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An Archipelago of Ecological Care: The 'Reclamation' of the Island of Sant'Andrea

Cristina Baldacci
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy

Notes

This lesson explains how contemporary artistic and curatorial practices can effectively contribute to so-called 'ecologies of care', protecting the dignity of life and human rights along with the rights of nature, and encouraging critical thinking, emotional involvement, ethical responsibility, and public imagination for the well-being of the Earth. The Venice lagoon, with its islands and natural/cultural ecosystem, is taken as a case-study – in particular, the island and fort of Sant'Andrea.

The report of the United Nations' *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC) of 28 February 2022 states that small islands are among the places most threatened by the environmental crisis. Despite being extraordinary examples of resistance, adaptation, and cultural and biological diversity – in their unique balance between land and water – small islands have been rendered vulnerable by climate change. Subject to the double threat of frequent flooding, caused by rising sea levels and extreme rainfall, and drought, caused by the opposite problem of water scarcity, these conditions, along with pollution, are contributing to the gradual decline of the rich ecosystems that characterise small islands. These ecosystems include, among others, coral reefs in tropical oceans and salt marshes in lagoons. The ultimate risk is their complete submergence, whether as individual entities or as entire archipelagos, like a modern-day Atlantis.

However, despite the uncertainty of the future and the urgency of extreme climate scenarios, islands provide effective examples of local sustainability that can also be replicated in other parts of the world to promote positive and collective change on a global scale.

As Édouard Glissant, the famous theorist of archipelagic thought, explains in his book dedicated to the coast of Lamentin, a small town in Martinique, his home island: "We can start from a tiny corner of the world, a real place. We can start from this real little place located in an archipelago, a small archipelago of the world, and from there live the life of the world in a global sense" (Glissant, Obrist 2021, 58, 67). This apparently utopian vision is in every respect concrete and applicable from the Caribbean to the Mediterranean Sea. For Glissant, utopia is neither an object, nor a goal, nor even a dream, but rather "what is missing to us in the world [...], it is about accepting the idea of change" (111) – and therefore fully achievable.

Let's take an example close to us, Venice and the islands of its lagoon. It is a fact that the Venetian archipelago is one of the most endangered in the world. Although it has always had to deal with the phenomenon of *Acqua Alta* (high tide), in recent years it has been experiencing more and more exceptional floods, which can practically be defined as anthropogenic disasters. After the historic *Aqua Granda* (big flood) of 4 November 1966, the peak was reached on 12 November 2019, as documented by the apocalyptic images broadcast worldwide. These extreme weather events have tested both the lagoon's ecosystem and the centuries-old negotiation between the natural environment and the anthropic landscape that the Venetians have carried out. Nevertheless, Venice seems to be a symbol of enduring resilience. It has thus become not only a privileged place to observe how planetary changes manifest themselves locally, but also a paradigm for understanding how to face future challenges.

This text, originally conceived for a recorded lecture, is a revision of Baldacci 2023.

Undoubtedly, Venice is not the only example of insularity that can be taken as a large-scale adaptable model. The biogeographer Sietze Norder sees islands, each with its own local peculiarities, as microcosms, i.e. worlds in miniature, where best practices, which are determined by more sustainable relationships between human beings and nature – from energy autonomy and food independence to ecotourism – take root faster than elsewhere.

Despite being an ecosystem at risk, where exceptional floods – temporarily mitigated by the MOSE mobile dam system – combined with the passage of large cruise ships and overtourism, represent the height of the environmental and social crisis, Venice also functions as a microcosm. Within this context, it is possible to observe, imagine, and adopt sustainable attitudes and solutions that result from a constant rebalancing of the relationship between humans and nature. Being aware of the changes that Venice is facing as a consequence of the climate crisis, learning from them, and taking care of the city and its lagoon is an increasingly urgent ethical and political action to try to guarantee its survival. At the forefront are its few but tenacious inhabitants: a small community where vernacular knowledge has been handed down and where conscious citizens – including activists, cultural workers, artists, and researchers – are promoting a new ecological awareness in order to rethink (environmental, social, and cultural) adaptation practices in the present for the future – because Venice is not dead yet.

The themes of care and of what have been termed ‘ecologies of care’ from a variety of disciplinary perspectives – including medical humanities, feminist and gender studies, environmental humanities, and visual and performing arts – are more pressing today than ever, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic raised awareness of the need to invest more time, attention, and resources in all the different relationships that defines our being in the world or, to put it with Donna Haraway, our being *with* the world.

As has been pointed out, the proliferation of care themes in the arts and culture, especially in curating, is not just a fad, but a response, on the one hand, to the ‘crisis of social and ecological care that characterises global politics’ and, on the other, to the ‘more recent professional crisis of curating’. As a result, there is a widespread call for both a curatorial focus on the primacy of caring for all forms of life and a shift in curatorial practice that brings care, understood in a social and political sense, to the fore.

In order to initiate this change and make it effective, by turning curating into a set of ethical and political practices capable of contrasting the still widespread capitalist, colonialist, racist, and sexist attitudes, care must be chosen as a method. Caring with mutual respect, by protecting the dignity of life and human rights on a par with the rights of nature, means being able to use institutions and infrastructures in a more sustainable way, making them (eco)cultivated, that is updated and informed with respect to today’s pressing issues. And even before that, it means freeing our collective imagination from stereotypes through art and culture, and granting bodies and ideas a space for action that is as broad, participatory, and inclusive as possible.

This is a specific form of ‘curatorial activism’ that represents a call to action for both the curator as such and the artist, the researcher, and the cultural worker. Unsurprisingly, these roles are often intertwined in fieldwork, contributing to a continuous redefinition of practices – albeit in the specificity of individual knowledge and experience – and establishing profitable collaborations.

From this perspective, Venice is a particularly interesting case study. A number of artistic and cultural projects focusing on care, awareness, and empowerment in relation to local environmental concerns have taken root – experiences that are also widespread among islands and cities on the water at a global level – and have promoted more responsible interactions with the environment. As an insular community – in other words, a ‘miniature’ community, but with international relations – Venice

is also particularly prone to the kind of collaborations that are actually taking place between the many organisations, groups, and individual actors involved in the various initiatives that have sprung up in the city.

One of the most recent projects that can be considered an exemplary case, although it is still too early to detail its future activities and developments, is the reclamation of the Island of Sant'Andrea, which serves as a research space that brings together nature, culture, and public commitment. The word 'reclamation' is used here in reference to the ecological actions undertaken by land artists in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Robert Morris, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, and Robert Smithson.

Located in the northern lagoon, Sant'Andrea is one of the smallest 'atolls' of the Venetian archipelago. At the forefront of this artistic and curatorial activism action are the Microclima collective, founded in 2011 by Paolo Rosso, and the artist Giorgio Andreotta Calò – supported by the TOCIA! gastronomic collective, led by Marco Bravetti, which focuses on the changed food needs resulting from the climate emergency. With civic sense and love for their city, they have joined forces to try to make life on the island sustainable and prevent it from falling prey to property and tourism speculation, as has happened to other abandoned lagoon islands, which can only be reached by private boat. Although the initiative has only recently been officially launched, through the winning of a public competition, it has a long history. The initial idea dates back to more than ten years ago, when the land artist Richard Nonas was invited to rethink the anthropic waterscape of the island. Historically, Sant'Andrea was an important military fortress built in the sixteenth century to defend Venice, and its ruins are still there, though partly reclaimed by native vegetation.

The 'reclamation' of the island of Sant'Andrea is in line with another non-profit initiative for environmental and cultural regeneration: the nearby Island of the Lazzaretto Nuovo – first the site of a Benedictine monastery, then a hospital (whose methods of treating and preventing infections, especially in the case of the plague, were so effective that they were known abroad) and an Austro-French military fortress – has been turned into an eco-museum open to the public, as part of the wider project for the redevelopment of the Venetian Lazzaretti. The highlight of the naturalistic visit is the walk along the 'Sentiero delle Barene' (Salt Marsh Path). For about one kilometre, this path immerses the ecotourist in what is one of the lagoon's most valuable and threatened habitats. As semi-submerged land, the salt marshes are not only home to a unique fauna and flora, but also play an essential role in naturally maintaining the level and circulation of the lagoon's waters.

To return to Sant'Andrea, Andreotta Calò and his comrades have so far leased a small part of the island, but their project is much more ambitious and far-reaching. They plan to participate in another forthcoming tender for state property to manage the rest of the island, where the remains of the military structures actually stand, in order to preserve it as a landscape and cultural asset – at least for the next few decades. Theirs is therefore a strong civic, ethical, and militant commitment to make Sant'Andrea – one of the last places in the lagoon that is still 'public' in the deepest sense of the word – a centre for research and debate.

But what can be done? This is the main question posed by Giorgio Andreotta Calò, Paolo Rosso, and Marco Bravetti. Perhaps the best answer is 'nothing'. However, this does not mean inaction, but rather a kind of active idleness. Indeed, it requires an enormous effort to resist the temptation to transform even the island of Sant'Andrea into something else, as has happened to other places in the lagoon. Therefore, one must change perspective and look at the island as a unique place to imagine the future.

At the beginning of the 1970s, the visionary György Kepes, in the introductory essay to his *Arts of the Environment* (1972), which he eloquently entitled "Art and Ecological Consciousness", anticipated the role that the artist, moved by a concern

for others and for the environment, would come to play in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, facing the various challenges of an era characterised by profound “displacement, disillusionment, and social upheavals”. In Kepes’s words, the artist

has had to cut through the ego-tangled scene to reach the free horizons that held a promise of the new ‘common’ of man-environment. Clearly, the artist’s sensibility has entered a new phase of orientation in which its prime goal is to provide a format for the emerging ecological consciousness. The tasks he assumes differ from previous tasks in kind as well as in scale. The values he uncovers become the values of us all, giving sharpness and definition to the need we sense for union and intimate involvement with our surroundings. Thus the artist has moved from a marginal role to a more central position. (1972, 9-10)

Contemporary artists who care about the environment, producing works and actions that create an ecosystem of thought, explore and challenge different fields of knowledge through an experimental and free approach, encouraging critical thinking, emotional involvement, ethical responsibility, and public imagination on pressing contemporary issues for the well-being of the Earth.

What can we hope for the future well-being of Venice and its lagoon? First of all, that initiatives and practices such as those just described will continue to grow, through both private and public initiatives, and will encourage the collaboration and involvement of different communities, both local and international, in order to give rise to ever more effective (and affective) forms of responsibility.

Mandatory Reading

Baldacci, C. (2023). “An Archipelago of Ecological Care: Venice, Its Lagoon and Contemporary Art”. *Lagoonscapes*, 3(2), 321-33. <http://doi.org/10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/02/011>

Further Optional Reading

- Glissant, É.; Obrist, H.O. (2021). *The Archipelago Conversations*. Transl. by E. Ramadan. New York: Isolarii Press.
- Kepes, G. (1972). “Art and Ecological Consciousness”. *Arts of the Environment*. New York: George Braziller, 1-12.
- Krasny, E. (2023). “Care, Thought, Being: Curating With a Wounded Planet”. Krasny, E.; Perry, L. (eds), *Curating with Care*. Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 141-50.
- Reilly, M. (2017). “What is Curatorial Activism?”. *Art News*. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/what-is-curatorial-activism-9271/>
- Ryan, L. (2007). “Art + Ecology: Land Reclamation Works of Artists Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, and Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison”. *Environmental Philosophy*, 4(1-2), 95-116. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26167143>