutional pirate’ – that you have your own island to which you can divert your resources because your work, your politics, your resources, would otherwise simply land in the system. You can struggle in the institutional field but, if you simply work in it, no matter how radical the content that you handle, if it simply falls within the machine, then that machine chews you. *Sale Docks* is our pirate cove – if we want to use the pirate metaphor again. Once more, the post-workerist grammar comes to help. It is essential to organise ‘institutions of the commons’. This is something that also belongs to the project of ‘abolition democracy’. We need to fuel processes through which we can get rid of the toxic-colonial institutions of racial capitalism and, at the same time, we need to imagine and implement an alternative infrastructure.

CB: Criticism is useful but, in many cases, not enough, especially if it is an end in itself or aimed solely at destroying something that, however wrong or objectionable, already exists. You need to propose alternatives.

MB: I think that it's not sufficient because the artwork as we know it now feeds on very radical content. Earlier, you mentioned this year's Venice Biennale: I really think that the Venice Biennale curated by Adriano Pedrosa is a very clear example – and I'm not talking about the quality of the individual artworks because their quality is probably amazing and I don't want to judge this – of the way the curatorial project deals with, for example, queerness, blackness and Indigeneity. It deals with these as if, to date, the absence of queerness, blackness, and Indigeneity was simply a cultural fact and had nothing to do with, for example, the violence of colonisation. As if, out of the blue, one could say: 'Sorry, guys, we didn't see you, but now it's your time'. So, the risk is that queerness, blackness and Indigeneity are reduced to a style, or to the next buzzword.

Apart from a few projects, most of this year's Venice Biennale presents artworks without problematizing the political framework: Queerness, Indigeneity and blackness are totally frictionless. It poses absolutely no threat to the institutional structure or to Western epistemology. We talk all the time about Western colonialist epistemology, but – you know – decolonising Western epistemology means more than simply working on historical archives. It means addressing, for example, current colonial relationships. And you saw the reaction of the Venice Biennale to the ANGA campaign, which demanded the withdrawal of the Israeli pavilion. It was Sanguiliano, the former Minister of Culture who answered directly in place of the Venice Biennale, reaffirming the unconditional solidarity of a post-fascist government with the government of Israel.² Of course, I didn't expect the Venice Biennale to refuse Israeli participation; it's probably something that the foundation cannot even legally do. But the double standard is evident. See the difference with the case of Ukraine. Two years ago, the Venice Biennale was very keen, and rightfully, to condemn Russia's imperialist war. The Biennale was right in being supportive of Ukraine, but it wasn't supportive at all of Palestine. So, do you see these double standards that are in place?

CB: The risk is that the voices of artists and the power of their works are levelled by a certain curatorial mode that makes them more easily categorised

2 Gareth Harris: Israel Will Not Be Excluded from Venice Biennale, Says Italian Culture Minister. In: *The Art Newspaper*, 2024. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/02/28/israel-will-not-be-excluded-from-venice-biennale-says-italian-culture-minister>. accessed on 24.01.2025.

and musealised. This is certainly nothing new in the history of museums and exhibitions, which, through collections and displays, construct a certain kind of narrative, gaze, stereotype and taste. Perhaps, speaking of large, recurring exhibitions, the only one that really managed to subvert the system recently was *documenta 15*, which was entrusted to the Jakarta-based artists’ collective *ruangrupa*. They turned the Western curatorial mode upside down, exponentially expanding (curatorial) multi-authorship by adopting the example of the art commons.

MB: You are absolutely right. In 2022, I wrote a review comparing the then Venice Biennale to *ruangrupa*’s *documenta*. I argued that, on one side, in Venice, you had an exhibition about the commons, and on the other side, in Kassel, you at least had an attempt to organise an exhibition as a commons, and this changes things. Of course I’m not saying that ‘lumbung’ (the Indonesian word for a communal rice barn, where the surplus harvest is stored for the benefit of the community) is the solution to everything. Neither am I saying that *documenta 15* was perfect but, rather, that you couldn’t really miss the difference between Venice and Kassel if you visited both at more or less the same time. And, indeed, the very artsy part of the art world didn’t like *documenta 15* at all.

CB: As a final question, let’s talk about your future projects. What are you working on at the moment?

MB: Well, we’re thinking about initiating a research process into what serious decolonial activists call ‘toxic philanthropy’. Again, this is hopefully going to take the form of a collaboration between the *Institute of Radical Imagination* and *Sale Docks*. ‘Toxic philanthropy’ is a term that was widely used in 2021 by *Strike MoMA*, a campaign led by a coalition of decolonial groups. The most well-known among them is probably *Decolonize This Place*. Based in New York, the coalition researched the Board of Trustees of MoMA and revealed that it was full of billionaires and entrepreneurs who make a lot of profit out of war economies by producing weapons, fossil fuels and so on. *Strike MoMA* is a campaign that, in 2021, developed different actions in only ten weeks. It highlighted the fact that such a model of museum cannot be reclaimed anymore. It should be abolished. It is interesting that ‘abolition’ is a term that has a long history. Its roots lie in the movements that fought to abolish chattel slavery in the U.S. Later, it was reactivated several times, mainly by African American movements. It was reactivated in the 60s against the industrial prison complex, and, in the con-

text of *Black Lives Matter*, against the police as an institution that continues the tragedy of white supremacy in the U.S. Now, this is something that makes us reflect a lot: this application of abolitionist terminology to museums. So: slavery, prisons, police and now museums. This also marks a very clear difference compared with the movement of 1968. If you see what the *Art Workers Coalition* in 1969 said about *MoMA*, it was very different. They still wanted to reclaim *MoMA* as a possible space. Now, decolonial activists are telling us: 'Look, some art institutions are not reformable because they're too imbued with colonialism, extractivism, gender and class violence'.

So again, long story short: What we're thinking about – and who knows if this project will ever see the light of day – is a mapping process for 'toxic philanthropy' and also for toxic public funding linked to art, at least in Europe. At the same time, it is a mapping process for a counter-infrastructure of art institutions, both activist and non-activist, who commit to a different model of art production. Hopefully, this can be used not only as a knowledge tool, as a research tool, but also as a tool for further mobilisation and for boosting an art that is more autonomous in regard to this type of toxic environments and toxic funding.