

Original citation:

Whybrow, Nicolas. (2015) 'The city of the eye' : urban aesthetics and surveillance in the city of Venice. *New Theatre Quarterly*, Volume 31 (Number 2). pp. 164-178. ISSN 0266-464X

Permanent WRAP url:

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/67502>

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:

© Cambridge University Press

Final published article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X15000263>

A note on versions:

The version presented here may differ from the published version or, version of record, if you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the 'permanent WRAP url' above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: publications@warwick.ac.uk



<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk>

Nicolas Whybrow

'For this is the city of the eye': Urban Aesthetics and Surveillance in the City of Venice

Joseph Brodsky's assertion in *Watermark* (1992) that Venice 'is the city of the eye', providing a sense of security and solace to inhabitants and visitors via the sheer aesthetic force of its surroundings, implicitly raises questions, in the context of the 21st century city, about the performative nature of not only modern-day urban aesthetics but also surveillance in public space, both of which are dependent, as phenomena, on forms of visual observation. Taking into account contemporary Venice's complex make-up in terms of its transient and permanent populations – tourists, economic migrants and local residents – and the central issue the city faces of the gradual erosion of its historical infrastructure owing to excesses of commercialism and the material effects of flooding, this article ponders the continuing role of aesthetics in this specific urban context. In particular it considers how both Brodsky's perception of the effects of the historical environment and contemporary instances of artistic intervention or engagement with the city – official (as part of the globally-renowned Biennale) and unofficial (in the form of graffiti writing) – might position users of public space in the light of increased attempts to implement formal controls in the overall interests of security. Nicolas Whybrow is Associate Professor (Reader) and Head of Department in the School of Theatre, Performance and Cultural Policy Studies at the University of Warwick, UK. His most recent books are *Art and the City* (2011) and, as editor, *Performing Cities* (2014).

Keywords: complex(ity), citizenship, public art, Venice Biennale, CCTV, graffiti, tourism, economic migrants

Complex-city

In *The Art-Architecture Complex* (2011) Hal Foster analyses the dynamic spatial and conceptual interdependency, indeed *fusion* of artworks and the built environment. In short, contemporary art and architecture can be said to form a *complex* or ensemble whose component parts are both mutually contingent, effectively producing one another, and inextricably bound up with and driven by the effects of broader socio-economic and cultural impulses. The implications of conceiving of such a performative complex are that it can usefully direct us towards an expanded perception of the site of urban aesthetics and space in general, one that not only assumes everyday urban life as integral but also takes into account the framing and positioning of spectator-participants and/or users of public space as key actors. In doing so, it recognises art in the public sphere as having the potential these days to adopt an infinite number of often transient, mobile or interactive forms.

Fig 1. Palladio's church of San Giorgio Maggiore with Mark Quinn's *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (2013).

The intersection of art and architecture is particularly evident in the city of Venice, but where Foster's focus in establishing that relationship as a 'complex' is clearly on the modern era, it can be said here to be premised on a long and rich history in fact, as seen

in the pervasive, interior and exterior adornment of churches, *scuole* and palazzos with artworks from the Byzantine and Renaissance periods through to the present day. This particular, historical art-architecture complex has always profoundly defined the city and was wholly bound up, via systems of private and public patronage, with religion, politics, trade and commerce, and, in general, with the changing ways Venice has governed itself as a city state across the centuries. Contemporary Venice can be said then to represent a rich Neptune's vault of historical architecture and art – much of it acquired, in fact, from 'elsewhere' as a symptom of the city's global trading past – but it also continues to host new exhibitions and installations, not least in the form of its highly-prized, rotating art and architecture biennales. By spreading itself across the whole historic centre and encouraging all manner of collateral art events that take the spectator not only to all four corners but also into unsuspected nooks and crannies of the city, the international art biennale in particular – long-standing and of the utmost global significance in art-world terms – effectively renders the entire built environment of Venice a site-specific artwork for the five months of its duration every two years, one in which past and present inevitably engage in various forms of dialogue with and about the city.

Figs 2. + 3. Material erosion of architecture, Venice, 2009.

An intriguing tension exists in present-day Venice around, first, the ever-increasing dependency on mass tourism; second, an aging, impoverished and dwindling resident population, accounted for in part by local migrations to the immediate mainland (and

beyond); third, an illegal migrant influx from mainly Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia; and, fourth, the vexed politics of water management. Above all the city has been struggling for some time now to control the decline of its historic infrastructure as the rising tides of water (literally) and tourists (figuratively) threaten to make the city disappear altogether. The commercial excess of tourism, which is also responsible in part for both the flight of residents and the prevalence of illegal migration, implicitly exacerbates the practical problem of regular flooding, and thereby the material erosion of the built environment.

Fig 4. *Costa Favolosa* cruise liner arriving in Venice, 2011.

The most striking instance of this is seen in the inexorable increase of oversize cruise liners 'showboating' in immediate proximity of the urban core (200 annually in the year 2000, 510 by 2005). The displacement of water involved as these disproportionate ships parade their way along the central channels of San Marco and Giudecca from the lagoon's Lido inlet on the eastern seaboard all the way over to their docking berths on the western side of the city (and back) is one thing, but churned up sea-beds and the adverse effects of salt erosion on facades are further factors in a complicated picture of ecological destabilisation and structural wear and tear. That aside, such cruise ships, whose operating companies view the delivery to its customers of the grandiose spectacle of arrival within this unique cityscape as the prime, money-spinning commercial consideration, are also responsible for dumping up to 5,000 sight-seeing

tourists on the city in one fell swoop, which naturally also strains at its infrastructural capacities.

The very sights that might be said to constitute the singular appeal of the city are under attack by virtue of being subject to such a relentless and indiscriminate 'industry of seeing', suggesting that the long-running 'immersive show' that is Venice contains the seeds of its own destruction. Major events such as the Biennale are implicated in this complex scenario inasmuch as they contribute directly, and for substantial periods of time, to the influx of visitors into Venice and arguably continue to exist as signature events precisely so as to prop up the image of the city as an attractive destination, thereby perpetuating the commercially profitable but attritional tourist industry in general.¹ At the same time the art of the Biennale holds the promise of a critical negotiation of the city's public spaces.

The notion of a complex, or of *complexity*, can be seen to emerge, then, as a description of that which is perceived to be a highly sensitive and intricate as well as problematic urban ecology within which art in general maintains a vital and integrated position that is thoroughly implicated within the day-to-day workings of urban life. As such art possesses the aesthetic and conceptual capacities *implicitly* to perform a teasing out of the complexities of modern urban living – that is, even where it does not necessarily or consciously seek out such a role for itself – which might include drawing attention to the

latter's fragile, often fragmented or dispersed nature and therefore the infrastructural problems with which the city struggles.

Surveillance and Aesthetics

If stone, water and art form a particular, all-encompassing visual and performative complex in Venice that underscores the perception of the city primarily as a sensual one, beholden to aesthetically-pleasing sights and an experience of *seeing* in general, then the introduction of a widespread modern-day form of observing or perceiving the city, namely surveillance technologies, offers an intriguing, if, in the first instance, left-field counterpoint. I was struck when reading Nobel Literature Prize winning author Joseph Brodsky's Venice meditation *Watermark* by his assertion early on in that text that it was for him 'the city of the eye', offering its visitors a 'visual superiority', as he puts it, 'absent in their habitual surroundings'.² Later he expands on this notion thus:

The eye is the most autonomous of our organs. It is so because the objects of its attention are inevitably situated on the outside. Except in a mirror, the eye never sees itself. It is the last to shut down when the body is falling asleep. It stays open when the body is stricken with paralysis or dead. The eye keeps registering reality even when there is no apparent reason for doing this, and under all circumstances. The question is: why? And the answer is: because the environment is hostile. Eyesight is the instrument of adjustment to an environment which remains hostile no matter how well you have adjusted to it. ... In short the eye is looking for safety. That explains the eye's

predilection for art in general and Venetian art in particular. That explains the eye's appetite for beauty, as well as beauty's own existence. For beauty is solace, since beauty is safe. It doesn't threaten you with murder or make you sick. A statue of Apollo doesn't bite, nor will Carpaccio's poodle.n.3

For Brodsky, then, Venice was the 'city of the eye' because the sheer picturesqueness of its art and architecture – he deems the city as a whole to be a work of art that is 'the greatest masterpiece our species [has] produced'n.4 – guaranteed a benign, becalming public environment (and therefore solace) for visitors and citizens alike, an argument whose potency might implicitly be encapsulated by the city's centuries-old mythical name of *La Serenissima* (the most serene republic).n.5 Of course, there is much over which one might take Brodsky to task in this all-too-neat analysis, not least the seamless association of art with beauty and, therefore, various assumptions implied by that equation. His spatio-temporal thesis in *Watermark*, as he reiterates on the final page, boils down to the universalising formula 'Water equals time and provides beauty with its double',n.6 which, at the risk of an all too prosaic interpretation, can be taken to mean: water equals time inasmuch as the ebb and flow of the lagoon's tides *mark out* time (over the course of a day). At the same time, Venetian water reflects, above all, the picturesqueness of the city's ornate facades, thus the movement of water-as-time momentarily, yet repeatedly, captures and records the beauty of Venetian space.

For my purposes just now, however, I wish simply to extract the twin-notions of, first, the eye's primal function being to seek out safety in the face of challenging spatial surroundings; and, second, the experience of the aesthetic of art providing an alleviative 'place' of solace and security. In essence the question arising is: since the eye is deemed central to both the aesthetic experience and 'animal safety', are these two phenomena linked? In considering this, my ultimate aim is to point beyond Venice in what I have to say, yet, not unlike Brodsky perhaps, it is the specificity of circumstances in Venice that will enable me to arrive at some broader conclusions.

Figs 5. + 6. *Attenzione Telecamere* official sign, Ca' Foscari and unofficial graffito, Campo Santa Margherita.

By way of a counterpoint or, indeed, counter*mark* to Brodsky: one factor that he will not have had to face in his seventeen continuous annual visits to Venice between the years of 1972 and 1989 (culminating in the writing of *Watermark*) was the presence of surveillance cameras. As both the images depicted suggest, these would appear to prevail now in the city, though from my own personal estimation on the ground (after a week spent consciously searching), not to any overly conspicuous extent. However, this reflects perhaps the perspective of someone used to the veritable rash of surveillance that exists in the UK, which boasts the staggering statistic of having more CCTV coverage than the rest of Europe put together.⁷ While Scheppe et al concede that the exact number of camera units aimed at observing the public in the historic centre of the city is not known, they provide a map indicating a fair smattering of *known* surveillance

locations as well as various demarcated levels of formal zonal control (by police), relating to prohibitions on street vending and artistic activities.^{n.8} Pointing on the one hand to ‘obviously placed cameras, as well as dummy units’ in Venice, more ominously the authors assert that ‘for serious surveillance activities, miniaturised technology makes the mechanisms of observation imperceptible’.^{n.9}

What is striking about the juxtaposition of these two images – one an official sign at Ca’ Foscari, the other, at Campo di Santa Margherita, clearly unofficial graffiti – is that at one level they effectively convey the same basic message, which is to underscore the fact that there are CCTV cameras in the vicinity (in case it isn’t obvious to the naked eye). Moreover, that message can be read in each instance as both *warning* and *reassurance*, though it is also in this respect that the differences between the intention of the signs begins to emerge, based on the question of *who* is being warned and reassured about *what* respectively. The purpose of the official sign can safely be said to be to deter criminal activity as well as to reassure law-abiding citizens that measures to assure their safety are in place, while the graffiti arguably suggests that the presence of cameras is perceived by some – Venice’s invisible writers of the night – paradoxically to be a public *threat* to which citizens effectively need to be alerted.

Brodsky’s ‘city of the eye’ acquires a new spatial and conceptual dimension, then, that can be extrapolated to propose a contested triangulation of gazes in urban space between the human eye that naturally seeks out reassuring environmental signs of

security, the mechanical camera eye that supposedly seeks to provide that reassurance, and the visual 'experience of the aesthetic' whose beauty, supposedly, provides solace and safety. In fact, all three points (or angles) might be said to be in a form of competition as respective guarantors of 'safety', which is why the graffiti image depicted is so intriguing, for it seems to encapsulate the complex nature of what may be at stake in this triangulation, as well as beginning – in a 21st century kind of way perhaps – to shake Brodsky's conventional assumptions around art, beauty and solace.

As indicated, this highly public graffiti – located in one of Venice's largest and liveliest squares, which mixes tourists and local residents to a greater extent than anywhere else in the city – lays claim to the human eye far less, *at first glance*, to provide some kind of solace (via the beauty of its aesthetic force) than to issue a stark warning. The warning it would issue, though, is that the official mechanism installed and prevalent throughout the city, supposedly to provide precisely the security of 'solace', represents a danger or threat and is to be treated with critical mistrust. Incidentally, when I revisited the scene of the graffiti, four years after taking this photo (in 2009), not only was the image still there but it had had a political slogan added to it below: in similarly stencilled style – which always points to a more considered intervention than that of the unthinking vandal's scrawl (as we shall see in a moment) – it said, in translation, 'less CCTV, more freedom'. At *second* glance, therefore, the aesthetic of the graffiti *is* arguably seeking to provide a form of reassurance inasmuch as it expresses a solidarity that can be said to have the general social wellbeing of the public – in other words, its freedom – at heart.

So, as an interim conclusion, one might say, *either* the aesthetic of the graffiti creates its own kind of modern urban 'beauty', far removed from Brodsky's conventional one but still in its own way performing a useful public function when it comes to the question of safety as he conceives of it, *or* that an urban aesthetic of the 21st century actually has no business whatsoever seeking to 'be beautiful' in Brodsky's sense so as to induce feelings of comfort and containment, since this would merely represent a distraction from actual circumstances on the ground. A crucial distinction that Richard Sennett draws out in *The Conscience of the Eye* in attempting to establish a sense of aesthetic value is perhaps helpful here. It is between the egocentric tagging 'I' of 1970s New York City school graffiti – an 'I' that competes with other 'I's and 'establishes an aggressive rather than an exploratory relation to the environment', effectively obliterating the wall on which it appears – and 1980s Parisian stencilling practice (usually referred to as *pochoir*, though not by Sennett himself), which was, and still is in its many incarnations beyond Paris, carefully pre-designed and positioned (and in that sense a site-specific artwork), with writers 'incorporat[ing] the wall as part of what is to be seen distinctly, as framing space': the 'response of the viewer is to be intrigued with what is on the wall; the viewer answers their mark, looks to see what it is'.n.10

A further factor in contemplating the Campo di Santa Margherita graffiti is that it packs a deeply ironic punch insofar as it is in itself *illegal* art, a criminal act, perpetrated here, moreover, on what is in fact the facade of a building owned by the local *Polizia*

Municipale. In other words, the objects of its critique (those *telecamere*) exist precisely to try and eliminate such events as the graffito's 'coming about' in the first place – actually an art of performance (based on elusiveness and invisibility)^{n.11} – and here the act has been executed right under the noses of those who would seek to utilise such surveillance mechanisms to enforce the law against public offences such as graffiti writing. So the graffito thumbs its nose at officialdom in the best street theatre traditions of the playful and elusive trickster (actually, and fittingly here, a *Commedia* archetype) – 'you can't catch me, but I can certainly give you a little problem' – and in doing so mischievously draws the public on to its side by implicitly posing for it, with humour, serious questions about the presence of surveillance: security or threat to civic liberty? For us or against us (in its purpose)?

The infamous and anonymous street artist Banksy displays a similarly complex and inquisitive playfulness in his 2004 Marble Arch intervention in central London: on a non-descript, blank wall where there is really nothing whatsoever threatening or transgressive to observe, he poses the stencilled question 'What are you looking at?' within the scopic range of a nearby CCTV camera, thereby cheekily redirecting the disciplinary gaze whence it came and highlighting its futility by innocently suggesting, first, that, surely, there really is nothing to see here; second, that that particular gaze wasn't in any case able to prevent or respond to the illegal act of him writing his message there; and, third, that it is in fact the instalment and presence of the camera

that has ended up framing the site as one of potential acts of criminality in the first place, a challenge to which Banksy has obligingly risen (to constructive ends).

The Stolen Gaze

Of particular significance in graffiti posing such questions is the way it carries the potential thereby to facilitate, or recoup, the 'public gaze' (or the gaze in public). In other words, it not only engages witnessing members of the public but tacitly invites them – and this can occur in very oblique, imperceptible ways that are hard to pinpoint – to acknowledge to one another the validity of its appeal. Potentially, by virtue of being noticed as a local sign, it generates among citizens a sense of communality, of benign, implicated 'we-ness' – 'this is about us' – that crucially implies a responsibility for that which takes place on the street. Human gaze meets human gaze because there is a collective confidence that it is in this merely phatic negotiation, to invoke de Certeau's use of the term, that safety in a hostile environment ultimately resides – importantly, prompted here by an *irregular, off-beat* intervention.^{n.12} In his book *The Ludic City*, Quentin Stevens makes a related point, referring to the phenomenon of 'triangulation', which he derives from the sociologist W.H Whyte, who refers to 'that process by which some external stimulus provides a linkage between people and prompts strangers to talk to each other as though they were not'.^{n.13} Stevens adds (citing Whyte):

The source of stimulation may be an unusual person, a deliberate performance, music, or an interesting physical object or sight. The quality of the event itself is not necessarily

important; “the real show is the audience. Many people will be looking as much at each other as at what’s on the stage”. ... What is important is that a triangulating event provides a context where strangers initiate contacts.n.14

There are strong shades of the legendary architecture and urban planning critic Jane Jacobs in all these arguments too, of course, above all in her emphasis on sidewalk use as an ‘art form of the city’, one that is premised on benign witnessing: the ‘eyes upon the street [of] those we might call its natural proprietors’.n.15 Importantly she observes in the everyday, ritualised comings and goings on her street in Greenwich Village, NYC a kind of reassuring communication as well as informal security between neighbours: ‘We nod; we glance quickly up and down the street, then look back to each other and smile. We have done this many a morning for more than ten years, and we both know what it means: all is well’.n.16 It’s worth remembering also that Jacobs’ point of *departure* in her renowned meditation on the liveable city, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, is an extended discourse – forming the whole of Part 1 – on the question of *safety* in the uses of sidewalks.

Significantly, the informal communication Jacobs advocates is between locals who may nevertheless remain strangers to one another over many years, but who implicitly – and here Venice’s tourists come into play – do the job of ‘handling’ both strangers to the locality (who come and go) and unforeseen incidents. By contrast surveillance cameras arguably *steal* that particular, *responsible* human gaze – and the use of criminological

terminology is as apposite as it is ironic in this instance – an effect that recalls Paul Virilio’s description in *The Accident of Art* of modern-day human vision increasingly being surrendered to or taken over by the machine, to the extent that the latter determines what is worthy of being seen to begin with.^{n.17} As such a network of mechanical eyes on the street, installed for our safety, can be said to *construct* the environment as hostile. Like the camera unit to which Banksy drew attention at Marble Arch, in marking out a potential space of hostility and implying that any incident arising will be covered by ‘external means’, it arguably *produces* rather than alleviates a climate of suspicion and fear on the streets, reeling all users of public space into an implicit web of criminological intolerance (or mass detention) in which everyone is potentially guilty and *no-one* is trusted. This results in an *averted* human gaze: a preferred looking away that implies relinquishing full engagement with that which is happening around you even in situations of adversity.^{n.18}

The Restless Eye

Sennett’s conclusion in *The Conscience of the Eye* is highly pertinent here too, although he is not even addressing the specific impact of surveillance *per se* on the use of public space (since its widespread implementation post-dates his book), but is implicitly arguing more against that which has come to be known in its planning and design, and subsequently in its effects, as ‘defensible urban space’. In other words, as Anna Minton explains in *Ground Control*, a ‘form of urban design based on the idea that the design of the environment, rather than social problems, influences behaviour [...] and that the

way to change behaviour was by controlling the environment rather than improving social conditions'.n.19 The intention can be viewed as benign to an extent – even displaying aspects of Brodskian argumentation in *Watermark* on the positive effect of aesthetics on a hostile environment – inasmuch as it aims in its design to allocate ownership and responsibility of urban space to citizens or neighbourhood residents. But, as Nawratek observes, it is ultimately 'based on a fear of crime',n.20 and so it seeks to do so by generating a sense of territorialism, of 'space which defends itself', and therefore earmarks the stranger or otherness in general as 'dangerous and threatening'.n.21 For Minton, it is more likely to lead in fact to 'isolated, often empty enclaves which promote fear rather than the safety and reassurance which automatically comes in busy places, where people are free to wander around and come and go'.n.22 So, speaking about 'qualities of experience' of public space, Sennett states that these

have to do with the relations people sense among themselves once they are no longer protected, once they are outside. The life of the street is the urban scene par excellence for this exposure; it becomes a humane scene simply when people look around and adjust their behaviour in terms of *what they can see* – a scene of mutual awareness [my emphasis].n.23

Sennett constructs his overall argument in *The Conscience of the Eye* around changing choreographies and perceptions of both private and public space in history.

Importantly, and of particular relevance to Venice – and, indeed, Brodsky’s view of the solace-inducing aesthetic beauty of its art-architecture complex – he analyses the Renaissance draftsman’s preoccupation with one-point perspective in which the eye, whether it is observing a painting or inhabiting an architectural environment, ‘measures near or far, tall or short by imagining a triangle of which the eye forms one point’. Significantly, ‘[a]ll the things in a perspectival space can change their appearance by the [artist’s or architect’s] manipulation of points and planes external to them [...] These games of invention order the visual world. The world can be made to cohere because of how one looks at it’.n.24 However, far from conforming, as Boyer puts it, to a ‘totally balanced and organised urban scenography’, an ‘ordered and stable vista’ of calculated effect, in which the eye comes comfortably to rest, n.25 Sennett points unexpectedly to an induced *restlessness* that marks out a ‘space of displacement’ in which any single point of view is experienced as inadequate.n.26

The prime model of this kind of disturbance or destabilisation, which highlights, moreover, the proximity of urban space design and theatre scenography (both ‘places of looking’), is located just down the road from Venice in Vicenza’s late 16th century Palladian *Teatro Olimpico*. The design of the theatre famously illustrates the one-point perspective street scene principle, incorporating an art-architecture complex of ‘three streets receding in perspective, seemingly endlessly, [but] in fact extending only forty-five metres [...] a masterpiece of perspectival control by foreshortening’.n.27 As Sennett further points out, though:

In the central receding street, obelisks are placed along the tops of the buildings lining the street so that the eye looking down the tunnel is disturbed. Something is happening *out of control at the edge*; the eye darts to the obelisks atop the buildings rather than moves down the regularly marching, endlessly regressing space between them [my emphasis].n.28

For Sennett this creates instead a 'restless, problematic space [...] one of discovery, of exploration'.n.29 Moreover, it marks a shift from 'an "I" perspective' – like that of the aggressive, self-preoccupied tagger – 'to a more puzzling "it"', as he puts it, that is similarly applicable to stencil graffiti with its 'exploratory relation to the environment' and destabilising 'signs that intrigue pedestrians who slow down and look'.n.30

As we know, for Sennett – as, indeed, for the likes of Jane Jacobs and, as Fyfe reminds us, Iris Marion Young, who, in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), similarly advocates 'openness to unassimilated others' as a prerequisite of the 'unoppressive city'n.31 – it is alterity, disorder, uncertainty, deviance and ambiguity – all those things upon which surveillance likes to pounce – that is likely to generate both viability and vibrancy in urban living:

The city has served as a site of power, its spaces made coherent and whole in the image of man himself. The city has also served as the space in which these master images have

cracked apart. The city brings together people who are different, it intensifies the complexity of social life, it presents people to each other as strangers. All these aspects of urban experience – difference, complexity, strangeness – afford resistance to domination.^{n.32}

Staged City of Facades

To relate this back to Venice: while surveillance may indeed prevail in its historic centre, I would suggest it is not so much the *perceived* presence in general of the mechanical eye that ensures a sense of security, whether as deterrence or reassurance. To some degree this turns out to be the case because existing surveillance is often imperceptible, as Scheppe et al maintain, but it is also because much of the ‘serious surveillance’ is actually, and significantly, in operation elsewhere in the city, as we shall see presently. As for the historic centre, one might say that it is indeed the sumptuousness of the built environment identified by Brodsky – in short, its stone and water, and the abundant art historical treasures to be found above all in or on its many churches (some of which are also Palladian, of course^{n.33}) – that has the effect of guaranteeing a form of safety for the city’s 16.5 million annual visitors and possibly some of its 60,000 residual residents, too (though, as my comments in conclusion will indicate, that is doubtless a different, more complicated story). However, arguably it is more the fact that Brodsky’s theory of ‘beauty is solace, since beauty is safe’ plays into the hands of a kind of complacency that can be aligned with the hackneyed visual image of Venice, which is so familiar in its

intensity, so pre-cooked and over-determined, that it leaves nothing more to be said or experienced.

In this view, one barely need visit the city to know what is in store; Venice is always already a mythical idea of itself (as commentators from Henry James to Mary McCarthy have observed). Again, then, the question of seeing or looking arises: a city that can be said to *live* off its image(s) or its predetermined visuality, noticeably photographed to *death* as it is by every single camera-phone or, more recently, tablet-carrying visitor, each one seeking to confirm a preconceived impression. As such, Venice is generally experienced by the tourist in a mode of ‘mediated perception’ – a staged city of facades or immersive show – that effectively engineers a safe removal from its darker realities and produces a form of unseeing, dulled *ennui* in all its dazzling splendour. In other words, the tourist is typically lulled into a semi-dream, indeed, *anaesthetic* state in which *nothing very much happens*, but that can also be said to amount to a false sense of security.

In fact, Scheppe et al clearly identify the ‘back-projected’ environment of the city’s historic centre as ‘a kind of fictionalised shopping mall’ which adds ‘fetish value’ to a location that acts as a ‘destination of desire’.^{n.34} Illuminatingly the authors point out that the facades making up this scenic backdrop always were built for show – an instance of *Beieindruckungsarchitektur*, ‘an architectural style designed to impress’^{n.35} – but whereas in previous centuries this occurred in the context of Venice being

‘conceived as a world trade centre’, projecting a ‘perception of fantastic affluence’, in recent times

these buildings, just like the *Serenissima* Republic, have become detached from their former significance and are now at the disposal of contemporary commercial aims. The staged city has changed the merchandise on its shelves, and the current offerings do not differ from those of its modern siblings – the fake Venices of Las Vegas and Macao, and all the other Venice-themed amusement venues.n.36

Moreover, as their comprehensive, two-volume study of the symbiotic relationship of economic migration and tourism – as respective instances of subsistence-based and leisure-based global mobility – also reveals, what is on offer in this haven of consumption is more often than not itself entirely fake: illegally and cheaply replicated luxury brand goods and Venice souvenirs displayed on the streets by poorly-paid illegal migrant-vendors (under the control of unseen gangmasters), who have one eye permanently peeled for any approaching police officers. Typically, and ironically, such an urban scene witnesses Chinese tourists haggling over counterfeit luxury goods and ‘traditional Venetian handicrafts’ manufactured in and exported from China.n.37

Surprisingly, perhaps, given its mass tourism, Venice’s historical centre is, as tourist guidebooks are quick to point out, actually relatively crime-free, at least in terms of *petty* crime. If there is no such customary tourist crime of pickpocketing and bag-

snatching, it is doubtless because a much bigger organised machinery of crime is in operation, one whose illegality the tourist either wilfully disregards or simply fails to recognise and, therefore, implicitly accepts as an integral and desirable part of the Venice experience. Paradoxically this form of crime is dependent on the city broadly nurturing and maintaining a global reputation of being a safe and secure environment so as to continue to attract the mass influx of visitors 'ripe for ripping off', and so it would not be surprising to discover as well that it operates its own unofficial policing mechanisms to ensure that all petty crime, performed by rogue thieves working independently, is kept at bay.

Complex Urban Art

If Brodsky's perception of the effects of the aesthetic environment leads inadvertently to a form of enervative solace born of subscribing to consumerist priorities, Sennett's form of 'restless' engagement with the city, by contrast, presupposes an alert, inquisitive seeing. *His* city of the eye would not seek to guarantee security as such, as a prime motive, but it would propose perhaps that a regime of aesthetic disturbance or destabilisation, of making strange, might bring about a form of engaged vigilance that implies a sensibility to the complex, irregular patterns that connect human beings at multiple levels (to expand on a phrase of Gregory Bateson's).^{n.38} In other words, permitting discrepancies and dissonances to emerge within shared public space is not only necessarily a way towards identifying and addressing underlying problems that affect all citizens but also more likely thereby to induce trust.

It is not, of course, specifically the mobile tourist's space of consumption – particularly one as dense and concentrated as that of Venice – that is necessarily uppermost in Sennett's mind, but that is not to say that his vision would not apply. For all the Venice Biennale's compromised ensnarement within both global art networks and tourism agendas, the artworks it presents nevertheless have the capacity to have this kind of usefully destabilising impact, particularly with those commissioned installations or exhibitions that seek, as many do, to engage directly with the city as site, usually well beyond the self-contained Biennale locales of the Giardini (the gardens with their national pavilions) and the former Arsenale naval dockyard in the eastern part of the city.

In 2013, for example, the controversial Chinese artist Ai Weiwei – who, incidentally, had produced an artwork in 2012 consisting of do-it-yourself instructions on 'how to make a spray device to block a surveillance camera' (entitled *CCTV Spray*)^{n.39} – presented six replica models of the prison cell in which he had been detained for 81 days in 2011 under permanent in-cell observation by two prison guards – who watched over him as he ate, slept, showered and, even, defecated – after his arrest by the Chinese state authorities on spurious tax-avoidance charges.

Figs 7. + 8. S.A.C.R.E.D installation by Ai Weiwei, church of Sant' Antonin, 2013.

Entitled *S.A.C.R.E.D*, these oblong cells, containing lifelike, modelled scenes of Ai Weiwei's 'entombment' and subjection to the most intrusive and immediate

surveillance imaginable, were lined up before the alter of Sant' Antonin like oversize coffins (a different kind of 'Chinese export'), producing a highly ambiguous, seemingly improbable intersection of location and intervention. The ritual integrity of the church as 'sacred site' remained deliberately preserved with, for example, the diligent enforcement of customary restrictions on taking photos of the church itself and the wearing of headgear (as I experienced personally). On the one hand one might say the reasonable appeal to the visitor to respect the sanctity of the church stood all the more sharply at odds, therefore, with the viewer's experience of witnessing the shameless, dehumanising 'is-nothing-sacred?' invasion of personal privacy evidently imposed on the artist at the intimidating hands of the state's law enforcement authorities. But, on the other hand, an inherent coerciveness simultaneously raised valid questions about the implications of an obeisance to – possibly fear of (how close the words 'sacred' and 'scared' are) – a pervasive, instinctively ritualised 'religious affect' in a city such as Venice, too.

Figs 9. + 10. S.A.C.R.E.D installation by Ai Weiwei, church of Sant' Antonin, 2013.

Indirectly echoing the form perhaps of Carpaccio's renowned narrative cycle of set-piece renaissance paintings (based on the lives of three patron saints) in the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni just round the corner,^{n.40} the letters S.A.C.R.E.D correspond episodically to the six prison cell scenes presented but also have biblical echoes in part – S for supper, A for accusers, C for cleansing, R for ritual – ending with the destabilising and disconcerting (as well as very secular and postmodern) E for entropy and D for

doubt, two concepts that seem not only more in keeping with the atrophying, self-destructive image of contemporary Venice but also distinctively at odds with religious certainties.n.41

Importantly, the viewer too is implicated in the ambiguity of Ai Weiwei's installation inasmuch as he or she is positioned not only within the sacred parameters of the Venetian church-as-site but also as voyeur, with the disturbing prison cell scenes being witnessed via restricted viewing apertures (akin to peepholes). Torn between desire and guilt the viewer thus finds him/herself complicit in the act of shameless intrusion upon personal space, as if he/she were listening in on someone else's private confession to a priest. That apparent analogy implicitly places the ritual act of confession within a related framework of repressive surveillance: the church as omniscient guardian and arbiter of that which is 'proper'.

Fig 11. Anonymous stateless immigrants pavilion graffito, Venice Biennale sign, 2011

But, to return us in conclusion to the illegal realm of graffiti and, indeed, to the streets of the city: if the 'global art world' of the Biennale itself is rather to be treated with suspicion, there are also visible instances of the subversion of *its* power in turn.

An example: the stencilled *détournement* (or 'creative hijacking') of the Biennale Arsenale sign in the name of a wholly unofficial pavilion for 'anonymous, stateless immigrants', whose arrows, positioned as the sign is on an embankment, literally direct one to the abject sea water of the canals. In doing so they not only draw attention to

the excluded and marginalised of a Biennale that is perceived to be elitist and glamorous (with its historical, traditionalist focus on national pavilions and attraction of a privileged international 'art crowd'), but also link this thematically to the plight of illegal migrants to Italy from the African continent, who often find themselves literally and metaphorically 'at sea'.

In European terms Venice is a frontline city when it comes to migrants seeking refuge and its border control practices of refused entry, enacted by Frontex, the European Border Regime, are correspondingly stringent and questionable in terms of human rights.⁴² Although there is clear evidence of surveillance sting operations in the historic centre to catch street vendors⁴³ – illegal immigrants selling illegal goods – the truth is that human screening processes tend to occur 'behind the scenes', well away from the tourist hotspots, or, one might say, in the realm of the *obscene*: that is, beyond the limit of what is deemed 'tasteful' or worthy of being seen. If there is an 'other Venice' – and so often the stated fantasy of the enlightened tourist is to discover an 'alternative Venice' away from the crowds – then it is to be found on the mainland of '*Grande Venezia*', in Mestre in particular but also in the de-industrialised zone of Marghera. It is here, where no tourist ventures for pleasure, that 70 percent of the city's population resides. Among it is the bulk of the historic centre's low-paid, unskilled, tourism-serving commuting workforce, many of them recent or temporary immigrants, and not surprisingly it reveals all the customary social problems associated with poverty, deprivation, dependency and restricted rights. This is the harsh actuality of the vast

Venetian underbelly, the decidedly unromantic invisible city or, ironically, 'life-support machine' which props up and sustains (for the time being) the beautiful, protected tourist-driven cash cow that is the most serene republic (even to the extent that organised crime is tolerated, insofar as it contributes to serving this industry).

In this context the aesthetic beauty of Venetian facades that Brodsky saw reflected in the ebb and flow of the city's waters as they marked out time can be re-interpreted as encapsulating the twin-traumas of an alternative present-day reality. On the one hand facades that are merely that, facades, or ornate theatrical scenery whose function is to provide a backdrop for the consuming tourist and which metaphorically masks a deeply flawed and inhuman supporting infrastructure; on the other hand a tidal flow of water that all too frequently gets out of control thanks to practices driven by commercial priorities, flooding the city and eroding its material infrastructure. The targeted, stencilled re-writing of an official sign such as the Arsenale graffito represents, then, a 'restless' disturbance of the public gaze within the urban visual complex but, more importantly, it triggers a realisation of 'something happening out of control at the edge' of the city itself, something that cannot afford to be subject to the luxury of turning a blind (Venetian) eye.n.44

Notes and References

1. According to Scheppe et al '[t]he *Film Festival* and the *International Art Biennale*, in its modern form, were conceived by the industrial magnate Giuseppe Volpi, who wished to expand the tourist season to increase turnover in his chain of *Grand Hotels*'. The authors

attribute the establishment of both ‘the infrastructure of heavy industry and the culture industry’ in post-war Venice to Volpi, who had served in Mussolini’s government and, Berlusconi like, was ‘director of the Italian employers’ federation, owner of the most popular Venetian newspaper, president not only of the Port of Venice, but also of the nation’s largest insurance firm and the biggest energy company in Northern Italy’. In Wolfgang Scheppe et al, *Migropolis: Venice Atlas of a Global Situation*, Vols. I and II (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), p.52-3.

2. Joseph Brodsky, *Watermark: an Essay on Venice* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p.26-7.

3. Ibid., p.106-7.

4. Ibid., p.116.

5. Moreover, as Tiziano Scarpa, points out, Venice also has a particular devotion to Santa Lucia, the patron saint of sight, after whom the central railway station is named and whose effigy in the church of San Geremia was held to possess healing powers. See Tiziano Scarpa, *Venice is a Fish: a Cultural Guide* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2009), p.76-7.

6. Brodsky, op. cit., p.134.

7. See Anna Minton, *Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the Twenty-First Century City* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2012), p.47.

8. See Scheppe et al, op. cit., p.938-9. The map is also striking for the list it provides of the various law enforcement services operational in Venice, including, to name a few, military, state, financial, border, municipal and local lagoon police forces (ibid., p.939). More sobering than that, as Valeria Burgio reports in the same volume, is the fact that

'On July 2, 2009 the Italian Senate approved a law on public safety that groups together illegal immigration and organised crime. This new legislation instigates mass delation and prompts a hunt for foreigners through the institutionalization of the *ronde*, a new system of voluntary citizen-patrollers who are charged with watching over public order' (ibid., p.1308).

9. Ibid., p.943.

10. Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: the Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York: Norton, 1992), p.209-11.

11. As I have written previously about the art of graffiti writing: 'if graffiti-spraying of this sort can be called art, ...surely it is one of *performance* rather than fine art. In fact, nothing could upset the impulse of the practice more than seeking to validate it on such a two-dimensional basis. For the impact of what writers leave behind is far less resonant for its intrinsic aesthetics (of painting or drawing) – though its stylistic features remain significant as signs of a specific metropolitan identity – than for the mystery of its executors' identity. You never see them. They're out there somewhere because their tags say they are, but you don't know who or where they are. So, what their pieces evoke – or *scream* might be more accurate – is the performance of their disappearance. That is the true moving force – perhaps threat – of their activity: their physical elusiveness'. In Nicolas Whybrow, ed., *Performance and the Contemporary City: an Interdisciplinary Reader* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.197.

12. De Certeau uses 'phatic' in his oft-cited discussion of walking in the city with reference to the purpose of informal spoken terms 'that initiate, maintain, or interrupt contact, such as "hello", "well, well", etc' and that thereby represent primarily an implicit effort to ensure communication for communication's sake takes place. In Michel

de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p.99.

13. W.H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Washington, DC: Conservation Foundation, 1980), p.94.

14. Quentin Stevens, *The Ludic City: Exploring the Potential of Public Spaces* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p.62-3. Whyte's inserted quotation, op cit., p.96.

15. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1993), p.45.

16. Ibid., p.61-2.

17. See Silvère Lotringer and Paul Virilio, *The Accident of Art* (New York and Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2005), p.62-72.

18. The ubiquitous machinery of the mobile/smart phone is of course a further factor here. As a sophisticated tool of communication and, indeed, orientation, it possesses considerable potential to be used constructively in public space. However, its most noticeable effect is to choreograph a form of behaviour that is distracted and inward, whose focus of attention is 'elsewhere'. In other words, while its purpose may be social, even public (in a tele-networked sense), more often than not it facilitates an effective displacement or absencing from the user's immediate surroundings, which easily produces behaviours that are perceived to be inconsiderate, even dangerous. Pertinent to the point about the capacity of graffiti to draw attention to serious public issues: several instances have arisen around the globe (China, the US) of separate, stencilled 'cell phone lanes' designed to combat and contain 'distracted walking' in public spaces.

See Leo Benedictus, 'What's Life Like in the Mobile Phone Lane?', *Guardian (G2)*, 16 September 2014, p.2.

19. Minton, op.cit., p.71. As Minton points out, the architect of 'defensible space' is the American Oscar Newman whose landmark study was *Defensible Space: People and Design in the Violent City* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

20. Krzysztof Nawratek, *Holes in the Whole: Introduction to the Urban Revolutions* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2012), p.75.

21. Minton, op. cit., p.72.

22. Ibid.

23. Sennett, op. cit.' p.247-8.

24. Ibid., p.154-5.

25. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory: its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1996), p.99 and 102. Boyer is actually referring to the nineteenth century neo-classicist plans for Berlin of the stage designer and architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel. As someone who combined designing for the stage and the urban environment, and, indeed, explained his ideas for 'a totally composed architectural setting' (ibid. p.99) via a proscenium arch stage set in a theatre, Schinkel epitomises the notion of urban space being conceived of perspectively as theatrical space for the pedestrian and citizen.

26. Sennett, op. cit., p.160.

27. Ibid., p.161.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., p.162-3

30. Ibid., p.209-11. There are echoes in Sennett's analysis here of the *punctum* that Barthes identifies in relation to the observation of certain photographic images: a punctuating feature at the edges of perception that is not sought out by the viewer but that 'rises from the scene, shoots out like an arrow, and pierces me [...] A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)', Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage Books, 1993), p.26-7.

31. Nicholas Fyfe, 'Zero Tolerance, Maximum Surveillance? Deviance, Difference and Crime Control in the Late Modern City', in Loretta Lees, ed., *The Emancipatory City? Paradoxes and Possibilities* (London: Sage Publications, 2004), p.41.

32. Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: the Body and the City in Western Civilization* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994), p.25-6.

33. See figure 1. Scheppe et al talk of an 'architectural style of medially conceived facades [that] recall the stage effects of illusory perspective scenery, which was introduced around the same time with Palladio's *Teatro Olimpico* in neighbouring Vicenza' (op. cit., p.1294). In terms specifically of Palladian churches forming a historical 'complex of power', as a form of private-theatre-in-public displayed for the benefit of an omniscient, all-powerful Venetian Doge, they add: 'Positioned opposite on the islands of *San Giorgio* and *Giudecca* are the three scenery-like structures of the Palladian churches designed for viewability from afar: *San Giorgio Maggiore*, *Redentore* and *Zitelle*. The marble volumes arrayed along the horizon constitute the purest embodiment of illusory

architectural space in the city of stage sets: they are buildings specifically conceived from the viewpoint of a privileged observer in the political epicentre of the city, the Doge's Palace and the *Piazzetta*. Therein the city of Venice regards itself' (ibid., p.1300).

34. Ibid., p.290 and 46-7.

35. Ibid., p.1295.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., p.46-7

38. The anthropologist Geoffrey Bateson, an early trans-disciplinary thinker, referred in essence to the importance, in thinking about life on earth, of developing a 'sensibility to the patterns that connect', by which he meant ways of thinking ecologically that drew on the complexity and interdependency of disciplines, systems and energies in their entirety. See *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (London: Paladin, 1973).

39. Ai Weiwei's proposal is documented in *Do It: the Compendium*, referring to the way surveillance cameras can make one feel 'uncomfortable, confused, disgusted, or even irate'. In Hans Ulrich Obrist with Independent Curators International, ed., *Do It: the Compendium* (New York: DAP/ICI, 2013), p.67-8.

40. Brodsky's mention of Carpaccio's poodle in an earlier quotation (see n.2) refers to one of the paintings in this cycle, *The Vision of Augustine* (1503). Further to Ai Weiwei's point relating to both the intrusiveness and absurdity of surveillance, a personal aside: when I visited the Carpaccio cycle in the small lower hall of the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, embedded in the centre of the altarpiece – thought to be by Carpaccio's son – was a CCTV camera lens which, as the blurry, near-indecipherable image on a

black and white monitor in a side chamber revealed, rather pointlessly kept an eye on the father's paintings.

41. There is an argument to say, in fact, that the solace Brodsky attributes to the *aesthetic* beauty of Venice's historical art-architecture complex fails to take adequate account of the *religious* dimension involved: the sheer atmospheric presence and affective influence of its dense network of churches – a pervasive holy environment, epitomised by the collective, melancholic tolling of bells at intervals during any one day – instilling as such an implicit atmosphere of obeisance, as Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis observed of the deeply-embedded effects of Catholicism on the built environment in Naples. See Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, (London and New York: Verso, 1997), p.167-76.

42. See Scheppe op. cit., p.386-501.

43. See Ibid., p.844-5.

44. Punning aside, there is actually an interesting linkage between the Venetian blind (known as *Veneziana*) and surveillance inasmuch as the former is an early instrument in the execution of the latter, facilitating as it does a form of unseen observation. This thought can be extended via the fact that the general word for blind or shutter in Italian is *gelosia*, which refers simultaneously to jealousy. Thus, a *gelosia* (English: jalousie) with its angled slats is the instrument that permits s/he who is suspiciously vigilant against, or zealously/jealously guards something to keep a protective eye out without being seen. Moreover, as Jane Rendell observes in making a related point about jalousie/jealousy referring to architectural space and psychical space respectively: 'Jealousy can be described as a trap – a blind emotion where one is unable to look past oneself'. In Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: the Architecture of Criticism* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), p.166. Far from facilitating seeing, then, the jalousie effectively

enshrines the perverse, dehumanising, *unseeing* limitations of jealousy (and therefore of the sinister practice of surveillance). Historically the built environment of Venice has in any case been the epitome of 'defensible space'. As Sennett points out in *Flesh and Stone*, '[s]urveillance was the very lifeblood of the Venetian port, and the physical form of the city made surveillance possible in many ways. The narrow entry straits of the lagoon, the promontory of the customs house, the great mouth of the Grand Canal permitted government surveillance by the eye as well as in law' (op cit., p.219).