

A Fish Out of Water?

Barbara Casavecchia

Ocean Space, Venezia; Accademia di Brera, Italia

Abstract Learning to acknowledge water as the interconnecting element of a dense ecosystem such as Venice and its lagoon marked an epistemological turn for the Author. Which language is being used – or silenced – to describe the rapidly shifting climatic conditions of the Mediterranean basin? In this article, Casavecchia retraces her steps as curator of the 2021-23 fellowship programme *The Current III*, titled *Thus Waves Come in Pairs* (after Etel Adnan), promoted by TBA21-Academy. ‘Thinking with waves’ means questioning our apparatuses of knowledge, and activating transdisciplinary processes of exchange, choral mappings and pedagogies of relation.

Keywords Venice. Experimental pedagogies. Hydrocommons. Tidalectic curatorial practices. Exhibition-making. Queer ecologies. Etel Adnan. Petrit Halilaj. Alvaro Urbano.



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2023-09-28
Accepted 2023-10-31
Published 2023-12-20

Open access

© 2023 Casavecchia | 4.0



Citation Casavecchia, B. (2023). “A Fish Out of Water?”. *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(2), 209-218.

The atoms of our body, as well, flow in and away
from us. We, like waves and like all objects,
are a flux of events; we are processes,
for a brief time monotonous.
(Rovelli 2017, 136)

Across many scales, the following passage from Epeli Hau'ofa's "Our Sea of Islands" often resonated with my experiences, after moving to Venice and understanding how uncritically terrestrial my views had been: "The idea of smallness is relative; it depends on what is included and excluded in any calculation of size. [...] There is a world of difference between viewing the Pacific as 'islands in a far sea' and as 'a sea of islands'. The first emphasises dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centers of power. Focusing in this way stresses the smallness and remoteness of the islands. The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships" (Hau'ofa 2008, 22). Until my relocation, I used to see the brackish waters and the archipelago of tiny islands surrounding Venice as a nondescript, empty background to its picture-perfect skyline, as if they were a blind spot on the maps. I never spent time with them, nor ventured beyond the majestic built environment of the city centre. But over time, it was instead the primacy of the hydrocommons in connecting the dots of this dense ecosystem that started to emerge, and with it, different epistemologies.

To live on a daily basis surrounded by the vastest Mediterranean lagoon where waters come lapping at one's doorstep, rising and lowering every six hours, in accordance to tides, moons, winds, meteorological conditions, times of the year, Anthropocenic impacts and the global upsurging of oceans, liquifies many preconceived ideas and allows that 'totality of relationships' to reshape our ways of seeing. And ways of feeling. It situates them within a proximity where the speculative and the actual collide, so that complexity unfolds. Inhabiting this condition taught me how to finally see *This Sea Around Us*, as marine biologist, conservationist and writer Rachel Carson titled her first book, published in 1951, with the intention to highlight the threats that nuclear energy was posing to the vastly unknown oceans, their inhabitants and, at large, to life on a planet whose three quarters are covered in water. Five years before, with the infamous Operation Crossroads at the Bikini Atoll, the U.S. started to use the Marshall Islands as a nuclear testing site: until 1958, 67 detonations were carried out, with devastating long-lasting effects. Currently, the Runit Dome, a concrete shell enclosing a huge deposit of nuclear waste on an island of Enewetak Atoll, is at risk of releasing further

contamination because of rising sea levels.¹ Between 1960 and 1966, France detonated 17 bombs above and below the ground of the Sahara desert in Algeria, still under colonial rule (other 41 nuclear tests were then carried out between 1966 and 1974 in French Polynesia); sixty years later, the storms that seasonally hit the area with increasing intensity, due to global heating and expanding desertification, are now returning to France those contaminated sands, rich in caesium-137. The slow violence and atrocious consequences of the colonial framing of oceans and deserts as *terrae nullius*, hence both empty, are as evident (cf. Samia 2022) as the return of the repressed.

“That sea around us”, for me, was – and is – the Mediterranean, a hotspot where the acceleration of climate change is happening at a rate twenty percent faster than any other areas of the planet.² The occasion for delving into its rapidly shifting condition was the invitation to work as curator for the third cycle (2021-23) of TBA21-Academy’s fellowship program *The Current*, a pioneering initiative that cultivates transdisciplinary practices and the exchange of ideas around bodies of water.³ From the very beginning, I proposed a working title inspired by a line of Etel Adnan’s poem “Sea and Fog”: *Thus Waves Come in Pairs*. Waves are propagations through space of disturbances, whose evolutions in time can not be described by simple trajectories, but rather mutual interactions. Movement is their constant, in response to the movement of others. Like water, matter never settles and reality is relational, quantum physics suggests.

Thinking with waves encouraged me to rethink ways of practising research, based on open processes of exchange and choral forms of mappings, across the many shores and layered histories of the Mediterranean basin. As part of *The Current III*’s first commissions, I asked Etel Adnan and her partner Simone Fattal to share a conversation about their own Mediterraneans – “la lèvres multiple de la mer” (the plural lip of the sea), wrote Etel Adnan in her first poem, *Le Livre de la mer*, appeared in 1944 (cf. Adnan 2000, 133-43) –, that became a key inspiration for the whole triennial program. In it, Adnan says:

We are in the process of leaving the Mediterranean behind, but there are forms which resist that, like food. [...] You see, these things become ideas and ideas can be carried from generation to generation, they are the most resistant things, they’re invisible

1 <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-u-s-must-take-responsibility-for-nuclear-fallout-in-the-marshall-islands/>.

2 Cf. UN Environment Programme, Information and Communication Regional Activity Center, 2020, *The Mediterranean is a Climate Change Hotspot*, <http://www.info-rac.org/en/communication/newsletter/newsletter-archive/mednews-01-2020/the-mediterranean-region-is-a-climate-change-hotspot>.

3 <https://ocean-archive.org/collection/286>.

like viruses, but they resist. We need them. What are these ideas? A need for togetherness, there is a Mediterranean humanism which is there. I remember when we used to say: small is beautiful. Not only a question of size. (Casavecchia 2023, 32-3)

The sea - for both Carson and Adnan, a feminine and gestational entity - can be a formidable vessel for dismantling outdated paradigms and for questioning the limits of our current apparatuses of knowledge. Curator and scholar Stefanie Hessler introduced the term *tidalectics*, a neologism borrowed from the Barbadian poet and historian Kamau Brathwaite, to define an approach that “formulates an oceanic worldview, a different way of engaging with the oceans and the world we inhabit” and “attempts to coalesce steady land with the rhythmic fluidity of water and the incessant swelling and receding of tides” (Hessler 2018, 31). She used it not only to outline water-centered ways of interpreting the connections between art and ecologies, but also to inform the practice of exhibition-making.

Curating in an oceanic way is neither limited to nor defined by exhibitions addressing the oceans, but is composed of methodologies that are hybrid, transdisciplinary, generative, fluid, uncertain and transformative, working at different temporal and spatial scales and involving various forms of knowledge, both human and non-human. The ocean provides a model to accommodate change and unpredictability, to sway back and forth between, and ultimately to transcend, numerous disciplines and to invoke performativity, both in the exhibition making process and in the audience experience. (31)

So how to apply a framework questioning fixity to an extended (time-wise) inquiry stemming from Venice and expanding towards the Mediterraneans? How to implement pedagogies of relation and correlation, and to “make time for care”, as feminist scholar Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) calls for? Artists lead the way. A crucial reference was another initial commission, the action *lacuna* carried out by Venetian artist Giorgio Andreotta Calò, who in June 2021 - at the piping hot end of the first fully post-pandemic spring, at least in Italy - performed a solitary clockwise walk, around 270 km long, along the entire, fleeting perimeter of the Venetian lagoon, for ten days. Photographs and undisclosed notes marked his evolution. By measuring subjectively the ever-changing and ever-porous borders between land and water, wet and dry, their ontologies and intertwined dynamics at specific points in time and space, the artist kept moving and breathing at unison with the lagoon.

I was interested in reconsidering this place from the outside, from a dimension of physical crossing, by following its boundary lines. I was interested in considering it as a void, a gap to be gradually filled, slowly circumscribed and observed. To walk... [...] Within the circularity of the space covered, a unity is gradually established between outside and inside, between the slow mutation of the territory and that of those who are crossing it.⁴

The pace and introspection of that first exploration generated, a month after, a collective walk that we titled “Walking A Wavy Line”, conceived together with Giorgio and guided by him. Over four days, always in a row, we slowly covered the strip of land separating the Venetian lagoon from the Adriatic Sea, by walking from the lighthouse at San Nicolò on the northern edge of the Lido island, to the beach of Ca’ Roman’s natural reserve, at the southern tip of Pellestrina island. The body learns from every step and salty drop of sweat. The attempt to develop “habits of noticing”, as Anna Tsing calls them, by moving closer to water became a key principle of *The Current III*. The practice of periodically walking together around the city and the lagoon, started in 2020 (and co-curated, all along, with Pietro Consolandi), resulted in four cycles of free itinerant conversations, under the title: “Venice as a model for the future?” (2020-23). Each time, guided by a different voice, this iterative practice spawned a profusion of encounters and transdisciplinary exchanges around the Venetian ecosystem and its interconnected segments, ranging from science to activism, from anthropology to fishing, from cooking to conservation, from performative readings under the starry sky, to instructions on how to recognise the calls of nocturnal birds or to capture almost inaudible underwater sounds. Did we know that fish are now shouting, as a reaction and adaptive countermeasure to the high levels of acoustic pollution caused by humans? That on good years for prosecco on the neighbouring hills of Veneto, when vineyards benefit from the right amount of rain and sunshine, the abundance of nutrients brought to the lagoon make mussels grow at their best?

Transforming the verticality of a lecture into an itinerant, intimate and often messy talk, where bodies are positioned closely to the subject being discussed (dunes, currents, sediments, seagulls, erosion, clams, pollutants, invasive species), but also kept free to move and wander, helps to deconstruct the power system a lecture entails and blur the lines between speakers and audience. From an institutional standpoint, it suggests a possibility for moving outside fixed walls and partitions, which is both physical and metaphorical. The fact of

⁴ See Giorgio Andreotta Calò, *lacuna*, in <https://ocean-archive.org/collection/277>.

repeating, somehow ritualising the same action, created an open space and a collective rhythm, operating also as reservoir of shared memories and possible visions of the future. A transfixing moment, for me, was the perception of deep time while standing on a fossil dune, over a thousand old, in Cavallino, inhabited by an assemblage of thousands different species, standing quietly next to the bareness of a neighbouring corn field, where contemporary herbicides annihilated everything that humans consider useless at the ground level. To keep on walking allowed us also to record and witness the speed of changes. Since my arrival in Venice, only three years ago, the controversial MOSE barriers started to operate successfully and to stop *acqua alta* from submerging the city, although unprecedented high waters started to present themselves even over the summer, severe droughts moved the line of salty waters over 30 km inland within the Po river delta and its agricultural grounds, sudden violent storms brought with them giant haze and dramatic floods, the temperature in sea waters reached such peaks that mussels now find it hard to reproduce, while the surge in population of invasive blue crabs is disrupting the entire submarine and amphibious food chain, together with the fishing industry. Finding new lexicons to voice and interpret this speed, to align existing databased models with reality is the challenge ahead.

When Giorgio asked us to walk for hours without speaking, the sounds and the silence surrounding our movements became extremely present, together with many questions. By means of ripple effect, that experience suggested also a necessity to rethink how and which language is being used – or not being used – to describe shifting climatic conditions. For instance, if the Venetian lagoon is scientifically described as an arid space because of the paucity of sweet water and resources available to all living beings, how many *lacunae* could we learn to detect in the mainstream understandings and cultural constructions of aridity and desertification, above and below water?

The podcast *Aridity Lines*,⁵ developed in collaboration with Reem Shadid and Radio Ma3azef, looked into the interconnectedness of geopolitics, extractive forces, climate migrations, environmental colonialism and local ecological knowledges relative to water protection, as did two cycles of the online *Ocean/Uni*, under the title “Imagine the Ocean Dry as Lavender”⁶ (after a verse by Egyptian-Lebanese-French poet Andrée Chédid), probing into artistic practices, rights of nature, independent Global South scientific approaches, intersectional feminisms. In analysing ‘the Mediterranean question’, scholars Iain Chambers and Marta Cariello reflect upon the inadequacy of the current cartography. They write:

5 Cf. <https://soundcloud.com/tba21-academy/sets/aridity-lines>.

6 Cf. <https://ocean-archive.org/collection/291>.

The re-mapping and re-narrating of the Mediterranean clearly evokes the plastic geographies of de-territorialization and re-territorialization; an uprooting and re-orienting of given interpretations. Posing the question of by whom, how and why the Mediterranean is explained leads to a critical evaluation of the current political economy of knowledge (and power).

Listening to the languages used to narrate the Mediterranean, and crossing the spaces in which such languages are transmitted and translated, means folding and crumpling the received structure of sense (without erasing it), thus creating a historical and critical depth that proposes a different Mediterranean, one still to come. (Chambers, Cariello 2020, 143)

It is urgent to generate spaces where to reflect collectively on how the information on climate change is articulated, circulated, illustrated, and how it could be radically reimagined.

Postcolonial studies scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty has discussed the way scientific discourse on climate change and the Anthropocene have ushered humankind's return as the agent of history, which in effect re-elevates gendered man to the center of research and actions. [...] Queering now is not only a move for deheterosexualization, but also a collective quest to redefine the status of the human in the extended ecosystem of the interdependencies through which humans exist. (143)

In the exhibition *Thus Waves Come in Pairs* at Ocean Space that marked the end of *The Current III*, artists Petrit Halilaj and Álvaro Urbano (also a couple in life) presented the installation *Lunar Ensemble for Uprising Seas* (2023), composed of several sculptures in aluminum, all functioning also as musical instruments and protest banners, swirling in a vortex below a suspended *Luna* (Moon), in the shape of a giant egg that encapsulate possible queer futures, the artists explained. These transformative, imaginary creatures could fly in mid air with their lucent fins and wings, but also swim out of water and move on the ground as our common ancestors did millions of years ago. By shape, they sometimes recall many fishes commonly found in the Mediterranean Sea as well as on the plates of classic Venetian restaurants. More often than otherwise, humans ignore that those subaqueous individuals can reproduce themselves first as males and then females, or vice versa, or even simultaneously, depending on their life stages and the systemic stress to which their community is subjected. To quote Yuki Kihara:

Darwin's theory of evolution prioritises heterosexuality as solely responsible for the survival of the species, including humankind, despite a plethora of examples in the animal kingdom that challenge this notion. Fish change sex, including reproductive functions, practise role reversal and allow their kinship to become resilient. (Kihara 2022, 105)

Venice is a fish, they say. This story is told very often, again and again, along the canals. Look at the cartographic map of the city, they say, it is there, don't you see the tail, the round body, and the head, attached to a long fishing-line? Ironically, that structure, *i.e.* the bridge that anchors Venice to the mainland, as if caught and held hostage by its concrete bait, is called *Ponte della Libertà* (Freedom Bridge). I always find this story too short, too misleading. Which fish is Venice, for instance, and how resilient could it be, in the near future, if we could stop thinking of it as the sole, frozen occupant of an empty tank? Instead of focussing on it as alone, collective imagination could change its adaptive patterns by starting to include in the picture also all the islands and salt marshes that surround it and constitute this lagoon, so full of endangered life. Then the image re-composed would be that of a swarm of aquatic creatures. And then, I guess, it would be so clear: how can there be fishes without water? It is all there, already, for everybody to see.

Bibliography

- Adnan, E. (2000). "الكتابة بلغة أجنبية / To Write in a Foreign Language". *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 20, 133-43.
- Adnan, E. (2012). *Sea and Fog*. New York: Nightboat Books.
- Carson, R. (1951). *This Sea Around Us*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Casavecchia, B. (ed.) (2023). *Thus Waves Come in Pairs. Thinking with the Mediterraneans*. London; Venice: Sternberg Press; TBA21.
- Chambers, I.; Cariello, M. (2020). "The Mediterranean Question: Thinking with the Diver". *Journal of Mediterranean Knowledge-JMK*, 5(1), 141-9.
- Hau'ofa, E. (2008). *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Hessler, S. (ed.) (2018). *Tidalectics: Imagining an Oceanic Worldview Through Art and Science*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.
- Hessler, S. (2020). "Tidalectic Curating". *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, 9(2), 248-70. https://intellectdiscover.com/content/journals/10.1386/jcs_00023_1.
- Jaque, A.; Otero Verzier, M.; Pietroiusti, L. (eds) (2020). *More-Than-Human*. Het Nieuwe Instituut; Serpentine Galleries; Office for Political Innovation; Manifesta Foundation.
- Kihara, Y. (2022). "Fa'afafine Aquarium". King, N. (ed.), *Paradise Camp by Yuki Kihara*. Melbourne: Thames and Hudson, 105.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017). "Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics". *More Than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rovelli, C. (2017). *Reality Is Not What It Seems: The Journey to Quantum Gravity*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Samia H. (ed.) (2022). *Deserts Are Not Empty*. New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City.

