

The Biennial-isation of Venice

Art-led financialisation and the imaginaries of public space

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Boat transporting stanchions for crowd control for the 2025 *Biennale Architettura*. Image taken from *Viale Giardini Pubblici* ("Public Gardens Street") by author, May 2025.

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To my family, to my friends, to all the friends I made, to the patience of my interviewees, to the public library of Giudecca for continuing to open even though I am the only one there, to the Gaité Lyrique for hosting my afterwork writing sessions, to *Une Fabrique de la ville* for the same reason, to ASC, to LiSC, to Sherwood, to *Venice Art Events* for letting me write while at work, to my colleagues, to von Beckerath for allowing my first entry into the subject, to my supervisor for accepting to support my project despite the non-traditional timeline. To those who consoled my neuroses at the beginning, middle and end of the writing process, to those who interrupted me with coffee and lunch and the balcony and a joke and a secret and a project and a protest to procrastinate and keep me sane. To my mum, of course. Against the municipality, now in June 2026 renewed to stay the very same. Against the cultural machine of the Biennale, to the workers who are trying to change it. Against speculation, speculators, easy money on the alienation of people from the living city. Against dead cities kept writhing by the working poor, for an imported spectacle for imported spectators.

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Glossary and acronyms

Pavilion : early in *Biennale* history, the event was organised in the *Giardini della Biennale* and divided into a central collective exhibition and several national exhibitions, each taking place in small decorative villas, which in architecture are termed “pavilions”. Even though the Biennale no longer takes place only in this format, the name “Pavilion” still refers to the national participations (and their organising team), wherever they may be located.

National Participation , National Delegation : each participating country chooses a project to represent it in that years’ edition of the *Biennale* : that is their “national participation”. The project is usually funded by and organised alongside their country’s public offices, such as cultural and heritage ministries, who will travel to Venice or be located there alongside the curators and artists. These groups are called the “national delegation”.

Collateral event : exhibition which is not organised by a participating country (or recurring participant, such as the company *Rolex*) or part of the central collective exhibition, although has been chosen by the Biennale edition’s curator to be part of the official programme.

Curator, curatorial team : exhibitions generally have a “curator” or “curatorial team”, that oversees the narrative concept of an exhibition and helps manage logistics of creating it. Every year the President of the *Biennale* chooses a curator, who in turn determines the theme, the artists of the collective exhibition and the collateral events. Each national participation has its own curator or curatorial team. In exhibitions of the Architecture *Biennale*, curators are often also the architects of exhibitions.

Cultural Invigilator / Cultural mediator : person generally charged with the everyday functioning of the pavilions, such as opening and closing the exhibitions each day and everyday relations with the public and press.

Calle : typical name for insular Venice’s streets.

Sestiere : typical name for the six neighbourhoods of Venice.

Fondamenta : walkable street bordering a canal.

Campo : the majority of squares in Venice are called “campo” (“field”) as in the past they were covered in grass.

ASC : *Assemblea Sociale per la Casa* (“Social Assembly for the Home”)

CSO / CSOA : *Centro Sociale Occupato / Autogestito* (“Occupied Social Center / Self-governed”)

ASAC : *Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee* (“Historical Archive of Contemporary Arts”)

Ocio : Osservatorio ClivicO sulla casa e sulla residenza (“Civic Observatory for the home and residentiality”)

Introduction

“The Venice Biennale used to be an art foundation, but now it has become... something else.”

- Casteo neighbourhood community activist at the *Stop Bezos* Assembly, 13 June 2025

On the 13th of June 2025, hundreds of local Venetians and activists assembled in a square a few meters from the monumental Rialto bridge to accuse the mayor and his administration of selling out the city : as public spaces and infrastructure all over the historic city, namely the islands that form the historic urban core and the neighbouring lagoon islands, are made available to buy or rent for the highest bidder, the city is becoming unlivable for the average resident. The assembly was organised in the event of the upcoming wedding of Amazon billionaire Jeff Bezos, which seemed to crystallise a number of international and local frustrations, namely that of tourism gentrification, and a number of neighbourhood activists were asked to speak on the occasion. The *Biennale di Venezia* is an internationally renowned festival of the arts, known as the “Olympics of the art world” (Witek 2019). Why mention the *Biennale*, when the fight for public space is the topic at hand ? While the city of Venice was only surrendered by its Austro-hungarian occupants in 1866, the first edition of the Venice *Biennale* took place less than thirty years later, constituting a major engine for the development of the city and its leisure industry : a historical introduction is necessary to understand the complex relationship of the urban history of Venice, tourism, and the *Biennale*.

A. Venice and the shifting spectacle of tourism

Although many contemporary headlines will denounce tourism as a modern invasion into the city (Baroli 2023) responsible for the loss of local culture and identity of the historic city, to imagine Venice as a city whose culture has only recently been transformed by the tourism industry would be shortsighted. Given its strategic position and predominance in the maritime industry, Venice was a frequent stopover for pilgrims hoping to board a ship to reach the Holy Land: one of the first ever visual representations of Venice can be traced back to the drawings of mid XIV century pilgrim Niccolò da Poggibonsi, (AFP 2020) and by 1494, pilgrim Pietro Casola expresses in writing his hopes to stay in Venice as long as possible so to experience the city. Historians’ reconstitutions of these travels show that pilgrims’ habits were not too different to those associated with the modern tourist, as a differentiated market was created around their presence and consumption. Far before the advent of mass media, fascination with the city of Venice was produced and circulated, and private and public actors alike took advantage of the incoming strangers and their money. Boat captains competed to attract the pilgrims’ business, and a variety of leisurely activities, concentrated on the city’s religious heritage, were organised for pilgrims to spend the time before boarding their ships. Public authorities fueled the city’s spectacle: over the course of the XV

century, the departure of the boats were organised to coincide with public festivities such as the Corpus Christi, and oftentimes a place in the parade was reserved for visitors. This evolved into a six-week series of spectacles, used to impress pilgrims and lighten their wallets before the continuation of their journey (Salerno 2020, p. 165). In its early developments, these industries of leisure and wonder were structured by the local economic élite, concerning few travellers in specific moments of the year, making it easier to integrate the visitors into the traditions of the powerful republic with little risk of the populations' expropriation from local traditions (Davis and Marvin 2004, p. 24). The principal economies of the city remained the commercial and maritime power of the Serenissima, and this was equally the subject of voyagers' fascination.

There is a historical point of rupture in the city's balancing act with the tourism economy : as the Republic fell before the Habsburg Monarchy in 1797, all changed. Historians Robert Davis and Garry Marvin (2004) separate the early developments of the hospitality and leisure industry from its modern articulation by comparing its scale and central narrative. Having lost its function as a capital and maritime power, the city entered a period of economic and demographic decline drastic enough to be compared to previous pandemics. The occupation and economic recession transformed the aesthetics of the city : material urban transformations in the 1800s were kept to a minimum, and new infrastructure concerned the continuation of military control of the occupied city, such as a bridge connecting insular Venice to its mainland in 1845 to streamline the transport of troops and weaponry (Salerno 2020, p. 176). By this time, Venice is known as a city of decadence, a phantom of its past political and economic prowess. The theatre and sex industries were major attractions for youth on their Grand Tour¹ : local celebrations such as the Carnevale were organised by the city to create a six-month period of festivals (*ibid*, p. 167 - 168). Poet Lord Byron and his libertine entourage cemented the idea of Venice as a Romantic ideal, a "gloomy gaiety" (Byron 1812) which inspired authors such as Ruskin, Morris, Dickens and Proust in their production of travel guides (Martini 2020b). In this period of deep economic crisis, one of the only activities to remain untouched was the industry of tourism. On the contrary, the romanticism of a city melancholic of its industrious past attracts an increasing number of travellers. Referring to this point in time, philosopher and urban geographer Giacomo Maria Salerno hypothesizes that "...the city has stopped producing anything of significance which is not the image of itself." A breaking point is reached : the city no longer creates culture, only reiterating what it has inherited (Salerno 2020, p. 169-172).

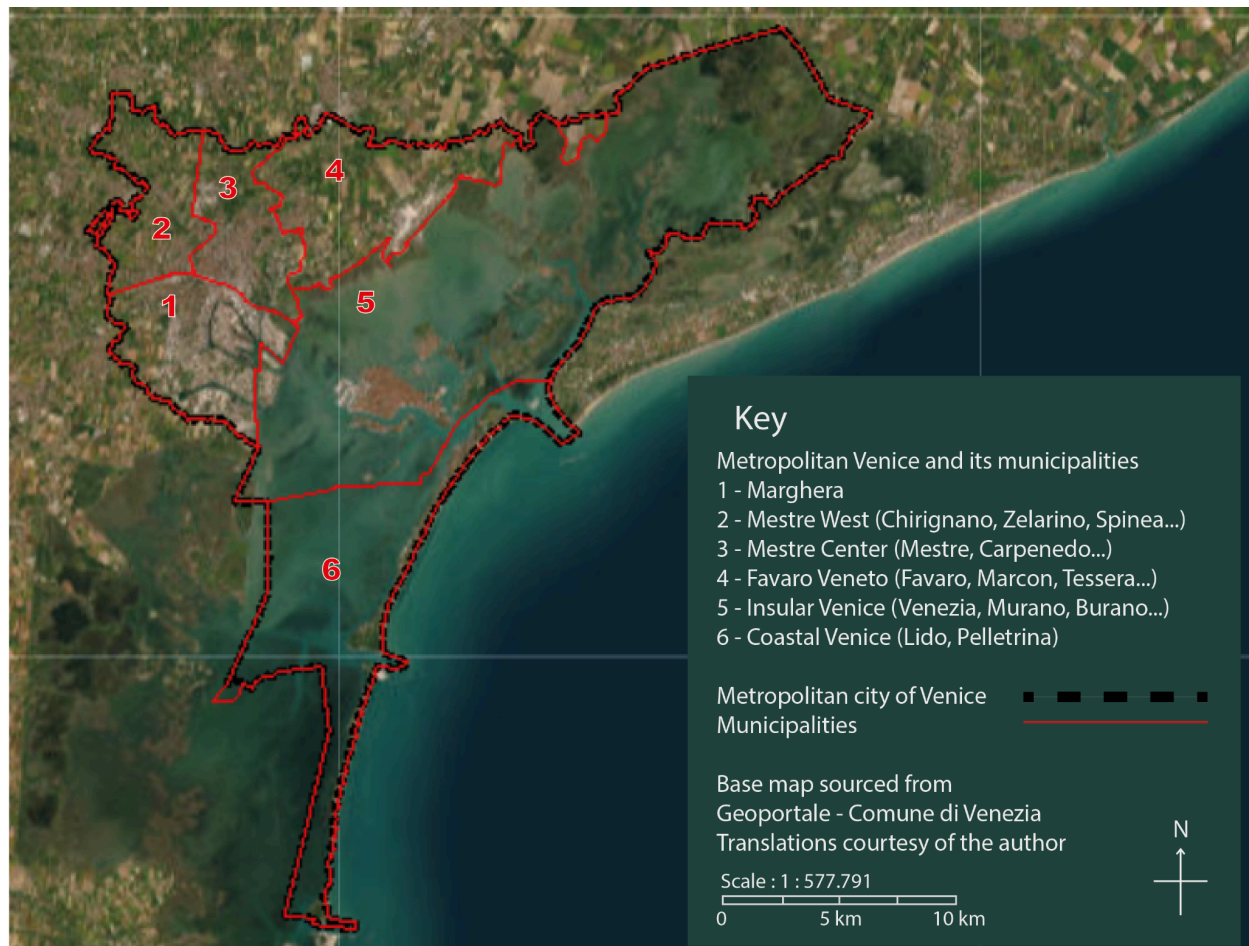
¹ *Grand Tour* : Coming-of-age voyage taken by upper class young men, often from England or Northern Europe, often through Southern Europe.

Once Venice was absorbed into the Kingdom of Italy in the second half of the 19th century, the delay in modernization was made a priority concern. Productive industries began to develop, such as the cotton mill in Santa Marta, the slaughterhouses in Cannaregio, and especially the many workshops in Giudecca, such as the flour mill Molino Stucky. Although this only took place in the geographic margins of the historic city : local intellectual elites concurred with tourism industrialists on the importance of conserving the aesthetic of the historic center (*ibid*, p. 177 - 186). The tourism industry modernised as well : with the rising trend of hydrotherapy, bathing houses and hotels were built in the island of Lido to cater to wealthy cosmopolitan society who wished to soothe their tempers and have an evening walk in historic Venice's decadent backdrop. The *Società Bagni Lido*, later *Compagnia Italiana Grandi Alberghi* (CIGA)², was established in 1872 to associate powerful hotel owners of the city who began to construct new grand hotels or open up business in the ancient palaces of the city (Martini 2020b). City authorities saw in these well-off, cosmopolitan and illustrious foreigners a chance to renew the city and its image : in 1893 then-mayor Riccardo Selvatico, known for his progressive policies, established a vote for an art exhibition which may be held every two years, which could look beyond the boundaries of Italian art and establish Venice's importance for art trade. An appeal was made towards different Venetian institutions to finance the project, and CIGA proved a fruitful partner. The first edition of the *Biennale* was held in 1895, and the catalogue illustrates the prices of artworks alongside adverts for hotels, cafés, spas and boutiques around the city. A singular pavilion was built for the first exhibition in 1895, in the Giardini Napoleonici : the largest public park of the city, built by decree under the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy where a neighbourhood once stood. Art historian Vittoria Martini hypothesized that this is the only place such a project could have taken place: a project with no connection with the city's encumbering past, in a space where Venetian history had already been erased (*ibid*).

This period of urban renewal proved to be short-lived. Besides the leisurely attractions, the islands were unable to sustain the ever-growing logistical needs of the manufacturing industry. Factories were moved to the continental mainland as the industrial port of Marghera began construction in 1917. The Venetian governing class faced a contradiction: on one hand, a historic center whose romantic bohemian connotations represented a goldmine for the tourism industry, and on the other continuous urban decline, especially within the working classes who saw their factories close down or relocate. The conclusion was to create a large metropolis structure with a strict compartmentalisation of urban space. Four mainland towns were absorbed into the Venice municipality to become the industrial and residential areas (Zanardi 2020) serving a historic center in the islands destined to become a picturesque and international space for the production and consumption of art and culture. The majority of middle and lower classes living in insular Venice was slowly to be relocated to the mainland through housing and

² Society of Baths of Lido; Italian Society of Great Hotels

labour policies, leaving only the Venetian upper classes and some “indigenous background actors” who in part will become a servile working class for said industries). The lagoon would serve as a natural separation between the working class suburbs and industrial centers of the mainland and the landscape of cosmopolitan consumption of the historic city (Fregolent e Vettoretto 2017, p. 84).



Map 1 : Metropolitan City of Venice and its Municipalities. Map by the author

For the purpose of this work, it is important to distinguish the different localities of the Metropolitan City of Venice, especially *Insular Venice* (sector 5) which is the subject of the thesis, so as to understand its function within the larger metropolitan context.

These conditions bring us to a second breaking point : with the number of tourist beds³ rapidly increasing especially after 2016 (Ocio, 2023), in 2023 the insular city finally counted more tourist beds than residents, a ratio of 50 000 to 49 211 (Baroli 2023). Although the tourism industry has ancient roots, the difference in its contemporary articulation is in how profit depends on the dispossession of

³ In official census and academic literature, there is a recurring use of the unit of “bed-places” (*posti letto*), measuring the number of residents or tourists which are able to stay in the city due to housing stock and the capacity of tourist accommodation.

residents : initially, as a people under economic decline and foreign occupation, then as local urban politics force working and middle classes away from the city. City governance strategies and travel companies deliberately reiterate the melancholic Byronic narrative of a city looking nostalgically towards a past grandeur, stifling the proliferation of alternative economies on the island. So what about cultural initiatives which do not uniquely depend on historic heritage ?

B. The *Biennale*, for another kind of tourism ?

Since its first edition in 1895, the Venice *Biennale* has gained relevance as a major event of the contemporary art world, attracting 800 000 visitors in 2022 alone (La Biennale 2022b). International observers see the potential of the contemporary art institution to “reinvigorate the city” (Rysman 2024), a vision shared by past presidents of the institution: in 2018, the art exhibitions’ theme was ‘Free Space’, describing Venice as filled with empty spaces needing to be “filled with international blood”. The *Biennale* had been created as part of a progressive, public cultural programme to stimulate the local economy and donate proceeds from art sales to city charities, its first edition held in a singular “pavilion” building in the public Napoleonic Gardens (Martini 2020a). Since then, the Foundation has undergone many transformations, and so has its scope.

Under the Fascist regime, a 1930 decree expropriated the organising powers from the Venice City Council, transforming the *Biennale* into an autonomous entity where representatives of the national corporatist executive powers were inserted in the board of directors. (La Biennale 2017) By this time, ten new national pavilions had been built in the Giardini: countries frequently participating could build a small villa-style exhibition space in the Giardini for their artists to display in, and this portion of the gardens was only accessible by purchasing a ticket. Instead of all artists exhibiting together, a new format evolved in which artists of the same national origin exhibited together to represent one’s country on the international stage (Martini 2020a). The *Biennale*’s purpose and geography expanded through the creation of the *Biennale* of Theatre, of Music and of Cinema (known as the *Mostra del Cinema*) (Labiennale.org 2017). The creation of the Mostra had been spearheaded by CIGA to be held in their Hotel Excelsior on the island of Lido. At the fall of the Fascist Regime, talks of a democratisation of the institution filled the public and arts discourse, but it is only following a widespread protest and boycott of the 1968 edition of *La Biennale* - participated by locals and invited artists alike, and met with considerable police presence (Pajusco and Ghigiin 2020 ; Di Stefano, 2024) - that the Italian Parliament approved a law for the *Biennale* to gain a new status (Bassetto 2024). A more democratic Board of Directors was decided upon, composed of government officials, representatives of the largest local entities and trade unions, as well as a representative of the staff, who together nominate the president of

the *Biennale*. The *Biennale Architettura* (*Biennale* of Architecture) was introduced, alternating in time with the *Biennale Arte* (*Biennale* of Art) and taking place in the same spaces. The motive was to promote a decentralisation of the exposition program, towards interdisciplinarity and for a *Biennale* which may exist outside of the previous calendar limits. The new position of the State was that although it may continue to finance contemporary art, it must step back from managing the “free forces of culture” (Bassetto 2024, p 198). Carlo Ripa di Meana, member of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) which at the time constituted the opposition, was named president of the *Biennale*, and some of the most politically controversial editions of the *Biennale* were created under his mandate. From the “*Biennale per una Cultura Democratica e Antifascista - Libertà al Cile*”⁴ (1974), inviting different Chilean artists and trade unionists to Venice to discuss the local realities in the year following the military coup; likewise, the “*Biennale del Dissenso Culturale*” (1977)⁵ exhibiting unofficial aesthetics of different Eastern Bloc countries, initiating a geopolitical crisis between Italy and the Soviet Union. Wishing to create a widely participated and democratic exhibition, the *Biennale* began to decentralise and diffuse throughout the city : panels in public squares, murales on city walls, but also happenings, debates and shows in ex-workshops and warehouses in the working class island of Giudecca and in the neighbourhood of Dorsoduro (Orzes 2022; Bassetto 2024). One 1974 comic strip from the Italian art magazine *Bolaffiarte* satirizes, under a sketch of empty San Marco square: “One must recognise, the new Biennale is really Venetian. / Why? / Because no foreigners come anymore”. The *Biennale* had shifted its target demographic and political goal, from illustrious and wealthy foreigners to bring money and glamour to the city, to the local population so as to develop an internationalist political potential.



Figure 1. Illustrative cartoon of the article “I misteri di Venezia” in *Bolaffiarte*, 1974. Source : Orzes, 2022

⁴ Biennale for a Democratic and Anti Fascist Culture - Freedom for Chile

⁵ Biennale for Cultural Dissent

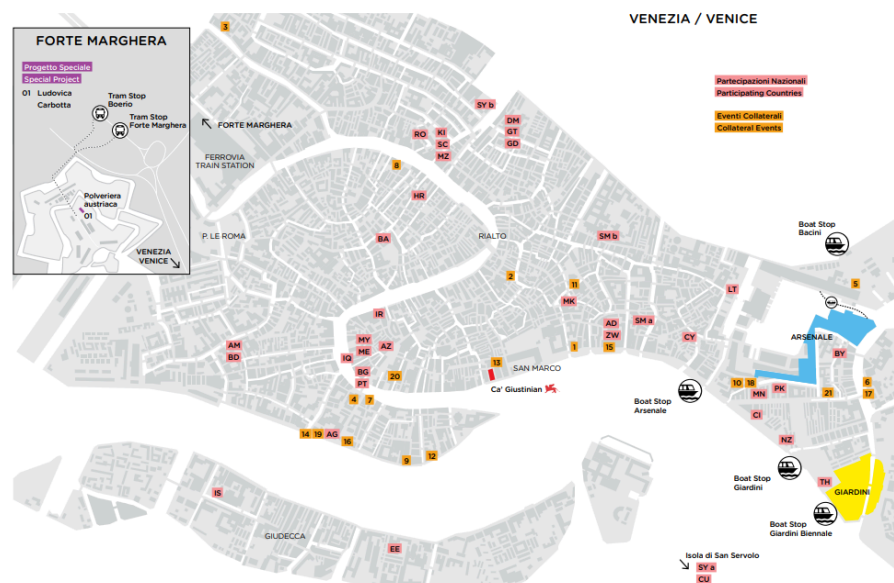
This vision of a progressive *Biennale* as a device for politicisation and democracy quickly came to an end, as critics accused its instrumentalisation for party politics (Orzes 2022). De Meana's successors chose to return to more conservative curatorial thematics, and return to its official venues. 1998 sees the partial privatisation of the Biennale, as the institution was transformed from a public entity to a private foundation, or "Società di Cultura", and the governance structure shifted to a form which remains largely intact today. The society remains under financial supervision of the national Ministry of Culture, meaning it must publish its financial reports yearly and is not allowed to distribute its profits between investors (D.Lgs. 29, January 1998; Somma 2021, p 177) which either finance the following Biennale edition or are collected by the State (Interview A 2025). The president is nominated by the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and the Board of Directors is reduced to four people, the mayor of Venice, two representatives of the local government and one of private investors (La Biennale di Venezia 2017) For jurists such as Girolamo Sciullo (1998), this change was motivated for more private actors to play a part in the institution. Given the Board of Directors is reduced and no longer features participation of staff and local trade unions, a more hierarchical and managerial structure takes its place : the reconfiguration of public and private actors influences the function and urban shape of the events. In 2004, another reform renamed the Society to a private Foundation of national interest, justifying the present Biennale's continued access to public funding and infrastructure. However, whether local and national public interest is maintained is questionable : the penetration of private forces in its management can be clearly seen not only through its acquisition of private sponsors and fundraising, but also through its labour practices.

Instead of directly employing its staff, the majority of workers operating within the exhibition arrive through subcontracting companies, civil volunteering agreements and student internships, often featuring low wages (if at all, for Italy imposes no minimum wage for internships) and precarious conditions, with irregular and short-term contracts (Bison 2024). It is estimated that a thousand people work within the yearly *Biennale* ecosystem, (*ibid.*) although the Foundation only reports 213 employees in 2024 (La Biennale 2024) The *Biennale* is ritually underfunded by the Italian government and its corporate sponsors, with a budget of 19 million euros in 2022 (compared to the *documenta* in Germany, with a budget of €42m the same year), which invites galleries, auction houses and private foundations to bankroll individual exhibitions so that they may take place. This is seen by many curators as an ethically questionable and financially speculative practice (Morris 2024), as an appearance in the *Biennale* could make or break an artists' name and thus the pricing of their works : most of the works exhibited will be bought immediately after or during the exhibition. Despite public financial scrutiny, the Foundation is also

routinely accused of conflicts of interest, for example in 2025 when the mayor signed a million-euro contract between the *Biennale* and his own company (Iannaccone and Trocchia 2025).

The *Biennale* does not own any real estate (Interview with A, 2025), although the foundation is routinely granted use and management rights by the municipality or the state. As national and private participations in the exhibition have extended overtime, its success has been measured by the increasing number of visitors and the “conquest” of new exhibition locations: churches, palaces, warehouses, public walkways and waterways (Somma 2021, p. 118). The objective of the *Biennale* to become a major actor in the “development and growth of the city of Venice, and of the country” is reiterated by the new president in 2020, Roberto Cicutto (labiennale.org, 2020).

At present date, the Biennale has expanded to hosting two main alternating biennial events (Art and Architecture) which last around 6 months from May to November, and four annual events (Cinema, Dance, Music and Theatre) which last up to a month each. As for the Architecture and Art exhibitions, 30 national pavilions are housed in the Giardini Napoleonici, occupying the near-totality of these public gardens (almost 120 500m²) as well as 60 000 m² of the Arsenale of Venice, another public building. Many more national pavilions for a total of more than 80 participating countries, as well as collateral events, may join the official programme, although they must rent a space to host them. As exhibitions proliferate around the city, questions arise on the impact of this use of public spaces, as well as the democratic, labour and residential dynamics which are produced : from *Forum Futuro Arsenale* to *Biennalocene* and *Sale Docks*, several bottoms-up initiatives have organised to question and contest the *Biennale*’s impact on the city. The critique of the Foundations’ disconnection to local realities has also been integrated into different pavilions. In the 2023 Architecture *Biennale*, the Austrian pavilion architects attempted to create a bridge between the pavilion and the public street, symbolically “giving back” this space to the neighbourhood. But which publics are actually invited ?



Maps 2 and 3. Maps of the *Biennale Arte* locations of 2019 and 2022. Source: official brochures from *La Biennale di Venezia* website

D. Quantity or quality ? Tourism, the *Biennale* and class relations

Questioning the Biennale's social sustainability remains controversial despite the widespread knowledge of the impacts of tourism. Mainstream media and politics have problematised the "quality" of tourism, shifting the conversation from the quantity and impact of the tourism phenomenon and introducing measures such as an entry ticket to the city, meant to limit "poor quality" tourism (Caruso 2022) via economic selection. This references an imaginary of poor, uneducated masses perceived as incapable of appreciating the beauty of Venice (Gangopadhyay 2022), contrary to educated visitors such as those who visit the *Biennale* : criticisable as little more than thinly veiled class selection (Salerno and Giossi 2020; Salerno 2020, p. 53, 99, 219) for who may access and use the city. Despite the case of Venice is well-documented in tourism studies literature (Van Der Borg 2014; Seraphin et al. 2018; Bertocchi and Visentin 2019; Salerno 2020) the role of the *Biennale* has not yet been analysed under the same disciplinary lens, or even less so in urban geography : such research may shine a light into the hypothesis of a richer "quality" tourism which is less impactful than poorer, "low-quality" tourism.

Over a century, the *Biennale* has developed into a complex and contradictory structure : a private foundation under public tutorship, which claims public interest while generating high revenue for a few. Focusing on the relationship between the public and private character of the institution allows us to understand the institution, its form and its politics, as a product of modern governance in late capitalism, while a spatial approach allows us to understand the institution as a producer of specific kinds of spaces and social relations within them. The question of public-ness of space is particularly significant in historic Venice, as local authorities are often accused of the privatisation of space and infrastructure, most flagrantly through the creation of an entry ticket ("contributo di accesso") to the city. *Biennale* events occupy both private and publicly owned space, which continues to obfuscate the difference between these two, creating conflicts of use of space which reflect the impact of the tourism industry and city users' right to the city. The *Biennale* contributes to an imaginary of the city itself, which becomes commercialised within the ever-growing industries of culture and tourism, and with it the private management of spaces and services : Venice undergoes a slow, then fast, process of *Biennalisation*. Public spaces are produced and experienced as components of a staged, marketable narrative of Venice, optimised to create return on infrastructure investment, rather than as spaces primarily oriented towards everyday urban life and collective use. In these processes of art-led urban financialisation, in what dimension does public space and the public sphere which inhabits itself become part of the spectacle of Venice ? A review of the pertinent academic literature will allow a specific research question to arise : first, of the spatial impact of urban spectacles and festivals, then contextualising these studies by investigating tourism, gentrification and financialisation processes, to finally discuss public and common goods.

Literature review

1. Biennials and urban spectacles: between cultural framing and democratic potential

Few scholars have analysed the impact of the *Biennale di Venezia*'s spatial practices on its host cities, despite burgeoning interest : art historian Vittoria Martini has written on the simultaneous creation of the Biennale and the branding of Venice (2020a; 2020b) and has more recently delved into the spatial element of the exhibition in an online article (2025), while urbanist Paola Somma has dedicated a few pages to the Biennale in her 2021 book "Privati di Venezia", when discussing the privatisation of the Arsenale complex. These all represent valuable resources, and the available literature will be analysed to create new perspectives on the Biennale's impact on the social and political fabric of the city.

Curator Carlos Basualdo describes art biennials as "unstable institutions" (2008) : volatile products straddling contrasting historical processes and their meaning, while attempting to produce an impression of totality. Since the pioneering *Venice Biennale*, new biennial events have appeared everywhere as diplomacy, politics and trade converge to appropriate and instrumentalize the symbolic value of art in marketing the hosting locality as well as the nations participating in the event. The prestige of the contemporary art world is perfectly adapted to this task, given its symbolic capital and supposed autonomy from market logic (Basualdo 2008, p. 8) despite the Venice Biennale being described as "one of the largest art markets in the world" (Harris and Shaw 2015) and owning a piece in the Biennale will affirm the taste and judgement of a collector, increasing the value of the entirety of their works. The majority of biennials claim to be internationalist in their curatorial form, although this is seldom realised : global diversity is potentially homogenised as it is exhibited under a single curatorial narration, and the exhibition format integrates difference within the capitalist economic art system dominated by the Global North. As a result, Biennials are institutions of a provisional, incomplete character, always subject to negotiation and readjustment in their very nature. Often, an overarching curatorial theme is imposed onto the different participations and is linked to the local context: the local space becomes a fetish for the historical revisionism inherent in its integration into a curatorial narrative (Basualdo 2008, p. 9) albeit one that is materially present under visitors' feet. Basualdo's analysis of the form of international biennials may help us explain the structure of the *Biennale*, and relate it to its spatial form, supported by other authors writing about festivals, cultural events and universal exhibitions. What negotiations, between homogenising globalisation, a fetish for the local, and the creation of new hybrid cultures and opportunities to challenge top-down forces, are taking place in the space that hosts it?

a) Public art, city branding and governance: how Biennials emerge

Cultural framing has accrued importance in overall urban governance. As many western cities are marked by industrial decline and financial speculation, the symbolic economy grows in accrued importance : it is the manufacturing, exchange and commodification of signifiers which now generate income and capital, seeing a “symbiosis of image and product” produced by media, entertainment and finance industries (Zukin 1995a, p. 8). The image becomes a bearer of meaning, symbolising who belongs to a space: “those who create images, stamp collective identity” (Zukin 1995b, p. 433). On the other hand, this dynamism can be manipulated by local governance and enterprises, who wish to brand a city with a kind of continuity (or harmonious discontinuity) in the public culture, in order to ensure future investments and economic development. Art historian Vittoria Martini (2020) parallels the conception of the Venice *Biennale* to an early strategy of territorial marketing : the margins of the city must become modernised, and the historic center represented as poetically ‘decadent’, rejecting its previous degenerate connotation. Zukin (1995) conceives the quest of using culture to frame, narrate and shift representations of the city in the sense of political theorist Antonio Gramsci (1948-1951) : the dominant classes maintain power by controlling the means of production and including the means of cultural production, producing a hegemonic culture which justifies the status quo.

Cities which market themselves as creative hubs strive to generate an ideal social fabric for business transactions: promising return on investment as the condensed cultural landscape has the potential to generate other types of commodities and attract more visitors, promising a flexible and submissive dynamic labour force, and offering social spaces (such as art museums, shops and restaurants) for the exchange of ideas which form the bases of the business world (Zukin 1995, p. 12-14). Simultaneously, as discussed, they generate a culture which justifies business as usual and the urban desires of financial holdings. Eager to attract the attention of these potential investors, local public authorities find themselves on the boards of cultural institutions (*ibid.*) and the organization of art biennials has now become a widespread tool among medium-sized cities to increase local cultural attractiveness (Basualdo 2008): although the Venice Biennale was the first of its kind. Urban cultural events such as festivals have been studied as “dynamic modulators in contemporary cities” (Nunes et Pereira 2019, p. 20): tools able to mediate and shape social issues, intersecting with urban planning and the integration or exclusion of marginalised groups (Zukin 1995).

b) Celebrations, public festivals: instruments of hegemonic power in urban political regimes?

The study of celebrations and festivals have long been at the center of ethnological studies in the construction of community identity, (Garat 2005) and so urban festivities has equally been studied as playing a significant role in the development of ethnic communities and constructing a collective identification (Law 1993 ; Zukin 1995a). Zukin demonstrates how the Indian-American Day Carnival Parade represents and legitimises the ethnic population of New York as a “magnificent mosaic”, integrating diverse cultural practices and aesthetics in the same public space in order to create a shared public culture. Although it is clear that overtime, the construction and organising of urban festivities and celebrations has been developed into an industry, with a specialised workforce and efficiency goals, festivals have become paid commodities which are integrated into a symbolic economy of goods and services (Saez 2002 ; Garat 2005). The function is still to narrate the distinction of the locality, by highlighting certain territorial attributes selected from the regional and urban history. Thus, while some urban scholars argue for the benefits cities receive by increasing extra-local exposure and prestige through urban festivities (Schuster 2001), others raise the concern of how these may be used as instruments of hegemonic power (Waitt 1999 ; Zukin 1995).

David Harvey (1988)⁶ describes how festivals and celebrations are mass produced to create ‘voodoo cities’, creating a facade of cultural redevelopment to mask increasing social inequality and continuing public disinvestment. Peter Eisinger’s 2000 article, “The Politics of Bread and Circuses”, demonstrates how urban administrations manipulate public approval through diversion, soothing and entertainment, instead of improving quality of life for residents and addressing their concerns. All while assessing such concerns, another body of literature has stressed the importance of applying nuance to the contested character of such mega-events (Ley et Olds 1987; Gotham 2005a, 2010, 2016 and 2017 ; Stevens and Shin 2014). Far from simply pacifying atomised spectators, the audience are actively involved in the construction of meaning. Geographers Ley and Olds set out to analyse how hegemonic meanings can be imposed through spectacles onto a depoliticised mass audience on occasion of the 1986 World Exposition in Vancouver, although finding that the power in instilling meaning onto the audience of the event was “fractured and negotiated... never absolute” (Ley and Olds 1987, p. 20). Most respondents to their survey demonstrated that their dominant memories of the Expo were of personal social experiences rather than political issues, and others engaged in the fair as a learning opportunity of global citizenship (rather than imposed local pride). The planning of the expo even became a catalyst to expose and aggravate regional tensions, as conflict arose within the different governing structure, from the

⁶ Unfortunately, the original copy of the work has been difficult to locate, thus I cannot provide an accurate page number

labourers, and from popular opposition movements. Urbanist Quentin Stevens and geographer Haeran Shin (2013, 2014) demonstrate that protesters and visitors to urban festivals and biennales are able to give and act out new meaning to the events and are not limited to protocolled parade choreography, in particular in marginal, liminal spaces at thresholds of formalized festival sites: "spectacles are perhaps not as concentrated or as seamlessly choreographed as Debord (1994) suggested" (2014, p.16). Instead, meaning can be subject to interpretation and participation by different parties : at Glasgow West End Festival, one resident purchased a stuffed teddy-bear from the parade stall and used it as a puppet, waving at festivalgoers, drinking beer and "playfully" insulting the police at the parade. Beyond an "act of alienated consumption" (*ibid.*, p. 14), to borrow from the same Debord, this performance can constitute an act of *detournement* : recontextualising elements of dominant culture in order to subvert and challenge dominant ideology (Debord and Wolman 1956).

The democratic potential of art can be a heated debate in humanities literature. Caroline Levine (2002) posits that the modernist spirit of rejection of the mainstream has lasted in the judgement of the value of contemporary arts, which may posit art as inherently anti-democratic. Although, in this sense it is not too different from public education, since it involves challenging the public for a shared goal of sophistication and progress: democracy claims to reflect the will of the people, although it also relies on procedures which aim to measure and weigh a range of existing viewpoints. Simultaneously, the public is shamed into an embrace of the avant-garde, as to not appear to be against progress itself. Levine uses the example of Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc" sculpture, which purposefully "got in the way" of other social activities and services of a New York Plaza in order to disrupt the daily users' life and force reflection on the nature of the very space which is being constructed. Instead, it was met with petitions and finally a public hearing to remove it. Public art thus necessarily brings attention to the tension of democracy itself, between the celebration of pluralism and the desire for harmonious unity and collectivity.

While such authors advance the necessary reminder that urban planners are not entirely able to hegemonically impose meaning, which is constructed dialectically along with diverse publics, one must be cautious not to overstate the democratic potential of such events: few examples mention how criticism is able to overturn the political and economic regimes that these mega-events and urban festivals impose onto the urban fabric. As urban festivals continue to increase in size and make their place into city calendars, this demonstrates how the resistance to such festivals stays marginal. Literature on mega-events can show us how, besides the function of mass culture, urban festivals have become a tool in revitalising the urban built environment.

c) Mega events: between urban revitalisation and capitalism's "creative destruction"

Over the last half century, "mega events" have surged in the context of neoliberal economic ideology and globalization (Gotham 2016), becoming a subject of interest in academic literature as their proliferation as international events meant to stimulate the local economy, namely through the tourism industry, and promote a country's "soft power" has undergone controversy as to their value, impact and legacy. (Gruneau et Horn 2016). When looking towards mega events which may have a diffused effect on the urban fabric and urban governance, the Olympics are a recurring example in literature and a convenient parallel as foreign press has dubbed the *Biennale* the "Olympics of the art world" (Walker 2025; Witek 2019 ; Russeth 2024) as to signal the importance of the event to the industry, the international diplomatic function and the promise that one is seeing the best that the world has to offer. Although there is an important distinction to mega-events, which is that of its ambulatory character. While Olympics tend to change location at each edition, the Venice Biennale stays in Venice; although creating temporary organisations in the national participations' curatorial teams, and often temporary spatial configurations for them to exhibit, it has overtime created permanent organisations and locations which host it every year.

Olympic games in particular have been studied for their potential to promote urban revitalisation, beginning from the 1960 Rome edition where instead of using pre-existing infrastructure, the city authorities redeveloped infrastructure which then became a permanent contribution to the city's sporting and cultural life (Gold and Gold 2008). City spending on Olympic infrastructure instead of social programmes did not go without conflict: the Mexico 1968 Olympics led to mass student protests, upon which the military opened fire, leading to 350–500 deaths in what became known as the Tlatelolco massacre. The Montreal 1976 edition, littered with ambitious although poorly executed projects which crippled city finances for two decades, finally forced a necessary reflection of what legacy the Olympics should have on the host city. In reaction, the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics organisers sought a mix of private and public funding, amounting to profits of US\$225 million to be channelled into local sports programmes and organisations, and the planners of the 1992 Barcelona Olympics destined most of the total expenditure into urban improvements such as extending the Metro and rail system, rather than into sport. (*ibid.*) Although these experiences of spending considered virtuous by the authors were overtaken by disputes on the commercialism of such events. The organising team of the Atlanta 1996 games stated that the Olympics were "not a welfare programme (but) a business venture" (cited in Gold and Gold 2008, p. 308) as they carried out urban improvements which were mainly of a cosmetic nature, consciously displacing poorer residents and the homeless population as to project a positive image in the international eye.

Mega-events does not only represent interesting business ventures, but are also products of contemporary globalisation, where spatial governance is a product of an eclectic superimposition of overlapping administrative entities, upsetting the idea that space is produced by a hierarchy of administrations specific to the territory and its history, from neighbourhood or town governance to a nation-state. This framework is used by anthropologist Anne-Christine Trémon in describing the World Expo held in Shanghai in 2010. 192 participating countries and 50 corporations participated in the transformation of over 500 hectares of Shanghai into a massive mosaic of exhibitions and pavilions, creating a microcosm where territoriality is temporarily suspended. In this way, the Expo “opens a temporary and spatial parenthesis in which Nation-States, international organisations, and finally the cities, intermingle over six months on the same site”⁷ (2015; p 186). In the context of biennials, Basualdo (2008) describes this togetherness as a source of instability for the institution and exhibition, in which contrasting world contexts come together to attempt an illusion of harmonious totality. Although this spectacle is not created discursively, as difference coexists and is negotiated between horizontal entities, but rather as it is regulated within an institutional framework, attempting to stabilise the eclectic products of modernity into a desirable shape, although in the process producing many more. In the case of the Shanghai World Expo, Trémon (2015) describes how the Chinese state has a final say on the juridico-public dispositions in which participating entities are able to exist within the territory. The occasion of the Shanghai World Expo creates a network of “collective entities” which gain relevance in their relationship with other “collective entities”, as well as distinguishing itself from those who are not inside of this network (p 188), and in order to do so must constitute themselves into a format of participation which is designed by the Chinese state, in this case the creation of a locally existing entity. The designs which are conceived abroad must be carried out and installed by subcontractors who are aware of local intricacies (p 201 - 203). The spatial character of the Expo demonstrates the simultaneous expansion of supra-national entities and national administrations, creating fragmentations and recompositions at the local level.

Kevin Fox Gotham discusses mega-events as sites of “creative destruction” (2016). Referencing political economist Joseph Schumpeter’s (1942) theory of capitalism’s tendency to constantly promote innovation and thus obsolescence of past economic activity from prior regimes, David Harvey (1978; 1985) discusses the spatial dimension, as capitalism creates a physical landscape mirrored in its own image. Creative destruction thus reveals the tension between capital’s spatial fixity, and the constant motion and transformation imposed by capitalist modes of production. As for Harvey, when too much capital is produced relative to the employment opportunities for that capital, one can “fix” the capital in

⁷ Translation from French by author

the built environment, creating a whole physical landscape to fuel production, circulation, exchange and consumption. This process creates and is sustained by a system of credit and speculative capital which can finance these investments, as well as anchoring routine, investment flows and networks of activity (Harvey 1978). Although this becomes a complication, as the cycles of production and crisis become ever shorter, the fixed nature of the built environment means that it is unable to transform itself, shifting investment from less profitable to more profitable sectors, in the time needed to overcome this crisis. The consequence is “a perpetual struggle in which capitalism builds a physical landscape appropriate to its own condition at a particular moment in time, only to have to destroy it, usually in the course of a crisis, at a subsequent point in time.” (1985, p. 25) This framework is used to highlight the contradictory and dysfunctional nature of mega-events, as these create new institutions, infrastructures and tourist-oriented spectacles for economic growth and development thus destabilising existent social relationships, institutions, and structural arrangements.

d) Temporalities and the city : Space-time and acceleration of capitalist cycles

Analysis of urban rhythms and the study of urban space-time is an emerging field within geography and urban studies (Henckel et al 2013) and acceleration of perceived urban rhythms, as through the constant renewal of the built environment, its occupants, and overall eventfulness (markets, nightlife, festivals, so on) has been discussed in relation to gentrification and touristification (Kern 2016).

Geographer Ella Harris (2018) discusses cycles of creative destruction and applies it to pop-up urbanism: transitory occupations of existing structures, and with which we may find similarities of some Biennale pavilions' six-month temporary occupations of preexisting structures around the city. Pop-ups and temporary occupations become a ritualised tool in urbanism, and according to Harris represent an “ultimate capitalist dream” (Harris 2017, p. 54) as it eliminates the obstacle of spatial fixity in capitalist accumulation, as it allows to continue and accelerate the turnover of use of built space. The use of spaces for art exhibitions in particular have been studied as tools to smoothen the transition between different regimes of use of the built environment (Zukin 1995a, p. 17).

Discussing Venice, Giacomo Maria Salerno and geographer Antonio Russo coined the term “short term city” : as the prevalence of short-term rentals (STRs) within the housing stock pander towards visitors rather than long-term residents, the city itself shifts towards an urban form which is not anymore anchored to and dependent on a resident population. Their analysis is limited to housing, although the framework may be interesting to apply to other kinds of infrastructure subject to rent. Urbanist Leslie Kern (2016) showed that reorganising neighbourhood social life and privileging creation of certain

temporal landscapes, incompatible with local community members' lives, can function as a means of excluding, marginalising and rendering invisible such residents in public space, acting as a barrier to representation and hiding the "slow violence" of gentrification. She highlights how eventfulness acts as a way of colonising and thus disciplining public space, for example disrupting other activities such as sex work, drug trade and "uneventful hanging out" (*ibid*, p. 9).

This section I. of the literature review analysed how festivals can be tools of cultural framing of urban politics, as well as being catalysts for accelerated infrastructural change. What is produced is an acceleration of perceived urban space-time, as constant change must accompany the fast cycles of capitalist production, with a tendency to displace long-term residents and users of a space. To contextualise such changes and see how this interplays with other wider phenomena in Venice, we must look into literature on tourism and gentrification.

2. Tourism, gentrification and financialisation of urban space

No study of contemporary Venice is possible without mentioning it as a prime case study of overtourism, conceptualised a mass influx of tourists which tends to put pressure on destination spaces, leading to significant negative environmental and social effects, in particular for local residents and workers. (Salerno and Russo 2020, p. 2). Tourism can be analysed through its transformation of the urban fabric, allowing us to compare the effects of the Biennale. Tourism can be conceptualised as an interplay of local and global forces, from which dispossession of the previous resident population arises : at once from the physical urban space, and from the cultural knowledge and practices associated with the space. One way in which dispossession has been studied in tourism landscapes is through the study of financialisation of goods such as housing. Analysing the role of class and capital in such dynamics of displacement has allowed authors to draw valuable comparisons to gentrification.

a) Between local and global forces: Place is the raw material, Tourism the commodity

Several scholars (Meethan 2001; Urry 2002; Coleman and Crang 2002; Gotham 2005b) have studied tourism as an industry that has developed itself as a global, delocalised phenomenon, which is simultaneously place-less and place-ful, as international corporations ally with museums and cities to produce localised commodities. When localities are commodified into landscapes of leisure and tourism by multinational corporations, authors argue that “authentic” cultural spaces are destroyed in the process (Boissevain 1996; Alsayyad 2001; Meethan 2001). Sociologist Dave Maccannell (1976) initiated a now seminal theory of “staged” authenticity, used to demonstrate how places are subjected to constructed representations which are then performed (Urry 1990; Cohen 1979). Such theories have more recently crossed with gender studies to address the gendered and servient roles tourism industries create (Veijola and Valtonen 2007). As the democratisation of high-speed travel is at the heart of globalisation and tourism dynamics, Manuel Castells (1996) argues that we move from a world which has a “sense of place” to a world that has a “sense of flows”, which annihilate the space they traverse. In this sense, globalisation creates non-places, a term coined by anthropologist Marc Augé (1995) to determine spaces characteristic of supermodernity: such as supermarkets, highways, hotel chains and international airports, these spaces paradoxically reassemble the world into a series of common references although which are not particular to any identity: these are not meeting spaces nor do people live here.

Sociologist Kevin Fox Gotham (2005a, 2005c) wishes to bring nuance to this reading of tourism and globalisation as a homogenising process. Neither residents nor tourists should be read as passive

consumers of the prepared, homogenised narratives and choreographies created by global corporations: a construction which he names “tourism from above” (2005a). As the global “sits” in places (*ibid.*, p. 332), it will have to confront local idiosyncrasies, and the representation of the true spirit or culture of the city becomes contested terrain. Locals will construct new traditions, appropriate tourist and global symbols and images to reinforce old and new traditions: through a process of “tourism from below” thus, building or enhancing place distinctiveness. In his analysis of Mardi Gras, the festival has been transformed into a territorial marketing ploy and the New Orleans Mardi Gras’ organising parties (“krewes”) have become increasingly commercial, although old traditions persist and new hybrid traditions emerge as these global processes are forced to confront local idiosyncrasies: for example, the creation of a new satirical canine krewe by a local television broadcaster. However, Gotham’s analysis seems incomplete : despite citing population decline as a reason for which krewes are becoming increasingly commercial (2005a), he does not explicitly underline how hyper-tourism is driving the metropolitan population decline. Who will continue to create grassroots traditions and contest Mardi Gras commercialism, when even more of the historic residents which enact it have been displaced? Can the creation of the satirical canine krewe truly “tourism from below” if it is an extension of the same phenomenon of commercialisation of social life which alienates Mardi Gras from the resident population which once both produced and enjoyed it?

Paradoxically, tourism is productive of non-places and non-things : flows of people, information, symbols which dissemble and delocalise culture, place being reduced to “raw material” (Molotch 2002, p. 677) instead of a lived phenomenon. Giacomo Maria Salerno (2020) has developed on this theme as pertaining to Venice in his book, *Per una critica dell’economia turistica*. According to the author, the modern tourism economy is built upon a transformed relationship to the present moment, experienced as an alienation: residents, who make up and build the city, are alienated from their own present by a conservative “patrimonialisation”, which reiterates a romanticised and homogenous past in order to extract a commodity from it. Mass tourism as an industry alienated tourists from their own lived experience and free time, by offering them an increasingly mediated relationship with reality (*ibid.*, p. 36-57; 121-133; 154-161).

Salerno applies two terms from ecological management to the tourism industry. The first is “monoculture”⁸ : normally applied to the cultivation of a single species of plant on a plot of land to the detriment of the soil’s health, here it is recontextualised to depict a city whose economy is based around a single industry, which in Venice’s case is tourism. The term is widely used by civil society, as can be seen in graffiti and demonstrations, not only in Venice but in other cities in Italy.

⁸ translated from italian, *monocultura*.

Closely linked is the term “extractivism”, originally used to denounce economies based on the predatory extraction of natural resources from territories. Salerno argues that the tourism economy is an essential part of the urban variation of extractivism; tourism must be seen as a device that can capture and privatise the value sedimented in a stock of common resources, as in the case of the extraction of raw materials from the ground. Under heritage regimes, what is supposed to be “protected” or “valued” is ultimately distanced from the common life to which it belongs and which keeps it alive. Through this comparison, ecological heritage and cultural heritage are associated processes, as the economic regime used in their management operates in essentially similar ways, involving “accumulation through dispossession” (Harvey 2004).

b) Dispossession dynamics: tourism, gentrification, financialisation

Contemporary scholars of tourism (Salerno 2020 ; Salerno e Russo 2020 ; Cocola-Gant 2015, 2018; Morell 2018, 2020) have demonstrated how the creation of the city as a touristic commodity can cause a forced exodus of residents. Contemporary scholars of tourism (Morell 2020; Jover and Cocola-Gant 2022) have linked the phenomenon to a process of financialisation of housing, which can be defined as “the increasing role of financial motives, financial markets, financial actors and financial institutions in the operation of the domestic and international economies” (Epstein 2005). Rather than being distributed based on logics of use value or right to shelter, housing is not only marketed as a commercial commodity, but managed and distributed as a financial asset frequently subject to speculation and price inflation (Ugalde 2022). Housing financialisation in touristic cities has notably been studied through the conversion of residential housing into higher-revenue short-term rentals (STRs) (Morell 2020; Jover and Cocola-Gant 2022), which are usually intended to house people for short stays such as tourists.

At the intersection of global austerity, thus the hindering of public provisioning of goods necessary for social reproduction such as housing, and increased financialisation, underfunded local governments pave the way for tourism-led housing investments as an accumulation strategy. Platforms of the so-called “sharing economy” such as AirBnB promise democratised access to both consumption and production of touristic rentals, thus the possibility for individuals to create passive income by renting out a room or apartment and thus combat low or stagnating wages. Although what is routinely examined is that the proliferation of STRs have a tendency to remove a significant amount of the housing stock from the long-term rental market and inflate costs of housing, as it is more profitable to create STRs, making accommodation a commodity with high barriers to access. Far from “sharing”, STR “hosts”⁹ tend to

⁹ vocabulary used on apps such as AirBnB to denominate owners of STR accommodations.

professionalise, concentrating property ownership and capital from STRs (Morell 2020). Research on STRs in Venice shows that the top 5% of hosts accumulate over 35% of the revenue stream, and a relevant proportion of hosts are international investors who will own multiple properties, exacerbating the crowding-out effect (Salerno and Russo 2020). As housing represents high-return investment both in renting and selling, the financial opportunity related to real-estate becomes a dominant logic compared to its use value as shelter, further demonstrating that housing becomes viewed as an interchangeable financial asset by often delocalised actors, thus the interest in using the term financialisation to describe the phenomena.

The proliferation of STRs has the capacity to create new class configurations and alliances, as digital platforms monopolise the market to become gatekeepers to access profit from rent ; property owners complicate access to residential rentals ; small property owners tend to professionalise and concentrate the sector ; and employers unite in keeping the work and living conditions precarious, so to continue to extract rent (Morell 2020). Furthermore, small property owners of STRs tend to have a contradictory positionality, as they can be identified as middle class given their simultaneous acquisition of land rent, personal labour, as well as capital, as they often employ workers to manage their property; although their participation in the sector “fuels self-exploitation, for STR suppliers misalign their interests with those of capital” (Yrigoy, Morell et Müller 2022, p. 965).

The financialisation of the built environment is not limited to living spaces and conversion to STRs. Urbanist Paola Somma describes how neoliberal forces in venetian city planning have pushed for all kinds of historical infrastructure (palaces, factories, warehouses...) to be sold and converted to tourist accommodation, event and exhibition spaces and department stores, which has serious consequences for residential dynamics, as social services, community and work spaces are removed (2021, p. 6-7). These public-private partnerships often were initially justified by a need to balance the public books, although turning the role of the state as simply the executor of market directives. Selling infrastructure and outsourcing management to the private sector has become an unquestioned credo, and all infrastructure which does not have a touristic function is labelled as “underutilised” (*ibid*, p. 58-73). Meanwhile, free market real estate prices are kept unachievably high, both by large private demand, and artificially as public money is funnelled to grow attractiveness to investors and hand out appetizing tax breaks (*ibid*. p. 6-7).

Despite the complicated class configurations, Morell (2020) describes how opposition to STRs are usually made on the basis of territory and community. In fact, often within tourism studies and newspaper media, “resident” and “tourist” categories seem to be placed in opposition to each other,

although this binary distinction may not give the full picture in contemporary population dynamics. The generalisation of transnational mobilities has conflated tourist and residential landscapes (Duncan 2012), which begs the question on whether this brings about the end of tourism, or rather promotes it everywhere, as they search for authentic spaces which are “off the beaten track” (Minoia 2016). Urbanist Richard Florida (2002) has accrued international fame beyond strictly academic audiences by promoting an entrepreneurial approach to urban planning, selling cities the strategy of marketing their services and local cultural offer to attract the “creative class” - a nebulous class of highly mobile and educated residents of variable liberal professions - as to revitalise the local economy thus making them clients and consumers of the city, the distinction between work, leisure and travel become blurry (Peck 2005, Sequera 2024). These dynamics can only be described as accelerated with the increase of teleworking and digital nomads (*ibid*). In response to blurred distinctions of tourist/resident, we can insist on the place of class in the displacement discourse, as it is noticeably the working classes to be the first to be displaced in such processes. The introduction of class as a necessary element of analysis makes financialisation of housing due to touristification comparable to gentrification, the process by which a prior community is displaced as middle class residents move into a working class neighbourhood (Cocola-Gant 2015), leading scholars to use the joint term of “tourism gentrification” (Gotham 2005a; Cocola-Gant 2018).

c) Tourism gentrification and the instrumentalisation of culture

Geographer Neil Smith has demonstrated how gentrification takes place as a way to achieve a rent gap, which consists of the disparity between the present rental income of a property and the potential income it may generate (Smith 1996). This rent gap creates interest in financial speculation on properties, meaning a property is purchased in the prospect that its value will increase. As discussed above, STRs will present the highest potential rent gap within touristed cities (Salerno et Russo 2020), inciting the conversion of long-term residential rentals to short-term rentals for tourist purposes.

Another common denominator of touristification and gentrification processes are the instrumentalisation of culture and heritage in the process of financialisation. Sociologist Sharon Zukin shows how a gentrifying class may promote a specific version of urban esthetics and heritage which resonates with bourgeois habitus and consumption as to dissimulate the ideological practices of exclusion and surveillance which constitute the process of gentrification (1987, 1995) all while securing their real estate interests. This is not too dissimilar from Salerno’s (2020) observations of how conservative regimes of heritage reinvent the past as to extract a capital gain, or geographer Minoia (2017) who focuses on the gentrification of two classes of actors, the super-rich and cultural elites, who

will be attracted to the city for its idealised landscapes and active cultural and international environment. The super-rich group will typically have multiple residencies and position themselves as “ideal” Venetians in their patronage of the physical heritage of the city, claiming to have an “authentic” experience albeit holding little relation with local residents nor depending from local public services, and thus promoting a version of the city which is not habitable for lower and middle classes. One example is the US philanthropist-backed foundation Save Venice, which is active in preserving works of art and architecture, although their events “reveal a strange combination of charity and dispossession” as the donors have exclusive use of these rehabilitated spaces (*ibid*, p. 8). As for cultural elites, these will show clearer political interest and participate in collective projects for the city. Although this activism will attract a more homogenous class of intellectuals and some sympathising foreigners, with minor participation of people born in Venice or that can be considered working class. New projects to safeguard the city do not represent these excluded groups, and projects defending commons involve leisurely uses close to cultural industries, exploitable to global and tourist markets, somewhat reproducing the romantic idea of use of the city and veering away from the recovery of vocational, educational and recreational needs of disadvantaged groups. Such examples demonstrate how culture can be instrumental to the purposes of alienation of lower and middle classes from urban space through touristification and gentrification, as the perpetuation of leisurely, romantic ideals of the city amplify rental gaps.

Simultaneously, cultural institutions such as museums have been studied as spaces where alternatives to hegemonic narratives may develop and proliferate, serving an important public interest for diverse communities. Anthropologist and museologist Yujie Zhu describes how private museums in the Chinese state of Yan’an allow citizens to negotiate memory and identity in a way which is not in line with official memory politics, and in doing so create a space where local communities may come together to shape and perform their identities : the space becomes *public* as it allows for interaction and discussion of historic narratives as promoted by political elites (Zhu 2024). In Aarhus, Denmark, cultural policy and management experts Eleonora Redaelli et al have studied how museums can become spaces for debate, informal learning, interaction and foster social inclusivity (Redaelli et al 2025). These public effects being observed in private museums demonstrates a need to go beyond normative ideas of private and public spaces to define public interest and inclusion.

The Venice *Biennale* is fruit of national and regional cultural governance and territorial branding of over a century, a festival which takes place in reoccurring as well as temporary spaces, consolidating certain networks and transforming others in the spaces it traverses. Some such spaces are juridically owned by the municipality or state, others constitute private property, although the festival is considered of public

interest, is publicly funded, and many events are free to enter : to better analyse the public/private behaviour of this event, it will be necessary to understand what constitutes the public, and thus public spaces.

3. Public spaces and urban commons

This section will explore different theories to understand the concept of public space: a geographical and material space of social interaction which is usually fruit of urban planning, where consciousness of belonging to a collective may occur; or a space which is made public as one of a multiplicity of publics claims it as part of their claim to the right to the city. What brings these two theories together, is the preoccupation of private real-estate interests to penetrate the production of public space. This will bring us towards common and public goods literature to create a foundation for our understanding of social justice, viewing the city is a common good and to claim publicness is to claim the equal repartition of its riches.

a) Public space as produced by public authorities

For many scholars who chose to approach the question of public space, Jurgen Habermas' theory on the public sphere remains central. In his homonymous work published in 1962, Habermas demonstrates how the birth of the press participated in the creation of a 'public', as well as the creation of theatres, cafés and salons. Such instances of sociability created political and critical spaces, representing a place of mediation between the State and the individual, and eventually exerts its own power against that of the State (Habermas 1988). Geographers Cynthia Ghorra-Gobin (2012) and Antonin Margier (2017) lament Habermas' missed spatialisation of the public sphere : geographic and material places where a consciousness of belonging to a collective may occur. Public spaces symbolise the very essence of the city and living together, although these have lost their place as a fundamental political question in urban politics over the course of the 20th Century. As city planning begins to conceptualise cities as concentrations of individual functions, public spaces must serve the purpose of efficient transport in between such spaces. Motor roads are privileged, the sense of the "flaneur" pedestrian which does not use public spaces such as roads and squares uniquely as a tool to access private consumption is lost, and with it the idea of urban fabric as a space for meeting and suddenness. Simultaneously, daily and residential life is moved to the peripheries, as the city centers and their public streets and squares become objects of heritage, their usage tied to entertainment and consumption; as public authorities begin to neglect the function and maintenance of such spaces, private actors begin to penetrate the production of public space. "Traditional" public spaces decline faced with the rise of "private spaces open to the public" (Sorkin 1992): such as malls and cafés, these can be preferred by the public as they facilitate "conventional" social interaction away from dangerous cars and other users of the roads. Although these spaces are produced in an inegalitarian way, in a commercial and securitarian logic, limiting access to "undesirable" people who are not promotional of a space ideal for consumption.

(Ghorra-Gobin 2012; Antonin Margier 2017) According to Ghorra-Gobin (2012), public spaces need to be politicised, which must be done together by the state and municipality; a municipality cannot do this alone, given public spaces (and especially in the case of sites of heritage) are not used only by their citizens; although to not lose its local specificity to globalising economic forces, the local territory must gain political legitimacy in front of the state.

b) Public space as a space for representation, and the multiplicity of publics

Geographer Don Mitchell seeks to move beyond this traditional conceptualisation of public space, placing social justice and the formation of political claims to it at the center of his approach (Mitchell 2003). Beginning from Habermas' notion of the public sphere which forms the basis of many established theories on space, Mitchell denounces such a theory as limited, singular and normative, as Habermas was almost uniquely inspired from his own masculine, bourgeois and white experience. One must begin to collect theories on public space which put difference at its core, as all critique of human geography must privilege a social justice approach (*ibid*, p. 30) as to seek "a different kind of order, one built not on the fears of the bourgeoisie but on the needs of the poorest and most marginalized residents" (*ibid*, p. 9). He cites feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser (2009) in opposing Habermas' notion of a singular public sphere as for multiple public spheres which can be divergent and exclusive. This theorisation is not used to argue for the planning of separate public spaces, for example for housed and unhoused individuals. Instead, public space must be understood as a material place where groups of people can represent themselves and claim a right to the city in a Lefebvrian sense: of inhabiting a city which is built in difference, in the struggle between different groups on the shape that the city has, in its material shape as well as its politics (*ibid*, p. 18). In the words of Henri Lefebvre (1968, p. 73), "The right to the city manifests itself as a superior form of rights: right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit. The right to the oeuvre, to participation and appropriation (clearly distinct from the right to property), are implied in the right to the city." The right to inhabit and appropriate includes the right to housing, by insisting on use value and thus differentiating it from private property. In this sense, geographic and material space is of prime importance, as a right does not exist without a space where it may be enacted; simultaneously, space is produced by social action, in proportion to the equilibrium of power of different groups in the struggle for the production of space (Mitchell 2003, p. 17 - 29).

Mitchell demonstrates how planification and provisioning of urban public spaces does not automatically enact a powerful public discourse ; public debate does not develop because it can but because it must, around specific questions and needs. What characterises the 'publicness' of a space is not a space which is preestablished as 'public', but rather when a group takes on this space in order to represent

themselves towards a larger public, they make this space 'public'. The very act of representing one's group (and one's self) to a larger public creates a space for representation : representation both demands space and creates space. The importance of such right of use is highlighted in a later article by Mitchell and co-written with Lynn Staeheli in 2006: similarly to Ghorra-Gobin, they raise the alarm as the rise of private spaces open to the public - in their example, shopping malls - become new spaces of sociability and civic action. The community which has transferred such functions of public spaces to shopping malls have accepted private spaces open to the public as *de facto* public spaces, thus also tolerating private property as a base to regulate institutions, actions and the people who are authorised within said space : in their example, the mall owners decide the limits of free expression inside their spaces, and when civic action goes 'too far'. This does not mean that interactions with different people or ideas cannot take place inside the mall, but that the creation of an inclusive and democratic space is obstructed by the necessity to maintain a civil, well-behaved 'community' (note : not public), which does not disturb the primary commercial function of the mall.

Although geographer Kurt Iveson agrees with Mitchell's base argument of a multiplicity of publics, he argues that Mitchell conflates multiple types of 'publicness' of urban space (2007). Iveson argues that publics are social imaginaries, which are produced simultaneously to voicing a claim to the city, in a chicken-and-egg paradox : an instance of public address is motivated by the idea of a preexisting public ready to receive it, although creating a public sphere amongst the people engaging with the public address. This means that space becomes a place of power through "publicising" actions : one must detach "procedural" publicness (the practices of "publicisation" and public address) from "topographic" publicness (the physical space in question). There is no clear public space which can be highlighted on a map and distinguished from private space : there are only different "types of publicness" which may concern the imaginary of a place and its subsequent governance, highlighting the messy real geographies of publicness. Public address can be related to physical, geographical (or "topographical", as Iveson defines it) urban space in a variety of ways. Urban sites can be *venues* of public address, although always facilitating certain forms of public address over others given varying conditions of accessibility. Urban sites can be *objects* of public address, when the limitations and potentialities of a space become subject of public debate, although efforts to contest these expectations are not only done inside the physical space in question. Finally, the city itself can be used to represent an idea similar to the idealised singular public, an urban imaginary of diverse publics united by shared interests as users of the same space. Public-ness is performed in rapid flashes, infusing space and making it into a "site of power" or public space, although with little privileged relationship to physical spaces in the city. As publics are different, there are different potentialities for publics to express themselves in different venues. While these modes of publicising space are somewhat compatible with Mitchell's theory as well,

Iveson specifies how they often are not simultaneous, nor do they demand the intervisibility or co-presence of the actors making and receiving the public address : meaning can be circulated by physical and digital media, such as banners, stickers, articles, and so forth.

c) The Public or the Commons? A question of redistributive justice

Public space in Mitchell and Iveson's understanding thus puts the process of appropriation at its core : how public space is not provisioned but created through taking a space and transforming it into a place of self-representation and debate. This position opens up the topic to wider literature of public and common goods and the process by which they are safeguarded and created. Philosophers Toni Negri and Michael Hardt (2009, p. 7-8) mention that the production of commons such as knowledge, language, symbols, information, affects and so on are at the center of social cooperation and thus production of value. Other scholars (Harvey 2012; Linebaugh 2009) have brought attention to commoning as an act, entailing the management and sustaining of common assets through collective practices, so as to demonstrate that there are no inherent characteristics which produce a good as a common good, but rather it is a social and political construction. Although commoning must not be idealised; as the generated value mentioned by Negri and Hardt will be forcibly privatised, and commoning becomes a defensive means to socialise poverty (Linebaugh 2009) For this reason, anthropologist Trémon underlines the importance of treating public goods alongside common goods : instead of creating enclaves of pooled resources shielded from state and market intervention, it is important to call upon the state. The author proposes the term 'publicising', as in to make public, indicating the initiatives to safeguard or recover access to public goods (Trémon 2020, p. 3) As with Mitchell, the emphasis is kept on the decision-making process and the struggle to create or make a space public, as in a place where one may represent their right to the city as well as the goods and services which are necessary to inhabit and contribute to the city.

Tourism can be framed as an issue of urban commons and privatisation of the commons. In the words of Harvey, "the ambience and attractiveness of a city, for example, is a collective product of its citizens, but it is the tourist trade that commercially capitalizes upon that common to extract monopoly rents" (2012, p. 74) The right to use this common good should be extended to all those who have taken part to their production, which is at the base of the claim to the right to the city. (*ibid*, p. 78) The issue is that these commons are continuously appropriated by capital in their commodified form, and the way this is seen in urban contexts is through the extraction of land and property rent (*ibid*, p. 77) can be related to issues of high rent which goes to displace prior residents and their productive activities.

Considering urban space and culture as a social good, thus a good that is created and owed equally to all users of the city, allows us to keep social justice at the center of our reflection: to analyse the allotment of material and geographic space as produced in a struggle of different actors to represent their diverging interests, as is the case in Venice. Publicness, as in the creation of public space by claiming one's right to the city, is appealed to in order to safeguard the allocation of these goods in a just way.

Research questions

The *Biennale* is an organism which is defined juridically as an institution of public interest, since its creation when it was governed entirely by the city board. Despite the changes in juridic form and governance to the actual private Foundation, the *Biennale* and the spaces it produces claim to carry out a beneficial public function, which gains them the patronage of the national and local city's administration, including access to publicly owned spaces and infrastructure. The *Biennale* equally takes place in spaces which are not juridically public, such as art galleries and private Palazzos, which will become openly accessible for the time of the exhibition. These exhibitions may attempt to relate with the public in a multiplicity of ways, including creating spaces of sociability where individuals may meet, represent and recognise each other, and interact with the content of the art exhibitions, constituting a social community (in the sense of Mitchell and Staeheli 2006) which can eventually become politicised. These aspects of the *Biennale* put into question the public character of the *Biennale* and the spaces it generates, across the multitude of definitions of publicness and public space.

Public events and festivals can be contested terrain, and the *Biennale's* local anchorage and international scope creates political questions at both of these scales. At a local level, public events and festivals can represent ways to govern urban space, legitimising control, new infrastructure and new urban regimes through public spectacles. In the case of Venice, cultural policy particularly operates within a context of gentrification and tourism, which in Venice have worked to depose lower and middle class people from the city: on one hand, moving access to basic services, affordable housing and labour to the mainland, and on the other, removing their presence from the hegemonic representation of the city, which in the case of insular Venice is one of leisure and cultural consumption, in particular of historical heritage. At an international level, the *Biennale* aims to represent global realities, although imposing a narrative lens and cultural market governance which is emanated by global North powers. Simultaneously, festivals and cultural events can be spaces for discussion and development of a multiplicity of narratives concerning the city, with ambition to influence its governance. This is not only true for organisers within the bounds of official content of an event, but also for different publics, which may decide to interact, reject, and hijack both the narratives and the governance models proposed by the *Biennale*. Despite the Foundation finding itself at the crossroads of numerous spatial problematics, there is little literature which questions the impact of the Foundation on these grounds. Focusing especially on insular Venice (and not metropolitan Venice), and based on this reflection, the following questions arise :

In what ways do the Art and Architecture editions of *La Biennale di Venezia* produce public space ? The Biennale di Venezia takes place similarly in public and privately owned spaces: does this make such spaces public, or private, and according to which definitions and manipulations ? Which publics are invited, excluded or generated by such Biennale events and installations ? What kinds of participation is permitted, which kinds are enacted, between consumption of cultural goods, reinterpretation, detournement and dissent? Between local and international fluxes, material redistribution and cultural representation, which public spaces and which publics are produced by art mega-events tied to financialisation and touristification of city space ?

The very definition of public space, as well as its production, is multifaceted, needing further questions to break down our analysis. In the first part, the dynamics of the Venice *Biennale* and its occupation of urban space are analysed through political and economic lenses, in regards to the legal definitions of publicness (meaning, ownership and governance is by the public administration). These reflections will allow to understand the complex public-private structure of the *Biennale*, how this translates into its urban form, and how this impacts the kinds of activities and interactions that are proposed inside the spaces. The assumption that public ownership translates to public functions taking place inside the space will therefore be challenged through several definitions of what that the 'public' may constitute, in particular articulating around three major, but linked, divisions in public space literature : whether the public can be described as a sole but diverse group, or rather multiple, fragmented political communities ; consequently, what is the importance of a space with widespread accessibility, so that diverse individuals may interact with each other and their political claims in order to form a political community ; and finally, whether space can be designed as public, for example by insisting on its diversity of participants, or can only become public through appropriation (or 'publicisation') of a group.

Introducing these key conflicts in literature allows to enlarge the understanding of public spaces, past the legal definitions of management by a public entity, and instead understand public-ness as a social process, which may have the potential to rescue the *Biennale* from the private interests which govern it. The kinds of differentiated public spheres that are produced by the *Biennale* ecosystem and their relationship to the city will be described, as well as how this translates to different claims over urban space and its use, with different capacities for influence. These spheres do not exist in a vacuum : these publics use different venues to organise, communicate and make a claim to the *Biennale* and the city, as an attempt to map out the complicated 'public-ness' of the *Biennale*. Given the global shape of the *Biennale* and the cosmopolitan quality of Venice itself, where many city-users are temporary, the question of redistributive justice will begin to concern the interplay of transnational and local publics alike. As our understanding of public space and its creation evolves, this study aims to arrive at an updated understanding of the creation of public space in contexts of art-led urban financialisation.

Theoretical Framework

Throughout the work, attention is given to multiple definitions of public space, namely that of Ghorra-Ghobin (2001a, 2001b, 2012), Mitchell (2003), Mitchell and Staeheli (2006) and Iveson (2007) : from public space as the spatialisation of the Habermassian public sphere, representing the gathering space for the 'public' to interact, deliberate and confront its differences ; to the consideration of multiple publics with diverging interests which make a claim to a space, thus publicising said space ; to a more complex geography of publics, where spaces can hold multiple forms of public-ness. An underlying framework will be that of social justice and the right to the right to the city, which constitutes a place of difference : the work of the public, including claims to the public, is at its core a means to achieve distributive justice.

Public spectacles, in our case study the Art and Architecture Biennale, are a multifaceted subject of analysis. They will be seen as components of the processes of mass tourism and gentrification (Gotham, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c), thus dissociating urban commons from their community context of production (Salerno, 2020) by imposing certain economic, social and political relations within a determined space, as well as the cultural framing of said space. Simultaneously, attention will be drawn to their potential for instances of creativity, spontaneity and disobedience, which are not wholly subsumed by top-down narratives but rather offer occasions to negotiate said hegemonic meanings. As such, public spectacles theoretically have the capacity to accelerate the privatisation of space, and open up spaces for the claim to the public to take place.

Methodology

Our research methodology will be inspired by human geography and anthropology research methods, in particular as proposed by Marianne Morange and Camille Schmoll (2016) and Ian Hay and Meghan Cope (2021). As for Morange and Schmoll, a methodology must be based on hypotheses created through reading and observations, which I have presented under the form of a theoretical framework and justified by my literature review. My research deals with multiscalar and superposed processes, featuring multiple temporalities and spatialities : from centuries-long globalisation to the organisation of a single event, from global processes to a seating chart. This diversity has implications for the accessibility of data collection, thus requiring a diverse and adapted methodological approach.

a. Positionality and ethical considerations

Before stating my methodological approach, it is necessary to understand how it will be influenced by my degree of participation and positionality within my subject of study. I spent my early formative years living in Giudecca, an island of insular Venice, and maintain many familial and friendly relationships in the city. I have remained an administrative resident of the city and for most of my life have been dependent on local services, such as for healthcare. My early political awareness is tightly linked to witnessing the process of touristification of the city ; as my artistic interest has grown by going to Biennale exhibitions. A majority of my work experiences have been in cultural production, including within the Biennale ecosystem. My research topic is a direct product of personal perplexities while questioning my place, participation and impact in larger social and political processes. Cantugal and Dowling (edited by Cope and Hay 2021; chapter 2) outline how positionality and power relations shape qualitative research, and consequently suggest that critical reflexivity - scrutiny of the researcher and research process - needs to be constant and intertwined throughout the research process. I detail below some ways in which I use critical reflexivity throughout my research, affecting my data collection and possibly the extrapolation of results.

The simultaneous reality of being a resident of the city, and having profited from a high level of education from internationally renowned institutions, may impact the way that I am addressed by my interlocutors. The intersection of multiple identities I carry may also impact the way I am addressed by my interlocutors, as well as the spaces I have access to. The fact I was born in Venice and remain a resident can provoke diverse responses : allyship on behalf of residents, fetishisation from non-locals (given the sense that “authentic” locals are now rare) as well as potential self-censorship on certain topics (such as financial operations in the city). Simultaneously, I have profited from an international higher education

experience, making me at ease when addressing academic topics in multiple languages, making me more respectable and sympathetic to people with certain political and financial standing. My presentation as a white, able-bodied, middle class, cisgendered and heterosexual woman is generally perceived as more socially approachable and less politically threatening. The degree to which I inhabit one identity or another, for example via code switching which may be conscious or subconscious (changing language, accent, physical presentation...) influences the social dynamic between the interlocutor and I, thus changing my access to information.

In acknowledging my positionality, it is important that I follow a certain ethics protocol. I often let my interlocutors know early on that I am writing a social sciences thesis on Venice, and although I may decide to stay very broad on this subject so as not to influence my interactions with my interlocutors, I am careful not to give any false or misleading information upon request. Especially complex is when I engage with certain groups where there is a considerable asymmetry of power, such as an employer or someone who is occupying their house. My particular background gives me a mixed positionality, between claiming affinity with long term processes of dispossession and having profited socially and economically from my family's emigration from Venice. While I can claim this detachment allows me to moreover objectify my research, it poses an ethical issue of dishonesty to both my interlocutors and to the reader : am I reproducing tourist and upper-class imaginaries of Venice, if most of my time spent in the city has been in a leisurely context of visiting family ? To address this, I am honest with my interlocutors about my background and positionality. Transparency with my interlocutors, anonymising them in my findings (when not a public official), allowing for organic interpersonal relationships, and at times participating productively in the movements which I study, are ways in which I combat a purely extractive relationship to my research field. Although, as with all interpersonal relationships, there are considerations to make as to limit potential harm: one of my case studies includes a refugee reception center with many families and small children, and creating a strong bond with a child while knowing that I cannot be consistently present in their life may aggravate psychological distress. To further create a bond of trust and transparency with the persons on the field, when I will cite my interviewees I will usually send them the excerpts in which I refer to them or our interview, for them to confirm that the information is correct and that they accept the level of anonymity I have given them.

My methodology combines several different research methods, adapted to the specific realities I enquire about, so that I may triangulate and compare findings.

b. Bibliographic research and online material

Prior to arriving in my research field it was necessary to contextualise my interests in previous research, as well as identify entry points for participant observation. Academic papers and books were crucial to understanding long-term transformations of Venetian urban space and the Biennale : I began with reading a few foundational works in the thematic areas of study (urban cultural policy, tourism, public space) as well as any literature I could find which analysed Venice as a case study. I also used blog posts (such as through Facebook, Instagram or blogs by specific movements) and newspaper articles to understand current realities and local perceptions of my research topic.

c. Participant observation

Participant observation, as described by Annette Watson (Cope and Hay 2021) turns witnessed actions and experiences into qualitative data, making the researcher themselves an instrument to processing and recording observations, such as through the practice of taking field notes: a series of notes where one describes what they saw, the social interactions and different social groups which meet, the details and context of the sites of interaction such as smells, sounds, and look of surroundings. It is a method initially developed within the discipline of anthropology, although nowadays routinely adopted in human geography, with emphasis as to the “place” of observation. (*ibid*, p. 126)

The first step is thus to place oneself in a strategic place in which “systematic understandings of place are most likely to arise” (Kearns 2016 in Hay and Cope 2021, p 126) Given my relationship to the city and working relationship to the *Biennale Cinema*¹⁰ I already had a limited active social network in Venice. Regardless, prior to beginning the research I had no connections to people in the administration of the *Biennale*, the urban administration of the city, or local social or political movements. Before arriving on the field, I reflected on spaces where it might be interesting to position myself, reflecting both on what spaces were accessible to me and what dimensions of the exhibition could be interesting to investigate, settling on four different aspects. The first is an institutional perspective from within the organising committees of the *Biennale* and its pavilions : for this, I was employed within exhibitions, I interviewed curators and pavilion workers, and on two instances I was able to join workshops organised as part of pavilions. Another important perspective is that of local civil society negotiating with the *Biennale*’s presence, beginning with exploratory observations around the neighbourhood of Casteo. As a young student, public spaces and local social movements were coherent points of entry as a participant and observer to study grassroots phenomena. Participant observation in grassroots movement and public

¹⁰ Also known as “Mostra del Cinema di Venezia”

space was done in a more fluctuating, snowball effect, where one place of observation or plain luck allowed me to organically come to know of other potential places of observation. While allowing myself to visit and study a multitude of realities as constitutive of a whole, it was important to pick certain movements, so to analyse them in depth and avoid homogenisation. Finally, the *Biennale* also represents an important international dimension, as the exhibition claims to represent global diversity. While I was initially hesitant to integrate this aspect into my research in order not to lose focus on spatial issues of Venice, throughout my fieldwork and writing it became evident that excluding this aspect could lead to a skewed comprehension on the interests of organising teams, especially operating from the lens of spatial justice. As these reflections came on later into the data collection, I mainly relied on the reinterpretation of previously collected data, interviews on global grassroots movements concerning the *Biennale* and bibliographic sources.

Before entering a new space of observation, I constructed an observation table, as proposed by Morange and Schmoll (2016) to simultaneously guide my attention and the eventual treatment of data. These tables were largely inspired by the observation grid created by Quentin Stevens and HaeRan Shin in their 2014 article, 'Urban Festivals and Local Social Space', as for its interest in physical infrastructure and how it may affect sociality during public festivals, and Marianne Morange's 2014 study 'Programme DALVAA - Repenser le droit à la ville depuis les villes du Sud'¹¹ as to understand the "creation of order" (Morange and Schmoll 2016, p. 77) of a public space. The observation table was constructed using findings from our theoretical framework, and at times modified in the first days of terrain as new questions arose. The grid is available in the Annexe (1.1-1.4) The data was collected in the form of notes, taken by hand, on laptop or by phone; photos and videos, taken by phone or camera; finally, I often drew images and diagrams to remember the layout of spaces and meetings, as well as certain movements and interactions.

In order to come into contact with the institutional and organisational realities of exhibitions that made up the *Biennale*, I was hired as a cultural invigilator (ensuring everyday technical functioning of the exhibitions and mediation with the public and press) on two occasions. First in 2024 at the *Mostra del Cinema*, in the Virtual Reality section taking place in the historic island on Lazzaretto Vecchio. Then, in 2025 in two different exhibitions of the Architecture *Biennale* : the Omani national participation in the Arsenale venue, and an exhibition that is not part of the official program in the neighbourhood of Santa Croce. The Architecture Biennale is particularly interesting to study as for its relation to visitors, as inhabitation is generally more integral to the discipline than contemporary art. As part of my research

¹¹ Translation from French : 'DALVAA (Right to the City - Sub Saharan Africa / Latin America) Programme - Rethinking the right to the city from the cities of the South'

ethics protocol, I let my employers know during the hiring process that I am writing a thesis on the *Biennale*. This field work gave me the opportunity to understand the spatial and organisational daily functioning of two very different components of the Architecture *Biennale* (although that are also used in similar ways during the Art *Biennale*). Work responsibilities had to be coordinated early on and I was contractually obligated to stay in a delimited space, leading to a slow process of understanding the potential and real interactions of a space over the time of my shifts.

i. Working at the Biennale as an invigilator / cultural mediator

I was able to work within the *Biennale*, first in September 2024 in the event of an installation at the Virtual Reality (VR) portion of the *Mostra del Cinema* (film festival of the *Biennale* Foundation). This first experience, lasting a total of fourteen days of observation, confirmed the placement of invigilator/cultural mediator as adapted for my research, as the position includes plenty of down-time when it is possible to socialise, ask questions and take notes. I use the terms “cultural mediator” and “invigilator” together, as these two were used almost interchangeably by actors on the field.

The *Mostra del Cinema* works quite differently from the Art and Architecture *Biennale*, as the time frame is shorter and the visitors are far fewer: the choice to work in the film festival portion was made by the cooperative which employed me rather than my own strategic preference. In fact, I had already decided that I wanted to focus on the Art and Architecture *Biennale*, and this experience proved so rich in research material that I decided to exclude the *Mostra* from my analysis altogether for lack of space, as it functions with a different timeframe and in different spaces. Regardless, this period constituted an interesting point of comparison and entry to the field for a few reasons. First, it allowed me to work for a major subcontractor of logistical and service staff employed by the *Biennale* foundation and its Pavilions, *CoopCulture*. Secondly, it allowed me to confirm the research interest into the *Biennale*’s spatial practices and use of public space, as the VR portion of the exhibition had been granted almost the entirety of the island of Lazzaretto Vecchio, an island of great historic importance to Venetian history which had previously been imagined as venue of a public museum of archeology. Furthermore, as VR is an up-and-coming sector in the arts dependent on developer investments and a fertile ground for tech start-ups, the function of the exhibition for networking and creating future business collaborations was more thinly veiled than in larger *Biennale* festivals. During my work, I was able to interact and have fruitful discussions with visitors, investors and workers, experience the working conditions, and observe interactions between different agents, as from my installation I had a good view of the main corridor with smaller installations, and I could move around and experience the installations during my breaks and

after my shifts. I took notes during my breaks or afterwards on my phone, which was more coy for I could be penalised on the job otherwise.

In 2025, in the months of May to July, I was employed again to work at the *Biennale*. This time, I was employed by another smaller cooperative which positioned me inside the Oman National Pavilion for the 2025 Architecture Biennale for two days a week, and two other days a week at S.V.¹², another gallery space which advertised itself as “parallel to the Architecture Biennale”. Similarly, these positions allowed me a fruitful posture for observing the interactions between different actors, the space, the pieces and the meanings which are vehiculed. The seemingly random assignment of 3 to 4 shifts throughout the week allowed me to randomize my own data collection. Any perplexities regarding the meanings of the works were reported to me directly, often in the form of a question, as it was my responsibility to offer an official answer. The difference between the two installations, one which is officially affiliated with the Biennale and inside the Arsenale, and the other being a few kilometers away and not officially affiliated, brought valuable insight into the relationship between the Biennale and the city, and the spatial practices it propulses outside of its official enclosure and programme. From the Omani in the Arsenale, I could look into two other national pavilions - the Bahrain Pavilion, winner of this 2025 edition, and the Irish Pavilion - and I could make observations throughout the Arsenale spaces, socialise with workers, visitors and press, during my breaks and during my days off as I had a free pass for entry. All notes are taken on my laptop or a notepad, as soon as possible after the observation.

ii. Public space in the Casteo neighborhood and around pavilions

To understand the everyday interaction of *Biennale* pavilions with their neighbourhood of Casteo, I decided to put aside some time for simple exploratory observation. Casteo (in Italian, Castello) is a relatively residential neighbourhood, hosting around 12% of insular Venice’s social housing (Ocio 2024) and recognised, alongside few others, as a “popular” neighbourhood, representative of the “Venice of Venetians” (Salerno e Basso 2023) (Davis 2022, p. 65). It is also home to both the Arsenale and Giardini venues, as well as many pavilions located outside these venues, thus particularly vulnerable to effects of tourism gentrification. I was often casually present in the neighbourhood, with an affinity for observations in the bar of the local branch of the political party *Rifondazione Comunista*, which has a strong local character given its social function, as well as being 200m from the main entrance of the Arsenale venue in the direction of the main shopping and restaurant street, offering insight into a space seasonally shared by workers of the *Biennale* and long-term residents alike. I decided to construct a map of potential spots of observation, including entrances to main venues, entrances to other pavilions, and

¹² Anonymised, in order to protect the gallery and therefore myself as a worker in the industry

main axes of the neighbourhood on a free map device on my phone, and during my first series of observation added spots on routes which connected one pavilion to another. Each event of observation entailed a 10-15 minute observation at each location on the map, using both a camera and tripod to film, and using a notebook to note any interesting interactions which happen off or on camera. Given limited time, the observation events are four in total : once in the days leading up to the Biennale, once in the opening days of the Biennale, once in June, and once in July. All observations are taken during normal opening hours of the Biennale and during the working week. Given the limited number of observations I was able to do, the data collected via this method was explorative, intended to open up new further leads to information I may triangulate using other methods : namely, I chose to take contact with grassroots movements located in Casteo, which are explained in more detail below. Using a camera can be contentious in certain spaces, although in Venice it made me somewhat less suspicious than standing still, as most tourists around me were also equipped with some photo-taking devices. Besides being able to watch back footage later on, it allowed for certain organic interactions to arise with passerbys. The observation grid is in the Annexe (1.2)

iii. Participating in different grassroots movements and associations

The intention in participating in different grassroots movements and associations was to understand how and where local publics make a claim to the city, in a process of producing public space. Within militant and associative spaces, participation can take a variety of forms: from being inside a crowd during a protest, to engaging in assemblies to organise an event, to specific tasks such as taking photos and creating posters. To some interlocutors, my research inherently made me a participant in their movements, thus, my participation was inherent to my positionality. Given the precarious and voluntary nature of such movements, my participation felt important so as to not have an extractivist approach in my research: this allowed me wider insight into local political dynamics, and to see and experience certain situations first hand, as well as listen to past experiences.

Different grassroots movements in Venice are deeply intertwined, and I was able to have a fluctuating posture in between different movements, discovering different initiatives throughout my time in Venice. This posture allowed me to understand how urban commons are perceived by different Venetian movements, and thus contextualise the difference between said movements, in particular in regards to their contact with the Biennale and its spaces. Some assemblies and associations are more punctual and less structured, concentrating on specific issues or creating a long-term network which can be mobilised over a variety of issues. In order not to sacrifice nuance, I was able to select certain specific

movements which I followed closely throughout three months, following their social media, assisting public events and protests, and certain organising assemblies.

So as to not lose contact with realities in the immediate proximity of Casteo, I came into contact with two committees: *Salviamo San Piero e Sant'Anna*, and *Movimento per la difesa della sanità pubblica veneziana*¹³. Both hold punctual public assemblies around specific issues of common and public services in the neighbourhood of Casteo. *Salviamo San Piero e Sant'Anna* was constituted in response to the wish of the state to sell the ex-police station Sanguineti, currently home to eight families, to a french investment group who intend to use it for tourism reception and exposition space. The latter movement was created to discuss the lack of healthcare services around the historic Venice, although it concentrates especially on the neighbourhood of Casteo, where there is a large aging population and few remaining public general practitioners. Both movements are constituted especially by elderly people, which is representative considering they are the majority of residents in the neighbourhood : 31.9% are over 65, and 56.7% are over 50 according to statistics in 2021 (Salerno e Basso, 2023) and issues such as healthcare impacts this group the most.

Another point of observation is the *CSO Morion*¹⁴, a political and social center in Casteo which has been occupied since 1990, and ever since acts as a trampoline and meeting space for local left-wing and party-unaffiliated politics. As expected, this space proved valuable to understand local political life, and being an occupied space, the importance of use value over exchange value was central to several of their fights, such as organising the *Laguna Pride* (local LGBTQ+ pride event) and *No Space for Bezos* (organising against the privatisation of the city by billionaire Jeff Bezos on the occasion of his wedding). *Sale Docks* (also written *SALE Docks*) is another space which hosts several left-wing movements, in particular around activism in the arts world. It is in the neighbourhood of Dorsoduro, quite far from the main *Biennale* spaces, but located in between other major international exhibition spaces and museums such as the Pinault Collection. It was initially squatted in 2007 although now in a use agreement with the city of Venice. The collective *Biennialocene*, which denounces the precarious conditions of arts workers in Venice, was initiated by *Sale Docks* organisers. They defend commons against "the neoliberal use of art as a device to capture critical imagination and thinking, and the link between art, finance, real estate and gentrification", through a practice of collaboration with locals and developing projects with international art agents and artists. (Saledocks.net 2025) In fact, like *CSO Morion*, *Sale Docks* has had several instances of collaboration with different *Biennale* pavilions. These two spaces are constituted

¹³ Translations: *WE ARE for San Piero and Sant'Anna* (note : two areas of Casteo). *Movement for the defense of public healthcare in Venice*.

¹⁴ CSO is a common appellation of this type of political occupied space around Italy, standing for *Centro Sociale Occupato*, translating to *Occupied Social Center*.

especially by young people and students, although there are older residents who are very active and attached to the space.

*VERAS (Vignole Energia Rinnovabile Agricoltura Sana*¹⁵) and *ASC (Assemblea Sociale per la Casa*¹⁶) are two grassroots groups which I chose for their punctual collaboration with *Biennale* pavilions, in particular the German Pavilion of the 2023 Architecture Biennale, despite being different in their format and politics. *VERAS* is a non-profit association which plans to create an agro-environmental public parc on the island of Vignole, on land which is officially state property¹⁷. *VERAS* has benefited from infrastructure originating from different past Pavilions, including future infrastructure plans which were created by students arriving through the bias of the German Pavilions. While *VERAS* is concentrated on rural and insular commons, *ASC* fights for housing as a commons, working as a network to connect families and individuals squatting unassigned public housing around the city. They collaborated with an exhibition created by *Rural Studio* in 2017, and the German National Pavilion in 2023, such as to create practical workshops and share material. Both movements engage meaningfully with diverse publics and particularly residents: *VERAS* attracts especially middle class families and elderly, while *ASC* is constituted of more disenfranchised individuals (of which many have creative, political and social professions with low salaries) and families while having a strong anchoring within neighbourhoods.

In order to understand the *Biennale* as a potential commons at an international level, I decided that the international movement *ANGA* (Art Not Genocide Alliance) would be an interesting point of observation given its recent and active status, having formed in event of the *Biennale Arte* 2024 not excluding Israel as a national participation, despite its active role in genocide in the palestinian territories. Given Israel had not participated in the 2025 *Biennale Architettura* (officially, due to maintenance work in the pavilion) there were no local actions in Venice during my 2025 fieldwork, so my participation in the movement was restricted to following their online presence and assisting an online organising assembly in 2026. This lack of data was supplemented by interviews with an activist of *ANGA* and other local activists which collaborated with the movement.

Field notes were taken mostly via writing and drawing in a notebook, as photos may be unwelcome in some activist spaces due to privacy concerns unless specifically stated otherwise. My observation grid was partially inspired by the previous grids, and is also found in the Annex (Annex 1).

¹⁵ Translation: *Vignole Renewable Energy Healthy Agriculture*.

¹⁶ Translation : *Social Assembly for the Home*

¹⁷ in Italian, *proprietà Demaniale*.

iv. In depth study of specific Biennale Pavilions

As the production of urban space is characterised by conflict over specific uses of space, and the *Biennale* and its pavilions are one of multiple claims over the use of space, the need to focus on certain specific pavilions became clear in order to bring forward the specific mechanisms of this conflict. While the pavilions in which I was working already functioned as case studies, I learnt that certain pavilions had decided to directly tackle the question of urban commons and the *Biennale's* role in its urban context, which made them ideal places for observation, as contradictions between curatorial discourse and real functioning demonstrated the influence of the *Biennale* format in determining shape and organisation of pavilions. The German and Austrian pavilions of the 2023 Architecture *Biennale* were major inspirations for my research already early in the development of the research questions, as they dealt with the issue of urban commons and the role of the *Biennale* in two very different ways. The effects and implications of these pavilions were analysed through interviews, and I personally took part in a week long workshop organised by the German pavilion, although the fact I did not have a research question or methodology in place at the time limits the objectivation and thus application of my data, so I supplemented it with interviews and bibliographic research. Furthermore, the 2025 Austrian Pavilion also decided to tackle issues of right to the city in a way that directly engaged local activists, creating an interesting intersection between small scale grassroots movements often based in dissent, and the large, state-backed institutions which form the *Biennale*, creating another interesting case study which I was able to interact with during my fieldwork. I also chose to take on an in depth analysis of the 2025 Vatican Pavilion, given it is at the center of local controversy for taking the place of a childrens' library and play room¹⁸, a criticism which continues despite the Vatican Pavilion converting it into a "a platform for ongoing exchange, participation, and engagement rooted in the local context" (Dogan, 2025). As I was able to gather plenty of information on this pavilion, I decided to use it as a case study on conflicts over use of urban space and the instrumentalisation of culture, dedicating a whole part of a chapter to it, unlike other pavilions which were used as data points, woven into larger discussions. Overall, the pavilions which were engaged in-depth (through interviews, bibliographic research, participation of events, workshops and seminars, working as an invigilator) were 7 in total, as summarised in Table 1 below. Despite the majority of pavilions I was able to investigate belong to the *Biennale Architettura*, this is because my fieldwork mainly took place during the year 2025 in which only the Architecture edition takes place. This does not obstruct discussion of the *Biennale Arte* as well, given its organisational and spatial format (national participations, in the main venues and in rented venues outside the main venues) are similar to that of the *Biennale Architettura*.

¹⁸ in Italian, *ludoteca*

Pavilion name and date	Reason for interest	Research methods
Germany Pavilion at the 2023 <i>Biennale Architettura</i> : "Open for Maintenance"	The pavilion's workshop programme formed an entry into the field and was an initial inspiration for my research, given it interacts with local grassroots organisers and addresses the problematic relationship of the <i>Biennale</i> and the city.	Bibliographic research, participation in one week-long workshop, interview of members of several associations and collectives which had participated in the project (ASC, R3B, Officine Marghera, Rebiennale, Zenobia, Veras, Biennialocene/Sale Docks ¹⁹), observations on the site of the pavilion
Austria Pavilion at the 2023 <i>Biennale Architettura</i> : "Partecipazione"	This pavilion was also an inspiration for my research project, as it also interacted with local grassroots organisers and addresses the problematic relationship of the <i>Biennale</i> and the city, but in a very different way to that of the German pavilion, creating a point of comparison.	Observations on the site of the pavilion, bibliographic research, speaking to a person on the curating team
Vatican Pavilion at the 2024 <i>Biennale Arte</i> : "Con i miei Occhi"	Pavilion which was praised by different art commentators for its inclusion of the residents of the local penitentiary, despite being criticised by local associations and residents.	Bibliographic research, observations on site, interview with a volunteer of an association working inside the penitentiary
Austria Pavilion at the 2025 <i>Biennale Architettura</i> : "Agency for Better Living"	In continuity with its 2023 thematic interests, this pavilion again brought local organisers inside the <i>Biennale</i> and addressed the thematics of the right to the city. Given it took place after I had defined my research question, I was able to collect data more systematically.	Observations on the site of the pavilion, participation on two seminars of the pavilion programming, interview of several activists which had been invited to speak at the seminars, speaking to two of the curators
Vatican Pavilion at the 2025 <i>Biennale Architettura</i> : "Opera	This pavilion was the center of local controversy even before	Observations on the site of the pavilion, participation in

¹⁹ Many of the interviewees have participated in multiple collectives at different times, and some collectives' continued existence is disputed, as will be discussed in the findings

Aperta”	opening, given the space had been promised as a children’s play library, allowing for me to follow the conflict as it played out	the workshops, assisting the opening day seminar, interview of two invigilators, a curator, a local mother fighting for the <i>ludoteca</i> to reopen and a councilmember representing the parents’ request to the municipality, assisting a city hall meeting on the subject of the reopening of the <i>ludoteca</i> and follow-ups with the mother and council member
Oman Pavilion at the 2025 <i>Biennale Architettura</i> : “Traces”	Place of work I was randomly assigned to, allowing a deeper understanding of pavilions’ organisation and usage over a longer time frame. The curatorial intention is one of a space built by community and for community purposes, making it interesting to compare to actual use.	Working as an invigilator one to two days a week for three months, participating in the opening event, interview with the curator
S.V. 2025, not part of the official <i>Biennale Architettura</i> programme (anonymised) ²⁰	Place of work I was randomly assigned to, allowing a deeper understanding of pavilions’ organisation and usage over a longer time frame. The gallery owners’ intention in creating the space was to create an open space of socialisation, and both exhibitions referenced commons and community knowledge, making it interesting to compare these intentions to actual use.	Working as an invigilator two to three days a week for three months, interviews with the artists, a teacher organising an exhibition, and gallery owner

Table 1. Summary of the Pavilions which were researched in-depth for this thesis, alongside the reason for interest and research methodology.

²⁰ Anonymised in order to protect the gallery and therefore myself as a worker in the industry

d. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews proved deeply valuable to accessing information on long-term processes or spaces of organisation and administration where participation is not possible. The semi-structured interview method allowed me to create questions beforehand, usually based upon my case studies, bibliographic research or participant observations, while maintaining the flexibility to address new related topics which arose in conversation. Interviewees were given a very superficial description of my research topic in advance, so they may mentally recall the subject and answer more clearly. I attempted to create a balance between different scales and realities of the Biennale and city ecosystem. To represent top-down organising at the city-wide level, two respondents are the heads of the departments of 'General Urbanism' and 'Heritage' for insular Venice, and another is working as part of the 'Location Promotion'²¹ office of the Biennale Foundation. To represent Biennale Pavilions in their attempt to "create commons", one interview is from the 2023 Austria Pavilion organising team, one is from the 2025 Vatican Pavilion organising team, and two other from associations collaborating with the Vatican Pavilion. To triangulate observations on movements and associations, several other interviews were with activists which I met during my field work. The full list of the interview questions prepared beforehand are available in the annex (Annex 2).

²¹ Translated from "Promozione Sedi"

Findings

Part 1. Public administration, Private profits : a topography of the Art and Architecture *Biennale* exhibitions in Venice



Figure 2 : "Art needs a space". Advertising by Venice Art Events, 2025. Image taken by author, August 2025.

The first part of this work explores the Biennale's spatial character through the legal and political definition of "public", referring to a good that is owned, distributed or governed by a democratically elected public administration, as opposed to private ownership and governance. These definitions will be useful as a starting point to compare planned and effective behaviour in public space : does public ownership and governance encourage the consolidation of a public, and according to which definition ? Throughout this part of the thesis, the production and governance of spaces occupied by the Biennale, meaning exhibition spaces within and beyond the main venues as well as the headquarters, are analysed as the mix of public and private actors, reflect the administration of the foundation itself. This produces consequences of questionable public interest, which spill over to impact the governance of the entire city. The word "topography" present in the title references Iveson's (2007, p. 3) use of the word when discussing public space, given the interest in the geographic, material occupation of activities, within determined spatial boundaries and as could be labelled on a map or land register. First will be explored the public-private administration of spaces through exploration of the histories of certain venues ; this will evoke the recurring theme of rent, as an incentive for the development of the Biennale and influencing its shape, as well as as a boundary for participation. The importance of the rental economy and its disadvantages, expands to the whole city, which essentially becomes an open-air museum. This creates a contradictory truth : a city appears largely accessible, although the modes of governance prioritise specific groups and modes of interaction to inhabit and participate in the Biennale and Venice's urban life alike.

Chapter 1. The Politics of Party make Reliable Rent

The *Biennale* first opened in 1895 as a public institution, operating on public land, in a single pavilion inside the Giardini Napoleonici (now known as the Giardini della Biennale). Despite its transformation into a private institution, albeit governed primarily by public authorities, the portion of public land and assets in which it operates has only expanded. By tracing the foundation's development through the histories of the three main venues of the Art and Architecture Biennale (the exhibition venues of the Giardini Napoleonici and Arsenale, and the headquarters of Ca' Giustinian) the event's spatial developments as a national strategy to attract international investment and maximise rent extraction can be analysed, through alienation of alternative and less lucrative uses of the urban space. The economies of short-term festivities and leisurely activities ("parties") become a reliable source of high rental income. While the Biennale does not charge countries to participate, rent costs can be an effective barrier to entry, influencing the inclusive character of the Biennale as well as the dynamics of the exhibitions.

A. The Giardini Napoleonici

Now known as the Giardini della Biennale, the Giardini Napoleonici (*Napoleonic gardens*) are the most iconic venue of the Biennale. The gardens are a unique green space in the city, having been commissioned by Napoleonic decree in 1807 and having required the demolition of an entire neighbourhood, of which some of the city's most ancient churches and monasteries. Art historian Martini argues the Biennale could only have originated here : while the historic Venetian landscape had been 'fossilised' to maintain its melancholic appeal, the new Giardini could host the mission to modernise the city and its image (Martini 2020). The grand central pavilion built for the first edition is decorated with a modern, neoclassical style, contrasting with the traditional Venetian architecture, and is surrounded by a fence enclosing 42 m² of the park to ticket entry. As the exhibition grew, artists disputed over exhibition space favouring local artists, and foreign countries were invited to build their own pavilion in the gardens to favour international solidarity. Belgium was the first to inaugurate its pavilion in 1907, a small art-nouveau single-storey villa, and was quickly followed by Hungary, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, Sweden, Spain, and Czechoslovakia within the next twenty years. In 2026, there are a total of thirty-one pavilions, creating the venue's iconic landscape of small villas scattered through the park. Of these villa-pavilions, twenty-eight are owned by foreign nation-states: although the land is owned by the Venice Municipality, the nation-states own the physical buildings and are granted use of the public land (Piano Particolareggiato "Giardini della Biennale", 2000) for long-term contracts and often symbolic

prices. Besides being the original venue, the capacity to have a larger, semi-autonomous exhibition space within a standalone villa in an identifiable architecture style, can arguably make the Giardini the most attractive venue for participating countries, as it allows countries a stronger sense of self-representation on the global art stage.

This arrangement has been compared to embassies by locals and scholars alike (Martini 2010) as for the principle of extraterritorial administration, given the independence of countries to administer their individual pavilions, for example needing to organise their own infrastructure maintenance. The alienation of the Giardini from its local context to serve as a space for business interests and international diplomacy was a politic of the interwar period according to Martini (2025), congruent with the 1930 transition of the Biennale from being administered by the Municipality to becoming a corporatist “autonomous body” administered by the Fascist state. This is illustrated by the Biennale’s official communication, losing reference to symbols of Venice or beginning to show the Napoleonic Gardens as if detached from the rest of the island (See Fig. 3 - 8).

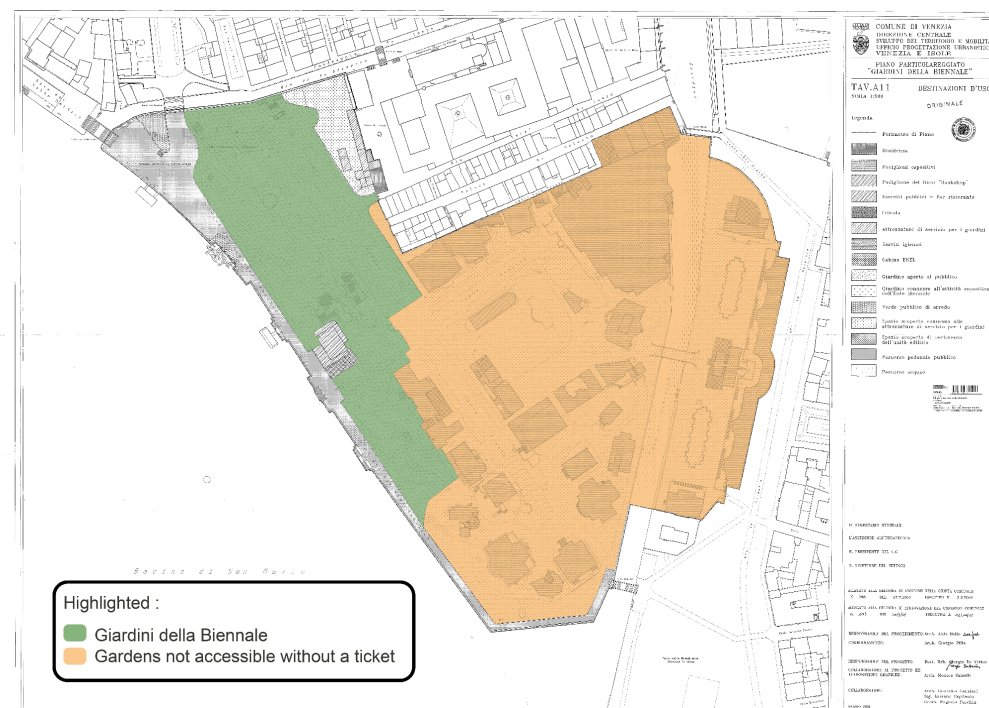


Figures 6 - 11. Cover art of the Biennale official catalogues.

Above, pre-Corporatist transition, left to right : 1922, 1924, 1926, 1928.

Below, post transition, left to right : 1930, 1932. Source : ASAC (asac.labiennale.org)

As the number of pavilions grew, so did the enclosure surrounding them, limiting access without a ticket and only during the opening months. Bounded by high brick walls, fences, shrubs, buildings, private security and ticket officers, 42 000 m² of the 65 000 m² gardens are reserved for use by the Biennale, meaning over two thirds of the total surface area (See Map. 4 : Tav. A11, Piano Particolareggiato “Giardini della Biennale”, 2001). The current master plan of the gardens (“piano particolareggiato”), dating back to 2001, shows that the only administrative difference is that of “destinazione d’uso” or “intended use of space” : one third of the gardens are labelled as “Giardino aperto al pubblico” (“Garden open to the public”) while the rest is labelled “Giardino connesso all’attività espositiva dell’Ente Biennale” (“Garden connected to the exhibition activities of the Biennale entity”) (*ibid.*), despite both spaces being considered part of the public gardens.



Map 4. Intended use of the space of the Giardini della Biennale (Giardini Napoleonici), component A11 of the garden's master plan. Source : base map available on comune.venezia.it, highlighted by the author.

The *Biennale's* disorganised expansion allowed for the increasing occupation of public space in a somewhat urbanistic anomaly, demonstrating the lack of true protection of public space when faced with a political and economic tool such as the *Biennale*. The Napoleonic gardens have been subject to strict landscape protection laws, such as the Bottai law of 1939 and Galasso law of 1985. The latter means that specific authorisation is necessary for any kind of building intervention, and affirms the state's role in protecting inhabitant's right to access the landscape free of charge. (Giunta Regionale, delibera n. 7091, 1986; Martini, 2025). In 2001, a municipal report deemed it “necessary to reconsider the

multiple needs of the *Biennale* within the context of a new management and reorganization of public gardens,” calling into question “the compatibility between the recreational and leisure function of public greenery with the cultural activities of the *Biennale* [due to] the private use of part of the area of the latter” (Martini, 2025). As the *Biennale* has always been governed at least partially by the public administration, the municipality has been fully complicit in the de-facto privatisation of space through restriction of access. In the case of the Galasso law, the mayor of a city has the power to allow construction on restricted municipal lands, submitting them to the approval of relevant superintendencies, as well as the Ministry of Cultural and Environmental Heritage. But given the *Biennale* Foundation is controlled by the very same Mayor of Venice and the Ministry of Cultural and Environmental Heritage, these controls become illusory in preventing the spatial expansion of the *Biennale* exhibitions (*ibid.*). Another obstacle to this expansion would be zoning master plans, which freeze intended use of urban space and create guidelines to respond to current city needs. Although the Venice municipality has been very slow to produce updated masterplans reflecting the present reality of the city, and as of 2026 the municipality still relies on the most recent masterplan created in 2001, albeit with frequent specific amendments which are typically a product of executive decisions of the governing city council. According to the head of the local municipal urbanism office (interview with Omar Tommasi, 2025), amendments changing intended use to tourism accommodation or cultural infrastructure are increasingly frequent. This functioning effectively removes agency and competences from the urban planning offices and allows for urban development in a disorganised manner with little holistic vision of the city and its cultural and tourist industries.

The purpose of the alienation of land, from widespread public use and access into a space for international business and diplomacy, is to extract a commodity. Classic theories of capitalism place alienation as central from the extraction of capital (Marx, 1867, 1939), which geographers such as David Harvey (1978, 1985, 2004, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2018) have contextualised in the production of space, and tourism and gentrification scholars (Salerno 2020, Cocola-Gant et Jover 2022) have connected to their own field. As for Harvey, capitalism alienates the working class from space and the process of its production, reducing it to a commodity and resulting in social division and exclusion. In our case study, the alienation of public land is visible through the mechanisms detailed above, for its commodification through two ways ; directly through rent, and through the consolidation of the *Biennale*, Venice and Italy’s international prestige consolidating future rent and economic relations.

Recent events have brought the issue of the public character of the Napoleonic Garden into public debate. For the first time in thirty years, the construction of a new pavilion was announced, belonging to the state of Qatar. This came as a general surprise, not only given the rarity of the occasion, but

especially as the country had never participated in a single edition of the Biennale (Bison 2025) and amid criticisms of the undemocratic nature of the decision and the fact the state had recently been accused of severe human rights violations (Martini 2025). Some perplexities gained an answer in a following press release, as an agreement was announced for Qatar Museums to donate 50 million euros to the Venetian municipality in the name of “cultural and socio-economic participation”. The transactionary character of the accord demonstrates a thinly veiled relationship of rent, where cultural policy is instrumentalised to generate a highly monetisable product to countries wishing for soft power and international visibility : a plot of land in the Giardini. On the official press release, the municipality reminds its citizens that living in a city of unique historical heritage entails high costs of maintenance, and thus donations such as these are essential “to address the pressing needs of the City in managing a unique and extremely complex heritage, which transcends borders and represents a treasure for humanity” (Comune di Venezia 24 July 2024). Again, Venice’s heritage is highlighted as its responsibility to the international community, before ethical concerns or residents’ right to access said heritage as investment in services plummet despite a reportedly overflowing public wallet. This reinforces Martini’s argument of the Giardini being imagined as disconnected from the local.

Although rent as a tool of extortion for some, impediment for others can be found in every *Biennale* participation. As of 2023, when numerous grants of land use in the Giardini between the city of Venice and the national pavilions were coming to an end, the mayor explained the wish to negotiate higher prices for the new contracts, while in the past the land rent had been more so symbolic (Bison 2025): a behaviour essentially consisting of coercion, given the physical pavilions are already built. In 2024, as the *Biennale* restricted Russia from participation given their recent attack on Ukraine, the Russian cultural ministry decided to allow Bolivia to open an exhibition inside their pavilion in the Giardini. Bolivia was able to participate in the Art *Biennale* for the very first time, making a powerful statement on the true effort of inclusion of the *Biennale*, even in a year where diversity was the central theme (Bison 2024). The *Biennale* administration, in its non-interventionist and neutral facade in respect to the national pavilions and their content, may use rent agreements as a technical excuse to limit certain content or maintain the value of land in the Giardini. Perhaps even more exemplary, is the 2023 attempt by the Austrian pavilion to create a bridge connecting a room of their pavilion with the street just outside the walls enclosing the *Biennale* in the Giardini Napoleonici : the building of this bridge was refused by the *Biennale* administration, again citing how it did not want to create a precedent for using the space outside of the land grants (Burgos May 11 2023) despite there have been other pavilions to do so in the past (Interview with H 2025).

Through the case study of the Giardini, the use of the *Biennale* and cultural policy to commodify public land, becomes evident. To better understand how the *Biennale* and its public-private juridical form allows to blur the definitions of public and private, consolidating private administration of public goods as a best practice, the historical development of the Arsenale as a second main venue can be explored.

B. The Arsenale

A second main venue of the Art and Architecture *Biennale* is the Arsenale complex, hosting 25 national pavilions in 2025 and a large collective exhibition in the main halls, accessible with the same ticket as the Giardini. Having been converted to a space for culture and leisure only later in time, the unique history of the Arsenale is telling of how decades of public disinvestment have consolidated a regime of private, often foreign, administration of public goods as a best practice. Again, the expansion of cultural offer, of which the *Biennale* is a primary tool and manifestation, has become a pretext of the municipality to extract higher rent gaps.

The name “Arsenale” translates to “arsenal” or “shipyard”, and for much of Venetian history it represented a hub of commercial and military power, spanning around 48 hectares or around 15% of the historic island’s total surface. A state decision dismantled this primary military function in 1957, which was met with an enormous popular discontent: not just in solidarity with the “Arsenalotti”, the workers of the shipyard who became unemployed, but also in the fear that closing a major hub of production in historic Venice, the city would essentially become a museum (Somma 2021, p. 111). Once emptied of its functions, the future of the Arsenale complex remained uncertain and subject to popular debate, torn between real estate interests and the political promise to open it up to the city, and the *Biennale* administration became an influential player in deciding its fate. In 1980, 70m of the Corderie halls, once used to produce ship ropes, were opened to host the first Architecture Biennale : the curator Portoghesi claimed the Biennale was meant to be a “trojan horse for the desirable return of the Arsenale to the city of Venice” (Portoghesi, 1980; in Somma, 2021).



Figure 9: *La presenza del passato - Strada Novissima*, exhibition of the 1980 Architecture Biennale, held in the Arsenale. Photo by Marburg, available in ASAC, 1980

Despite this initial optimism, the next few years would reveal that the municipality's idea of a "return" to the city was very close to that of privatisation. In this period, beginning with the 1990 national budget, the sale of public real estate became a doctrine at a national and local scale, with Venice spearheading this shift nationally as the municipality quickly accepted the role of intermediary and facilitator of the private market, often through the creation of special purpose entities. The 90s saw the rise of the figure of the 'planner-entrepreneur', such as through the work "Privatising Venice"²² (Bonomi 1995) promoted by the think-tank assembling major public actors and private corporations operating in the municipality, Venezia 2000. The same work equally proposed to make *La Biennale* the "driving force" of Venice, expanding it into a chain of "micro events and mega exhibitions" (A. Preiti pour Venezia 2000, 1995). This work states that the "interest and profit in planning Venice is in taking its empty and abandoned spaces and filling them with functions" (*ibid*, p.16), making responsible urban planning a question of efficient business

²² translated by the author from the italian title, "Privatizzare Venezia"

management (Salerno 2020, p.198-199) rather than a political task of public administration. This privatisation is articulated in the alienation of public infrastructure and frequent easing of the zoning master plan, for projects that will favour the touristic and cultural industries. The Agenzia del Demanio has been a major instrument in enacting these sales, a federal agency created to sell state-owned land and infrastructure to private investors under the guise of “valorising” (Agenzia del Demanio, 2025) public heritage, certainly a softer formulation to “putting a price on”. While the creation of the agency was officially motivated by the general lack of funds and lack of capacity to manage these assets, the agency has been awarded far more public funds for its functioning than what the entirety of the sales have been projected to amount to, demonstrating the ideological nature of a preference of private management (Somma 2021, p. 57 - 73).

The first sales were under center left mayor Cacciari (in office 1993 - 2000 and 2005 - 2010), were often directed towards cultural foundations (such as *Fondazione Prada* in 2011) and described by the mayor as a breath of fresh air for the city’s public debt (Somma 2021, p. 57-61). Cacciari had risen in popularity on the basis of saving Venice from its transformation into a “tourist-hotelier non-city” (Cacciari 1989, p. 57), although throughout his mandates, Cacciari reevaluated tourism into an “extraordinary and strategic resource”, an industry which “creates added value exactly like building cars, producing chemicals, where one takes a raw material and transforms it” (Cacciari 2011, p. 51). Arguably, this raw material is the physical heritage ; the transformation, the translation into real estate and services related to its administration. By the beginning of the mandate of neoliberal conservative mayor Brugnaro in 2015, sales of public infrastructure to private enterprises only accelerated, although the municipality no longer felt the need to justify the transactions’ public interest, instead declaring its position as a neutral actor of the free market (Somma 2021, p. 68).

Venezia 2000 published reports campaigning for the creation of public-private financial holding to govern the spaces (1992). The proposal was adopted in the 2001 city masterplan, which envisioned the requalification and development of the Arsenale as a hub of cultural production and exhibition, and Arsenale S.p.A. was officially founded in 2003, owned at 49% by the Venice municipality and 51% by the Agenzia del Demanio²³ (Audis 2009), with the goal to immediately seek out foreign investors : a delegation of Chinese investors were the first to visit the site, with plans to create a warehouse. New projects began unfolding starting 2005: the Agenzia del Demanio decided to show parts of the Arsenale at real estate fairs, as well as hosting luxury real estate fairs in the Arsenale itself. A 2010 protocol between the Demanio and municipality began the transferring of several parts of the complex to the municipality, advertising the possible creation of a large hotel, a new luxury neighborhood and a harbour.

²³ as previously explained, the federal agency for the management of public land and physical heritage

This is despite the municipality having declared the need to reinvent the Arsenale into a space of productive, creative labour, for example in a speech by mayor Cacciari in 2005:

"With the bored representations of a space that is destined to be a museum or exhibition, one limits its potential : it can also be thought of, not only as a place of memory, but also as a place of work, of musical workshops, of artists' workshops or even in creating movie sets by taking advantage of the mediatic effect of the Cinema festival." (Cacciari 2005, cited by Somma, 2021)

Once the agreement with the Demanio was completed, the keys to the Arsenale were symbolically handed over to the president of the Biennale at the time, Paolo Baratta, regardless the *Biennale* mainly exhibits creative work rather than produces it. In a speech, Baratta claimed the *Biennale's* role in returning the space to Venice.

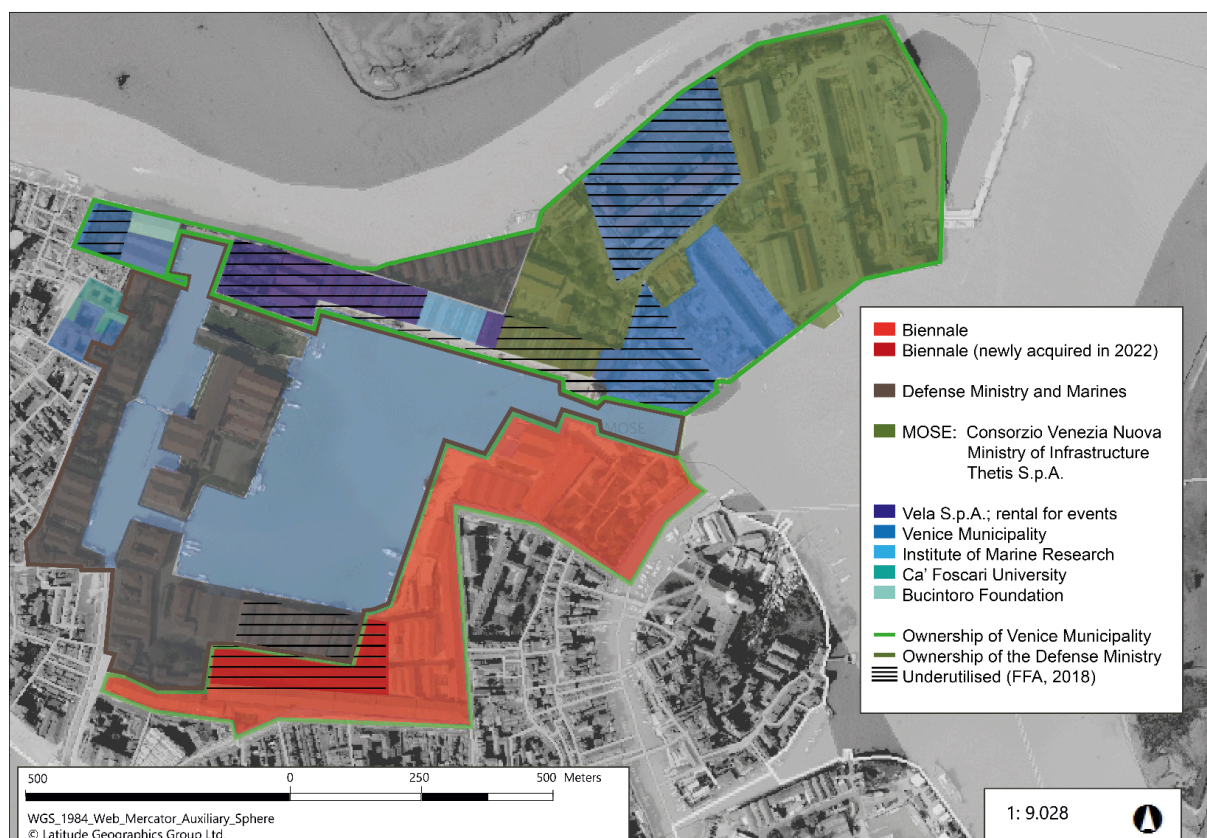
"In a certain sense, today is the crowning of the Biennale for years of commitment in the transformation of spaces, then simply warehouses and partially abandoned, in a renowned urban area, and I wish to underline, an urban area : one of the largest and most important public areas of cultural destination in Europe." (Baratta, cited by Bertasi, 18 May 2011)

Baratta held the presidency of the *Biennale* for a grand total of 15 years in between 1998 and 2020, after a lengthy political career, having held the positions of minister of public-private partnerships, minister of foreign trade, as well as having managed major industries. Close to the desires of *Venezia 2000*, he campaigned for a regeneration of Venice through the expansion of the *Biennale*, alongside the restructuring of the Biennale into a private foundation. This meant loosening public control and becoming more reliant on private enterprises and funding, forcing the foundation itself to take on a more entrepreneurial shape (Somma talks of a "factory of production of goods of cultural consumption", (p. 117). This is reflected in its labour practices, as strategic externalisation and rehiring between 2009 and 2016 allowed the Foundation to purge its senior, highly unionised workforce, which was instead replaced with a more academically qualified, flexible and un-unionised workforce (Barvalle 2020). In 2024, the *Biennale* reported having only 168 employees (Bilancio d'esercizio 2024, p. 108) as the grand majority of workers within its ecosystem are externalised. Although the Foundation's entrepreneurial shape is equally visible in its administration of *Biennale* spaces, as is abundantly clear early in Baratta's mandate, for example in a 1999 speech :

"We needed new spaces, essential for a renewal, to give the Biennale new breath (...) for this reason we made ourselves into entrepreneurs and we have promoted and directed the renovation and recovery of new

spaces, in collaboration with different institutions, local and national, public and private. Since then, the Biennale has continued to expand its spaces but has also become one of the key players in shaping the future of the city” (Baratta, 1999; cited by Somma 2021, p. 117)

This intention continued to the end of his term as president, overtime claiming merit for “conquering” new spaces around Venice, around 30 thousand square meters in Lido and 40 thousand square meters in the Arsenale : from the Sale d’Armi, to the Corderie, to the Artiglerie, Tese, Bombarde, to the Giardino delle Vergini. Today, the Arsenale is host to several institutions (see Map 5). A third of the structure remains under the ownership of the Ministry of Defense, which hosts a marine military research institute and naval museum, while another third is lent rent-free to the *Biennale*. The rest is ownership of the municipality through *Vela S.p.A.*, which it leases to different entities such as the engineering company *Thetis S.p.A.*, the *Consorzio Venezia Nuova* and Ministry of Infrastructure which are tasked with the management of the system of flooding protection *MOSE*. Although many of *Vela S.p.A.*’s spaces remain empty or underused, and are routinely rented for private events, meetings and parties, such as the highly contested wedding of billionaire Jeff Bezos in 2025.



Map 5. Current uses of the Arsenale complex, complemented with the Biennale’s new spaces in 2022 and underutilisation data from Forum Futuro Arsenale in 2018.

Map made by author using sources : FFA, 2018 and 2022 ; Vela S.p.A., 2023

In 2012, a network of thirty associations created *Forum Futuro Arsenale*, an association to campaign for the Arsenale to be considered “bene comune” (“common good”) (Exibart, 2022) open to the city, proposing a different use of the space which may reinvigorate the local economy and create alternatives from the touristic monoculture, for example in the creation artisan workshops and two shipyards (Futuroarsenale.org 2018 ; weareherevenice.org 2018). The association successfully organised a day in which parts of the Arsenale were opened to the public in 2013 and 2015, with over 20 thousand persons participating, and created numerous studies of the current use of Arsenale to call for a different, united administration of the ex-shipyard, as well as different proposals for a regeneration of the space, “for Venetians” (Forumfuturoarsenale.org 2023). In this process, the association, now uniting over forty associations, has opposed the expansion of the *Biennale* in the Arsenale and the city. When Paolo Baratta announced the second-to-last Architecture Biennale of his mandate was named “Free Space”, referring to how Venice is filled with empty spaces needing to be “filled with international blood” and a crowning example of his vision of the *Biennale* in regards to the city, *Forum Futuro Arsenale* contested this vision :

“Like an alien spaceship, the Biennale lands in Venice every year, maintaining its lifelines to other worlds - those similar to its own - while remaining somewhat detached from the city... To its credit, the Biennale has restored a number of valuable buildings and spaces within the Arsenale, but every year it tends to *occupy additional areas* [original italics]. This ongoing ‘conquest’ means that the areas available for other productive activities are increasingly limited while accessibility is blocked completely, except for Biennale ticket holders” (Forum Futuro Arsenale, 26 May 2018).

When a 2022 plan revealed the investment of over 100 million euros from the post-pandemic National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) to renovate spaces of the Arsenale to host the Biennale’s historical archive, Forum Futuro Arsenale organised a sit-in of over 300 people to ask the city’s mayor and national ministers of Defense and Culture not to sign the protocol to lease the space (Gasparini 2022). The protests were ignored, and the historical archive of the Biennale will be moved from mainland Marghera to the Arsenale as soon as 2026. These archives are advertised as a space “open to the City” (Di Gennaro 2024) despite being within a complex only accessible with the *Biennale* entry ticket, of which the standard price in 2026 is 30 €. In 2023, Forum Futuro Arsenale produced a study in which they demonstrate that large parts of the Arsenale that are owned by the Municipality are underused, stating that there is a lack of a plan or vision of the Municipality for future activities to permanently take place there, and almost the entirety of the funds that the city has received from the State (over 150 million euros) have been handed for the rehabilitation of the present and future spaces of the Biennale. This

creates the suspicion that the north portion of the Arsenale is presently handled by the Municipality only on standby so that it may be transferred to the Biennale (Bernstein 2023), which is not unfounded given that the portion which was awarded to the Biennale in 2022 had been reported as underutilised by FFA themselves in 2018 (see Map 5).

The exact cost of renting pavilion spaces remains undisclosed. Although journalists have repeatedly sought this information, their inquiries have gone unanswered, and the organisers of the 2025 Oman Pavilion similarly declined to comment during my interview. Despite this opacity, the Arsenale's role as a second major cultural hub of the Biennale, combined with the scarcity of available pavilion spaces, creates conditions for high rental fees charged to international states and foundations, which can sustain significantly higher rents than local enterprises. Notably, this revenue does not flow directly to the city, which may appear surprising given the substantial public investment Venice makes in hosting the Biennale.

Rental income nevertheless constitutes a major source of financing for the Biennale Foundation. In the 2024 financial statement, the Foundation reports €31,848,878 of revenue from "Sales of services" from "asset management"²⁴ (Bilancio d'esercizio 2024, p. 112) leaving the suspicion that a large portion of this sum originates from rental of spaces. Beyond the Foundation itself, the Biennale injects significant international capital into Venice's event and tourism economy and contributes revenue to the Italian state, which has long positioned both Venice and the Biennale as instruments of international cultural prestige and economic visibility. The third main venue of the Biennale, its headquarters in Ca' Giustinian, even better demonstrates the importance of rent as a primary method of financing the Biennale, not only reaching for foreign nations but also private pockets big enough; furthermore, this case study will be telling on the role of cultural governance in creating a brand of luxury for the city, defining what is an acceptable or preferred public.

²⁴ translated from "Vendita di servizi", under header "Vendita di beni e servizi e proventi derivanti dalla gestione dei beni".

C. Ca' Giustinian

Ca' Giustinian is the official headquarters of the *Biennale*, and although its primary function is not hosting Biennale art and architecture pavilions. A historical palace dating back to the XV century, located just a few meters from Piazza San Marco and on the other side the luxury shopping neighbourhood of Mercerie, it served as the illustrious Hotel Europa in the 19th century before being bought by the municipality and turned into administrative offices, including that of the *Biennale* (which remained a public entity at the time). In 2008, Baratta was able to campaign for the municipality to fully renovate the palace and grant its entirety to the Biennale : the main offices, a downstairs underpass it uses as an exhibition space, a giftshop/bookshop, a cafeteria, an art workshop, an upstairs terrace, and multiple multifunctional event spaces between 200 and 600 m² (the Sala delle Colonne, the Salone al Piano Nobile, and two other smaller rooms). These spaces are not accessible via ticket : and other than the offices most spaces are available for hire for private events and press releases of the Biennale itself, and the ground floor containing the underpass is considered 'public' and an important space for the Foundations' relations to the wider public (interview with A., 2025). This section will be in large part informed by two interviews carried out with A., an employee of the office for "valorisation of spaces" (*Valorizzazione Spazi*) at the *Biennale* Foundation, alongside bibliographic research and a visit to the headquarters.



Figures 10 and 11 : Terrace and Sala delle Colonne of Ca' Giustinian, two of the spaces available to rent.

Photos by Margherita Carita Minoia, July 2025

The use of polyfunctional rooms for hire was not immediate, but only began around 2011 and 2012 : an office for the "valorisation" of the spaces was opened, initially challenged with marketing the large halls to the interested public, although nowadays they have the "opposite problem : we need to constantly

skim the requests to use the halls, which are varies and infinite” (Interview with A., 2025); meetings of public institutions (such as ministries and national associations), although private enterprises take the largest slice of the cake. *Biennale* official sponsors, such as Rolex or Mastercard, have access to the spaces for private events and parties as part of their sponsorship deals ; other entities also apply to hire the rooms. There is no published rule as to who or what activities are accepted to take place in these polyfunctional spaces, although there are two main intentions in leasing the spaces, which limit widespread use of the space : balancing the books of the *Biennale*, and the construction of the *Biennale* as a brand.

The first barrier, related to the profit incentive, is the hidden price of the rooms. Although certain public institutions and selected third-sector activities are allowed to forego any kind of rent, only paying services such as cleaning or event technical support, private individuals and entities must pay a significant sum for the spaces: 20 thousand euros per day for the open-air terrace, 18 thousand for the ‘Sala delle Colonne’, and so on. Private individuals also request the use of the spaces for events such as weddings and birthdays, although this is tendentially no longer accepted unless the budget is particularly low. Despite the high income, the total sums are not visible in the financial statements that the *Biennale* is, by law, required to produce:

“...It’s not even contemplated, the idea of making known this information to a wide public, that the Biennale is giving these spaces to rent.” (Interview with A., 2025)

In fact, the word “rent” is rarely mentioned.

“Usually, we use a more delicate formulation, we do not talk of rent as many museums do... but you will never read these words on our website, because it is a function that is not usually allowed through the contract we have with the municipality. We moreso talk about hospitality... it’s a softer formulation, and our office always lets people know that there are tariffs and a small compensation for the use of these spaces.”

The word “hospitality” implies generosity and an organic relationship between the institutions, despite the evident transactional quality of leasing the space. This approach can be compared to Bourdieu's notion of “disinterestedness” where actors, often of the intellectual or governing elite (Bourdieu 1987-1989 ; Sapiro 2017) may claim to sacrifice their personnel interest in the name of common good, despite there being an evident stake in being “disinterested”. In the case of Ca’ Giustinian, the use of “hospitality” as a euphemism for a marketised service allows two types of capital exchange to be less visible : the economic capital exchanged for rent, and the symbolic capital of being related to, and thus

recognised in association with, other prestigious brands. This is part of a strategy to build the Biennale as a brand through the use of Ca' Giustinian. The Biennale began investing in the creation of a brand identity in the late 90s, as it partially privatised to become a "Società di Cultura"; A. explains that Biennale exhibitions "seemed to come out of nowhere, with little in common in between them", making it more difficult to attract potential sponsors, and Ca' Giustinian is an important component of this strategy. Of the numerous requests that are made, "... we no longer hold activities where the people behind these requests do not have a specific interest for the Biennale." This includes the creation of relationships which the Biennale can eventually benefit from, from relationships with official sponsors, to institutions which do not interfere with the glamorous image which the Biennale wishes to demonstrate. Although associations and other entities may request the use of the spaces, the point of entry is different : associations and new entities must be approved by the direction of the Biennale, while sponsors pass directly to the event organising office. If there was something they would do differently about how these spaces are managed, A. would want to "say yes more often... I'm certain there are many requests that I haven't even seen, given they never got past the direction... we need to keep a "high" level of events... you would never say no to Cartier" (Interviews with A. 2025). To simplify the potential business trip itinerary, many luxury brands' stores are a stone's throw away in the nearby *Mercerie* shopping neighbourhood.

Differently, the downstairs floors are publicly accessible. This floor is entered through a giftshop of the Biennale at the street level, leading to an underpass with a cafeteria and entrance to the upper floors on one side, and an exhibition space on the other side, ending with a pier and access to the *Canal Grande*. The public aspect of this area is stressed by the Biennale, who is charged with maintenance of the space , and technically the Foundation cannot interfere or limit activities which take place on the ground floor (Interview with A., 2025). Although this liberty *de jure* is not easily practiced, starting from the entrance through the gift shop, which imposes a limit to entry and clearly marks that the space is ownership of the Biennale. On the day of my visit, a handful of tourists passed through the gift shop to the exhibition, although I was lucky enough to attend an event by ANPI, the national association of Italian partisans. The association usually holds a yearly commemoration of the killings of thirteen partisans on the nearby *fondamenta* (the walking banks along the canals) where the partisans had been executed in 1944, although this year the space was blocked by construction, which motivated the association to ask the Biennale administration for permission to use the underpass. In the event poster and opening speech, the Biennale was frequently thanked for its "hospitality", showing a different perception of ownership of the space compared to another urban public space, such as the street or *fondamenta*, where ANPI usually holds its commemorations.



Figure 15 : ANPI commemoration at Ca' Giustinian. In front of the wooden door is Andrea del Mercato, president of the *Fondazione La Biennale*. Photo courtesy by author, July 2025.

Through the study of three main venues, of the Giardini, the Arsenale and Ca' Giustinian, it is evident how the Biennale has been simultaneously instrument and willing participant of politic of privatisation and of the city by private entities, by appropriating public infrastructure to promote an economy based on events and cultural exhibitions. If the Arsenale was once a symbol of Venetian labour and skill, this is still true today, with the event and logistics for cultural consumption as a kind primary production, with base capital being space and its rental value : given the highest rent gaps can be achieved internationally, this is the public that the state, city and Biennale choose to pander to. The choice of favouring private real estate development shows a transformation of the role of the Italian state towards a programme of austerity, first using the alienation of built heritage as a way of funding, before allowing private interests to diffuse entirely in a project of state capitalism, blurring the methods and interests of the public and private spheres to the point of full collaboration. Without leaving the public domain, the spaces the *Biennale* occupies become legally alienated from the Italian and venetian public through relationships of rent and concession, legally passing from a regime of public ownership to one of private administration and conditional entry.

Movements such as Forum Futuro Arsenale call for a regime of "common goods": a "concept-slogan" (Algostino 2014, p. 29) employed by a variety of civil society actors seeking to resist liberalising and privatising policies. This concept envisions a third alternative between private and public ownership: neither "private" property, regarded as a mechanism of privatisation and dispossession, nor "public" property, since the state is recognised through repeated actions as an accomplice to privatisation (as

demonstrated by its sale of public assets through the Agenzia del Demanio) and as “other” with respect to citizens (ibid. p. 30). Instead, the *beni comuni* movement advocates for the full participation of civil society, for example through the delegation of goods and infrastructure from municipalities to civic initiatives and associations, as these actors are viewed as more representative of solidarity and common interest than the state itself. This perspective is supported by article 43 of the Italian Constitution, which provides for the possibility that “specific enterprises or categories of enterprises” operating in the field of essential public services and in the general interest may be reserved to or expropriated in favour of “the State, public bodies” but also “communities of workers or users” (Official english translation of the Italian Constitution, 2023 : art. 43). Across Italy, including in metropolitan Venice, the delegation of the use of urban spaces from municipalities to civic groups has become a common tool for a range of activist movements (Cacciari et al 2012). Rather than supporting and accompanying such processes of bottom-up participation, the current Municipality has preferred to leave spaces vacant, thereby creating an artificial dependence on the international private sector by making the sale or concession of public property appear to be the only alternative to abandonment. In doing so, it reinforces the distinction between public administration and the public interest. The rhetoric employed is one of opening up spaces, activating them, returning them to the city, and fostering meaningful relationships with those who contribute to it, closely mirroring the language and demands articulated by bottom-up initiatives. In practice, however, the dominant trend is one of land financialisation: the organisation of urban space according to a thinly veiled logic of rent. The instrumentalisation of cultural policy in producing higher rent gaps is well evident in the case studies. The venues of Giardini and Arsenale are positioned away from the more touristic *sestieri*²⁵ of San Marco and Rialto, in the historically working-class and still today relatively residential neighbourhood of Casteo, the Biennale happenings effectively create a new cultural center of the city. Meanwhile, Ca’ Giustinian is positioned just a few meters from the opulent San Marco square and Mercerie, consolidating the image of the Biennale as a luxury brand alongside its important history, which allows it to extract even higher rent in the Casteo venues. In the following chapter, the spatial development of the Biennale continues to be analysed, linking it to the Foundation and the City’s cultural policy.

Through the next chapters of this work, the dynamic of privatisation of public infrastructure and overall land financialisation as supported by the Biennale’s cultural policy is discussed, not only in its main venues but all over the city, with deep impacts on the economy and demographics of the city.

²⁵ *Sestiere* is the name of the neighbourhoods of the historic center of Venice.

Chapter 2. Side Hustle, Collateral Damage

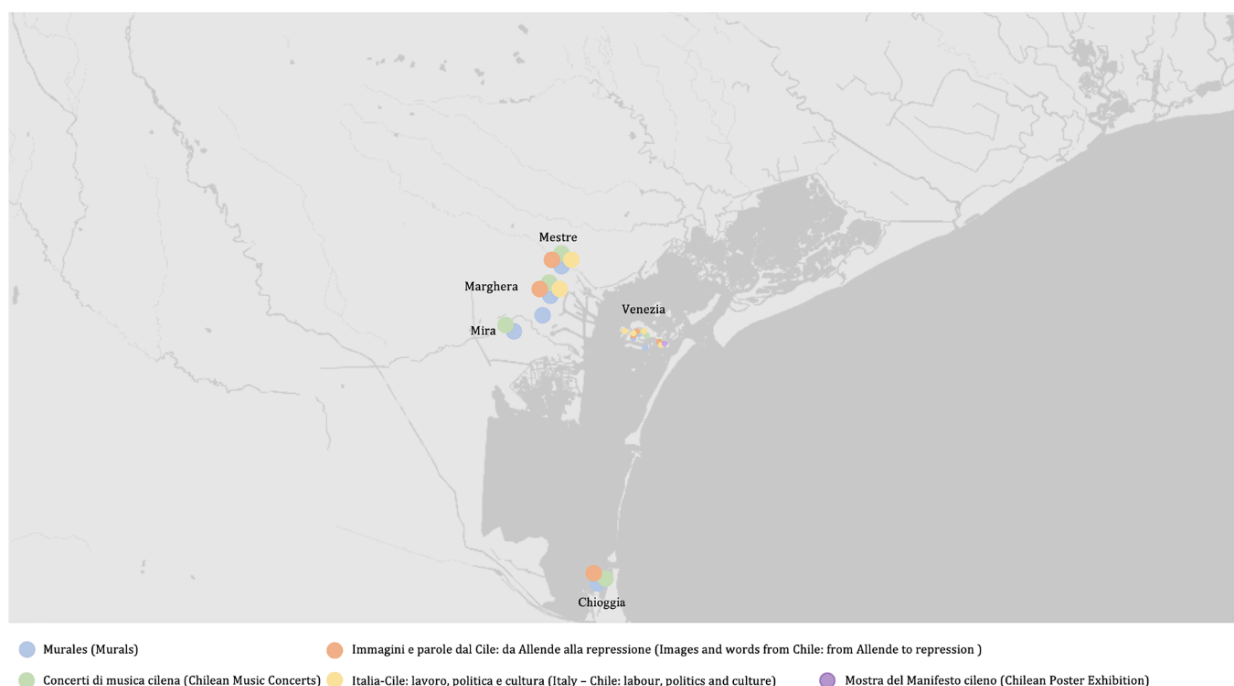
Over years of exhibitions and important marketing strategies, the Biennale has simultaneously built itself into an art event of global importance and an elite brand. Exposure within and alongside the Venice Biennale indicates presence within the global art and architecture discourses and markets, attracting public institutions and private foundations alike. For foreign cultural ministries, it is an opportunity to demonstrate the dynamicity of their cultural sector, as the pavilion becomes a showcase to the world. For private corporations and foundations, the Biennale represents a unique marketing opportunity, to position their product alongside the very best of international art, and position themselves as socially virtuous patrons of the arts. Their equivalence side by side can be almost uncanny : in the Giardini venue, alongside the national pavilions, Rolex was able to build their very own, and participate at each edition with its own exhibition. Despite their growing size, official Biennale venues still lack capacity compared to the high demand to participate. This chapter will discuss the explosion of Biennale events in Venice : far from simply creating opportunities of additional income for locals and small businesses (a “side hustle”) the high demand for renting spaces for art events creates real challenges for the installation and survival of other long-term activities, rooted in everyday use and not only the tourism and luxury industries (“collateral damage”).

A. The *Biennale* leaked out, now the city is flooded

It is a difficult task to exactly locate when *Biennale* exhibitions began to “leak” out of official venues and “flood” the city, although archival and bibliographic sources show a historic change in the spatial form of the exhibition during the mandates of Carlo Ripa di Meana as president of the *Biennale* in the 1970s. Events and exhibitions diffused through the city and especially in public spaces, such as public squares, murales on city walls, in workshops and schools, in an effort to achieve a more democratic and popular Biennale which could be highly participated by the local population. The Biennale arrived to the active spaces of politics, work and sociability of the local population, integrating them as full participants in the process of art making (most notably in certain collective murales) (Orzes 2022; Bassetto 2024), while these spaces maintained their original function. Art historian Anita Orzes has created a useful mapping of the events of the 1974 *Biennale Arte*, “Libertà al Cile”, showing the diversity of artistic interventions and decentralisation of the events from the main venues of Giardini and Arsenale (Maps 4-5).



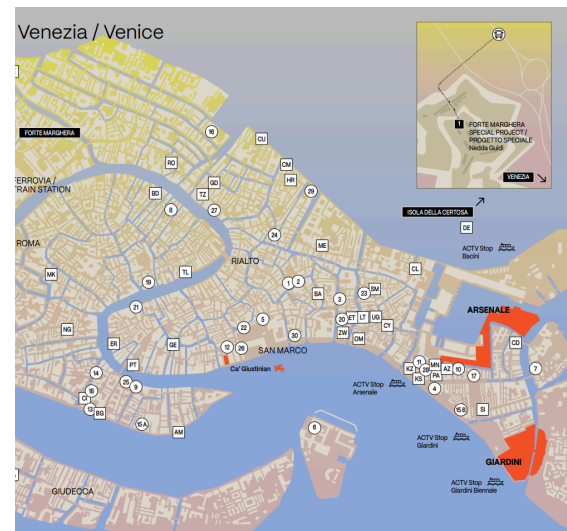
Map 4. Reconstruction of the events of “Libertà al Cile” (*Biennale Arte* 1974) in the historic center of Venice, 2021. By Anita Orzes, from “An Antifascist Biennale: ‘Libertà al Cile’ in and from Venice” (2022)



Map 5. Reconstruction of the events of “Libertà al Cile” (*Biennale Arte* 1974) in Venice and the outlying areas, 2021. By Anita Orzes, from “An Antifascist Biennale: ‘Libertà al Cile’ in and from Venice” (2022)

Although Di Meana’s successors decided to sweep aside such democratic and political efforts within the *Biennale*, today’s festival is even more scattered throughout the city : in between Maps 6 and 7, one can observe the increase in events outside the main venues between 1976 and 2024. Not only is this due to

the increasing number of countries which wish to participate, forcing many to find a space outside of the main venues, but also as a consequence of the rise of “collateral events”. This format was created for private art institutions and foundations not representing a national delegation, but can be integrated into the official programme by paying a fee to the Foundation and being selected by the Biennale edition’s curator.



Maps 6 and 7: Biennale exhibition locations in 1976 (left ; indicated in red ellipses and red text) and 2024 (right ; indicated in white ellipses, white squares and red polygons) as listed in the official pamphlets. Sources : Historical Archive of Contemporary Arts (ASAC) (left), labiennale.org (right)

In recent years, the proliferation of collateral events and off-site pavilions, creating an audience ready to explore the city for art exhibitions, has created an ample “off-Biennale”²⁶: art happenings and exhibitions not included in the official Biennale programme, although sharing a similar calendar as the Art and Architecture *Biennale* (May to November) and hoping to capture its same audience and professional network. This was the case for the gallery in which I worked for several months, which was positioned close to an official collateral event and heavily suggested it was part of the *Biennale*, despite not appearing in the official programme : displaying the word “*Biennale*” in its official communication (although formulated as “parallel to the Biennale”), and even encouraging workers to confuse visitors on whether it was part of the official programme or not. In 2025, the *Biennale* ingeniously began to capitalise

²⁶ reference to “off-Broadway”, “off-Avignon”... unofficial art happenings which rely on the popularity of the main events.

from its “off” as well, by including in their official fliers 80 exhibitions which had not made the curators’ selection under the header “Not Only Biennale”, for a fee.

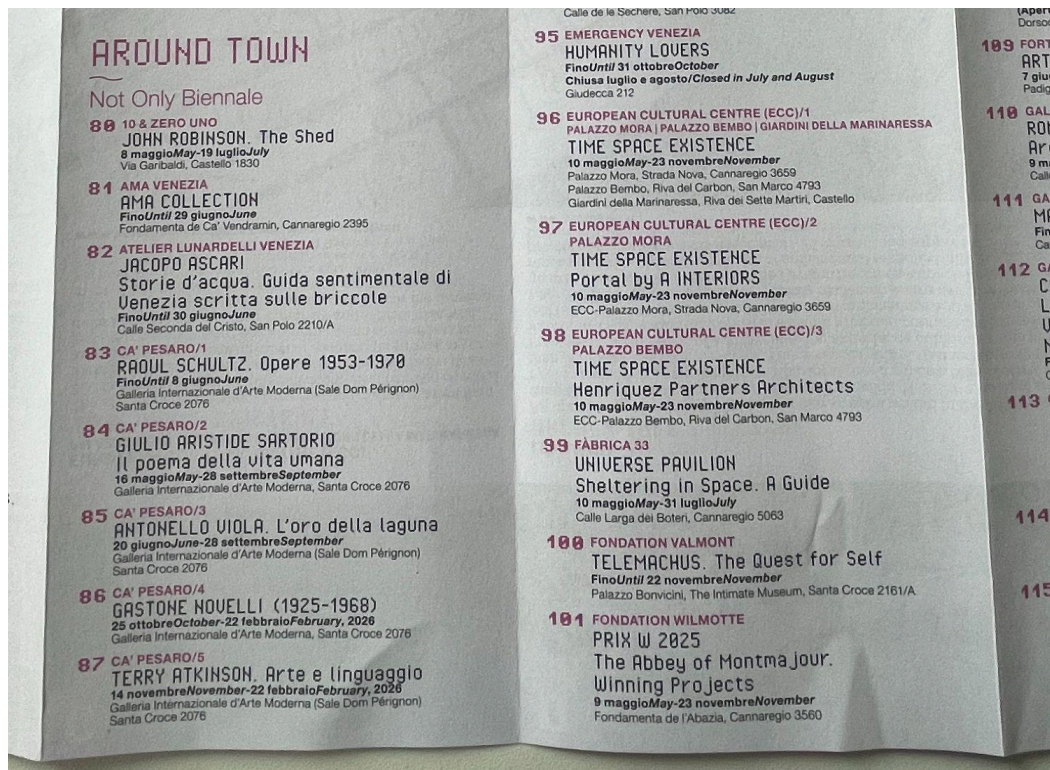


Figure 13. Photo of the official flyer of the 2025 Architecture Biennale, featuring “Not Only Biennale” events. Photo courtesy of the author

This surge in exhibitions has in turn created an elevated demand for spaces outside of the main Biennale venues, generating a lucrative economy for the rental of luxury locations around Venice. This short-term rental economy (usually around 6 months, the duration of the Art and Architecture Biennale) is addressed to wealthy international actors, allowing for inflated prices, which most national pavilions prefer not to disclose (Finestre sull'Arte 2024) although in my interview with an industry professional he reported failing to find a location of around 100 m² under 18 000 euros per month (interview with T. 2025). The art real estate market is particular, given the flexibility of art events' format and the loose urbanistic and architectural regulations which follow the creation of an art space : art spaces are capable of inhabiting all kinds of infrastructure besides the classic storefront, and even gain cultural interest from the particular history of the location. This phenomenon was famously discussed by Sharon Zukin in regards to SoHo (1983), who described how artists' use of ex-industrial buildings for workshops and exhibitions has helped manufacture a romanticised vision of these spaces as gritty and authentic, arousing investors and developers in turning such spaces into expensive commodities until the same

artists are priced out of the real estate market. The particular curiosity and fetishisation of the Venetian way of life is similarly able to produce particular interest in ordinary spaces. In the case of the gallery S.V., the gallery was priorly a well-known woodworker's laboratory for decades, a history which the new owners proudly declare to their visitors, and the graffiti on the interior walls, in support of the local football team, was carefully preserved in the refurbishment process to the location may "preserve its original essence" (citation from the website)²⁷.

Such factors allow for the displacement of many varieties of uses of the city as they are converted to art spaces, temporarily or permanently : churches such as the Chiesa di Santa Maria dei Derelitti, community spaces such as the Scuola Grande della Misericordia, workshops such as in the *Consorzio di Cantieristica Minore Veneziana*. Different *Biennale* events have taken place in high schools across the city as well as the exhibition space of the *Accademia di Belle Arti*²⁸, on a few occasions forcing students to hold their end-of-year exhibition in a nearby squat instead. In 2025, the architecture and design university IUAV organised a "diffused pavilion", taking place in different university-owned spaces around the city ; in a public assembly against the privatisation of space, a student activist exclaimed, "there isn't even a common room left, the Biennale has taken everything" (Stop Bezos Assembly 2025). The replacement of ordinary, everyday spaces and uses of spaces for art exhibitions is even visible in the local women's prison in Giudecca : in 2024, the Vatican pavilion took visitors inside of the women's common room, leading the association *Rio Terà dei Pensieri* to denounce how, although a few women were able to gain some work experience, the rest of the population was forced to give up vital spaces in an already crowded prison (Rea 2024).

In 2010, the Biennale Foundation even created an online bulletin board "Bacheca Biennale" (La Biennale 2010), where landlords may publicise any spaces they may have available to host future pavilions. This has allowed for non-professional owners to post a space for rent, and especially walking around Casteo one can see empty storefronts sporting a QR code linking to their page on Bacheca Biennale (see fig. 14).

²⁷ The website is not referenced to maintain anonymity.

²⁸ Fine Arts Academy.



Figure 14. Doorway to an empty storefront, available to rent out to exhibitions. Photo courtesy of author, May 2025

The owner of one such storefront, upon seeing me taking a photo, invited me inside the space. He was an older man, over 65, born and raised in a flat just above the ground floor he rented out : it used to be his father's woodworking shop, a trade he had learnt himself before finding out that "Venetians don't live here anymore", and as the clients left so did the work. He has since been working as a water taxi driver, essentially for tourism, given that there is "nothing else" in Venice. He keeps his old boat in the old workshop, which he had been able to rent out once to a national participation a few years back, for which he had been paid well; several times during the short conversation, he asks me to help him find new clients.

B. City administration vs Civic use

The creation of art galleries is facilitated by the local administration. Spaces which temporarily host art exhibitions are not required to officially register as such, as long as the time of use is six months or less (Interview with Omar Tommasi 2025 ; Interview with R. 2025 ; Tantucci 2021), almost the time of exhibition of the Art or Architecture Biennale, which usually lasts just over six months. Although art journalist Tantucci accused this measure of acting as a “blocca mostre” (exhibition blocker) when introduced in 2021, the 2025 fieldwork demonstrated the little effectiveness of the restrictive measure, if it ever was conceived as such. All kinds of built environments can be converted into an exhibition space, which even for just six months of use, given the extremely high potential rent, can easily generate more revenue than if the space was rented to another type of activity. As the owner of S.V.; once told me, “you can make your own apartment into a Biennale pavilion, but only for six months”. If one wished to register, this is hardly a restricted practice. Subsequent memos published by the municipal offices have encouraged limiting specific economic practices in the historic city to protect it from “the constant and disorderly growth of touristic fluxes which tend to make the old City lose its authentic identity and the activities of commercial production and distribution their historic capacity to integrate themselves into the urban and metropolitan context.” (Vademecum 6 Settembre 2022, p. 2) The document goes on to prohibit the opening of commercial activities such as selling tourist souvenirs, “un-assisted” dining (such as fast food and bakeries) and fast fashion clothing, allowing only for the opening of activities such as for high fashion stores, art galleries, jewellery and watches, and protected artisanal activities. The stated intention of the document is to limit a “disorderly” tourism, characterised by the consumption of fast food, fast fashion and souvenirs, as opposed to a desirable consumption of high fashion and design, art and traditional artisan activities. One may ask, does the average resident purchase more fast food or paintings in a week ? Far from defending local, popular patterns of consumption, this memo privileges an upper class luxury lifestyle only achievable by a limited upper class of residents and tourists, nurturing a class distinction of “quality” tourism as opposed to mass tourism (Salerno interviewed by Giossi 2020) and translating it into the activities allowed to be executed in the city : art galleries, representing high class consumption, are encouraged.

So what are the consequences of the business of renting out spaces for short term exhibitions ? Although it may seem like a simple business venture for extra income, for private persons disposing of an unused space and struggling small businesses : *Toletta*, the city’s oldest existing bookstore, has recently sold half of its store space (which has been quickly converted to a fast fashion store), before opening an event space in its storage unit in 2021 and hosting the national pavilion of Granada at the

Architecture Biennale in 2025. (latoletta.com 2025) Although the delocalised nature of national and international foundations wishing to create an exhibition has created a fruitful economy of local intermediaries : freelance professionals and cultural agencies (*Art Events, Venice Art Factory, Venice Events, Nexave, Solmarino+, Exhibition Care...*) provide art event location scouting (usually to spaces owned by the agencies themselves) and logistical services. The sector is thus professionalised and concentrated by such agencies, and this is despite the visibility of *Bacheca Biennale* : most spaces which are posted have the contact information of a cultural agency, which owns or manages the space.

The issue of platforms nourishing market speculation, while depleting available infrastructure stock, is not incomparable to well-studied dynamics of AirBnB platform capitalism : aided by lax legislation and ease of participation through specific platforms, the proliferation of STRs (short-term rentals) goes to deplete existing housing stock as it is converted to tourist housing, which allows for a larger rent gap (Morell 2020, Salerno and Russo 2020). As exhibition spaces for rent can be converted from more kinds of infrastructure, not only housing, this inflates real estate prices everywhere and removes spaces from other possible long-term uses. What is produced is an acceleration of Salerno and Russo's "short term city", where the city is shifted towards an urban form which is not anchored or dependent on the resident population : not only given the lack of housing stock, but also the loss of spaces of work, local commerce, common spaces and services. Under the guise of the democratisation of income, where struggling citizens or local businesses may gain a supplementary income from the renting of a location, there is the concentration of the industry by a few specialised agencies, the financialisation of all kinds of spaces and spiralling real estate costs.

The capacity of the Biennale and its collateral events to raise the value of real estate and attract international investors is instrumentalised by the public administration, at both the city and national level, to increase revenue in public books as well as for private investors. This is despite the loss of spaces of community and public interest, as the city and state continue to impose an ideology prioritizing private over public management. This is the story of the ex-Caserma Sanguinetti, a historic complex built in the XVI century as a seat of the local Patriarch, before being converted to a police station and today host to several subsidised apartments. Most of the complex has been in dire condition for decades, a crisis palliated by residents self-organising to carry out maintenance and construction work. Part of the apartments are catalogued as unfit to live in due to the poor conditions, demanding the elderly residents to exit the apartments and accept another housing option in the mainland. This offer has been routinely rejected, and these apartments have continued to be occupied illegally. These precarious conditions have created a strong civic network in the preservation of the site and the neighbourhood of San Piero and Sant'Anna. In 2022, the residents discovered the complex had been put on sale on the website of the

Agenzia del Demanio, and the sale to French real estate developer Artea was already underway. The website of the federal agency, in a format almost indissociable from a commercial real estate agency, describes the possibility of transforming the complex into tourist hospitality and an exhibition space and the location of the asset, “although located in an almost suburban, predominantly residential area, [it] benefits greatly from its proximity to the Arsenale complex and the Biennale exhibition venues.” (agenziademanio.it 2025) As of January 2026, the initiative *Salviamo San Piero e Sant’Anna*²⁹ has been able to delay evictions twice, once by contesting the federal Agenzia del Demanio’s decision to put the complex on sale and another attacking the municipality’s role as intermediary.



Figure 15. An organiser of “Salviamo San Piero e Sant’Anna” showing the perimeter of land on sale on the website of the Demanio. July 2022. Photo courtesy of the author.

²⁹ in English : “Let’s Save San Piero and Sant’Anna”

C. Zombies and Vampires of Venice

As the Biennale and similar events expand across Venice, the city is gradually stripped of its everyday functions in order to host cosmopolitan cultural spectacles. Salerno (2020, p. 142) links this process to Marxist theories of capital and space, describing built heritage as a form of fixed capital accumulated over time—what Marx called “dead labour, that only comes alive like a vampire, sucking living labour” (Marx 1867, p. 267). In Venice, this “living labour” takes the form of the tourism economy, organised to extract maximum value from the built environment. This shift reflects a broader transition from the “primary circuit of capital,” centred on goods production, to a “secondary circuit of capital,” focused on real estate, transportation and public facilities (Harvey 1985, p 7 - 8). Our analysis suggests that the contemporary art economy—of which the Biennale is a central actor—extends this logic by accelerating the removal of civic uses and productive labour, reducing the city to “dead labour” that can be rented at high prices.

The Biennale itself operates as a closed micro-city or world village, in which each villa functions as a pavilion with its own management, internal ecology, and mode of operation. Over time, its use of urban land intensifies, for instance through the addition of multiple national pavilions within the same areas. As the Biennale spreads throughout the city and absorbs more space into its specific public–private governance regime, the metaphor of a “city within the city” becomes increasingly apt. Henri Lefebvre (1970) anticipated such dynamics in his theory of the complete capitalist urbanisation of society, which he described through the model of implosion–explosion. The industrial revolution, he argued, produced an intense concentration of people, activities, and wealth in urban centres, alongside an outward projection of fragmented spaces such as suburbs, peripheries, and satellite towns (Lefebvre 1970/2003, p. 14). Although in a post-industrial context, the symbolic economy grows in accrued importance, and the manufacturing and exchange of signifiers become central to the generation of income and capital (Zukin 1995, p. 8). As cultural and heritage value increasingly contribute to economic value, it becomes more advantageous to preserve the architectural “shell” while transforming the governance and use of space. Architectural forms are thus emptied of meaning through changes in social practice and the loss of their original functions, leaving inherited structures without the uses that once justified their existence. The *Biennale* and its governance regime of rent can be conceptualised as a “zombie” city within a city : a city shell reanimated by temporary living labour, imploding within its main venues and then exploding throughout Venice through a constellation of collateral, off-site and off-brand events.

While international delegations and foundations initiate exhibition projects, most of the conceptual and creative labour involved remains offshore: artists, curators, project coordinators, and communication specialists fly in for the vernissage. The “living labour” that remains in the city is a servile economy that sustains this system through logistical and material support; invigilators, cleaners, installation technicians, and their supervisors. Despite many academic faculties related to visual arts located in Venice, both public and private, few such students seem to find a career in their desired industries, but rather are integrated as cheap, replaceable labour for the logistics of international projects using Venice as a backdrop. Universities such as Ca’ Foscari will integrate compulsory unpaid internships of several months into the degrees or orchestrate internship agreements directly with pavilions for as little as 3 euros per hour. The city’s dependency on international initiatives is made explicit on the homepage of an art gallery in Castello:

“Biennale Spaces is enthusiastically managed by a team of local professionals with decades of global experience, working synergistically to provide clients with the immense advantage of a single point of contact for the planning, management, and realization of their art projects. Biennale Spaces, aspires to be the pied-à-terre in Venice for all Institutions, Entities (both public and private), and international curators who wish to make the Serenissima the perfect showcase for their aesthetic vision.” (Biennaleartspaces.com, 2025)

The gallery plainly presents itself as a momentary stopover of global fluxes, international institutions searching for a backdrop for an art project that’s already been conceived. The services provided are organised to be as centralised as possible for the international institution to project their “aesthetic vision” into the city with a single point of contact and thus minimal integration into the city. Finally, despite no official affiliation, the name “Biennale Spaces” references the intended customer : international foundations and delegations participating in the Biennale. Let us reconsider Paolo Baratta’s claim of a Venice of “Free Space” needing to be “filled with international blood”; did the Biennale empty these spaces itself ?

Chapter 3. Life in the private city : interacting with and in the pavilion

The previous sections have analysed the ways in which the Biennale - both as an institution and through the individual events and pavilions that constitute its festival season - spills over into the city and appropriates urban space. This expansion often displaces other activities, particularly those that are not embedded within the tourism economy and are therefore less profitable. As spaces of work, community, and education are replaced and real estate costs increase, the absence of public institutions capable of mitigating these effects through social housing or support for access to workspaces contributes to the exodus of residents from the city.

By encouraging the proliferation of art exhibitions throughout the urban fabric, the Biennale promotes a specific mode of spatial management and economic use, based on short-term rentals or concessions of public property. These spaces are frequently left vacant and inaccessible for much of the year. As opportunities to live, work, and shape the city become unevenly distributed under a regime of privatisation and financialisation, the effects of this process on the production of public space can be examined through an analysis of how these spaces are used.

Access to the city is thus unevenly distributed, calling into question the very *publicness* of urban space. While the proliferation of cultural events renders many spaces physically accessible - either through ticketed entry or, in the case of most collateral events, free access - visitors often celebrate the extent to which the city's heritage is opened up and thereby "valorised," a term that conflates cultural and financial meanings. However, the conditions of accessibility are determined by the private owners or managers of these spaces. As such, they correspond to what Ghorra-Gobin has described as "private spaces open to the public." The *Biennale* exhibition, whether organised by the institution itself or by individual national pavilions, employs multiple strategies to foster participation and social interaction. Do these conditions make the exhibition spaces fulfill functions comparable to those of public spaces ?

A. Open to the public

A group of five middle aged Italian women walked inside S.V. on a June morning, their accents confessing their Padouan origin. Although absorbed enough in their conversation, concerning work and home renovations, to not greet me at the entrance, one of the women turned towards me as they passed

from one room to the other. She said they had found the gallery space stunning, and wondered who owned the place, to which I answered it was the foundation S.V. She asked if I knew the history of the building, to which I replied that it used to be a carpenters' workshop. On their way out, I overheard the same woman say to her friends : "This is why I love to visit Venice during the Biennale ! It opens up spaces you would never be able to see otherwise."

Economic ecosystems which are sensitive to culture and heritage such as the Biennale may create economic funds for spaces to be renovated and made accessible to the public, whether for a price (such as the main Biennale venues) or for free (such as the majority of collateral events). Does accessibility make a space public, despite their private ownership ?

As per Habermas' (1962) definition, a public space serves the function of allowing people to meet and conceptualise their belonging to a collective, which can be politicised against the power of the State, and in analysis privately owned spaces such as cafés were considered to be a primary example. Art exhibitions and Biennale pavilions tend to be built to inspire a welcoming character, so to encourage spending time with the art works. In the case of free entry art galleries, these are generally profitable either from commercialising the pieces exposed or via rental of the space, both gaining value from the amount of daily visitors coming into the space ; most invigilators are equipped with click counters and report the number of visitors in the end of the day. In the case of Architecture Biennales, convivial architecture often becomes the central focus of the pavilion itself, as curators include seating, interaction with other visitors and even additional toilets³⁰ to inspire a healthy, pleasant living environment.

Such spaces become effectively more welcoming and intimate for visitors, and S.V. especially seemed to serve a function of temporary shelter from a hostile outdoors, as Venice streets tend to become quickly unbearable as public fountains are closed (VeneziaToday 2022), benches are removed and sitting on the street is criminalised, and the heavy flux of tourists in the main arteries of the city becomes exhausting especially in the summer months. Over my time as an invigilator, I have noticed several ways in which visitors will come inside the gallery to use the space as an extension of public space, without showing particular interest in the art works. Every day, groups of friends will come inside to take photographs or have a conversation in a less overstimulating environment than in the busy streets, families and elderly people will sit in the shade, tourists will ask if they can use the bathroom, if I can provide them with a trash can, or fill their water bottle. Once, I saw two couples, previously strangers, begin to discuss the quality of the building's renovation, and after over twenty minutes of conversation shared contacts to

³⁰ in the case of the German Pavilion in the 2023 Architecture Biennale.

exchange information on the quality of medical services in a nearby town. Twice, I have seen a tourist fall asleep on the gallery's chairs, and many more I have seen couples and families sit in our entrance to enjoy their lunch.

During my shifts, motivated by a mixture of laziness, cordiality and scientific interest in how much liberty visitors would take, I never reprimanded anyone for their behaviour inside the gallery (provided there was no deterioration of the works). Visitors often guiltily or defiantly glanced at me after I "caught" them in any behaviour not strictly pertaining to admiring the art works, and some visitors felt the need to explain or apologise if they took too long to go through the gallery. Some visitors asked and thanked me for allowing them to sit or use the bathroom, while others engaged me in long conversations about the exhibition, sometimes strenuously, before allowing themselves to ask me if there was a loo. Another visitor, maybe imagining we did not have a visitors' bathroom, had sneaked into our well hidden staff bathroom, and I only discovered him as I was closing the gallery and he came out as he heard I was locking the doors. Many visitors excuse themselves before asking for a favour, on the basis that they had not found a water fountain, trash can or place for a long time before arriving at the exhibit, or thank me by offering to leave a positive review online or in our visitor's book. The visitor's adverse and hesitant behaviours demonstrated how such functions were often considered deviant, given the primary intended use of the space being that of admiring the exhibition. Although offering a space for rest and sociability, making such a use of the space was not evident to all visitors, but those that were visibly more economically and culturally *aisé*, most noticeably from the visitors who engaged me in conversation and eventually explained to me their life and work : a banker's housewife, journalists, art students, are a few of the profiles I have recorded. Contemporary art, in its incessant search for the *avant-garde* and defiance of popular hegemonic tastes and values, tends to overtly alienate and shame the larger public for its lack of sophistication (Levine 2002, p. 60) As a consequence, it is not evident to feel at ease in a contemporary art gallery, engage with the art and eventually appropriate the space through mildly deviant behaviour. This capacity to linger and appreciate the city's beauty, away from the masses, speaks to an interiorised class distinction in tourists or visitors of the city. A professor who led one of the exhibitions in S.V. told me in a conversation, "when you walk around the Biennale, there are so few people around... it's not like the mass tourists that take the boat from *Piazzale Roma*³¹, all the way to Rialto and back."

From these anecdotes, one can notice a clear difference between the public street or square and the interior of S.V. The public square or street is busy, loud and tiring, filled with crowds of lost and bustling

³¹ Point of entry to Venice through the mainland : the only square in Venice where there are motor vehicles.

people working, living and visiting the convoluted streets. S.V. is quiet, with few people comfortably strolling past and a highly educated and polyglot hostess to greet you and answer any questions you may have (my colleagues and I). In public streets, rest and conviviality is limited by the hundreds of bodies and their needs surrounding you, hastily searching for the limited provision of comfort: benches, water, shadow, a bathroom and so on. If one were to sit on the floor, litter or urinate, the violence becomes less diffused : a member of the law enforcement will fine you, or at the least ask you to leave. In S.V., there are few bodies, fewer movements and needs, and only one person setting the rules of the space (the landlord, through the invigilator) who seems to profit from your enjoyment of the space, as long as you follow and understand rules of politeness : that you are a guest inside of their gallery space, and should act accordingly. The rule of politeness is not without enforcement. Several times, both during the training and in response to specific occurrences of generic 'strange people', for example a man taking measurements of the gallery door for personal architectural research, we were reminded or advised to call the police.

Ghorra Gobin (2012) discusses the rise of "private spaces open to the public" (*EPOP*, in french) to refer to spaces which form the basis of public life in cities being increasingly produced by the private realm, privileging entertainment and consumption, compared to 'traditional' public spaces such as a town square which are built to meet in diversity and understand one's belonging to a political collective. In the case of S.V., one is more likely to temporarily appropriate the space, see and interact with other visitors, given the private landlord positions himself as more generous than the public administration. The face of authority is softened as rules are delivered by friendly, usually female welcoming staff and invigilators, despite conditions to access and enjoy a space are more arbitrary and conditional. Although the rules of politeness towards the private host also requires the visitor to understand they do not have a right to the service, but rather they are allowed a temporary favour in exchange for using the space for its primary purpose (admiring the art). The space is not meant to be fully lived in, claimed and appropriated, and unlike a public street, one is not expected to come back twice, and again make a claim to the same service : this would be a highly impolite admission to loitering.

On the first day of public opening at the S.V. gallery, an elderly man came by and introduced himself as a resident of the street right outside. I asked him about his life in the center of hypertouristic Venice and if he remembered the history of the space, before it became a gallery. To thank him for his time, I offered him a coffee, to which he responded that he had just had one, otherwise he would have accepted with pleasure. I insisted that if he ever wants to come by and sees that I am working, I am looking forward to offering a coffee. I saw him passing in front of the gallery many times, peeking in to greet me, but never coming through the entrance again.

What kind of public can be consolidated in a space in which individuals recognise each other as guests and passing visitors, before most likely not seeing each other again? Just as Ghorra-Gobin (2012) and Margier (2017) theorised, urban planning which imagines cities as concentrations of individual private consumption defines the primary purpose of public space as efficient transport in between such spaces, hindering the functions of urban fabric as a space for social and political interactions. Private actors and spaces begin to become the producers of public space, and not without modification of those who may gain access : those who will come in and linger in an art gallery are generally already of a certain creative and intellectual class. The parallel between the inside and outside of the gallery also speaks to an interiorised distance between uncomfortable, somewhat sheeplike mass tourism, and the elevated, elegant and comfortable art crowd. Although this bestialization is not casual. As the local administration limits public provision of basic welfare infrastructure in the public space (drinking fountains, benches, public bathrooms, trashcans) and simultaneously criminalises simple fixes such as sitting, those that are unwilling or unable to constantly consume are forced into dramatised collective discomfort. When the city administration acts as an absentee landlord, collecting fees without providing basic services for collective wellbeing, how does one distinguish a public space from a private space open to the public ?

As “traditional” public space and its democratic functions are eroded in the city, spaces for sociability and rest are increasingly synonymous with privatisation, meaning that access is dependent on consumption or the possibility of other forms of income. Subsequently, these patterns of consumption rarely stray far from one’s previous interests and preferences, characteristics which have repeatedly been studied as being defined by class. All the same, public and private museums alike have been studied in their potential to create spaces of interaction beyond difference.

B. Between participation and gaze

A rising field of social sciences investigates museums as public spaces, becoming “contact zones” through their functions as public forums, offering convivial urban spaces for generic visitors and local communities to meet and mediate hegemonic, top-down narratives. (Atwater and Herndon 2003; Zhu 2024; Redaelli et al 2025) This echoes the rise of participative design in museology (Carfora et al 2024; Gonzales 2019) as attempts to center social justice not only in the content of exhibitions but also in its creation process and eventual exhibition design. Simultaneously, decades of decolonial and political struggle have created fertile spaces in the contemporary art market for narratives inspired by values of

community, horizontality and positive change. Atwater and Herndon (2003) describe two potential dimensions which characterise museums as public spaces. The first is through a communicative function, harnessing the potential to promote social interaction and the construction of meaning between communities who may not easily meet otherwise. Secondly, through the creation of communal spaces, where visitors are invited and capable of influencing an exhibition's content, narration and interpretation. The creation of participatory experiences have been interpreted as ways to defect from the effect of public spectacles to tightly scripted public life and thus as a counterargument of the culture's instrumentalisation for political, cultural and economic gain, as visitors may proscribe their own meanings to space by being invited to appropriate it, as well as create new channels for social engagement and the shaping of group identity. (Shin and Stevens 2014a, 2014b)

Such values have been integrated by the Biennale within the themes of the yearly editions : 2023 was the year of "Agents of Change", 2024 the year of "*Stranieri Ovunque / Foreigners Everywhere*"³² as inspired by the name of an antiracist collective from Turin (labiennale.org 2024) and 2025 "Intelligens. Natural. Artificial. Collective", the last word echoing a convivial and participative sentiment. Pavilions and exhibitions have followed suit : especially in the case of Architecture exhibitions, artists and curators regularly wish to be more inclusive to audience participation, creating infrastructures meant to be experienced and 'lived in' by the audience. This was the intention of the Omani pavilion in 2025, as explained by the curator to the invigilators (including myself) before the day of the opening. Inspired by the *Sablah*, the Omani traditional communal space, the curator states the exhibition explores how cultural memory and tradition can guide the design of common spaces. This is executed through a large woven aluminum structure with multiple entrances to reach a central sound installation, surrounded by woven reed modular benches. The organic shape and seating both feature a weaved structure, meaning to recall collective intelligence and inspire different ways in which the space can be experienced, hoping that the visitors may inhabit and interact with the structure in unique ways, becoming a central part of the installation themselves. Sensors are placed in the room to pick up wifi signals from personal phones and collect data on persons' paths throughout the pavilion, which are interpreted as the diversity of appropriations and interpretations of the pavilion space as rearranged by the metal structure. This data will reportedly be used to install the structure in a public square in Muscat, activating the public potential of the space through the metal structure.³³

From the first days following the opening, it became clear that the pavilion's stated intention was utopian and never meant to be fully realised. As early as the day after the press opening, the event production team installed museum barriers to ensure that only the three main entrances could be used. Shortly after

³² In english, "Strangers Everywhere".

³³ The description is based on comments and recommendations of the curator to the invigilators.

installation, the metal structure began to visibly accumulate dust from the Arsenale's industrial infrastructure and from the neighbouring exhibition, which featured sand. Invigilators were instructed to clean the structure regularly and to ensure that no visitors touched it as to reduce apparent fingerprints. At the same time, they were instructed not to explicitly tell visitors not to touch the structure upon entry, as this would be impolite and risk impacting the experience of the artwork. The same justifications were given when installing a physical "do not touch" sign was proposed.

In the words of the curator, "We want visitors to interact with the structure. Not touch it." Responsibility was thus placed on the invigilators' social and emotional intelligence to simultaneously project a welcoming affect and an authoritative demeanour, so that visitors did not even attempt to touch the structure. This endeavour revealed itself to be almost impossible, especially as visitors become used to interactive exhibitions where touch is welcomed : I was only able to intervene after a visitor had already excessively touched the structure, attempting a sympathetic smile. Heatmap data tracking movement within the space primarily highlighted visitors resting individually in the corners of the room or remaining outside the metal installation. During the opening days, several visitors remarked that an aluminium structure that easily retains dust is ill-suited to the hot and desert climate of Oman, and asked in what kind of public space the piece will be installed to avoid becoming scorching to the touch. As it became increasingly evident that no placement had yet been determined, a member of the national delegation improvised a response, suggesting that it will be placed in the middle of a roundabout, despite previous promises of being a participated, lived in structure.

Participation and community thus remained ideals, fashionable themes abstracted into a curatorial statement rather than integrated into the process or material reality of the exhibition. Nevertheless, nothing prevented visitors from touching, tapping, climbing over, or crawling under the installation, much to the dismay of the national delegation, the production team, and the invigilators responsible for enforcing behavioural guidelines.

Other pavilions were more deliberate in their attempts to construct an ambitious public forum. The same year, the Austrian Pavilion named its exhibition "Agency for Better Living" and focused on urban living and the relationship between top-down and bottom-up provision of housing, comparing Austrian and Italian contexts. Curated by architects Sabine Pollak, Michael Obrist and Lorenzo Romito, a central component of the exhibition consisted of a series of talks, referred to as "assemblies" in reference to their open participation and horizontal format, organised with a range of institutional and grassroots actors, particularly from Rome, Venice and Vienna. Most of these assemblies took place within the pavilion itself, in a specially designed courtyard. Seeking to establish a public forum within the Biennale and in continuity with the previous pavilion centred on the "failed bridge" in 2023, the programme was

made visible online in advance. The assemblies were also positioned so as to be immediately visible upon entering the pavilion, often accompanied by signage indicating the topic of the day and explicitly welcoming visitors. Despite this careful planning, attendance at these seminars remained very limited. Some visitors paused to listen for a few minutes, but only one visitor decided to add to the discussion.



Figure 16 : Photograph of the courtyard of the Austrian Pavilion for the 2025 exhibition. Credits to Hertha Hurnaus for 'Agency for Better Living', courtesy of the curators.

The obstacles to creating an openly participatory seminar were evident given the pavilion's location within the Giardini. On any given day, the majority of visitors to the Giardini are on short-term visits to the city and have purchased a day ticket to experience dozens of pavilions. Encountering a local resident or a person most directly affected by the housing crises under discussion is therefore less likely within this context than elsewhere. This limitation became apparent when one of the curators invited me to assist with an assembly, graciously offering a free entry ticket in order to do so. The day-ticket format encourages fast-paced visitation and discourages engagement with long-form content, as visitors seek to maximise the value of their ticket. In 2025, the Biennale also introduced summaries of curatorial statements generated by artificial intelligence to facilitate quicker visits, arguably creating an additional barrier to discussion and the interactive creation of meaning, given artificial intelligence's tendency to produce shortcuts based on hegemonic assumptions.

Since 1930, the Giardini have also housed a pavilion dedicated to Venice itself, granting the city the opportunity to represent itself with the same symbolic importance as a nation. This pavilion holds the potential to function as a public space in the sense articulated by Atwater and Herndon (2003), through its communicative capacity to mediate hegemonic narratives by engaging with local culture. It could act

as a bridge between visitors and residents, amplify local cultural expression, allow Venetians to negotiate a collective identity on a global stage, and create meaningful opportunities for local workers.

In practice, however, the Venice Pavilion has consistently maintained only a superficial relationship to Venetian society and culture. Instead, it carefully preserves an image of the city as fertile ground for international narrative projection, investment, and capital extraction. In 2024, the exhibition titled “Domestic Sextant” explored the notion of home as a feeling detached from location. Groundedness in locality was entirely evacuated, with only one of the exhibiting artists originating from north-eastern Italy, and Venice was represented simultaneously as a liminal space and as a home for all travellers (La Biennale 2024). The 2022 edition did include artists based in Venice, yet the exhibition was titled “Alloro” (laurel), a species which is not particular to the Venetian climate, and far more typical on the western coast of Italy and other regions of the Mediterranean. The curator emphasised that local students mediated the exhibition, stating that “for us the collaboration with different local realities is fundamental” (Zabotti 2022, in La Biennale 2022b). However, this practice is far from unique, as many pavilions rely on student interns, a highly profitable arrangement allowing for wages as low as three euros per hour or no pay at all. The mayor, Luigi Brugnaro, commented that the exhibition represented Venice through its theme of femininity, stating that “Venice is a woman, heritage of every single individual” (Brugnaro 2022, in labiennale.org 2022b). Through both the exhibition and its curatorial framing, Venetian culture is simultaneously reduced to exploitative labour within the tourism economy and abstracted into a misogynistic metaphor of a woman who belongs to everyone except herself. This representation parallels the highly feminised labour force of cultural mediators and invigilators, whose agreeable performance of local hospitality conceals the harsher working conditions of the event and tourism industries, carried out by workers of all genders.

Despite the interest and potential for creating participatory and communal spaces, such functions are unlikely to be prioritised within the main *Biennale* venues. This limitation can be attributed both to the institutional structure of the *Biennale* and to its geopolitical role, which tend to privilege a separation between art, spectator, and broader social life, mirroring the binary between the sacred and the profane, and between dominant and dominated positions (Lahire 2019). The *Biennale* operates as a platform for the construction of national identity and the diffusion of soft power within the fields of art and architecture (Basualdo 2008), with Venice itself occupying a partially exceptional position.

In this context, maintaining a traditional museological approach that limits interaction between artwork and audience serves to reinforce national sovereignty and convey clear, measurable outcomes, such as visitor numbers. Basualdo describes biennials as inherently unstable, navigating between experimental artistic formats and the geopolitical imperatives that impose conventionality and professionalism. This

tension renders the conventional museological model paradoxical when confronted with the growing valorisation of artistic practices that critique arbitrary and unjust hierarchies.

The attempts to either impose or dismantle barriers to participation and appropriation, as seen in the cases of the Omani and Austrian Pavilions respectively, proved insufficient to fully achieve their intended outcomes. The extent to which the *Biennale* system and its administration can support the creation of genuinely communal spaces and shared meanings remains limited, not only by its geopolitical function but also by the governance of space and access. Nevertheless, the interactions that did occur within the exhibitions demonstrate the capacity of audiences to negotiate meaning individually, particularly when confronted with immersive and participatory formats. Such critical engagement was most evident among art and architecture professionals and children, groups more comfortable challenging meaning in contemporary art due either to professional familiarity or to a relative freedom from social norms.

These instances of meaning-making exceed mere consumption and complicate Ghorra-Gobin's notion of "private spaces open to the public" as being strictly scripted and oriented toward passive engagement. However, this form of interaction was neither widespread nor consistently welcomed, and was often perceived negatively by national delegations seeking to convey a controlled message, as well as by invigilators tasked with enforcing appropriate behaviour. To conclude this first part of the work, the Vatican Pavilion at the 2025 Architecture *Biennale* will serve as an in-depth case study, condensing several of the issues discussed thus far and providing a framework through which these questions can be jointly examined, thereby opening onto the second part of the thesis.

C. Opera Aperta, 2025 : a controversial pavilion

The Vatican Pavilion of the 2025 Architecture Biennale offers a particularly revealing case through which to examine contemporary transformations of public space in Venice. Its installation within the Santa Maria Ausiliatrice complex, a site previously hosting a public children's play library, generated significant controversy among local residents and raised fundamental questions about how publicness is defined and produced through cultural events. While both uses of the site were formally categorised as public cultural infrastructure, they mobilised radically different forms of access, participation, and collective life. Drawing on fieldwork conducted during the exhibition (attending the exhibition, a workshop, an event hosted by the refugee center nearby, speaking to different workers who have contributed to the pavilion, a representative of the parents' protest group, and in a city hall discussion of the pavilion) the analysis

examines publicness through three dimensions: accessibility, quality of interaction, and the potential for appropriation and politicisation.

The Santa Maria Ausiliatrice complex consists of several buildings organised around an inner cloister and historically brought together multiple uses: residential housing, a general practitioner's office, a migrant reception centre for families, and the ludoteca La Luna nel Pozzo. The ludoteca played a central role in structuring local life, offering activities such as cooking and language classes for children while also supporting parents through shared childcare practices. One local parent explained that its closure resulted in the loss of an essential support network, as informal arrangements of mutual childcare had become part of everyday life.

The ludoteca closed in 2019 after sustaining severe water damage during an episode of Acqua Alta. A citizen-led crowdfunding initiative followed, and together with public funding, approximately 200,000 euros were allocated for in-depth renovations (VeneziaToday 2021). The space reopened in 2022, although renovations were minimal. A former employee publicly described the conditions as unsafe, with rainwater entering the building, a claim later confirmed in my conversation with the chief engineer of renovations, who stated that only one room had been renovated. Later that same year, the ludoteca closed again, officially citing the need for further renovations. Parents were informed via email that the ludoteca will reopen at an unspecified future date.

In 2024, the Vatican Dicastery for Culture and Education addressed a letter to Paola Mar, councillor of Heritage and University of the Venice Municipality, asking for aid in finding a new space for their 2025 pavilion and specifying the intention to host activities of social interest, as they claim to have done on occasion of their 2024 pavilion located inside the women's prison. The Dicastery is offered use of the church of Santa Maria Ausiliatrice. While the dicastery asks for use of the infrastructure for the year 2025, with "possible eventual extension into 2026", the municipality replies with an offer of contract up to December 2028, citing the Municipality's interest to consolidate their relations with the Vatican state and the public interest of the Dicastery's actions : "the City Council has assigned... to the Holy See, confirming, in the spirit of mutual exchange of project ideas, the attention to be paid to the use of spaces for children, vulnerable people and the elderly, inviting the Dicastery for Culture and Education of the Holy See to strengthen the activities aimed at them, corresponding to the public interest needs of the Municipality of Venice, with moments of aggregation and socio-cultural and educational activities, also involving other local entities."

The contract of concession of use to the Vatican demonstrates that the space was given for only 7 thousand euros annually, and that rehabilitation costs are to be paid by the occupants, (although in part deducted from the price of rent). The condition of use of the space is that it is kept open to the public. Besides the closed-doors decision between the ministry and the dicastery, no other public offices were consulted, and both the head of the office for Heritage and the office for Urbanism reported in interviews they were surprised by the news. There was no variation in the city urban masterplan necessary : the Pavilions' exercises are under the same category of the Ludoteca, as public "cultural infrastructure" (Interview with Omar Tommasi 2025).

The Holy See nominated three Spanish architects to curate the pavilion, Marina Otero Verzier, Tatiana Bilbao and Anna Puigjaner, who are joined by Giovanna Zabotti, a close friend of Paola Mar acting as a liaison to the local realities, equally curator of several previous Venice pavilions. According to one of the architect-curators, the biggest challenge in designing the pavilion was to allow the structure to pass health and safety checks so it may in fact be open to the public, given its poor condition. In such a short time frame, there was no choice but to cover the walls with scaffolding and white plastic sheets. This limitation was integrated into the theme of the Pavilion: titled "Opera Aperta" (open/ongoing work), it highlighted the place of care and participation in maintaining physical and social heritage.

The pavilion aimed to create a space of encounter, sociability and transparency. Warm yellow lights are used to give the scaffolding a welcoming, almost ethereal character, and artistic conservation professionals can be seen away at work on the main church's altar. Multiple rooms are dedicated to holding artistic conservation workshops of materials such as wood veneers, ancient tiles and marble, in the spirit of making heritage conservation practice accessible to all and preserving potentially lost knowledge. These workshops are held by Venice International University, hosted twice a week and can be booked through reservation online. The room with access to the cloyster, the only one which had been entirely renovated and fixed with radiators, is fitted with a large table, chairs, and a bar which is used more or less once a day to host a small coffee or tea after workshops, as well as the occasional conference. The door to the cloister is kept open during opening hours, giving visitors a look into the historic architecture and daily life of the space. Throughout the different rooms are different musical instruments, which are put at the disposal of students from the conservatory too book to have rehearsals during opening time. The invigilators are all young students who carry out compulsory unpaid internships through an agreement between the Ca' Foscari university and the Vatican Pavilion, similarly as in the Venice Pavilion in 2022 and many other pavilions of that same year.

The location of the exhibition was announced by local newspapers. Once local parents learnt that the ludoteca will not reopen and instead become an exhibition space, the social network of the parents using the ludoteca was reactivated in indignation : to make matters worse, a local official commented that the ludoteca had become unnecessary given the small number of children who had been signed up in 2022, “only” 69 (Besio, in Venezia Today 2025) despite it had been open only for a few months and in between Covid-19 lockdowns. A few of the parents began collecting signatures and contacting journalists to make their case for the reopening of the ludoteca instead. On the opening day of the exhibition, parents went to protest in front of the ludoteca in the public street and continued collecting signatures for their petition. According to some of the curators, the protest was the first time they had learnt of the previous usage of the Santa Maria Ausiliare complex (Bison 8 May 2025): according to the information they had been given, the complex had been empty for over a decade, as reflected in the curatorial statements of the exhibition which had already been prepared, although it is difficult to understand whether this ignorance was also true for locally-based curators. After this meeting, the curators decided to organise certain activities specific to the children of the parents of the ex-ludoteca around once every two weeks (Interview with A.). Giovanna Zabotti, the locally-based curator of the pavilion, stated to the press : “We are giving it back in a better state than when we have found it, it’s important that the city knows. It can be a space for children and youth, not a normal national pavilion” (Zabotti cited by Bison 8 May 2025). I was able to attend the opening seminar of the Pavilion, and talk to the location manager. When I asked why the municipality “gave” the space to the Holy See, he was quick to correct me : it has not been “given”, it is only temporarily granted, and remains public “in every way”.

After months of campaigning, representatives of the parents’ group were called to participate in a discussion in the city hall on the matter, in presence of elected officials including Paola Mar. Despite the parents’ sympathetic cause, the council member concluded that the case was useless : the Vatican had signed a contract for use of the space, which the city had to respect. To palliate the lack of activities for small children, the parish of San Lorenzo will be asked to host a younger public, alongside the activities which are already organised for teenagers. The representative of the parent’s group replied that this was not ideal for many parents, as the parish is farther away from children’s schools, which can be an issue for mothers having to carry prams over several bridges, not to mention the space is already small for the teenagers’ activities (Livestream of City Hall meeting 2025). As of 15/03/2026, the parish of San Lorenzo has offered certain rooms to be used as a *ludoteca*, although this has not yet been accepted as the spaces are only available part-time as they are needed for other functions such as meetings. Unconfirmed rumours state that the materials contained by the old *ludoteca* are stocked partially in the apartments of the parents, of which some live in social housing and whose contract will not be

renovated by the municipality. The group of parents is set to be received again in front of city hall on 19/03/2026 (Interview with Martini 2026).

This episode highlights competing claims to space, as well as the asymmetry in power between groups in making their claim. The Vatican's wish to create a space for social interaction (within the boundaries of the curators' aesthetic vision), the Municipality's wish to restore accessibility to the historical complex of Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, and the parents group's wish to regain a space for childcare. Closed-door decisions between the Holy See and the Municipality created a contract which allowed the Vatican and its sponsors to gain a space for its Biennale participation and soft power, while allowing the municipality to simultaneously pawn off the space and its eventual costs of renovation and management off to the Holy See, unbeknownst to them as they had been misled that the space had been empty for decades. Once the situation came afloat, the councillor to heritage Paola Mar used the existence of a contract between the Dicastery and the City to depoliticise the question of competing claims to space, presenting the Vatican's right to use as unchangeable. Finally, the parents gained limited access to the pavilion through occasional activities, but failed to achieve the reopening of the Ludoteca. The end result remains that there is an erosion of public spaces, and the public is asked to commonise even fewer spaces, as is the case for the youth center of San Lorenzo.

Paola Mar, in offering the space to the Holy See, Giovanna Zabotti, in claiming this will not be an ordinary national pavilion, and the location manager, in stating that the space remains public in every way, implicitly state that *Opera Aperta* remains a public service comparable to that of the previous *Ludoteca*. Is the use of the space comparable, and to what definition of "publicness" ?

If publicness can be defined by individuals' capacity to cohabit and interact in the diversity that constitutes the public, one could make the point that the exhibition was a more public use of the space than the ludoteca, as it was intentionally created for use by different communities instead of only families with small children. Outreach to particularly marginalised communities was central to the exhibition concept, such as with associations working with people recovering from addictions, as well as the nearby refugee center, which despite hosting many families with small children were not integrated into the activities of the ludoteca as a local mum let me know. Tourists, which consist of a major part of city users, were previously excluded from use of the ludoteca, and invigilators let me know that almost every day a different tourist will stop and make conversation with them. Although these different groups were welcomed into the space and often in a benevolent way from the curators and invigilators, interaction between these groups was only partially achieved, as is inherent to the characteristics of a national pavilion in the context of the Biennale.

The exhibition space was characterised by a solemn and meditative silence more typical of a museum than of a lived social environment. While the curators attempted to collaborate with the nearby refugee centre, by the end of my fieldwork in late August these efforts had not yet materialised. The centre did organise a celebration for World Refugee Day in the cloister and was permitted to advertise the event at the pavilion entrance, yet I was the only attendee not affiliated with the centre. Some visitors observed the event from a distance, while others expressed frustration at the presence of children playing with water guns, which disrupted their visit. The stated ambition of shared use and collective growth was thus superseded by an atmosphere of harmonious coexistence and aestheticised benevolence, reflecting the Holy See's wish to reflect its theological framework and somewhat glossing over the gritty imperfect realities and daily power struggles of commoning in contemporary cities.

This is not to suggest an absence of appropriation by visitors or residents. The exhibition evolved through interactions with visitors and residents, demonstrating a degree of reappropriation beyond the largely passive engagement typical of other Biennale pavilions. The grand pianos were frequently played by passersby without reservation, and a small number of residents began attending workshops regularly without prior booking, often with the tacit approval of invigilators. However, these moments of appropriation remained contingent upon the discretion and benevolence of staff, and my own sense of freedom to engage with the space varied according to the perceived attitude of the person stationed at the entrance desk.

To imagine the space as public in the sense of a collection of public services is equally misleading. Visitors were integrated simultaneously as participants and as part of the spectacle, as all activities served an aesthetic function within the exhibition. Musical instruments were available only through a booking system for conservatory students, enabling free concerts by highly skilled individuals rather than functioning as a broadly accessible public good. Workshops were introductory and non-progressive, designed to provide an experiential encounter with conservation practices rather than to transmit sustained or specialised knowledge. Although most workshop slots were reserved for local associations in an effort to build ties with local communities, the session I attended functioned as a team-building activity for a student association for cultural consultancy, hence already interested in the Biennale's professional milieu. Workshops were not designed specifically for children, and the occasional activities organised for the former ludoteca users did not meaningfully replace the services previously offered. The workshops focused on conservation practices, reinforcing the primacy of Venice's physical heritage. Venice International University, which organised the workshops, is itself a contested actor in processes of touristification, offering costly, short-term programmes to international students and operating from a

privatised island campus in the lagoon. This positioning reflects broader dynamics of heritage privatisation within the city. Although offering a number of activities, the convergence point was to offer a narrative of diocesan wealth and harmony, both on behalf of the Holy See and its primary sponsor, banking group *Intesa San Paolo*. Similar as with other initiatives to 'save Venice' which are not grounded in daily civic life but rather a product of an external idea of the city, the image of Venice and its built environment, rather than the people of Venice that make it, takes center stage.

This analysis is not meant to overstate what a pavilion is concretely able to realise in a few months, but rather bring forth the structural difference of a *Biennale* event in comparison to a public cultural service, despite the insistence to conflate the two by public authorities and some pavilion workers. A *Biennale* pavilion is created to be short term, creating a series of social ties in a specific place which will quickly be replaced : either as a visitor exists and naturally does not return, or as the pavilion closes entirely and its activities come to an end. This is in contrast to public services, which are generally created to be largely accessible by a larger slice of the population and over longer periods of time. International curators are present only intermittently, often during high-profile events, while the daily functioning of the pavilion relies on precarious local labour. Meanwhile, the local curator - meant to be a bridge between realities - is closely embedded in Venetian politics, and actors notorious for promoting unsustainable cultural policies. This case study can instead demonstrate how cultural policy can be instrumentalised to pacify dynamics of urban change (or in this case, it failed to do so). Within the context of one population being replaced by another (in this case, working class locals by tourists) spaces of reciprocal dialogue and representation not initiated by the more dispossessed group tends to relegate this group to a nostalgic framing, suggesting they already belong to the past. The argument of art as a universal social good, or that private and foreign investments will be used in a publicly useful way, serves to camouflage power relations and thus depoliticise social conflict. To the dismay of the Municipality, this repeated formula did not work this time.

Although the Vatican pavilion had attracted a more diverse collection of city users, it was unsuccessful in the creation of a public. This is unlike when the space hosted the ludoteca, catering only to families of small children and staff : this group of people was able to create social ties and eventually mobilise as a network when their space of sociability became threatened. In the theorisation of EPOPs, the pavilion reads as a space which creates a harmonious context for sociability, but few ideas of publicity; a landscape of leisure and consumption, rather than contact and participation.

This case complicates Ghorra-Gobin's concept of privately owned public spaces. While her theorisation sheds light on the effects of globalisation and private actors on public accessibility and the eventual

creation of a place for the socialisation of a unitary 'public', in this case study the realisation of belonging to a politicised collective does not take place inside the space more prone to wider diversity (the Pavilion), but rather one almost exclusive to a certain group (parents of small children, in the Ludoteca). The emergence of a public is dynamic with the space that it inhabits, the group of parents becoming politicised at the moment that its space and resources are taken away. This is closer to Don Mitchell's (2003) conception of public space, where public space arises through struggle between different publics and the very 'call for public space'. Although Ghorra-Gobin calls for an effective politicisation of public space by local and national governments, the political decisions made regarding Venice's public heritage have instead positioned such spaces as instruments of international investment and diplomacy, serving the interests of local and national bourgeois and ruling classes. The result is the production of juridically public spaces that are consistently granted to private and foreign entities, to the detriment of everyday local social and political life, which the public administration claims to represent. In both cases of private and public jurisdiction over the space, the capacity of appropriation of the space allowed to members of civil society is very low, as both public and private entities begin to work in unison. The creation of alternative narratives of space in the interest of civil society do not seem to arise thanks to the public or private administration of the space, but rather despite it and in response to it ; this is not only in the case of the parents' group for the ludoteca, but also in the case of *Forum Futuro Arsenale* and *Salviamo San Piero e Sant'Anna*. As per Don Mitchell (2003, p. 35) public discourse develops not because it *can*, but because it *has to*, and in this process, even the least likely sites for political representation become the most important, instead of necessarily in those predesigned for interaction.

Beginning from a juridical definition of publicness, this first part of the thesis has developed multiple understandings of public space, including etic definitions proposed by scholars and emic definitions articulated by specific publics, often shaped by the spaces they are able to access and inhabit. The second part will continue this investigation by moving away from a top-down approach that treats public space as a pre-given container for use. Instead, it adopts a framework in which public spaces are produced by specific publics engaged in ongoing struggles for the right to the city.

Part 2. How do we make it public ? Practices for publicness



Figure 17. Graffiti reading “Fanculo la Biennale” (“F*** the Biennale”). Calle Lunga dell’Accademia dei Nobili, Giudecca. Image taken by author, 2025.

In the previous part of the thesis, we demonstrate how both private and public space carry capacities to create convivial spaces of interaction, although each space attracts different degrees of accessibility and conditionality to interaction and appropriation. Pavilions may create spaces for rest, interaction and dialogue, although only within expectations and values defined by property owners and organisers, usually representative of groups with major political and economic influence. On the other hand, public spaces are increasingly kept in poor conditions, forcing individuals towards private spaces, or often catered only to specific target groups, with a degree of politicisation and appropriation arising only when this public space is in danger. In the two cases, the production of multiple separate publics, rather than a unitary politicised public, is visible. This brings us farther from the theorisation of Ghorra Gobin's ideal public space, delivered by a public authority and allowing for interaction in diversity, and closer to Don Mitchell and Kurt Iveson's ideas of multiple publics and the consolidation of public space driven by these publics themselves. If the creation and quality of public spaces is neglected by the public administration, how does one make space public, and for whom ?

The second part of the thesis, will first delve into the heterogenous constellation of publics created by and surrounding the *Biennale*, as well as their capacity to represent themselves and create a claim to the city. Which publics are invited, excluded or generated by *Biennale* events, and what kinds of participation is permitted, or enacted, between consumption, detournement and dissent? Through the analysis of several initiatives aiming to claim the space created by the *Biennale* for redistribution - both by pavilions and by citizens, both local and global, mobilising both cultural representation and material repossession - will bring us to a provocative question. Faced with different initiatives attempting and often failing to create public spaces for meeting and debate, does physical space even matter anymore ? Finally, the question of how the *Biennale* can reimagine itself as 'public' is asked.

Chapter 4. Social life in the city of the Biennale

In the diversity of its format, from archival exhibitions to screenings to public installations to conferences to workshops to internships to artist residencies, the *Biennale* concentrates a constellation of different demographics. The composition of these demographics is shaped by differentiated forms of labour, leisure, mobility, cultural capital, and access to certain spaces, without the wish or capacity to be exhaustive. This section will work to understand what kinds of publics are generated and invited by the Biennale, as well as their relationship to the Biennale and to the city : how to represent themselves, and what is their claim to the city. An effort is made to work past a reductive binary of a local working class against international tourists, as populist media and politics have a tendency to appeal to. Instead, the Biennale reveals a layered ecology of publics, with uneven access to capital, visibility and space within the historic city. While this section will primarily focus on Don Mitchell's (2003 and 2006) understanding of the constitution of publics, his framework will be questioned and contrasted with Kurt Iveson's (2006) framework in the following sections.

A. Labour and Leisure

Among those working within the Biennale ecosystem are invigilators, technicians, artists, curators, financiers, students, interns, food service and hygiene workers, researchers, freelancers, architects, scenographers, location managers, artisans, small businesses... (Baravalle, 2020)

This section will be heavily based on qualitative data collected during fieldwork. This has allowed for the understanding of certain groups underrepresented in academic literature, although all findings were crossreferenced with other sources, such as surveys, academic and newspaper articles. The fieldwork which has amounted to this section forced me to reflect upon my positioning in the field. A born Venetian, with local ties to family and friends, speaking Italian fluently and working for a Venice-based company, this has allowed me to get to know people who live in the city long-term. Simultaneously, given I was raised with a strong international identity, fluent in English, and without a strong ready-built social network, I was able to meet and make connections with people visiting Venice for a short period of time, and communicate well with my superiors at work and their peers. This does not mean that I am a 'fly on the wall' with no influence on the situation unfolding in which I am participant, or even less had a total view of "both sides of the coin", (international *Biennale* worker and Venetian local), as there are more

than two : for example, my fieldwork heavily lacked perspectives from locally-based migrant working communities. Furthermore, the situations I was able to find myself in were heavily influenced by my interests, identity and consumption habits : for example, my morning coffee before work, or the glass of wine I can accept from my boss and their friends. The acknowledgement of this positionality underscores the need to cross-reference my findings with available resources, as well as maintain the hypothesis that my findings are partial.

Although understanding labour and capital relations within our fieldwork is made complex given the specifics of the cultural event sector, and especially in Venice, a city which has overtime been relegated to the function of leisure. Large funds are held by few public and private international foundations and often distributed through undisclosed and informal rationales. Labour disguises itself as leisure and vice versa, obscuring tourism from productive labour, and social etiquette imposes the dissimulation of precariousness in order to maintain a relaxed space for networking and commerce. Networking is integral to labour, in the consolidation of working cultures and its participants, establishing a framework for future projects and the exchange of capital. The *Biennale* and its related events become a place where economic and social value is produced, although with little 'trickle-down' effects.

Such dynamics are blatant in the first days of the *Biennale*, as pavilions organise press releases and opening parties, although continues through events, conferences, workshops and parties scattered over the six months of duration of the festival. The Omani Pavilion held a press release the second day of the opening of the *Biennale*, while access to the Arsenale was still limited to press and invited professionals. The curator and her team, the Omani Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth (equally son of the Sultan) and part of his delegation, the PR agent, the founders of the art management company and both invigilators were present to welcome the press, followed by a brief social with Omani sweets and coffee for visitors. An official programme listed all of the vernissages of the official Pavilions, to facilitate press coverage but also to allow professionals to network efficiently during their visit. Given my ease in English and basic formal Arabic, I was able to become familiar with the Omani ministry's delegation during the set up. The delegation even offered me to introduce the Sultan's son during the press conference, which I had to decline and concede to my superior so he could publicise the art management company's role in the pavilion's creation. During the social portion of the press conference, I was intermittently in charge of catering and cultural mediation of the exhibition. Away from the catering table, a friend from the Omani Ministry introduced me briefly to the Minister and integrated me into their conversation. Only a few moments later, upon seeing my invigilator badge, a woman asked me about the artistic installation and my role, engaging a short conversation until I mentioned that the delegation was just behind me : she immediately asked to be introduced, and began to explain to the Minister her deep admiration for Oman and its culture, as she had been in the country several times in between playing concerts in Saudi Arabia,

in fact she had been looking to eventually play in Oman as well. As I went back to the catering table, I saw them exchange contact information.

One of many similar anecdotes, as a logistical worker in the arts events industry, one often finds themselves becoming infrastructure to support the consolidation of a professional network. The Biennale creates over six months of opportunities for networking events, that for certain industries based on social capital become imperative to participate in, as professionals pay out of pocket to arrive in Venice and meet their future coworkers, funders or commissioners. Exclusive conferences and parties are organised in privatised historic palazzos and even entire islands, as the participants take on consumption patterns comparable to the tourism and leisure industry (for example, staying in STRs such as AirBnBs) although somewhat absolved of the negative label of tourist and judgement which exists within elite educated classes which feel deeply concerned of the fate of Venice in regards to the tourism industry. In other work contexts, an artist told me about how lucky she felt to stay a week in Venice to install her piece, as she felt she was living the city like other workers and not just as a tourist. In another social work event, in a group conversation concerning Venice and depopulation, a foreign-based gallery and multiple AirBnB owner interrupted and talked over me multiple times, explaining the impact of mass tourism, despite knowing that I was a local Venetian and had been researching tourism dynamics in Venice for over a year.

These work-full events do not make Venice a place of productive labour. At the collateral pavilion I worked at, hosted at a gallery which will be anonymised as S.V., the opening party was reserved only for people upon invitation. The owners of the space, the curator and the exhibiting artists and architects were all based in Germany. This was also true for the invitees, even the presentations and speeches took place in German. Although many locally-based people were also in the gallery : the invigilators, the catering team, the sound and light technicians, the architect who renovated the gallery, and one of the founders of the art management companies, who was officially listed as co-curator although was relegated to security roles at the door. My task for the evening was to answer questions about the exhibition, but especially to let people know where the toilets are. I eventually began a conversation with one of the artists exhibiting at the gallery, who was kind enough to mistake my working position as not having anyone to talk to : in our conversation, he was first surprised to find out I had no ties to Germany, and then to find out I was neither an artist, nor a journalist, nor an architect. The gallery was a place of consolidation of a transnational German and Germanophone working community, often working from Germany to create projects which will eventually travel abroad, largely supported and executed by a local main d'oeuvre.

This analysis is concomitant with the proposed analysis of the tourism economy in Part 1, Chapter 2, C. Venice's built heritage, representing 'dead' past labour, creates an attractive destination not only for tourism, but equally for work networks to consolidate. This analysis can be extended by connecting it to Baudrillard's concept of symbolic value, which complements the Marxian concepts of use and exchange value. Contemporary western industrial societies are "networked" into information cultures, which allocate "symbolic" value to commodities by conferring status to them, producing a "fetish" : objects which are produced uniquely for their symbolic value (Baudrillard 1976, 1981 ; Koch and Elmore 2006), and are thus assigned a 'sign value' (the value of the commodity given its social significance or status.. Baudrillard explores the economy of the contemporary arts world through notions of symbolic and sign³⁴ value (1981), as art markets constitute prime examples of how economic value and exchanges are dependent on constantly changing symbolic environments which generate and assign symbolic status to objects. Venice itself can be analysed as a symbolic environment : exhibiting in the Venice Biennale logarithmically boosts the price of an artwork as it implies its superior quality, and exhibiting in Venice suggests a relationship to the Biennale. Working social networks in Venice, generated around the Biennale, equally imply being part of an 'in-group' of the best art workers present worldwide, thus not only creating access to financing of future projects but also boosting market value of said projects, which are *recognised* to have a higher quality. By analysing the use of Venetian city space as a venue for the constitution of international working networks, Venetian art event logistics³⁵ live labour, by reanimating the dead body of Venice's built environment through the production of spectacle, becomes a factory floor to the production of international symbolic value. The attribution of sign value will eventually animate other economies ; with pockets of massive capital gains for those with the instruments to domesticate the spectacle, and far more exploitative live labour distributed across the globe to keep it alive.

B. Permanently short-term

Understanding labour and capital relations within our fieldwork is not only made complex by blurring the lines between labour and leisure, but also due to the diversity of work and work contexts which are

³⁴ Sign value is the value given to an object because of its social significance or status.

³⁵ In this context, intended as everything from art event management, location scouting, catering, exhibition design, exhibition technician, hygiene work, invigilators ... all work which is meant to support, and not design, the content of an art event.

produced by the Biennale, which heavily relies on the externalisation of labour, not only due to foreign participations, but also between locally based workers³⁶.

The structure of the Biennale accentuates the superimposition of different nationalities and jurisdictions, especially given many pavilions choose to hire at least a small part of the team on-site to facilitate local installation, meaning two individuals doing the same tasks may be subjected to different conditions. In one 2023 Pavilion in the Giardini³⁷, two foreign students and one Italian student opened the pavilion daily and ensured its daily functioning. While the foreign students held contracts with the architecture agency curating that year's pavilion, the Italian student's contract was created directly between the Pavilion's local entity and his university. While the foreign students were ensured weekends, specific hours, housing and a salary, the Italian student worked for free and regularly on weekends and late into the evenings. These kinds of discrepancies are highly visible in the conditions of invigilators, who are tasked with the daily functioning of the pavilions, that I will discuss below using a data collected on the field in 2025 and cross-referencing these findings with a survey by initiative of collectives *Biennialocene*, *Mi Riconosci* and trade union *Adl Cobas* in 2024³⁸, as reported by journalist and activist Bison (2024).

Many Venetian universities organise internship contracts with pavilions, offering students who will work for very little pay : in my 2025 fieldwork, I reported some students paid 3 € per hour or often for free, as is the case for compulsory internships which are part of many university diplomas. Besides these accords, there are several major cultural agencies (*Art Events*, *Venice Art Factory*, *Venice Events*, *Nexave*, *Solmarino+*, *Exhibition Care*, *CoopCulture*...) operating in Venice which organise logistical services and including invigilators ; the locally organised survey reports over 60 work environments in between the 126 respondents. In my fieldwork, I found most invigilators at the Architecture Biennale had salaries around 6 or 7 € per hour (approx 1 000 - 1 100 € monthly for a full time contract). The 2024 survey reported 70 % of respondents earned less than 1 200 € monthly, of which 50 % earned less than 1 000 €, of which the majority were short-term contracts although also free lance (*Partita Iva*), civil service

³⁶ To refresh our memories, it is estimated that thousands of people work within the Biennale ecosystem (Bison, 2024) although the Foundation only reported 213 employees in 2024 (Biennale Bilancio 2024). This is relatively new in the history of the Biennale, given its recent change to a private Foundation with public controls.

³⁷ Details are removed to preserve anonymity

³⁸ The survey inquired about all Biennale events and not only the Art and Architecture Biennale (Cinema, Music, Theatre...), so direct comparisons need to be scrutinised : for this reason, qualitative data collected on the ground remains the primary source of information. The biggest discrepancy between Art and Architecture Biennale and other events are the duration : Art and Architecture sessions last several months while other events tend to be a few weeks to a month. Having worked both at the Biennale Cinema, the shortest-lasting event at approx 12-14 days, and the Biennale Architettura, the most long-term alongside the Biennale Arte at approx 6 months, I attempt to draw from this experience to differentiate the data when needed. The survey contained 20 questions, of which 19 close-ended questions and one open-ended question. 126 workers responded, a significant number given around one thousand workers are assumed to work around the Biennale (sample size approx 12,6 % of the total population).

internships, university internships. Of those who have a lawful contract³⁹ more than half respondents do not know which type of contract they have. Most workers are part-time, although many report working over 40 hours weekly (Bison 22 November 2024).

These roles are not only precarious, given the seasonal nature of the work, but also offer little upwards prospects despite often requiring a related university degree, and many workers are re-employed each season to then have to find another occupation for the months the Biennale is not open. Just next door, or even in the same pavilion, other national pavilions may organise for youth to travel to Venice especially to work as invigilators, under different frameworks. In 2025, Irish Pavilion hired students for one to two months at a time for the rate of about 1400 € to 1500 € per month for approximately three days of work per week, while covering flights from Ireland and a shared apartment in Venice. The same year, the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities organised month-long “volunteering” periods, offering housing, flights as well as 450 BHD (approximately 1 000 €) per month for basic necessities. The UK organised groups of students to arrive in Venice in provided-for apartments from a few weeks to a month, sharing their time in between invigilator tasks and producing research on Venice and the Biennale.

The experience and positionality of international compared to local invigilators is extremely different, as are often their sociabilities. Locally based invigilators often live outside of Venice itself, as a consequence of the high cost of rent and the low salaries offered by the line of work. It is not rare for Italian-speaking invigilators to socialise and take breaks together, and over my fieldwork I found that many conversations eventually surrounded the contracts and working conditions. The *Biennale* represents an opportunity of work in an interesting field, although the exploitative conditions are highly apparent. In spite of this, local attempts to unify the workforce have not been very successful, an effect of the high turnover rate of workers and the competitiveness of the field. Activist at *Salé Docks*, curator and researcher Marco Baravalle has stated in our interview:

“With *Mi Riconosci*, we were working to create a general strike of culture... In the field of the arts, there are bodies of work that are harder to mobilise, because it is an individualised sector, a sector made of ‘self-entrepreneurs’, and a sector in which being recognised professionally is very important... Obviously, it is also a very precarious and competitive environment, so striking means potentially losing an

³⁹ In Italy, contracts are negotiated through trade unions specific to one’s sector of work : as there are multiple trade unions, there are different contracts possible for the same position. Although this generally does not make labour negotiations easier on the workers’ end. There are many minority trade unions which are able to create lawful contracts which are overly complex for laymen to understand offering few real benefits, and in the cultural sector many workers are offered contracts made for other sectors of work (eg, “shopkeeping”, “multiservices”), as was my personal experience on the field. These practices are sometimes called “pirate contracts”.

opportunity, putting oneself in a negative light, and in a position in which you can be easily substituted by someone who is behind you and can take your job for less." (Interview with Baravalle, December 2025)

The Biennale Foundation has repeatedly rejected responsibility for exploitative working conditions and especially by those not employed directly by the foundation (such as in response to the 2024 survey ; Bison 22 November 2024) despite the current generalised labour practices are a direct consequence of the foundations' governance under president Paolo Baratta. Between 2009 and 2016, several campaigns of outsourcing and new recruitment were able to purge the Foundation of "older, less qualified, unionized workers, making space for younger, more flexible, more qualified and not unionized labor force" (Baravalle 2020).

Many young people may see work in cultural institutions as a positive alternative to working in the tourism industry, thus having a less negative impact on the city. Although the lack of worker solidarity within the cultural sector has already been identified by authors such as Zukin (1995), she observes that arts and culture workers are more likely to normalise precarious working environments as part of working in a compelling field of work.

The same reality of normalised exploitation, few opportunities and exclusion from living in the historic city is not shared by international invigilators. Working at the Biennale is often packaged into a formative work-holiday for young people at the start of their career, an opportunity to network in exchange for working part-time at a pavilion, and often with more privileges than local workers with full-time, long-term contracts. Depending on the pavilion, the invigilators will usually be hosted in apartments inside insular Venice, which are converted to STRs after the end of the Biennale season. International invigilators will usually be more integrated into the exhibition production process, given they are hired directly by the curatorial team and not through a subcontractor. These participants tend to form tight-knit, homogeneous cosmopolitan communities, largely drawn from similar social backgrounds and predominantly from the Global North, with little overlap with local workers due to different temporalities of arriving at the Biennale and language differences. Overall, consumption and lifestyle patterns are easily comparable to tourists, a vacation which is made possible in exchange for part-time labour at a pavilion. The detachment from local networks and dynamics is somewhat addressed by certain programmes, for example the Great Britain Pavilion which hosts students in exchange for research projects related to Venice and the British Pavilion, although it is through these projects that the unrooted nature of the student-workers and the programme was the most evident : with little time to make contact with their research field, international invigilators' group chats on social media were spammed several times a week with surveys to 'send to any Venetians you may know' [paraphrase].

The comparison of international and locally based invigilators is useful in understanding the precarious nature of working at the Biennale, as well as the skewed distribution of capital within creative industries. Most students or early career workers taking on invigilator work are precarious themselves in their own home country, although through short-term work programmes are able to enjoy an expensive vacation in historic Venice ; meanwhile, local workers continue to have a precarious role and are usually forced to live outside of Venice and commute back, holding a more limited access to the city, its spaces and its economic opportunities.

Another body of workers which is temporarily 'imported' into Venice for the time of the festival are technicians. While there are several locally based exhibition technology companies (WeExhibit...) which are contracted directly from pavilions, the Biennale Foundation itself hires a great part of its exhibition technicians from nearby cities (Padova, Verona, Vicenza...) for its collective exhibitions. Several dozens of technicians are employed and housed collectively, creating parallel and tight-knit sociabilities and even political engagement : in 2025, exhibition technicians hired by the Biennale collectively participated in a crowdfunding campaign for humanitarian aid in Gaza through the selling of t-shirts with the inscription "Tecnici Antifa"⁴⁰, often wearing these shirts to work. Although it is unclear whether this engagement also extended to technicians not hired directly by the Biennale. In my fieldwork I noticed that the relationship to the Foundation seems to be a point of distinction between not locally-based workers (hired by the Biennale for seasonal contracts) and locally-based workers (hired by arts management companies working directly with pavilions and for longer term contracts). When I asked two locally-based technicians what they made of working with the Biennale, they immediately corrected me, in a tone suggesting that there is a moral difference : they do not work for the Biennale, but for the Pavilion.

After hours, many technicians met at the cultural center of the local chapter of *Rifondazione Comunista*, a splinter group political party emerging from the *Italian Communist Party* in 1991. Named "Sette Martiri", this cultural center has become an after-work favourite given its closeness to both the Arsenale and Giardini venues and cheap drinks, having brought pallets from unpacking exhibitions to improvise seating in the public streets. Although some technicians, when asked about their choice of bar, demonstrate a proletarian self-identification, the party *Rifondazione Comunista* has lost political relevance in Venetian political discourse, and the cultural center has become more of a social center for seniors to pass the time in company. When I asked one of the volunteers at the bar how he felt about the cultural center becoming an after-work bar for Biennale workers and what this means for *Rifondazione Comunista*, he replied "I get along with everyone, just don't talk to me about politics".

⁴⁰ "Antifascist technicians"

There seems to be a strong tradition of political affiliation within the art technician work culture. Although this line of work, such as many others in the arts, becomes increasingly subjected to outsourcing and short-term contracts, as generated by the Biennale Foundation and comparable to invigilator outsourcing between 2009 and 2016. As worker mobility becomes a prerequisite for labour, instead of maintaining long-term workers in loco, the Biennale hires workers through short-term contracts which will leave the city as soon as the event season ends. This has not stopped technicians from protecting their labour rights, although the coordination takes place at a regional level (through groups such as *Maestranze dello spettacolo - Veneto*) and, for non-locally based technicians, with little crossover to a larger fight for the right to the city.

Further complicating the relationship between local and global mobilities, class, labour, and the right to the city are internal divisions among Venetians themselves, as well as the city's heavy reliance on immigrant labour. Framing Venetians solely as victims of tourism obscures longstanding class hierarchies within the city. Wealthier Venetians who own property or capital often profit directly from tourism, through short-term rentals, owning a small business or employment in the cultural sector. Meanwhile, newer residents (and including foreign residents, but with higher economic capital) may arrive with an aestheticised vision of Venice that ultimately reinforces its touristification, even within associations and foundations aimed at "saving" the city (Minoia 2018), all the while this population of wealthy neo-residents may be acclaimed for their "choice" to be Venetian and fight for the preservation of its physical heritage when compared to previous Venetians who have "abandoned" the city to tourism, entirely camouflaging the economic and social reasons for which a person may decide or be forced to leave. The flattening of the Venetian population into a single public who is homogeneously oppressed by tourism and international capital is a deceptive rhetoric, which is recurring in episodes related to the Biennale, for example in the case of the Vatican Pavilion, where engaging the Municipality and local curator to create a socially useful space resulted in the Pavilion being instrumentalised to further erode public services in the city.

To sustain the tourism economy's demand for low-wage labour, a new proletariat has emerged at the margins of the lagoon (where there are more public services and including affordable housing), commuting daily into Venice and leaving at the end of the workday. Migrant workers (such as from Romania, Albania, Bangladesh, Moldavia, China, Morocco and Ukraine) constitute a significant portion of this workforce (Fabrucci and Della Puppa 2022), including within the Biennale itself, particularly in catering, logistical, and cleaning services. There is overlap in migrant labour and local student labour especially in the Biennale, although more so related to invigilator and management roles. as promoted by several international masters' courses in tourism and cultural management which are open to enroll with no limit to the number of students, with mandatory unpaid internships as part of the programme,

effectively providing the tourism industry with a large qualified workforce competing to work for free. The positioning of immigrant workers as proletarians in the Venetian context challenges populist narratives of a city *invaded* or *emptied* by foreigners, confusing tourism with labour, revealing the xenophobic roots of many such claims. Immigrant workers are treated as non-Venetians twice over: first, because of their foreign origin, and secondly, given the tendency to live outside historic Venice. This is despite immigrant labour, constituting a “structural component of the local socio-economic context” (*ibid.*). This condition of subalternity produces a relationship to Venice and the Biennale as places of work rather than of life or appropriation, and often excludes immigrant workers from civic movements advocating for the right to the city, and including being rarely represented within civic movements related to the Biennale and its labour and environmental practices. Unfortunately, such distinctions can also be reproduced in research when not sufficiently reflected upon: as immigrant workers were not my primary research focus, my ethnographic engagement with this group remains limited, including to what degree and according to what criteria sociabilities and publics are constructed.

Overall, it seems that the *Biennale* has worked as an instrument for urban development in a dynamic consistent with the intentions stated already at the beginning of the 20th century. Through low wages and precarious labour, working classes are pushed to the mainland. Meanwhile, insular Venice becomes a container for elite cosmopolitan tourism and trade, which relies on temporary influxes of labour to keep it alive. International artists, curators, students, invigilators, publicists, and so forth, are able to live out a decadent Venetian fantasy for a couple weeks or months at a time, in conditions of labour dissimulated in leisure. Hygiene, logistical, catering, security, invigilators and so forth based in the mainland or region are imported daily (or for a few months, in the case of technicians) and expected to leave as soon as the work day or season ends. This makes appropriation of the historic city more complex for working publics, although does not exclude all political engagement from taking place inside the Art and Architecture Biennale, or insular Venice as an extension.

C. The Biennale's political communities

The sociology of many working publics of the *Biennale*, their geographic distance and temporary proximity to the historic city, has not meant that publics have abandoned the creation of public claims to the Biennale or its spaces. This section will analyse for whom the *Biennale* does offer a place for self expression and negotiation with public discourse, (what participation is “permitted”) borrowing from and discussing Don Mitchell's theories of public space.

National pavilions frequently present politicised themes that are marginalised or difficult to articulate in everyday urban space. The Biennale administration remains relatively disengaged from pavilion content, intervening primarily on technical matters such as spatial occupation and energy consumption. This governance structure allows certain forms of political discourse to circulate under the protection of institutional legitimacy.

In 2025, the Lebanese Pavilion was titled “The Land Remembers” and curated by Collective for Architecture Lebanon (CAL). The installation addressed ecocide as both consequence and instrument of Israeli imperialist expansion across the Levant, calling for action through the signing of a petition. In a global art context where explicit opposition to Israeli colonial violence has been widely censored, the pavilion stands out as politically courageous. Yet this critique was partially mediated through contemporary artistic frameworks, reflecting the necessity of translating political struggle into an aesthetic and discursive language legible to Western art institutions. While working in the Omani pavilion, two of the curators of the Lebanese pavilion came looking for the Omani curator, because they found it politically necessary for Arab curators and professionals to collaborate and work towards greater representation in the global arts discourse.

The *Biennale* here functions as a platform through which certain political claims may enter international public discourse. At the same time, national participation constitutes a form of state-backed self-representation. Because of political and economic struggles in Lebanon, the Pavilion had to be entirely crowdfunded by private Lebanese sponsors, demonstrating how the presence of Lebanon and the message of the Pavilion was deemed politically necessary by many individuals (Fakharany 2025). The Lebanese Pavilion not only articulated opposition to Israeli violence but also positioned Lebanon as an ally in broader Arab political coalitions resisting Western hegemony. These representational acts, however, are made possible by contracts, rent, and institutional recognition rather than by contestation over space itself. Access to pavilion space is secured through pre-authorised institutional arrangements backed by state or corporate capital. There is little risk involved in occupying these spaces, and no challenge posed to the *Biennale*’s spatial order, labour relations, or governance structures.

What takes place is therefore not a struggle over space, but a negotiation over meaning : political activity becomes cultural content which can be consumed before walking over to the next pavilion. Political expression is permitted so long as it remains contained within the architectural, temporal, and administrative boundaries of the *Biennale*. This dynamic is exemplified by the 2023 Austrian Pavilion, designed by collective AKT and architect Hermann Czech and titled “Participation”, which proposed to create a pathway between the interior of the pavilion and the public street on the other side of the venue’s exterior walls, granting passerbys free entry to a room of the pavilion, a symbolic act meant to

contest and highlight the Biennale's privatising effects on Venice. The initial proposal was to break through the walls to create a doorway, although the proposal was blocked given the wall's heritage status. The curators answered with another proposal, to create a lightweight bridge which could still connect the pavilion with the public street without damaging the structure, which was also rejected by the Biennale administration, citing technical land-use and security reasons (despite comparable infrastructures having existed previously). The resulting half-built bridge became the pavilion's central exhibit, functioning as an accusation against the institution's refusal to allow even minimal reconfigurations of access (Burgos May 11 2023; Santos September 19 2023) The *Biennale* will tolerate political gestures in the form of symbolic critique, but will strictly limit intervention on spatial arrangements.

Again, the Biennale is able to integrate politicised claims into controversial content for the years' exhibition. Although political discourse surrounding the Biennale does not only concern participants. In October 2023, a protest was organised by the collective *Biennialocene* in front of the Giardini venue to protest unfair and precarious labour conditions of the Biennale. Two city policemen watched the protest unfold, a couple of meters of distance from the protesters themselves. Two of the protesters had formally bought a ticket and had entered the venue before the beginning of the protest, to then join the protest from within the gates of the venue and hand out fliers to visitors explaining the reasons for protest. The private security hired by the Biennale began to aggressively force the two protesters out of the gates of the venue, as well as verbally intimidate the other protesters and calling upon the policemen to intervene and force them to leave. Designs of the protest posters, alongside other political movements, were integrated into the wall of the German Pavilion that same year.

During the time of my fieldwork, I assisted another protest at the gates of the Biennale, this time not by Biennale workers but from a neighbourhood collective organising against local government cuts to public health, "Assemblea per i servizi medici a Venezia". The protestors, primarily senior citizens⁴¹, began an assembly in a park a couple hundred meters away, before walking collectively to the gates of the Biennale : the primary slogan was, "Venice is not only tourism ! It is not only the Biennale ! We want a primary care doctor !" Once in front of the *Biennale*, two local police officers arrived. The protesters continued chanting briefly in front of the gates, took a collective photo, and quickly left. The brevity of the standing protest was easily conducive to the senior age of the protesters, although one can also ask, why not arrange a sitting assembly closer to the *Biennale* gates ? Given local police are expected at all declared protests, why did they arrive only when the protest reached the gates of the Giardini venue? This example demonstrates how the *Biennale*, as a public-private entity and occupier of urban space, is

⁴¹ Out of approx 40 participants only three people seemed to be under 50: a persons' nephew who was there to install the soundsystem, a local politician, and I, who many mistook for a local journalist. Thankfully, this allowed me to take photos.

recognised as a political symbol of touristification and the privatisation of the city, thus an object and place of protest even in seemingly unrelated subjects such as access to public health. Although it also demonstrates how space around the *Biennale* is heavily supervised and framed, at a higher degree than other urban spaces in the city. It is recognised as such, as a space which is administered jointly by the public municipality and the private security, which can be used as a strategic point of representation, although under limited restrictions.



Figure 18 : Protest for public health services in Venice, before walking to the gates of the Giardini Venue.
21st of June 2025. Photo by author, reproduced with permission of the participants

Just as for Mitchell and Staeheli's (2006) example of the shopping mall, the *Biennale* operates as a privately governed space where rights of access and expression are conditional and revocable. Although political expression is possible, it is tolerated by the *Biennale* administration only insofar as it does not disrupt circulation, reputation, or the event's economic and symbolic value ; in the case of the *Biennale*, it is ideally integrated into the exhibition content. Does the fact that civic functions such as protests are transferred there, although respecting the limitations to use of space offered by the *Biennale*, mean that new political communities have accepted the primacy of private property over use value ? Through the privatisation of the *Biennale* and its spaces, have ideas of civil community replaced the need and sentiment for publicity, thereby reducing publics' capacity to self-represent to the wider public ? This is the thesis of Mitchell and Staeheli in their analysis of American shopping malls, replacing public squares as a place for the constitution of publics. On this topic, Baravalle has commented on the 2022 edition of the Art *Biennale*, of which the curatorial theme, named "The Milk of Dreams", focused on commons through the lens of "post-humanism, theories of the compost, new materialisms, and the decolonial" (2022, p. 327). He argues that the format of the *Biennale* overly focuses on grand curatorial gestures and

western geographies while engaging in alternative epistemologies in ways which may promote anti-intellectual stances : this allows for only superficial engagement with the thematics, effectively co-opting them to promote them to the cultural logic of neoliberalism and cultural production for fast consumption and the continuation of the social order : the *Biennale* effectively “works as an effective machine of depoliticisation” (*ibid*, p. 239).

The idea that the *Biennale*, as a privatised space in which usually public functions are transferred, creates space for interaction based on ‘civility’ based on exclusion rather than ‘publicity’ based on inclusion, is consistent with Ghorra-Gobin’s theorisation of EPOPs as discussed in Part 1, Chapter 3, C. Although Ghorra-Gobin argues for the existence of a singular public in the Habermassian sense, Mitchell disagrees and calls its ‘wholeness’ an ideal, albeit an ideal which is powerful in rallying calls to spatial justice and ‘publicness’ (2003, p.34) and driving the need for representation in front of a wider group.

Within section II.A. of this work, the Art and Architecture *Biennale* reveals a reconfiguration of urban politics in which representation is abundant, critique is aestheticised, and struggle is marginalised. The *Biennale* produces and promotes the creation of publics that have profoundly unequal capacities to make a claim to space, whether because locally based yet outside of historic Venice, or because only temporarily in the city, with a pattern of consumption comparable to that of a tourist rather than a labourer. The fleeting economy of short-term stays and events eventually consolidates itself into permanent destination use, forcing the city into becoming shells of “free space” to be “filled with international blood” (reference to Paolo Baratta’s comments surrounding the 2018 Architecture *Biennale*). This does not mean that the *Biennale* and its use of space - whether the question is the importance of participation within it, the kind of labour it produces, or the dynamics of privatisation and touristification that it promotes - are not politicised. Although the *Biennale* will either prefer protest in the form of cultural content, which can be assimilated as other content in the *Biennale*, than active protests, which it will work with public authorities to strictly frame and neutralise. Rather than fostering a shared political sphere capable of contesting the real estate and financial interests shaping Venice, the *Biennale* and its regime of privatisation tends to cultivate segmented depoliticised communities, similar to as theorised by Mitchell and Staeheli (2006) in their case study of shopping malls in the USA, where physical access is limited, behaviour is disciplined according to rules of politeness, capital and consumption, and engagement across diversity is scarce.

All the same, Mitchell and Staeheli add a necessary nuance to their theory, stating that “it is not the case that these regulations prohibit interactions with people or ideas different than ourselves; that would be too strong a conclusion and would deny the expressions of dissent and acts of resistance that do occur” (*ibid.*, p. 989). Additionally, Don Mitchell’s approach, insisting that the claim to urban space must take

place through the appropriation of a physical space as representation both demands space and creates space (2003), becomes inefficient in analysing other approaches to organising for the redistribution of resources, including urban space.

Chapter 5. How to connect the Biennale to Venice

The previous section has analysed how the *Biennale* cultivates divergent and depoliticised “political communities” rather than an idealised singular public, each with separate claims to space and capital in the city. The issue of an inaccessible, elite, western-biased Venice *Biennale* does not go unnoticed, and despite the *Biennale* Foundations’ capacity to integrate and frame protest, these themes have continued to be central to several initiatives, both grassroots, originating from civil society, and from certain pavilions themselves.⁴² This section will analyse certain initiatives which have approached the Art and Architecture *Biennale* as a potential starting point for redistribution, both in the sense of attention from a global audience, and in the sense of assets which are centralised by the exhibition, including labour, capital, materials, physical space, and so forth. This analysis will lead to question the very relationship to geographic and physical space of public address, uncovering how to negotiate redistribution in coexistence with, and even through, a contested institution.

This section is greatly informed by fieldwork carried out in 2023 and 2025, interviewing local activists such as from *Rebiennale*, different actors of the German 2023 Pavilion and the Austrian 2023 and 2025 Pavilions (both the collaborating associations and activists, and when possible, the curators) and participating in activities and seminars when possible. The fieldwork was informed by available information about the pavilions online, such as the official pages and interviews, which are presented as part of the findings.

Is material space essential in the claim to redistribution ? This question will be analysed through the experiences of different grassroots movements concerning the *Biennale*, first originating from local activists, and then a global movement. This will bring us into a reflection of how do publicness is defined in the context of globalised neoliberal societies.

⁴² The Biennale Foundation also has programmes to make its programmes accessible to the public, namely *Biennale Educational* (activities for children, schools and universities). Unfortunately, this has been a blind spot in my research.

A. Building the half-bridge, bringing in the public ?

The reality of divergent communities existing around the *Biennale* is an open secret. This reality has stimulated different attempts to “bridge the gap” between different publics, several originating from curators of different *Biennale* Pavilions themselves, and with different limitations. The 2025 Netherlands Pavilion organised public soccer games (although with difficulties recruiting a “local” public), the Vatican 2025 pavilion’s use by multiple entities and publics (as discussed in Part 1, Chapter 3, C), and the Austrian pavilion both in 2025 and 2023, to which the beginning of the section will be dedicated, although previously introduced. In 2023, the Austrian delegation named the exhibition “Partecipazione” (Participation) and designed a very literal metaphor for uniting the Biennale to public life, inspiring the name of this chapter : building a bridge over the exterior walls of the Biennale venue into the Austrian pavilion space, so that the space could be reclaimed by venetians and different civil society movements.

This idea was quickly scrapped as the *Biennale* foundation denied construction permits, citing the structure would be outside of the Austrian Pavilion’s conceded space, as well as possible endangerment to the walls themselves. The curating team turned this story of failure into a political narrative and red line for the exhibition, while collaborating with certain local realities such as *Ocio*⁴³ to co-create programmes and initiatives outside of the walls of the Biennale itself, such as inside the Sant’Elena *patronato*⁴⁴. Although when speaking to different local organisers, some demonstrated little interest in the initial idea of ‘opening up the pavilion’, or even finding the idea degrading : one activist commented in an interview he found it comparable to putting Venetians in a zoo for tourists. (Interview with T., 2025) Another activist who was in contact with the curators on behalf of *Ocio* found the pavilion concept communicatively strong, however regarded the activities organised inside of the pavilion as far less interesting than the collaboration that was born in the creation of events outside of the *Biennale* venues, accessible to all. His response towards the initiative was globally positive, although based on something entirely different from the point put forward by curators in the exhibition : instead of creating a crack in the *Biennale* fortress so the space may be filled by the impatient public theoretically waiting just outside its confines, instead the curators travelled outside of the Biennale’s doors to meet the activists, alongside lending their social, cultural and economic capital.

We can compare this episode to the following Austrian national contribution to the Architecture *Biennale* in 2025, which has already been introduced in Part 1, Chapter 3, B. Curated by architects Sabine Pollak,

⁴³ Osservatorio Clivico sulla casa e la residenza : a collective of inhabitants and researchers publishing data and essays on the topic of residentiality in the city of Venice

⁴⁴ Spaces tied to the church are often used for common activities and festivities.

Michael Obrist and Lorenzo Romito, the exhibition was named “Agency for Better Living”, concerning itself with comparing public provisioning and community welfare. The curatorial team created a public programme of seminars published on their website, of which four were situated around Venice, three in cultural institutions abroad, and thirteen to be held inside the specially designed courtyard of the pavilion. Bringing together industry professionals, public functionaries and bottom-up activists, the intention of the conferences in the Pavilion was to allow the general public to freely participate in the conference, aiming to create a diverse agora which may converse and create new perspectives. The very first conference (or “Assembly”, as it was titled by the curators, highlighting its horizontal aspiration) will be analysed in depth. Activists engaged in different local struggles were invited : from the right to housing and local services (such as *Assemblea Sociale per la Casa* and *Osservatorio Civico sulla casa e sulla residenza*), the creation of community green spaces (*Vignole Energia Rinnovabile Agricoltura Sostenibile, Poveglia per Tutti*)⁴⁵, the fight against a socially and environmentally destructive cultural economy (*ReBiennale, Sale Docks*), antifascist organising (*CSO Rivolta, Laboratorio Climatico Pandora*)⁴⁶ and the creation of cultural events alternative to massive top-down tourist spectacles (*Microclima*), although many of these initiatives collaborate with each other, tend to a great degree of intersectionality, and the activists invited participate in several other assemblies as well, such as social centers *CSO Morion* and *Zenobia APS*. At the assembly, they were told the floor was open to freely discuss different issues largely concerning Venice and activism.



Figures 19 - 22. Screenshots from the video of the first ‘Assembly’, June 2025.

Source : Youtube Channel of “Agency for Better Living”, Courtesy of the curators and filmmaker

⁴⁵ Translation of the names of the different entities in order of appearance : “Social Assembly for the Home”, “Civic Observatory on the home and residentiality”, “*Vignole* (island in the Venice lagoon) *Renewable Venice Sustainable Agriculture*”, “*Poveglia* (another island of the Venice lagoon) *for all*”

⁴⁶ Translation of the names of the different entities in order of appearance :

After a few moments of mutual shyness, one activist and basketball coach participating on behalf of *Assemblea Sociale per la Casa* (ASC), a network which regularly squats and renovates abandoned social housing for long-term residents to live in, launched the discussion. He compared the organisations' self-organised practices to the municipality's general inaction, citing the lack of affordable housing and recent preventable deaths from rotten trees falling onto passerbys, in order to develop on how the general population has lost trust in the local government to provide basic goods, services and security, creating urgency and space for bottom-up intervention. Later into the panel, another activist and social worker participating on behalf of ASC and *Zenobia*⁴⁷ cited how a past *Biennale* pavilion was able to productively support local initiatives, and that an ideal, sustainable *Biennale* could consist in each pavilion associating itself with a local initiative to support its developments. Faced with the state's lack of support and even antagonism, can the *Biennale* or its pavilions become an ally to bottom-up initiatives? This meta-question - after all, the panel was hosted and organised by the Austrian Pavilion - became an interesting point of tension. Two of the curators asserted the need to find potentials of allyship between tourists, pavilions, the Biennale Foundation and local movements, away from "antagonistic" points of view and to "throw the Biennale into the lagoon". Meanwhile, activists participating on behalf of *Ocio* (*Osservatorio Civico sulla casa e sulla residenza*), *Poveglia per Tutti* and *CSO Rivolta* emphasized the need for independence from large institutions, citing the tendency of the Biennale to engulf and transform local initiatives and their spaces into products of consumption.

"You can make the point that tourism is by definition not sustainable... and then the answer to your question is no. ... then you can ask the question if you can make tourism sustainable, and do things with tourists. But then you always feel like you are an attraction yourself. Even when you do something super cool, super local, in the moment the tourist comes, you get the feeling that you are doing it for them, and that it is a performance and an attraction..."⁴⁸ (Activist in behalf of *Ocio*)

As the ambition had been in 2023, Venice's civic society had finally filled the Austrian pavilion in 2025. Although they entered via invitation, with day passes issued by the *Biennale* by request of the Austrian Pavilion. Several of the activists informed me they found it an interesting exercise, part of the necessary outreach labour of activism, although collaboration with the *Biennale*, its curators or reclaiming its space was not necessarily their first priority.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ A sports and cultural center in Giudecca, opened by activists organising in Morion

⁴⁸ The rest of the citation, for just portrayal of the speaker, although not strictly pertinent to our analysis : "Unfortunately, this makes us very closed to foreigners, which is bad... I see the potential, the beauty in coming in connection with other people. But at the moment we don't have the human resources to say, let's connect with tourism, because we are suffocated. I think we need to first find space for ourselves, and to feel confident in having those spaces."

⁴⁹ Several of the activists found more interesting the assemblies and meetings taking place outside of the Biennale, often with activists which they did not already know beforehand.

The 2023 Austrian Pavilion fails its attempt to open its space to passerbys, and hence condemns the very *Biennale* which it takes part in, crystallising the struggle for public space as its motor of production. In fact, Mitchell describes the production of public space as “the dialectic between the ‘end of public space’ and its beginning” (2003, p. 35 - 36) All the same, the case study does not entirely fit Mitchell’s analysis of the production of public space. While the exhibition referenced local issues and the curatorial team collaborated with some local groups in the creation of event programmes, the project was not carried out by local activists themselves, thus it was not locals representing themselves inside the *Biennale* to claim back the space. The 2025 pavilion created a place of expression for local activist groups in their relationship to the *Biennale*, both in their wish for shared resources and their need for political independence from the institution, although this space was also ‘preordained’ public by the curatorial team in their invitation of the activists, preparation of the space and mediation of the talk. Just as in the Vatican Pavilion, where the presence of different publics creates the basis of the pavilion concept, this alone will not create public debate.

In both 2023 and 2025, the Austrian pavilion was used to give greater cultural representation of what was just behind the venue walls : a living, breathing population fighting to stay in Venice. Although the invited activists in part even rejected the present need for the *Biennale*’s physical space, they did not deny interest for the *Biennale*’s capital and resources. Don Mitchell explains that “...what makes a space public - a space in which the cry and demand for the right to the city can be seen and heard - is often not its preordained ‘publicness’. Rather, it is when, to fulfill a pressing need, some group or another takes space and through its actions makes it public.” (2003, p. 35) So if redistribution of the capital and resources within the *Biennale* are a pressing need, why wasn’t the occasion to claim the *Biennale* as a stage more strongly embraced ?

B. Decentralising the Biennale

“Let’s put it this way : of the [Biennale] itself, I don’t care at all. I care about the Venetian residents that work around the Biennale.” Interview with Marco Baravalle, curator, researcher and activist at Sale Docks, 2025

As expressed by Baravalle, as well as several other activists at the assembly organised by the 2025 Austrian Pavilion, the *Biennale* represents an important opportunity for labour and resources for many Venetians. In this sense, the Biennale becomes a political question, of how to negotiate its negative

presence with a potential redistribution of the resources, capital, and expertise which is attracted and concentrated by the exhibition. The experience of *Rebiennale* and consequently the 2023 German Pavilion is a useful case study, both of how an event such as the *Biennale* can be publicised, but equally as an analysis of the trajectory of resources as they are redistributed spatially, which can tell us about the public potential of different city venues. Finally, this will be related to the issue of visibility as a condition of publicness, especially in a context such as exhibitions where images are part of the product.

The *Rebiennale* initiative was born in 2008 out of *CSO Morion*, an autonomous social center initially squatted in 1990 in the neighbourhood of Casteo and constituting a major pillar of antifascist political organising in Venice. Local activists and students, many of which were working odd jobs inside the *Biennale*, began to notice that heaps of materials, of which most in good condition, were deposited outside the main venues during the exhibitions' desinstallation to be eventually brought to the landfill by boat. Imagining the material could have been useful in different political projects, the activists began to pass by the venues in the evenings and carry away useful materials. Over time, the material became useful in projects all over Venice. *CSO Morion*, which had been kept closed for several years, was refurbished creating a stage, a mezzanine and sleeping spaces still in use today. The interiors of *Salé Docks*, a squat which is born out of the very criticism of cultural institutions such as the *Biennale*, was also able to benefit from the material, as well as squatted apartments within the ASC network. The sneaky operation was quickly discovered by a pavilion, which was able to contact the youths to offer them the material directly, and other pavilions followed suit. Although the collaboration quickly came to a close, as the group became weary of becoming exploited as a free alternative to usual waste disposal, as well as a greenwashing tactic for pavilions. All the same, the experience brought a new perspective to the collective.

"We saw an opportunity for something else. As a Venetian, my first paid gig was for *Laguna Trasporti*, pulling carts in the Arsenale. In our lifetimes, in the *Biennale*, we saw the worst things... the *Biennale* in the sense of a place, the mess that it is, public, private, the Foundation, the Pavilions, all the countries, all of that mess. It is not only the empire of material waste, but also the empire of sh*t labour. We have seen it all, students being used as labourers, without safety procedures, without training, we've seen it all. So we said no, for us sustainability needs to be a whole concept. There is environmental sustainability in the productive paradigm, but it cannot be dislocated from social sustainability" (interview with T. 2025).

Rebiennale began to structure its political critique of the destructive social and environmental impact of the *Biennale*, but simultaneously questioned the possible routes to transform it, wavering between political antagonism and select collaboration.

“Let’s say that the *Biennale* has always been the friend-nemesis of this story, there has always been a strange relationship to the *Biennale*. Because there has always been a lot of criticism [towards the *Biennale*]. In the past [activists of *CSO Morion* and *Sale Docks*, not on behalf of *Rebiennale*] have gone to block the gates, to enter the venues, many times. We have attacked it many times, for the waste it generated. But it’s stupid, we have also worked with the *Biennale*, you see ? There is this strange relationship” (interview with P. 2025).

Some of the activists of *Rebiennale* saw self-entrepreneurship and labour as a possible way to slip inside the ‘mess’ of the *Biennale* and redefine existing power relations on their own terms. Initially offering exhibition construction and disposal services as a small group of freelancers, eventually *Rebiennale* formed as an association hired directly by pavilions by 2015, and able to negotiate their working contracts. The activists were mainly self-taught, although eventually the collective-turned-professional association began to cultivate their own expertise in materials use and life cycle assessment, such as only accepting to work with highly reusable materials, building exhibitions with deconstruction and reuse of the materials in mind, and even collaborating with universities and architects to develop ways to implement construction with organic and locally-sourced materials such as clay. Once dismantled, the materials did not only stay within the ecosystem of the *Biennale*, but rather continued to support different projects around Venice through organised self-construction workshops, including with different international universities.

Gaining recognition from different pavilions and the related high-profile professional networks, the collective was able to put pressure on the *Biennale*, all while collaborating and being contractually tied to individual pavilions thus formally independent from the central Foundation. This cohabitation is in fact possible due to the complex form of the *Biennale*, consisting of a mosaic of juridical forms of right to land use and what happens within the pavilions, meaning a reliance on the externalisation of labour. In 2017, *Rebiennale* requested to take local architecture students to attempt a materials life-cycle assessment of exhibition materials, although the *Biennale* Foundation denied the request. *Rebiennale* decided to take the question to the individual pavilions of the Giardini venue, and each pavilion agreed to be assessed ; the Foundation had no choice but to allow the assessment to take place, so as not to lose face (Assembly #1 recording, 2025). On another occasion, in 2012, the Russian feminist protest group *Pussy Riot* contacted local activists in the context of holding a protest in front of the Giardini venue gates; *Rebiennale* workers were able to leave their place of work, join the protest still in their work clothes, and come back to their stations after the protest. Several of the activists of *Rebiennale* have

reported being harassed on behalf of the *Biennale* Foundation, such as being intimidated by lawyers on baseless cases of slander, all while continuing to work for individual pavilions.

Over time, *Rebiennale* has successfully created an alternate imaginary of labour within the Biennale ecosystem, where there is collaboration between local and international realities and the individual worker is not reduced to standardised exploitation within massive cultural outsourcing companies. Simultaneously, it has put Venetians and their concerns on the busy Biennale itineraries of many international cultural workers, inspiring them to the point of creation. In 2016, students from *Rural Studio*, an architecture workshop and module of Auburn University in Alabama, were tasked by the university to organise an exhibition to be displayed in the *Biennale*. As many students were disillusioned with the art event and its socially and environmentally unsustainable model of exhibitions, they were able to contact *Rebiennale* with the idea to redirect the budget of the exhibition towards locally useful endeavours. Organisers from *Rebiennale* determined that several squatted apartments within the ASC network were in need of construction material, and a new homelessness shelter project by CSO Rivolta was in need of bedding. *Rural Studio* purchased these requested materials and arranged them inside the *Biennale* venue to create the exhibition's infrastructure, supporting video and photo elements on display. At the end of the exhibition, the materials were redirected to the local projects. One activist recalls, *Rural Studio* used so much of their budget on local activists' projects, that the habitual opening ceremony party was reduced to an informal event drinking canned beer in a public square, to the surprise of the director of Auburn University who had travelled to Venice especially to attend (interview with P. 2025).

Years later, in 2023, the German national pavilion put the practice of *Rebiennale* at the very center of their exhibition concept, named "Open for Maintenance" : using the Pavilion space as an aesthetically arranged storage for salvaged materials from the previous *Biennale* exhibition, over six months the pavilion hosted students from different universities, who created infrastructure for different initiatives around Venice, and including maintenance work inside CSO Morion and squatted apartments alongside ASC. The curatorial team consisting of the German architecture review *ARCH+* and architecture studios *Summacumfemmer* and *Buro Juliane Greb* state on their website (Archplus.net 2023) that the years' edition will not be an exhibition, but "an action framework for new building culture". In an interview, a member of *Archplus* stated that "the idea is to transform the German Pavilion from a space of national representation into a place of (re)production and collective learning", stating the *Biennale's* participation in the depletion of resources and touristic exploitation in Venice, and that the intention of *Open for Maintenance* is to create a laboratory which may support fights for spatial justice (Zambeletti 13 Sept 2023).

The opening party was organised in the style of a local festival or *sagra*, accessible to all in the little-known neighbourhood of *Casette*, a social housing project dating back to the 1930s, located in the historically working-class island of Giudecca and accessible through a single small doorframe, meaning many locals themselves ignore its presence. Many of the social housing units have been forced to close due to lack of public maintenance, several of which have been reclaimed by ASC; in fact, a group of activists took advantage of the opening party as a distraction and cover from immediate police retaliation to squat an abandoned social housing unit in the neighbourhood. The afternoon party included performances and music, ending early in the evening to not disturb the neighbours. The German collective *Constructlab* collaborated with ASC to create decorative banners to hang from the clotheslines, displaying text such as : “too many people without home, too many homes without people”, “I’m staying”, “Houses for all”, “This house is not a hotel”, “We are taking care of⁵⁰ living in Venice”.



Figure 23 : Opening party for the 2023 German Pavilion. Image courtesy of Nils Koenning ©

Rebiennale was able to politicise the question of the *Biennale's* impact⁵¹ and make a claim to its resources, although in a trajectory somewhat opposite from that imagined by the Austrian Pavilion in 2023 and 2025, and not fully consistent with Mitchell's relation of appropriation of physical space in order to gain representation and redistribution. The material space of the major *Biennale* venues has

⁵⁰ A play on words in the original Italian text : “Occupare” both means “to take care of” a task, and to “occupy” a space, such as in a squat

⁵¹ Alongside other movements, such as *Sale Docks*, *Mi Riconosci* and *Biennalocene*

overtime lost a relationship to the wider citizenship : some older populations will remember the promise of an open Arsenale, as represented by the organisers of *Forum Futuro Arsenale*, and long gone is the generation who has freely made use of the Giardini Napoleonici.⁵² Do Venetians wish to be represented by the *Biennale* ? Or do they rather wish that its presence did not contribute to an unlivable city, beyond its gates ? Instead of bringing the 'public' *inside* of the Biennale venue, the inventiveness of *Rebiennale* was to be able to force the pavilions to leave its own premises and public, and meet local activists' needs on their own terms.

The trajectory of capital and resources across different venues of the city, for example from inside the *Biennale* to the neighbourhood of Casette, can be telling of how each space has a separate public potential. Don Mitchell argues that representation demands the social construction of multiple kinds of public space (2003, p. 33), although also arguing that appropriation, self representation and the claim to redistribution take place in the same physical space. This is a point that is contested by Iveson (2007), who states a need to separate the procedural and topographic approaches of public space. Publics are social imaginaries, with three major types of relationship to topographic space : urban space can be a *context for action*, constituting the venue for public address ; urban space may become the *object of public address*, meaning the subject of public debate itself ; and finally, a city can be used to represent an urban imaginary of diverse publics, in a way similar to the ideals of a total public, and maintaining similar limitations. Public-ness is performed and determines spaces into temporary sites of power, and each space represents different advantages and limitations for publicisation. This is also true concerning struggles concerning the *Biennale*.

The physical spaces of the Biennale venues seem to have long lost a relationship to the wider citizenship, rather constituting spaces of performance dedicated to visitors (and especially tourists). The Biennale's physical space becomes a kind of *antithesis* of publicness, and genuine initiatives into spectacles when they are contained by it. All the same, there is a need to be present within the Biennale, in order to contest it, and eventually extract to redistribute. Although this presence is usually not done by appropriation. *Rebiennale* had to take on a number of changes in order to comply with labour within the Biennale, such as creating a juridical entity so that it may sign contracts and converse with pavilions, or activists needing an entry ticket to participate in an assembly. On the other hand, as the recipients of the material, there is Casette, *CSO Morion*, *CSO Rivolta*, spaces which are lived in, maintained and appropriated through daily use and disobedience - not for nothing, Casette is far less empty because ASC has decided to squat several apartments, create activities and networks of mutual aid. These are spaces in which activists and locals may decide to invite the organiser of a pavilion to, or any potential

⁵² Which furthermore, were built by a foreign authority by destroying a neighbourhood.

supporter or collaborator, although hold power to the final use of space. Casette, CSO Morion, CSO Rivolta and so forth, are not just recipients of a redistributive action, but equally spaces in which self-representation and a claim to redistribution occurs, within the local context and communities they are already embedded in rather than conditions imposed by the *Biennale*. It is through the activities taking place outside of the *Biennale*⁵³ spaces that the impact and responsibility of the event has become politicised ; as for Iveson's theory, the *Biennale* has become *object of public address*. The public discussion is carried out throughout different venues of the city, which hold distinct potentialities for public address, and are constantly in dialogue.

C. The revolution will not be Biennalised ; Visibility, performance and resisting assimilation

All is not to say that the collaboration between the different realities, between the context created by the Biennale and spaces of political resistance, have always been seamless. Some student projects of the 2023 German Pavilion programme were highly successful, for example as students from TU Berlin collaborated with a public park and energy community project in the Venice Lagoon (Associazione Veras) for several months to create technical drawings of greenhouses and solar panels which were used in their plea to the municipality to gain construction rights. On the other hand, other projects were considered too swiftly made and or of little interest by the recipients, as some groups considered the workshops as academic exercises rather than concrete projects ; for example, an association of senior citizens receiving a very elaborate mobile kitchen which was revealed to be far too complex for most members to use, or the extremely partial refurbishing of an incarcerated women's market stand as students were asked to ignore users' requests for a windproof roof in order to stay true to the "original design" of the table. One member of *Rebiennale* and inhabitant of Casette, where many of the interventions took place, commented the Pavilion's programme :

"I appreciate enormously the willingness to use material, to reuse, even to do assemblies and meetings with the inhabitants of Casette to understand what to do and what not to do. This effort is absolutely admirable. My critique remains a bit more... general. When the different pavilions and architecture studios do stuff, they want to be like what *Rebiennale* used to be, they offer stuff like this... When we did it with *Rebiennale*, we took care that the material and what we built would last. Here, they did some badly done jobs too... behind you you have a state, a millionaire financier... what I have always said is that we

⁵³ not only by *Rebiennale* but equally Sale Docks, Mi Riconosci, Biennalocene and others

have to make the most of this stuff and continue, but it felt a little bit like a promotional event” (interview with P. 2025).

The feeling of being in a showcase is reminiscent of the *Ocio* activist’s observation of the difficulty in creating local-tourist collaborations for sustainability, as one feels reduced to performance. While certain long-term collaborations were judged positively, in many cases the workshops only lasted a few days and students were not given the time to understand or assimilate into the contexts of intervention, sustaining a relationship to the city comparable to that of a tourist, a relationship of fast consumption and opportunism fuelled by the *Biennale*.

The collective *Rebiennale* itself has undergone major changes in its time of activity, in ways that can be understood as a consequence of the relationship to the Biennale itself. Around 2018, the collective experienced a rift due to internal tensions. In 2019, another entity began its operations: *R3B* (read as “REB”), a woodworking company specialised in artistic-architectural installations, claiming to be the continuity of *Rebiennale* and founded by some of the members of the collective. In 2020, the cultural association *Officina Marghera* was created by other members of the ex-collective, a woodworking workshop in the industrial area of Marghera, often hosting events, practical workshops and workspaces for other professionals.

R3B has continued working closely with the *Biennale* and individual pavilions, continuing to contribute as a local spokesperson in pavilion-led sustainability initiatives. Since 2020, the company has started developing its own creations, although not necessarily from reused material (citing there was no such material available due to Covid forcing the cancellation of the exhibition). While many of its workers remain deeply rooted in different local struggles, the trajectory of materials leaving the *Biennale* towards citizens projects seems to have taken a backseat relative to the growing clientele amongst the pavilions : in 2026, the company is experimenting stocking materials to be reused inside the Pavilion spaces where the future exhibition will take place instead of taking it to the workshop first, a practice which lowers’ the operation’s carbon footprint although effectively imagines the material inside a closed ecology within the *Biennale* and its spaces.

On the other hand, *Officina Marghera* has decided to decenter the Biennale from its practice. Working and receiving materials from a wider range of cultural events, the association continues to repurpose materials for public projects, such as a children’s park in Padova, furnishing a local independent bookstore, and continuing to maintain ASC’s common spaces. The association has also decided to make its workshop in Marghera into a plural space, creating a photography and recording studio as well as

other workspaces for fellow artisans and locally based creative workers. The workshop is also often used to host public parties, events and practical workshops.

From the experience of *Rebiennale* and its subsequent projects, a negotiated and careful relationship between grassroots movements, the *Biennale* Foundation and the national pavilions is revealed. It is in the trajectory from one venue of public address to another, that the danger of assimilation takes place. For example, as one space becomes subsumed in the regimes of space of another : the section in Part I, Chapter 2, A discussed in length how the *Biennale* began to 'leak' out of the main venues and 'flood' the city, privatising all kinds of urban infrastructure, starting exactly with the intention to bring the *Biennale* closer to the local populations. Local activists are forced in a complicated balancing act : on one hand, taking advantage of *Biennale* events, meaning the international attention, expertise and capital it may bring to the city which can be captured to cover local issues and resisting becoming subsumed by the *Biennale* events themselves, the constantly overturning exhibition cycles, the incessant need to produce quick images and narratives which will nourish a foreign audience and economy.

The potentiality of spaces for public address and achieving one's political ideals are thus highly related to the issue of visibility and intervisibility. As several activists have mentioned, activism when looked upon by people identified as exterior, such as tourists, feels quickly assimilated to a performance. In the context of a city choked by the circulation and exportation of its image, or in the words of Giacomo Maria Salerno, the *museum-ification* and *mercification*⁵⁴ of the historic center, ordinary life of inhabitants is constantly fetichised and intruded upon, meaning spaces of privacy are highly coveted, including for political organising and the constitution of publics. This may seem paradoxical. According to Mitchell's analysis (2003, p. 33 - 34) to be part of the public is to be seen in public, and to make a claim for public space is imperative to its creation. However, in our example, the claim to public space is dependent on spaces which do not wish to represent themselves to a wider audience, and are revered for their privacy, such as from tourists. However, Mitchell also states that "the work of citizenship requires a multitude of spaces, from the most private to the most public" (*ibid.*, p. 33), and, citing Nancy Fraser, there are mutually exclusive publics. Does that mean that some spaces recognised as private constitute public spaces for others ? This vision would be most congruent with Iveson's (2007) analysis, of public-ness being performed by self-identified publics with different relationships to physical urban space, creating temporary spaces of power, and each venue representing different potentialities for public action.

⁵⁴ Citations extracted from the translation of the italian title : "Per una critica dell'economia turistica ; Venezia tra museificazione e mercificazione"

The 2023 Austrian pavilion was criticised in creating a space for Venetians to use, citing frustration at being observed by visitors. In comparison, the German exhibition decided to decentralise its programme from its physical pavilion space. The curatorial statement introducing the pavilion refers to general concepts of care, repair and sustainability in construction, as well as the concept itself of making the Pavilion into a storage room, rather than immediately introducing the grassroots organisations involved, while criticism of the *Biennale* and clearly stating the local actors involved was reserved for their online presence and interviews. On one occasion of a university collaborating with ASC, a coordinating professor only fully understood that the students would be rehabilitating an illegally squatted apartment during the students' visit. This allowed for a practical collaboration, where a limited and handleable number of students could come into contact with an association or collective they could support, rather than making the grassroots organisers part of the spectacle. This is not entirely true for the opening party; with an open invite posted online, hundreds of people arrived in the neighbourhood of Casette for a limited amount of time, including many professionals tied to the German pavilion, and even the German federal minister of housing Klara Geywitz. On the subject of that day, and the implications of collaborating with Biennale pavilions and major institutions, specifically in regards to the German Pavilion opening party at Casette, a co-founder of R3B and activist at ASC said :

"You want me to be a background actor, as an indigenous, *giudecchino*⁵⁵ Venetian ? Great, I'll give it to you, but you will give me a cover while I occupy an apartment during your party. A home in which an 'indigenous' family, a single, working class mother and her underaged daughter, still live... you always need to try and break out of the box they put you in while pretending you aren't doing so." (Interview with T. 2025)

In this comment, performativity is embodied in full awareness, although it is negotiated with tactical dissent to enact practical, material exchange through a *detournement* of the situation. The *Biennale's* cultural and political elite searched for a reality which was deemed 'authentic', which the local groups expertly delivered, although breaking past the un-ambiguous image of a good "indigenous" (to cite T above). Performance became another method of maintaining strategic visibility, and in this context created an absurd carnival of hypocrisy, with concrete political effects : a German federal minister visited a neighbourhood with no knowledge she would be used as cover for the illegal occupation of a house, and in her speech praised ASC, the collective responsible for the squatting. In one image⁵⁶, she can be seen with German ambassador to Italy Viktor Eberling, holding up a t-shirt made by *Constructlab* and ASC with the text "HOUSING FOR ALL". Her response would have certainly been otherwise had she not been

⁵⁵An inhabitant of Giudecca ; can be stated as a working class connotation, given the industrial history of the island

⁵⁶ I was unfortunately unable to contact the photographer and gain rights to include the original image

in a foreign country and somewhat secluded neighbourhood, where she felt as a guest and with reduced authority, highlighting the hypocrisy of government responses to grassroots strategies of urban regeneration. This brings ridicule to the local Venetian and Italian government equally, as a foreign minister is exposed to the poor living conditions of its citizens and an immediate police intervention would only worsen the situation.

Rebiennale's fracture into *R3B* and *Officina Marghera* can be understood as a division between two complementary types of urban venues for political address, each possessing distinct potentialities. *R3B* continues to advocate for redistribution through sustained engagement with foreign pavilions and institutional actors, while *Officina Marghera* remains rooted in everyday collaboration with grassroots initiatives across Venice, such as *ASC*. These differing orientations are reflected in their official online communication. Although it may be tempting to regard the latter strategy as superior because of its relative independence from the ever-expanding *Biennale*, maintaining pressure on powerful institutions and rendering discontent visible remains essential if activists are to avoid the trap of merely "socialising poverty" (Linebaugh, 2009). At the same time, the distinction between the two organisations should not be overstated. *R3B* is run by local activists who collaborate with many of the same collectives as *Officina Marghera*, a representative of *Officina Marghera* participated in the plenary of the Austria 2025 Pavilion, and the workshops of both organisations in Marghera are located only a few metres apart. The appearance of separate orientations nevertheless allows activists to regulate the intervisibility between these venues. It is precisely this calibrated balance of visibility and distance that enables *détournement* and the contestation of meanings imposed by the Biennale Foundation and its pavilions when necessary. Moving between venues also contributes to the decentralisation of the *Biennale*, shifting political action beyond its official sites and making material redistribution possible rather than limiting intervention to symbolic acts of representation.

The dynamics of decentralisation which can be seen in the 2023 German Pavilion, and especially in the case study of its collaboration with the Casette neighbourhood through *ASC*, is illustrated in Diagram 1. As both a space and an institution, the *Biennale* centralises multiple forms of international capital. Participation within it is governed by strict conditions tied to the continued circulation of global capital, while the local population is often subjected to an "othering" gaze that reduces it to cultural raw material for extraction and display. By contrast, spaces such as the Casette neighbourhood possess limited economic resources and often lack funding for basic needs, including the repair of abandoned housing. Participation in these spaces depends on voluntary commitment, long-term presence and social relationships, making tourists and non-locals a minority.

These venues therefore embody different relationships to public power. The *Biennale* operates under state patronage and receives substantial funding to sustain its international visibility, whereas places such as Casette experience neglect from the state and organise themselves in direct opposition to centralised political projects associated with depopulation. Yet exchange between these spaces remains possible. Organisers in Casette seek to redirect material resources and capital concentrated within Biennale venues, while the *Biennale* itself depends upon “authentic” local experiences as a source of cultural production. The politicising act of redistribution consequently unfolds across multiple venues, through different formats and discourses. To adopt Iveson’s framework of relationships which publics may have to topographic space, spaces such as the Casette neighbourhood and the *Biennale* venues constitute the *object of public address* (what shall we do about Casette ? what shall we do about the *Biennale*?) and the *context of public address* (as activists speak to neighbours in Casette to constitute a public of solidary residents, or as activists speak to curators in the *Biennale* to constitute a group interested in changing the institution’s impact on the city). Activists may adopt distinct forms of speech and performance depending on whether they are operating within either space. Such embodied performances help preserve a degree of separation between venues, protecting spaces like Casette from being absorbed into the neoliberal logics of the *Biennale*. Thus, while presenting an image of neighbourhood conviviality to international audiences, organisations such as ASC continued to enact everyday practices of struggle and contestation beyond the awareness of many organisers.

The coexistence of multiple and diverse venues is therefore crucial, enabling social movements to engage different publics, mobilise different forms of capital, and connect communities that would otherwise remain separate.

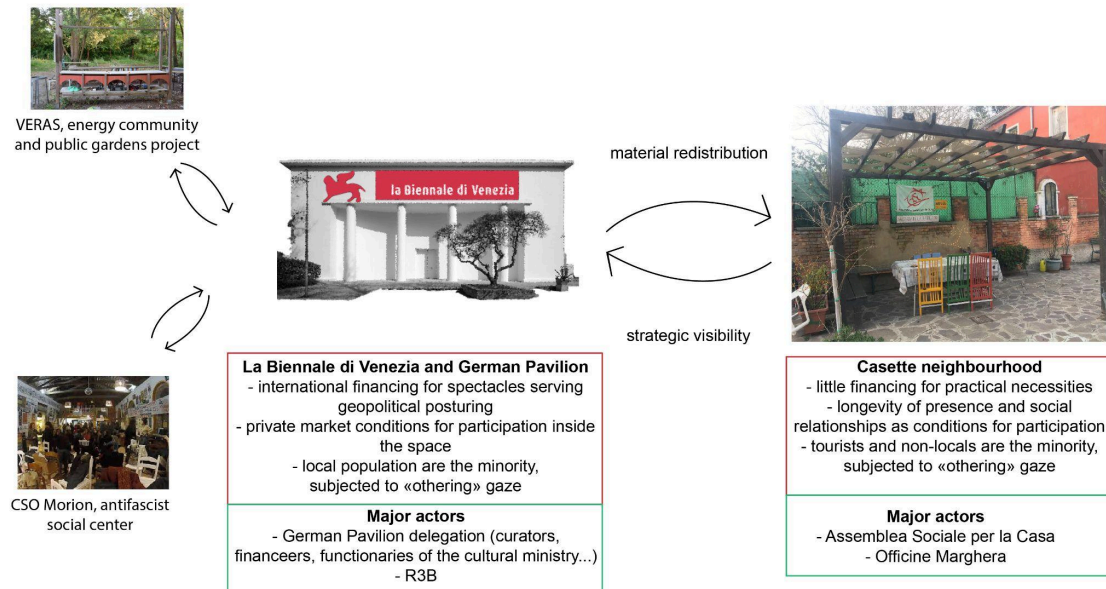


Diagram 1 : Different Venues, different potentialities : the case of the 2023 Germany pavilion. Diagram by author

Chapter 6. Space and redistribution in a global *Biennale*

The previous chapter analysed how the claim to space and to transform its governance does not only take place within that same space. By differentiating procedural from topographic approaches to public space, it is revealed how the fight for redistribution relies on the interplay of different venues, representing separate public imaginaries, each with different potentialities and limitations. Although this observation may lead us to wonder : if public spaces are really social imaginaries, and simultaneous presence or intervisibility of the actors involved is not essential, is topographic space even essential to the construction of publics and public claim to space ?

The Biennale is not only a physical space in which international exhibitions may take place, but also a renowned institution and important symbol of global arts discourse, shaped by a transnational apparatus of communication technologies, financial and material fluxes, and agent mobility. The international event becomes an opportunity for self-representation on a global stage, to make a claim against global inequalities and for global redistribution of wealth, all the while its material conditions of existence are extractivist of material and labour on different scales. In this final chapter, redistribution is discussed by contextualising the Biennale within the global fluxes which construct it, and thus does not only have a potential for spatial justice at a local, city level, but also internationally.

The chapter will begin by discussing how the Biennale's governance of space is contested on an uprooted, international scale, questioning if global fluxes have effectively "annihilated" the spaces they traverse (Castells 1996). Then, the importance of locality, including and especially faced with transnational debates influencing regimes of space, will be argued. Finally, different proposed frameworks which unite different spatial levels to achieve spatial justice, in the context of art institutions such as the Biennale, will be explored.

A. Venice the all-stage, the non-place

Inherent in its a format, the Biennale itself represents different localities on an international scale : a constellation of participations, between national and collateral pavilions, are united under the same curatorial theme in order to make emerge a sort of common cosmology or meaning. Naturally, this is a volatile and artificial product - that is the thesis of Carlos Basualdo, in his definition of biennials as "unstable institutions", already in 2008. As demonstrated by the Lebanese curators in Part 2, Chapter 1,

C. both in their implicitly anti-imperialist exhibition thematic and in attempting to connect different Arab curators, representation on a global stage such as the Biennale becomes significant in a fight for spatial justice.

Mimi Sheller and John Urry argue that we are living in the age of a new mobilities paradigm which has modified both our conceptions of public and private, and our relationship to physical space (2004, 2006). While citizenship has always depended on processes of communication and symbolic resources such as newspapers, the rise of international mass media and including internet technologies allowing content to be produced and diffused almost immediately, has transformed our public sphere : “Indeed, there is little that can be kept secret or remain private”. (p 119) With the rise of social media and the ubiquity of self-publishing content, filmed or livestreamed from one’s own bedroom. This does not mean that public discourse can no longer be created, although instead of imagining public spheres and spaces, it would be more accurate to talk of a public screen.

Art Not Genocide Alliance (shortened to *ANGA*) is a telling case study of a global movement that has seized the Biennale as a battleground for spatial justice, despite taking form almost entirely online. *ANGA* is an international collective of art workers, that one may call grassroots despite the little clarity of what grass and what roots they sprouted from. The group formed to contest the participation of Israel in the 2024 Art *Biennale* due to their genocidal operations in the Gaza strip, just as Russia had been excluded by the institution following the beginning of the war on Ukraine in 2022. In an interview (interview with D., 2025), one Milan-based artist and organiser recalls how he entered the collective by being forwarded an invite to a group chat by an acquaintance, and that the process of organising took place mainly through audio and video calls given the participants were scattered across several continents. This group eventually consolidated into *ANGA* in February 2024, as a letter demanding the exclusion of the Israeli pavilion was published : this letter became one of the most-signed letters of boycott in the history of the art world with over 24 000 signatures, as its success was ensured due to the well-connectedness of organisers to international professional networks, members of the press and global disinvestment movements of the cultural world such as *Writers Against the War On Gaza* (WAWOG) and *Strike Germany*.

The digital shape of *ANGA* was essential to becoming a mass international movement, officially communicating through Instagram to thousands of followers and being featured and cited repeatedly in online media. The instagram account is also used to platform other cultural boycott initiatives internationally. Despite calls to stop politicising the event and allow for a “space of freedom, meeting, and dialogue” (Italian Minister of Culture Gennaro Sangiuliano, cited by Schrader, 2024), *ANGA* accused

the *Biennale* Foundation's attempt to claim helplessness in blocking a country's participation as selective non-intervention: according to the activists, to allow the Israeli pavilion to open is to 'art-wash'⁵⁷ a genocide, thus support it. The importance of the *Biennale* as a global cultural symbol consolidated a movement existing transnationally, making a demand to Italian public authorities, to act upon a small, one-story villa to close its doors, because of the symbolic value of the space.

Can one claim that in the age of interconnectivity, the significance of a space as formulated ex-situ become the defining principles of its governance ? This is not only relevant to the *Biennale*, but amplified to the historic city of Venice : after all, as a strategy of territorial marketing, the *Biennale* is used to signify Venice as a whole, and the proliferation of national pavilions and unofficial collateral events outside of the main venues demonstrate that being inside Venice is almost synonymous with being inside the *Biennale*. The city is overwhelmed with images of itself, and its likeness and past constitutes its primary export, eventually achieving a *hyperreal* character. As theorised by philosophers Eco (1977) and Baudrillard (1981) : the simulation of reality creates infinite copies until all relation is lost to reality, and all that remains is the imitation (or *simulacrum*). Ethnologist Marc Augé describes how "in changes of scale, in the proliferation of imaged and imaginary references, and in the spectacular acceleration of means of transport", one observes the multiplication of "non-places" (1995, p. 34) : functional spaces of communication, transport and consumption that have been repeatedly standardised by hypermodernity and globalisation to the point of deterritorialisation. Venice is a "mirror on the world" (slogan of conservation organisation *We are here Venice*) and equally the "toy of the world" (Italian-language title of Davis and Garry's 2004 publication). The fate of the city is continuously decided by capital investments originating offshore, and even the fight "for" Venice (or often, "to preserve" Venice) is overwhelmingly financed and represented by international foundations and new temporary residents (Minoia 2018). Does this confirm Sheller and Urry's call to update and de-spatialise our theories of public space ? Is access to a geographic space no longer essential to the constitution of a public and its claim over it?

B. Reterritorialising the Biennale

The reflections put forward can be considered partial, when considering the very real (not *hyper real*) form of the Art and Architecture *Biennale*. Curator, researcher and activist Marco Baravalle describes the *Biennale* as symptom of an art world which imagines itself as a "an interconnected archipelago of

⁵⁷ The use of philanthropy of the arts to promote one's reputation

dialoguing differences like for example the powerful assemblage Glissant-Obrist-Utopia Station... Yet this achievement was the result of a plan based on the nature of capitalism where ... 'a few Islands of abstract labor are surrounded by an ocean of exploitation' and – I may add – extractivism." (Baravalle, 2020) The Biennale concretises as an assemblage of local and international raw material and labour, consolidating practices of extractivism and exploitation at different scales and locations. In response to Augé's theory of *non-place*, geographer Michel Lussault proposes the concept of *hyper-place* (2017), where concentrates of globalisation and social relations make global and local worlds enter in collision, although not necessarily to the negation of either.

Although ANGA essentially organises online, the local component of the mobilisation was more than essential. ANGA organisers decided that a physical political demonstration inside the Biennale will be the most efficient during the pre-opening days, where the spaces and pavilions are only open via invitation, thus to international press, industry professionals and insiders. The organisers came into contact with local groups such as *Sale Docks*, *Collettivo Cocomero* and *Biennialocene*, who were crucial to determining the shape of the actions, given their knowledge and experience of organising in the city, for example discouraging a large demonstration through the narrow, winding *calli*, or a parade on motorboat through the trafficked Canal Grande (Interview with D., 2025.) but rather choosing the following.

Activists distributed pamphlets simulating the official foundations' graphic style, although containing information about the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the necessity to boycott the Israeli pavilion, as well as a map of the national pavilions in the Giardini venue with information on each country's ties and complicity. The pamphlets were even hidden in the dispensers of official communication, so they could be shared as much as possible.



Figure 24. Pamphlet by ANGA distributed in the opening days of the 2024 Art Biennale Sourced from ANGA.live, with consent of a member of the collective

Through the professional network of ANGA and local organisers, they were able to contact the different national pavilions and hide banners, kufiyya, megaphones and flags, as well as secure invites for April 17th, one of the pre-opening days. Activists were able to stealthily enter the venue like all other invitees, despite different security forces preparing to suppress any upheaval from taking place : the Biennale's

private security, the municipal police, and lastly the military, stationed directly outside the Israeli pavilion. After retrieving the hidden material, the activists met in front of the pavilion at a predetermined time to begin the protest. This strategy was able to take the authorities by surprise : especially as many other visitors spontaneously joined in the protest, the protesters were many more and the audience far too distinguished and well connected (not to mention the numerous international newspaper headlines present) for a repressive response.

On the same day, at the same time, protesters distributed pamphlets, dropped banners and read a statement prepared alongside ANGA at the Rialto bridge. This is a frequent venue for local organisers given its capacity to reach a global audience due to its touristic appeal, and to reclaim the space from the spectacular consumption of tourism into a grounded political reality.

That year, the Israeli Pavilion never opened its doors to the public. The editions' curators and artist taped a sign on the door on the eve before the grand opening, reading : "The artist and curators of the Israeli pavilion will open the exhibition when a ceasefire and hostage release agreement is reached." (Broomberg 2026) Despite never fully engaging with the claims of the protesters and recognising genocide, the action can still be considered a victory. Furthermore, ANGA received many more requests to join their collective following the demonstration, widening the movement.

In the case of ANGA's mobilisation, the local 'turn' of their actions was essential. The demonstrators, in their physical and local presence, were able to reap the benefits of, creating a show of courage, force of organising and ubiquity of solidarity with Palestine. Despite interaction becoming overwhelmingly online, hyper awareness of the mediation of digital realities, between fake accounts, photo and video editing, and echo-chamber inducing algorithms and so forth - creates an attachment to physical, in-person experiences to interpret reality. This is despite the high level of mediation to experience that in-person experiences offer as well. For a start, the high exclusivity of the Biennale pre-opening days creating a filter of participation, and the reception of the protest was informed by ANGA's prior digital mobilisation primed the media and the audience for the protest, as the controversy created vigilance (and excitement) amidst journalists, industry professionals and public authorities for a potential escalation. To stage a protest inside such an exclusive event can be a surprising choice, when compared to urban actions taking place in crowded market squares or city centers, where wider physical public access and visibility to passersbys from locals are prioritised. Although the limited accessibility allowed for a large concentration of well-connected individuals, and not all publics are created equal in the sense that they have equal power of influence ; each journalist represent potential hundreds of people reached, and the boycott by a person already inside the art world - especially a financier - will have larger leverage than that of an average passerby. All the same, a protest was held on the Rialto bridge, which created a

connection between the Biennale and its urban context, although the protest was less concerned with the Israeli Pavilion specifically than its Giardini counterpart, aware that the question of representation inside an arts institution such as the Biennale does not resonate equally with all publics.

The dynamics of ANGA's mobilisation are revealing of the construction of publics and public claims in contemporary, hyper-globalised societies. Where transnational (often digital) conversations and 'global fluids' (to use Sheller and Urry's expression, 2004) flow into local settings and back into the global realm, neither scales are unscathed. The constitution of ANGA as a digital entity imagined a public ready to receive their address for boycott, and simultaneously generated this public, as shown by the attention and participation of their action at the *Biennale*. Their address localised inside the Giardini was welcomed by this preexisting public, and generated an even wider public - as larger newspapers reported on their action in physical and online media, and new participants joined both the protest and the movement. Perhaps the map created by ANGA organisers of the Giardini (fig. 24) is the most telling example, as each small pavilion is localised within the perimeter of the venue, although are equally concerned with 'art-washing' war crimes committed either directly by their country and its soldiers, or through complex financial networks and supply chains. Kevin Fox Gotham (2005a) theorises how global actors are not free agents to impose a *modus operandi* on passive cities, but are forced to face social processes and contradictions rooted at the local scale. Even when major transformations alter old forms of action and identity, actors remain linked to both the local and global through different networks. Coordination with local collectives was indispensable to the success of the action within the Giardini, which was heavily modified from the initial propositions of many organisers. Reflexively, local collectives took ANGA's claims for cultural boycott, retransmitted them at a venue usual to them, although modifying it for a different audience. Each venue - digital press, the Giardini, Rialto, physical newspapers - became a platform for the expression of a public address and the creation of a public, although each with a specific potentiality and limitation, slightly transforming the message to suit the imagined audience.

Albeit, the different venues of public address must not be relativised as all having some form of mediation, and thus equivalent. Instead, their specificities must be acknowledged and navigated. Geographers such as Ghorra Gobin (2001, 2012) and Mitchell (2003) accuse traditional "public" spaces of being increasingly privatised and surveilled, forcing public address and speech into private spaces and limited communities, digital communications once the playspace of DIY hackers begin to encounter the very same issues. Movements are forced to pay "rent"⁵⁸ to a private server or exist within a social

⁵⁸ Term inspired by Srnicek's concept of "platform capitalism" (2018) and Yanis Varoufakis' "technofeudalism" (2020), where the internet and cloudspace is paralleled to land owned by a few big

media conglomerate's community guidelines, and more recently governments defend the criminalisation of encrypted messaging services such as *Signal* or *Telegram*. Digital media allows a wider potential public to access (although never total) a message and interact with its meaning through comments, response posts, and so on. Although is this the same as putting one's physicality and body at play, joining or interrupting a protest, interacting with police and security, making a speech in a square? Does the digitalisation of tools for political struggle shift dissent from a "convivial tool" (Illich 1973) which is easily handled by politically independent agents, rather than manipulated by experts ? Or rather, does online anonymity allow (for now) for the wider dissemination of speech which would either be criminalised in a city square, or not seriously considered because of the speaker's identity? These factors demonstrate a simultaneous incentive for global demands to go local, and local demands to go global, each change in medium infecting change in message, as new publics are imagined, constituted and revealed.

In this subsection, the Art and Architecture *Biennale* has been located at the intersection of seemingly contradictory realities. The event is constructed as a powerful symbolic cultural infrastructure, producing spectacles of geopolitical importance both at a local level, as the city of Venice positions itself a highly connected mirror to the world, and at an international level, as different nation states, corporations and institutes represent themselves on the global scale. Although this cultural apparatus also produces real economies, real exploitation and real extractivism. This happens simultaneously locally and globally : locally, Venetians become dispossessed from the city they live in, at once subjected to precarious conditions of labour and unable to access the city in which they work in due to free market competition with international funds for basic goods such as housing ; and globally, as the global art economy runs on extremely mobile, precarious workers, and makes use of art's narrative potential to excuse and 'art-wash' consequential investments and political decisions, and even integrate the very cultures represented into neoliberal market standards. The janus-faced character complicates the complete detanglement of local from global contentions, as well as material redistribution from cultural representations. Within this framework, how are claims for redistribution organised ?

technology companies who extort economic control over the users, in a way similar to a capitalist landlord or feudal lord.

C. Redistribution of a glocal Biennale

How can a public *Biennale* be reimagined? How can one address the need for representation to a global audience in a globalised world that increasingly communicates through images, while confronting the evident risk that global visibility may crush the local everywhere? In such conditions, local realities often become fetishised spectacles, integrated into the neoliberal art market standard, which forces exploitative work and displacement in order to fulfil international free market forces. Faced with these realities, the Art and Architecture *Biennale* presents itself as a 'global village', a microcosm of countries (and corporations) representing global diversity of expression. Yet this model raises several questions. How can global art institutions continue to display global diversity and thus become a stage for global politics of distribution, without exploiting the localities they may wish to represent? What do our case studies say about the formation of publics, more generally and specifically in the global arts contexts and their local implantation?

In his critique of the 2022 Art Biennale's co-optation of the theme of the commons into what he describes as an elite and unsustainable art event, Baravalle draws a parallel with *documenta 15*. *documenta* is a non-profit organization supported by the City of Kassel and the State of Hesse as shareholders that organises quinquennial German contemporary art exhibitions, of which *documenta 15* is the 2022 edition. This edition was curated by *ruangrupa*, an Indonesian art collective whose practice is deeply embedded in local and urban struggles. *ruangrupa*'s curatorial model introduced a new dynamic into the political economy of art institutions, exposing the longstanding hypocrisy surrounding the relationship between radical artistic messages and the institutional structures that host them. In an interview, a member of *ruangrupa* stated that they imagined *documenta* not merely as an exhibition but as a "bank of resources", i.e. a site for redistribution of shared resource, to be used by all those who can utilize them to sustain their practices (Marchart 2022, p. 52). Many of the invited artists were already involved in political struggles, and the commons functioned as a crucial resource enabling them to sustain their political and humanitarian causes. In this way, the exhibition attempted to reduce the extractive dynamics often associated with the cultural representation of non-hegemonic realities. Through a historical analysis of fifteen editions of *documenta*, political philosopher Oliver Marchart (2022; also cited by Baravalle 2022) describes the event as an ongoing confrontation between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic artistic tendencies, reflecting a broader tension between centralisation - expressed through curatorial authority, depoliticisation, and lasting Western bias - and decentralisation, which emphasises politicisation, collective authorship, and postcolonial geographies.

Despite its attempt to embody decentralised aesthetics and practices, *documenta 15* did not leave unscathed the German art establishment. Having directed attention to the harassment experienced by pro-Palestinian, Black, and Muslim artists during the exhibition (Schwartz 2025), and having refused to cooperate with the antisemitism expert committee convened to evaluate the situation, describing it instead as a “censorship committee”, several of the exhibited works became the subject of international controversy and accusations of antisemitism of varying validity, particularly targeting West Bank artists involved in the BDS movement and other collectives whose works addressed anti-palestinian colonial violence. Some works were subsequently covered or removed. With the hindsight available today regarding the ways accusations of antisemitism can be mobilised to silence decolonial struggles, the controversies of 2022 reveal complexities that many Western audiences may not have fully recognised at the time.

Operating within a framework of conflict theory, these contradictions can be analysed through Baravalle’s concept of “alter-institutions” (2018, 2020, 2022). Building on the idea that societies create institutions precisely in order to provoke change, alter-institutions emerge at the margins of established institutions while attempting to transform hegemonic practices. Baravalle identifies two distinct forms: governmental alter-institutions and autonomous alter-institutions. Governmental alter-institutions are typically created by cultural workers operating within institutional frameworks. Their aim is to push museums beyond the traditional roles of conservation and the valorisation of artefacts, encouraging them instead to function as spaces for critical social debate and support for activist movements. However, such initiatives face important limitations. First, institutions tend to develop these alternatives through conventional artistic roles (artist, curator, audience) and formats (exhibitions, festivals), thereby reproducing the neoliberal apparatus of art production (2018). Second, structural change cannot rely solely on institutional goodwill (2020). Finally, these initiatives rarely evolve outside of the art institutions that sustain them (2021). Autonomous alter-institutions, by contrast, emerge from collective processes often closely linked to social movements. They tend to stabilise within specific spatial contexts and maintain greater independence from external pressures. While this independence may allow them to pursue more radical practices, governmental alter-institutions generally possess a greater capacity for action due to their institutional resources and visibility. Importantly, the relationship between these actors and official institutions is not fixed. Over time, alter-institutions may shift between positions of resistance and collaboration, provided that such cooperation does not compromise their autonomy.

This parallel, together with the tensions it exposes, may shed light on the intentions underpinning the German Pavilion at the 2023 Venice Biennale, already discussed in Chapter 5. B. The pavilion, named ‘Open for Maintenance’ and curated by *ARCH+*, was strongly influenced by the concept of the

alter-institution in its programme design. For the organisers, spatial practices and the arts should no longer function as event-led activities “parasiting the collective symbolic capital of Venice but rather as a maintenance strategy in the context of the right to the city” (Makele’s interview in Zambelletti 2023). Indeed, while remaining dependent on the German state and the institutional framework of the Biennale, the curators were able to collaborate with a variety of local initiatives which may be considered alter-institutions. As with *ruangrupa*’s experience, this collaboration was not seamless, revealing multiple points of conflict across different actors (local activists, the curatorial team, the *Biennale* organisation, local public authorities, German governmental authorities..) The parallel between the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and *documenta* offers a productive lens through which to analyse the relationship between Western art institutions and counter-hegemonic narratives, issues that have become central to contemporary debates among scholars and art publics. In fact, as central and local governments fail to respond to the needs of inhabitants, communities increasingly turn towards alternative, commoning, counter-hegemonic forms of organisation. This dynamic, evident in *ruangrupa*’s approach to *documenta*, echoed in the testimonies of ASC activists during the ‘Assembly’ organised by the Austrian Pavilion in 2025. According to the activists, the municipality had failed to provide even basic materials, services, and security, forcing communities to organise themselves, while collaborations with national pavilions helped them sustain certain initiatives.

How can the discussion on art events, global redistribution, and alter-institutionality developed so far contribute to our understanding of the formation of publics and public spaces ? One way to approach this question is to examine the spatial imaginaries through which publics are constituted. According to Iveson (2007), one of the strategies through which public spheres make use of space lies in the conceptualisation of ‘the city’ as a social imaginary, similar to the idea of a unitary public, and with similar limitations as discussed in our literature review. For the purposes of this study, ‘the city’ can be translated into ‘the *Biennale*’, as the institution pretends to bring together strangers and to represent a global public. Examining the Biennale through this lens helps illuminate how practices of redistribution and alter-institutionality shape not only institutional arrangements but also the conditions under which publics emerge and interact.

Iveson outlines three ways in which strangers who make up the collective city can imagine themselves as a public with a shared horizon. The first vision imagines the city as a community grounded in shared values, although this perspective can easily be mobilised to justify exclusionary measures. A second vision, associated with calls for a ‘public city’, assumes that shared space is defined by pre-political interests and recognises all individuals as legitimate participants, regardless of their ability to consume a service. However, not only have cities increasingly moved toward the privatisation of space, but the

creation of public cities has also increasingly been determined by planners “more concerned with rationality than democracy, their interventions serving to discipline the city to an imposed order” (ibid., p. 44). The third vision is closest to the imagination of a heterogeneous public sphere: the city as “cosmopolis” (ibid.). Rather than seeking to erase estrangement and difference, urban inhabitants engage in dialogue over their shared fates, or shared horizon, thereby creating a polity. This vision requires a delicate balancing act : participation is not based on adopting a supposedly neutral point of view that leaves behind affiliations, commitments, or desires. Instead, participation demands the capacity to be ‘reasonable’ (p. 45) in order to engage in broader dialogue, thereby forming a constellation of public spheres. Yet this vision also has its limitations: who decides what it means to be reasonable, who can ‘educate’ or ‘empower’ a community to facilitate its entry into debate ? Attention must therefore always be paid to those who are marginalised and expected to be excluded from such visions.

The Art and Architecture *Biennale*, in its present format, crystallises several issues of representation that can be connected to the idea of the public as a community bound by shared norms and values, as long as members have substantial access to economic capital, whether through representation by a recognised and wealthy nation-state or corporation, and can easily integrate into Western exhibition models, markets, aesthetics, and politics. In this sense, the Biennale's claim to represent a global public often rests on mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that privilege already recognised actors. As proposed by Iveson, the vision of a “global public” is one that is not constructed through the erasure of estrangement, but through encounters of strangers across a shared horizon : a ‘cosmopolis’ of difference. By placing struggle and the multiplicity of perspectives at its centre, this view is compatible with the concept of alter-institutions, thus challenging dominant institutional arrangements.. In this respect, the formation of alter-institutions can be compared to that of counter-publics : borrowing from Nancy Fraser's definition (1990), cited by both Iveson (2007) and Mitchell (2003), members of subordinated groups such as workers, women, people of colour, and the queer community have repeatedly constituted alternative publics, “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1990, p. 67).

The comparison is not intended to equate alter-institutions with counter-publics. Rather, alter-institutions can be understood as organisational and infrastructural forms through which counter-publics are sustained, made visible, and able to intervene in wider public debates. Both emerge within spaces of marginality, and maintain a tense, strategic relationship of inter-visibility with hegemonic publics. Because they challenge established norms, they are frequently considered deviant or disorderly. Iveson's

cosmopolis invites us to abandon hierarchical understandings of publics, allowing the public sphere to become a site of cultural and ideological contestation among diverse actors (2007, p. 27)

How to imagine a landscape in which cultural institutions and alter-institutions relate to one another without reproducing hierarchical forms of power ? How can one truly construct the 1990s utopian vision of “a world as an interconnected archipelago of dialoguing Glissant-Obrist-Utopia”, without the “ocean of exploitation - and extractivism” (Baravalle 2020) that sustains it ? *ruangrupa’s documenta 15*, like ARCH+’s ‘Open for Maintenance’ can be understood as attempts to create platforms for spatial justice through the arts at both local and global scales. Yet they raise several questions regarding the modalities of inclusion and exclusion, and most importantly rely, at some point, on the centralisation of resources, materials, visibility, and institutional access while fostering partnership and redistribution with other actors. Their capacity to support alternative initiatives ultimately depended on resources that had first been centralised : German public funding in the case of *documenta 15*, and materials and infrastructures circulating within the *Biennale* in the case of ‘Open for Maintenance’. This dependency complicates any distinction between institutions and alter-institutions. Although many participating initiatives are deeply invested in creating alternatives to failing local state provision and in sustaining autonomous counter-publics, they remain partially reliant on public provisioning. This is coherent with Trémon’s analysis that “urban public goods serve as the basis for the urban commons” (2022, p. 3) Consequently, alter-institutions continue to require forms of representation before those bodies that decide the allocation of resources, whether governmental alter-institutions, major institutions, or wider publics.

As long as a centre and periphery exist, hierarchy persists, undermining the search for a horizontal ‘cosmopolis’ of difference. Nevertheless, challenging hierarchy remains crucial in order to avoid falling into the trap of “socialising poverty” (Linebaugh 2009). *ruangrupa’s documenta 15* did not only concern the commons, but also redistribution from the global North. As redistribution means subtraction from a centralised accumulation, it inherently represents a matter of conflict, as quickly became evident in global arts media. Rather than demonstrating the possibility of a fully horizontal cosmopolis, these case studies point toward what Iveson describes a public city (or *Biennale*, or art event), where citizens are imagined to share collective interests and needs addressed through state provisioning of services which should be universally accessible. A call for public provisioning, implying a singular public, does not necessarily mean that decisions must be made by planners “more concerned with rationality than democracy” (Iveson 2007, p. 44). Rather, as Don Mitchell theorised, widely accessible public spaces—and the ideals and images of the public sphere anchored in space—retain significant normative force for driving political organisation and action (2003, p. 34–35). The framework of global basic rights, despite its limitations and its tendency to homogenise collective interests, remains relevant insofar as such rights “establish an important ideal against which the behavior of the state, capital, and other

powerful actors must be measured—and held accountable” (ibid., p. 25). In this sense, rights must also defend the right to representation, enabling each community to contribute to the broader struggle over resource distribution, according to their specific needs and interests (ibid., p. 33). Combining the two authors’ perspectives, the struggle for the right to self-represent within the social imaginary of a broader public may ultimately contribute to the formation of a more inclusive social sphere, enabling participation by a wider diversity of political communities. Iveson’s vision of a cosmopolis of difference should therefore not be understood as the absence of hierarchy or mediation, but through the recognition of the power relations embedded in processes of distribution and through struggles over representation within a broader public sphere.

If the cosmopolis must confront the realities of distribution, then the spatial organisation of distribution itself becomes a central question. In *Social Justice and the City* (1973), David Harvey demonstrates the deep problems inherent in the market logic governing the allocation of goods, including public goods, made possible by the non-consideration of space, including in between distributors and receptors. The current model of redistribution persists largely by using itself as justification. For the moment, a wider public sphere solely as a horizontal ‘cosmopolis’ of difference is impossible to imagine, where resources are debated and shared, because those resources are not presently pooled within commons controlled by labouring classes. This forces counter-publics and alter-institutions to continuously perform the distance between centre and periphery. Such performances may reproduce that distance, yet they also constitute a form of struggle against that distance, politicising and publicising venues along the trajectory, each with its own negotiated strategy of visibility, shaped by the specific conditions of spaces and their imagined audiences.

Yet struggles over redistribution also raise a further question: who is able to access the spaces in which representation becomes possible? Although large-scale privatisation and financialisation do not prevent the formation of publics and public claims, their expansion remains a threat to the creation of public spaces and spheres. As discussed in Part 2, Chapter 1, B, among wider known collectives and organisers active in Venice, an increasing number no longer inhabit the city, but maintain forms of labour often characterised by precarity and exploitation. As argued by Lefebvre (1996 [1968]; p 174 - 180) and cited by Mitchell (2003 ; p 19 - 21), it is important to rescue the idea of cities as spaces of interaction across difference, and to defend their heterogeneity. In order to participate in the public oeuvre of the city, one must have the right to inhabit : this means, provision of basic social goods such as housing, not as objects of ownership and speculation, but as conditions for appropriation and participation in the city’s life.

Conclusion

This thesis examined how international art events such as La Biennale di Venezia constitute spaces of intensified neoliberalism and urban privatization, with concrete effects on public civic life, while paradoxically functioning as a site where publics are constituted and redistributive claims are articulated. The work aimed to build upon preexisting literature on tourism-linked urban financialisation by intersecting it with the construction of urban spectacles through cultural governance and the effects of public space. The ambition is to be able to apply theories developed within urban tourism studies more vastly by bypassing binaries of tourist/resident and high/low quality tourism, as well as to inquire the effects on the political potentialities of our urban environments dealing with quickly shifting demographics and geographies. Despite the city of Venice being a primary subject for tourism studies, few critically analysed the *Biennale*, and fewer inquired on the effect of urban financialisation industry on public space. When the entire city seems subsumed by a neoliberal, privatising tourist spectacle, how do populations continue to organise for concrete redistributive justice ?

Given the ability of art events such as the *Biennale* enhance local attractiveness to global investment and international interest, such cultural events have become central to contemporary urban development strategies, receiving large investments from governments and corporations which see in them vehicles of economic, political, and symbolic accumulation. Cultural policy such as through art events is used to create an attractive city for investment, through the development of the city's image. The concentration of global wealth and investment associated with the *Biennale* contributes to art-led gentrification, widening rent gaps and progressively dispossessing residents and local businesses from urban space, even as many inhabitants remain economically dependent on the very institutions driving these transformations, alienating workers from the very city they work in. Meanwhile, as real estate values continue to rise, market logic deems it irrational to maintain civic functions within public spaces rather than financialising it. Intensified global flows invest in and privatise nearly all spaces of the city, reducing it to a "shell", a temporary stopover for global circulation : despite a high diversity of people sharing the same space, alliances and the formation of a public is unlikely. Defining public space as owned by a public entity or administration or being widely accessible, the Art and Architecture editions of the *Biennale* are responsible for the dismantling of public spaces throughout the city, allowing more spaces of civic use to become engulfed in a privately owned and managed spectacle of tourism, where the functions of consumption are privileged over civic uses.

On the other hand, rather than engaging solely with local administrations, civil society organisations increasingly turn to the *Biennale* itself as a locus of authority, visibility, and influence through which to

seek spaces for democratic engagement and civic action. Although spaces in the city may be privately owned and/or administered, this does not necessarily obstacle the creation of public claims towards them. Their centralisation of resources and capital may transform them into sites toward which publics form and from which claims for redistribution emerge. These venues are not necessarily perceived as spaces to be widely inhabited or made juridically public, but rather as platforms of resources to be redistributed throughout wider urban space. Representation within these industries and spaces thus becomes of major importance for agency and for the claim to redistribute the capital concentrated within them, and the heterogeneous, public-private governance of art events can constitute multiple points of entry for activists fighting against urban financialisation. However, this process is mitigated by the risk of tokenisation, whereby members of subjugated groups are included primarily for the discursive and symbolic value of their presence. This mode of organising redistribution across a multiplicity of spaces, from the most public to the most private, the most in each with its own logics and imaginaries, contradicts the idea that these actors are passive recipients of redistribution. Instead, they actively create and mobilise publics in diverse ways, shaping both the claims themselves and the discursive forms they take. This process enables individuals and communities to maintain agency over their representation while linking it to material redistribution, rather than becoming subjects of voyeuristic extractivism.

As global art events are shaped not only by local forms of exploitation and extractivist economies but also by global dynamics, they carry significance at geopolitical scales and participate in broader global arguments about distribution. As such, they may also function as potential platforms for distributive justice at the global level, bringing another scale to the multiplicities of spaces which can shape art events, although are not necessarily synonymous with the disappearance of locality or local autonomy. By becoming a political subject, despite their wider inaccessibility, spaces of the Art and Architecture *Biennale* effectively become one of the spaces in which the public claim to the city and global redistribution are made, both at a local and international level, thus serving a public and publicising function.

The majority of the fieldwork for this thesis took place in the summer of 2025, while the final words are being written almost one year later, in early June 2026. The past few weeks, the very first of the 61st edition of the *Biennale Arte*, have only strengthened my arguments and the need to continue to insist on the *Biennale's* political responsibility and potential. This year, Israel and Russia have both been allowed to participate, and the *Biennale* Foundation promised to 'host' the Israeli national participation while the pavilion in the *Giardini* continues to be under maintenance. *ANGA* reactivated its network, stronger than before thanks to its previous victories, creating a boycott so wide it was eventually joined by the official

jury : a loud geopolitical crisis ensued, and the jury resigned. Not only is the *Biennale* prize system into hiatus, but its very integrity as a global art authority is under attack. The opening days have produced more photos of protests, sit-ins and smoke-bombs than any single exhibition. In a few days, on the 12th of June, a national strike of cultural workers might be able to prove the social determinism of international art-workers as opportunists either right or wrong. While past editions of the *Biennale* were criticised for co-opting difference and conflict into aesthetic products of consumption, an effective “machine of depoliticisation” (Baravalle 2022, p. 239), this year’s *Biennale* can not hide its political nature, in spite of itself.

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Annex

Annex 1 : Observation grids

1.1 Observation grid for general Biennale pavilions

Modules	Questions	Indicators
Use of space and morphology	How has the space been reorganised by the installation(s)? How do these affect interaction and movement within space? What actor has put them there, and with what intention?	Physical barriers and obstacles, temporary or permanent, both within the space and to delimitate it. Security personnel. Signposting. Frequently taken routes and rests throughout the space.
Actors' interaction with the installation and space	How do actors physically interact with the installation ? How do they interact with the space the installation is in? What is/are the primary intended use(s) intended of the space by the curators and organising team? What proscribed activities, what intended meaning(s) of the work? How are these effectively reinforced in the visitors and/or investors?	Actively sought interaction which is not walking, such as stopping to look, sitting, touching, climbing... any practice which is not prescribed by the piece, such as graffiti, property destruction or political gathering. Where such behaviours take place. Physical barriers and instructions given by the curator and organising team. Questions and overheard conversations from visitors.
Social and economic interactions	Who are the main actors who are in this space; what institutions, what kinds of professionals, what kinds of tourists, what kinds of workers? How do these groups perform these identities and self-identify? How does this change their behaviours and interactions within the space and others? What kind of social interactions take place within the space, and how does this vary in between groups?	Uniforms and dress codes, business cards, actors' own introduction. Elements of distinction, such as clothing. Languages spoken. Social behaviour in between people and its declinations ; cordiality, (in)formality, volume of speech, in between strangers or friends or family members, feelings or actions of ease, content or function of the conversation or sociality. Potential conflict and conflict resolution.

1.2. Observation grill for Castello

Modules	Questions	Indicators
Use of space and morphology	How has the space been reorganised by the installation(s)? How do these affect interaction and movement within space? What actor has put them there, and with what intention?	Physical barriers and obstacles, temporary or permanent, both within the space and to delimitate it. Security personnel, <i>public or private</i> . Signposting. Frequently taken routes and rests throughout the space.
Actors' interaction with urban space	How do actors physically interact with the urban space? What seem to be the primary intended uses of said space by urban planners and event organisers and what proscribed activities? How are these effectively reinforced in the different users of the space?	Actively sought interaction which is not walking, such as stopping to look, sitting, touching, climbing... any practice which is not prescribed, such as graffiti, property destruction or political proclamation or gathering. Where such behaviours take place. Physical barriers and instructions given by the curator and organising team. Questions and overheard conversations from visitors. <i>Is there a visible change in foot traffic throughout the spaces, and what reactions to this?</i>
Social and economic interactions	Who are the main actors who are in this space; what institutions, what kinds of professionals, what kinds of tourists, what kinds of workers? How do these groups perform these identities and self-identify? How does this change their behaviours and interactions within the space and others? What kind of social interactions take place within the space, and how does this vary in between groups?	Uniforms and dress codes, business cards, elements of distinction, such as clothing. Languages spoken. Social behaviour in between people and its declinations ; cordiality, (in)formality, volume of speech, in between strangers or friends or family members, feelings or actions of ease, content or function of the conversation or sociality. Potential conflict and conflict resolution. <i>What are the main kinds of services visible close to the Pavilions?</i>

1.3. Observation grill for social movements and associations

Modules	Questions	Indicators
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Use of space and morphology	How has the space been reorganised by the installation(s)? How do these affect interaction and movement within space? What actor has put them there, and with what intention?	Physical barriers and obstacles, temporary or permanent, both within the space and to delimitate it. Security personnel, public or private. Signposting. Frequently taken routes and rests throughout the space.
Actors' interaction with urban space	How do actors physically interact with the urban space? What seem to be the primary intended uses of said space by urban planners and event organisers and what proscribed activities? How are these effectively reinforced in the different users of the space?	Actively sought interaction which is not walking, such as stopping to look, sitting, touching, climbing... any practice which is not prescribed, such as graffiti, property destruction or political proclamation or gathering. Where such behaviours take place. Physical barriers and instructions given by the curator and organising team. Questions and overheard conversations from visitors.
Social and economic interactions within the space	Who are the main actors who are in this space; what institutions, what kinds of professionals, what kinds of tourists, what kinds of workers? How do these groups perform these identities and self-identify? How does this change their behaviours and interactions within the space and others? What kind of social interactions take place within the space, and how does this vary in between groups?	Uniforms and dress codes, business cards, elements of distinction, such as clothing. Languages spoken. Social behaviour in between people and its declinations ; cordiality, (in)formality, volume of speech, in between strangers or friends or family members, feelings or actions of ease, content or function of the conversation or sociality. Potential conflict and conflict resolution.

1.4. Observation grill for the Vatican Pavilion

Modules	Questions	Indicators
Use of space and morphology	How has the space been reorganised by the installation(s)? How do these affect interaction and movement within space?	Physical barriers and obstacles, temporary or permanent, both within the space and to delimitate it.

	What actor has put them there, and with what intention? Who officially owns the space, and is the use or ownership of this space contested? Is there an implicit or explicit subversion of the meaning or use of this space? How do the agents organise space? What places are considered commons, what spaces are considered private? What activities are organised, and how do these aim to subvert the meaning of space? How does this change the claim to space?	Security personnel. Signposting. Frequently taken routes and rests throughout the space.
Actors' interaction with the installation and space	How do actors physically interact with the installation ? How do they interact with the space the installation is in? What is/are the primary intended use(s) intended of the space by the curators, and are these different from the other invited institutions? What proscribed activities, what intended meaning(s) of the work? How are these effectively reinforced in the visitors and/or investors?	Actively sought interaction which is not walking, such as stopping to look, sitting, touching, climbing... any practice which is not prescribed by the piece, such as graffiti, property destruction or political gathering. Where such behaviours take place. Physical barriers and instructions given by the curator and organising team. Questions and overheard conversations from visitors.
Social interactions	Who are the main actors who are in this space; what institutions, what kinds of professionals, what kinds of tourists, what kinds of workers? How do these groups perform these identities and self-identify? How does this change their behaviours and interactions within the space and others? What kind of social interactions take place within the space, and how does this vary in between groups? What groups adapt to others' needs, values and temporalities?	Uniforms and dress codes, business cards, actors' own introduction. Elements of distinction, such as clothing. Languages spoken. Social behaviour in between people and its declinations; cordiality, (in)formality, volume of speech, in between strangers or friends or family members, feelings or actions of ease, content or function of the conversation or sociality. How much each member speaks. Potential conflict and conflict resolution.

Annex 2. Interview questions

2.1 Curator of the Oman Pavilion

- What are the motivations of the Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sports in participating in the Biennale? How did this influence choosing a location to exhibit?
- In the past years, have you received help from the Biennale or other local institutions in finding the necessary employees from the Pavilion, or a location to exhibit?
- Was it hard to exhibit in this space in the Arsenale? What barriers are there to exhibiting in the Arsenale (price, bureaucracy, internal criteria...)
- What organism are you officially leasing from (the Biennale Foundation, the Demanio, the Comune di Venezia, the Military...)
- Are you able to exhibit here next year too, and do you wish to?
- What was the budget of this years' Pavilion? How much is the leasing of a space in the Arsenale? Is it entirely paid by the Ministry or are there other donors, and which ones?
- You mentioned that this years' work will be exhibited in Muscat after the exhibition. Juridically, who does the work belong to at the present moment? Will it or has it been "sold" to another entity, for example the City of Muscat or a private person, after the end of the exhibition so that it may be exhibited in the public space?
- The works that were exhibited in the past Biennales (both art and architecture) who do they belong to now?
- What's one thing you hope visitors take away from this years' Pavilion ?

2.2. Co-owner of the gallery S.V.

- When did you first arrive in Venice, and why open up a gallery in Venice ? (Any ties to the Biennale ?)
- When did you decide to open S.V. ?
- How did you find the location of the gallery ?
- How did you open the first Biennale exhibition inside the gallery ?
- How did you fund the gallery this year ?
- Were there administrative difficulties in opening this business ? What kinds of aids were you able to gain ?
- How did you find the necessary staff ? (Technicians, invigilators...)
- What are the main sources of economic income for the gallery ?
- When did you / do you imagine beginning to have a return on your investment in opening the gallery ?

- How did you choose your artists for this exhibition ?
- How did the experience of S.V. influence your wish to open your other project (buying a house to rent out the flats) ?

2.3. A. from the office Valorizzazione Sedi (nb. Translated from Italian)

- How did you start working for the Biennale?
- When did your office open? Probably an office that not many people know exists. What was its purpose?
- If I understand correctly, the promotion comes primarily through renting the spaces to institutions and third parties?
- Ca' Giustinian is owned by the Municipality: what kind of agreement does it have with the Biennale? For how long? What are the terms of this concession? Can rentals be made to anyone?
- Your office manages the spaces at Ca' Giustinian: are there other venues where you hold events?
- What types of events do you organize? With what types of organizations or institutions? To give me an idea of the typical functions of these spaces...
- What is the budget for renting these spaces? Are there different prices, and for whom? How can I find out how much this activity generates annually?
- Have you ever organized special events that welcome residents, local associations, etc.?
- The Biennale has had its budget cut in 2025. In 2024, the Venice Biennale Foundation received almost €16 million from the Ministry, leaving a shortfall of around €800,000 this year. How does this impact your work, or what can you see more broadly around you?
- You mentioned protecting venues and "quality standards." What are the standards criteria you're keeping in mind, which are important in this review?
- Do you like your work? Do you have any criticisms, or ways in which things could be done differently?

2.4. Omar Tommasi, head of the Urbanism Office for Historic and Insular Venice at the Venice Municipality (nb. Translated from Italian)

- What does the city master plan include about exhibition spaces, such as art galleries and exhibition spaces ?
- Have there been many changes to the city master plan in the last few years ? How do these take place ? On what justification of public interest ?

- What are the administrative regulations to create art galleries, art spaces ? Are there limits, or criteria to meet ? How are these limits or criteria calculated ?
- In insular Venice, are there regulations to limit the price of certain spaces, both rental and real estate price ?
- As the Urbanism office, you have a position on the value of the economy of contemporary art in the city ? Are there studies or analysis which are made on your behalf ? Is there interest in the question ?
- What is the impact of the presence of this economy on the territory ?
- As the Urbanism office, how is the creation of new commercial activities not tied to tourism supported ?
- Do you work with the *Biennale* administration ? In what contexts ? Coordinating services, urban logistics, ect...
- Are there any public services that are changed given the nearby presence of the *Biennale* ? Street cleaning, ect...
- What are the justifications of the *Biennale* to occupy public urban space ?
- Many spaces of the *Demanio* are being conceded. Why is there still no "Piano Città" (master plan for a city in the concession of federal infrastructure) for the projects of the local *Demanio*, if so much infrastructure is being conceded ?

2.5. Veronica Rade, Head of the Built Heritage Office of the Venice Municipality (nb. Translated from Italian)

- Can you present your office, and what is its purpose ?
- What percentage of the historical city of Venice is considered heritage ?
- What are the major activities to valorise Venetian Heritage ? What types of "activations"? What percentage of built heritage is currently without use?
- When there is a public call for projects for the use of an infrastructure, what are the criteria for assignment ?
- Given you deal with concessions and not sale, what are the terms of use that demarcate the fact that the spaces may remain public ?
- What importance does the office give to find opportunities of widespread use of a space ? Are there programmes (eg of mediation, of reduced price for residents) that are put in place to allow for widespread use ?
- Do you work with the *Biennale* Foundation ? What is the relationship ?
- What opportunities of conservation and preservation can be acquired through collaboration with entities such as the *Biennale* ? What counter-points ? Any bad experiences that come to mind ?

- How often are spaces conceded to public services ?
- How do you work with the current city master plan ?
- You sometimes work with the *Demanio* : how come there is no “Piano Città” for Venice ?
- The concession of the *Ludoteca La Luna nel Pozzo* : how did this take place ? How was the space chosen ? Why offer it for 4 years and not just 1 ?

2.6. Member of *Assemblea Sociale per la Casa* (nb. Translated from Italian)

- Can you present yourself, your relationship to the city ? Can you present the assembly ?
- According to you, what are the biggest problems in Venice ?
- How did the collaboration with the Biennale, or Pavilions, take place ? Rural Studio, German Pavilion, Austrian Pavilion... Did you feel welcome in this space, did the collaboration feel natural ?
- Was this collaboration politically useful, in what way ? What discussions did you have internally before collaborating ? Is there still a link with the people who collaborated with you from the Pavilions ? Did they integrate well with the needs and philosophies of the collective ? What resistances, negotiations, points of tension, translations ? Do you still use the objects produced, or money gained ?
- How do you see the Biennale, of how it could be, of how it is today ?

2.7. Member of *CSO Morion* (nb. Translated from Italian)

- Introduce the Assembly.
- In your view, what are the biggest problems currently facing Venice?
- When did the collaborations take place?
- How did hosting the members of the German Pavilion come about?
- How did the opening party of the Danish Pavilion come about?
- How did these collaborations take place in practice?
- Who approached whom to initiate the collaborations?
- In what ways were these collaborations politically useful?
- What discussions took place within the collective before deciding to participate?
- Were there any moments of hesitation before collaborating with the Venice Biennale?
- Do you still maintain relationships with the people who took part in these collaborations?
- Did they integrate well with the needs and philosophy of the collective?
- What forms of resistance, negotiation, tension, or translation emerged during the collaborations?
- Do you still use the objects or installations that they designed?

- What about the funding—how was the money used or managed?
- Would you be open to similar collaborations in the future?

2.8. Member of Rebiennale / REB (nb. Translated from Italian)

- Introduce yourself, introduce Rebiennale.
- In your view, what are the biggest problems currently facing Venice?
- How did Rebiennale come into being?
- Why did you decide to collaborate with the Biennale?
- Were there any hesitations before collaborating with the institution itself?
- How long does it usually take to complete an exhibition installation?
- How many people are involved in the group, and how many clients or projects do you take on?
- Rebiennale later became R3B. How did this transition or separation take place?
- How do you continue to engage with civil society through your activities?
- What does the Biennale represent for Venice today?
- What are its strengths, and what are its negative impacts?
- Do you ever encounter communication difficulties with the organizing bodies, or mismatched expectations, given that you operate differently from traditional exhibition installers?
- What challenges have you faced in adapting to an institutional environment?
- What challenges have arisen as you have expanded your activities and become more professionalized?
- Have there been any pavilions or projects that you refused to work on?
- What could the Biennale represent ideally? What is your vision of a utopian Biennale?
- How do you work toward achieving that vision?
- What are the current limitations preventing that kind of Biennale from becoming a reality?
- How do you reconcile your positive objectives with the negative impacts that the Biennale can have on the social and urban fabric of Venice?
- Can you tell me about “The Green Lion”? How was it organized? Why has it not been organized again?
- In your opinion, why has / hasn’t the *Biennale* been met with more contestation ?

2.9. Member of Rebiennale / Officina Marghera (nb. Translated from Italian)

- Introduce yourself. Who are you, how did you come to Venice, and how do you position yourself within this city? If you would like, you can also introduce Officine Marghera.

- How did Rebiennale begin? Let's start with the very early days.
- Why did the idea of collaborating with the Biennale emerge? Were there any hesitations before collaborating with the institution itself?
- Can you tell me how Rebiennale developed over time, and then how Officine Marghera emerged? How have your ways of working with the Biennale changed over time? (For example, were you officially recognized as an association for a period? Is it true that associations can no longer work with the Biennale?)
- What role did the Biennale institution play in transforming the relationship between activists like yourselves and your way of operating?
- How did the shift occur from recovering materials from the Biennale for a variety of social uses to recovering materials primarily for the construction of pavilions?
- How were the current working methods of Officine Marghera shaped? Which experiences and political ideals informed these choices?
- Have you ever had negative interactions with the Biennale administration because of the work you do? How would you describe your relationship with the Foundation itself, as opposed to your relationships with individual pavilions?
- I looked through your website and noticed that you do not prominently showcase many of the projects you have completed. Why is that?
- What is your opinion of the German Pavilion 2023 and the Austrian Pavilion 2023?
- How do you work with the Biennale today?
- What is your broader view of the Biennale as an institution? What does it represent for Venice?
- Why do you think a broader discussion has not yet emerged among Venetians about the role of the Biennale in shaping the future of the city?

2.10. Interview with member of ANGA (nb. Translated from Italian)

- Presentati. Presenta come sei arrivato ad ANGA.
- Parlami di ANGA, di com'è nata. Come vi conoscete, com'è cresciuto ?
- Dove sono localizzati gli attivisti di base ? Come si entra nell'organizzazione, e come ci si organizza se localizzati in luoghi diversi ?
- Perché è importante la rappresentazione alla Biennale ? Perché è importante la Biennale ?
- Come sono state immaginate e organizzate le proteste e le loro forme ? Fra spettacolo, e protesta... Qual'è il ruolo di ogni forma ? (Qual'è il ruolo del dissenso, e verso chi ci si sta dissentendo)?

- Visto che non eravate tutti su Venezia, come vi siete organizzati per trovare i luoghi dove fare le proteste ? La galleria dove avete esposto, l'avete dovuta pagare ? Come avete trovato i fondi ?
- Quali legami con attivisti a Venezia ? Che tipo di allegiances ?
- Raccontami della protesta che é accaduta dentro ai Giardini della Biennale. Come é stata organizzata ? Come sono entrati i manifestanti ? Quali complicazioni ? Quali reazioni della polizia, o degli agenti di sicurezza (chi era peggio?)
- Dopo la Biennale 2023, come avete continuato ad operare ? Che continuità con i compagni di Venezia ?
- Che continuità, che cosa avete imparato dall'esperienza : che cosa farete diversamente nella vostra campagna 2025?

2.11. Member of Vignole Energia Rinnovabile Agricoltura Sostenibile (nb. Translated from Italian)

- Introduce yourself. Tell me how you came to join ANGA.
- Can you tell me about ANGA and how it was founded? How did the members first come together, and how has the organization grown over time?
- Where are your grassroots activists based? How does someone join the organization, and how do you coordinate your activities when members are located in different places?
- Why is representation at the Biennale important? More broadly, why is the Biennale itself important?
- How were the protests and their various forms conceived and organized? Between spectacle and protest, what role does each form play? What is the role of dissent, and who is the intended target of that dissent?
- Given that not all of you were based in Venice, how did you organize yourselves to identify locations for the protests? Did you have to pay for the gallery where you exhibited? How did you secure funding?
- What relationships did you build with activists in Venice? What kinds of alliances or solidarities emerged?
- Can you tell me about the protest that took place inside the Biennale Gardens? How was it organized? How did the protesters gain access? What complications arose? How did the police and security personnel react, and were there differences between them?
- After the 2023 Biennale, how did your activities continue? What forms of continuity remained with your collaborators and comrades in Venice?
- Looking back, what continuity has there been since that experience, and what lessons did you learn from it? What will you do differently in your 2025 campaign?

2.12. Member of Osservatorio Civico per la casa e la residenzialità (OCIO) (nb. Translated from Italian)

- Introduce yourself, introduce OCIO.
- For you, what are the biggest problems Venice is currently facing?
- Has OCIO ever conducted studies on the Biennale and its impact?
- What were the main themes?
- What difficulties did you encounter?
- Collaboration with the Venice Biennale. Did it only take place in the context of the Austrian Pavilion?
- How did this collaboration come about?
- Did you feel welcome in that space?
- Did the collaboration feel natural?
- In what ways was it politically useful?
- What discussions took place before deciding to participate?
- How do you see the Biennale today?
- How could it be different?
- Is there still a connection with the people who took part?
- Did they integrate well with the needs and philosophy of the collective?
- What forms of resistance, negotiation, points of tension, or translation emerged during the

2.13. Marco Baravalle, researcher, curator and activist at Sale Docks (nb. Translated from Italian)

- Introduce the Assembly. How did S.a.L.E. Docks come into being? How did Biennialocene emerge?
- How is the idea of the “city as a common good” conceptualized within your movement?
- How does S.a.L.E., or Biennialocene, respond to this issue?
- What are your usual methods of political action? What is your overall strategy?
- What kinds of people usually participate in and engage with your spaces?
- What kinds of people would you like to see participating more?
- Is temporality or transience a challenge in this regard?
- What are the greatest difficulties you currently face in achieving your political ambitions?
- There have been several moments of collaboration with the Venice Biennale. How did these collaborations come about?

- What tensions or hesitations existed before entering into these collaborations?
- In particular, could you discuss Biennialocene and the collaboration with the German Pavilion?
- You are a collective that uses artistic and aesthetic forms of communication as part of your political practice. Does this make collaboration with an artistic exhibition institution seem natural?
- Looking back, do you feel these collaborations were politically useful?
- Was there any concern about being reabsorbed into the realm of aesthetics, becoming part of the passive spectatorship associated with the traditional Biennale exhibition system?
- How do you see the Biennale today?
- How could it be different?
- As a technician, what is your relationship with the Biennale as an institution?
- In the context of We Exhibit, what kind of relationship do you have with the central institution?
- At what moments does communication take place?
- Do you have to pay in order to work there?
- Can you tell me about the protests at the Biennale that you remember?
- Could you discuss Biennialocene's 2023 action in front of the entrance gate?
- Could you discuss the ANGA Alliance protest in 2024?
- Could you discuss the Mars Pavilion action in 2025?
- How did you choose the locations for these demonstrations?
- Did you encounter any problems with security personnel?
- What was your relationship with security staff like?
- Were these demonstrations declared or authorized in advance?
- Was there ever a request to enter the Biennale itself?
- If so, how did that process unfold?

2.14. Curator at the Vatican Pavilion

- How you first got to Venice.
- To you, what are the biggest problems that Venice is facing?
- How was the pavilion organised? so many different associations working together: how did you manage contacting the associations? and the coliving with the association nearby here?
- What were the leading questions or interests of the curators... what was the vision of Venice of the pavilion? How did you try to answer these thematics with your intervention? What difficulties in interacting with a residential neighbourhood like Casteo? was your posture to

revolutionise it, or to serve it, or to... how come these events were held out of official collaboration with the Biennale, how was the communication handled?

- How did it feel working for the Biennale, all the whilst trying to shine a light on residentiality? What part can, or should the Biennale play in all of this? What is something you would have done differently, and something you think you got right?

2.14. Invigilator at the Vatican Pavilion

- Can you give me a tour?
- Can you tell me what kinds of instructions you were given in the use of the space? to help visitors engage with the space, or things you ask them not to touch... - what are the most frequently asked questions?
- Did you discover anything new? of surprising uses of the space?
- How long have you been working here? did you see any changes in the time you spent here, in the way people come to the pavilion?
- Did your perception of the installation change overtime?
- What do you think of the way this space was activated?
- What do you think is the most, and least, interesting thing about this installation?
- What other associations and entities have activities here? what do these kinds of activities consist in?
- Is there a good collaboration with the people of the activities? are there difficulties eg in scheduling, in communicating what they want to do, whether it's possible in the space, different interests in using the space...
- Do you assist the meals, and other activities?
- Do you know about the use of the space beforehand?
- Do you ever have locals complain or tell you about the use of this space beforehand?

2.15. Giovanni Andrea Martini, city councilor who supported the parents' struggle to regain the Ludoteca (nb. Translated from Italian)

- Could you introduce yourself? How did you become a city councillor, and for what political reasons did you enter local politics?
- Could you tell me about this former play centre, *La Luna nel Pozzo*? Under what circumstances was it closed?
- Is it true that there was also a crowdfunding campaign to finance restoration works?
- Had a completion date for the restoration works ever been announced?
- Do you know how much of the promised restoration work had actually been completed before the site was opened as a pavilion?

- Could you tell me about the resistance campaign? The mothers' petition, the contact with journalists... How was the struggle built, and how did you become involved?
- What are the main criticisms directed at the movement, and how do you respond to them?
- The children were partly integrated into the pavilion's programme, which presents itself as having a social purpose and a particular concern for residential life. How has the attitude towards this space evolved?
- What do these same mothers think now that the pavilion has been open and operating for several months?
- Has the pavilion's "social mission" changed anything in terms of opposition to the loss of the play centre?
- Could you put me in contact with one of the mothers involved?
- The pavilion's programmes, workshops, and communal meals are scheduled to continue until November. Do you already know what the Vatican's plans are afterwards, given that it has use of the space for several more years?
- Have you been able to establish contact with the Vatican's Ministry of Culture?
- Do you know how the Vatican obtained access to this space?
- It seems to have been granted through the municipal property authority, but if the site was officially unusable, how could the authority allocate it in the first place?
- Broadening the discussion, what does the Biennale represent for you personally?
- Do you attend it often?
- Is this the first time you have been involved in a campaign directed against a Biennale pavilion?
- Have you seen the Biennale change during your time in Venice?
- Both in terms of its content and in the way it operates within the city?
- In your opinion, what effect does the Biennale currently have on Venice?
- Is there any connection with the former site at Sant'Anna?
- What does the Biennale represent for you politically?

2.16. Interview with social worker at the refugee center next to the Vatican Pavilion (nb. Translated from Italian)

- Could you tell me about the reception centre? What are the things that work best there?
- What are the centre's greatest needs at the moment?
- In terms of coexistence with the rest of the cloister and the surrounding neighbourhood, what other activities, services, or organisations exist in the immediate area?

- What kind of relationship does the centre, and its residents, have with the local neighbourhood?
- When the centre opened, did the play centre (*ludoteca*) still exist?
- The ludoteca was supposed to reopen briefly in 2022—do you know whether residents of the reception centre ever used it?
- What kind of relationship did residents have with that space while it was closed for restoration works?
- What is your opinion of the integration—or lack of integration—between the Pavilion and the reception centre?
- What do you think the Pavilion did well?
- What do you think it could have done better?
- When the Pavilion first contacted you, were there any hesitations about collaborating with them?

2.17. Interview with one of the mothers leading the fight to regain the Ludoteca (nb. Translated from Italian)

- Could you introduce yourself? How did you come to Venice?
- How long had you been using the play centre (*ludoteca*)?
- What did this place mean to you personally?
- The ludoteca seems to have reopened briefly in 2022. Under what conditions did it reopen, and how much of the restoration work had actually been completed?
- Had a date been given for the completion of the restoration works?
- Could you tell me how the campaign developed?
- How did the petition begin?
- How did you establish contact with journalists?
- And with the municipality ?
- Did you ever get in touch with a representative of the Vatican?
- How did that exchange unfold?
- The children were partly integrated into the Pavilion's programme, which presents itself as having a social mission and a particular focus on residential life.
- How has the perception of this space changed since then?
- What do these mothers think now that the Pavilion has been open and active for several months?
- Has the Pavilion's stated "social mission" changed anything regarding opposition to the loss of the ludoteca?
- What is the situation now?

- Do you have to continue dealing with the municipality?
- How are things progressing?
- The Pavilion's workshops, activities, and communal meals are scheduled to continue until November. Do you already know what the Vatican's plans are afterwards, given that it has been granted use of the space for several more years?
- Have you managed to establish contact with the Vatican's Ministry of Culture?
- What are the main criticisms directed at your movement?
- How do you respond to those criticisms?