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Situation Venice: towards a performative ‘ex-planation’ of a city

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The article’s main concern is to analyse theoretical and artistic factors influencing the attempt by a group of undergraduate students (at the University of Warwick, UK) to produce a ‘performative mapping’ of the city of Venice. In other words, it asks what kind of performance-based strategies might usefully be applied in the process of encountering and documenting – or creatively researching – an ‘unknown’ but highly determined urban situation. Far less an evaluative assessment of pedagogy and outcomes, the overall aim of the article is to delineate possible points of reference in the development of an applied creative practice within the emerging discipline of urban intervention as performance research.

In 1957 the English psychogeographer Ralph Rumney, a founding member in the same year of the Paris-based Situationist International (SI), created a photographic montage with commentary entitled ‘The Leaning Tower of Venice’. Based on stalking the American Beat poet Alan Ansen through the streets of this labyrinthine city, it attempted to provide an ‘alternative mapping’ in story-board form, one that would be able to record such typical situationist preoccupations as chance encounters and the rooting out of ‘ambient zones’ during the course of a ‘drift’ across a specified area of urban terrain. Citing the SI’s figurehead, Guy Debord, at the outset with a definition of psychogeography that declares it – famously, in the meantime – to be ‘the study of the exact effects of geographic environment, controlled or otherwise, on the affective behaviour of individuals’ (Knabb 2006, 39), Rumney’s documentation goes on to state: ‘It is our thesis that cities should embody a built-in play factor. We are studying here a play-environment relationship’ (Rumney 1989, 45).

According to Simon Sadler, Rumney's montage ultimately fails, however, because its creator cannot make up his mind whether the point of his work is the demonstration of a systematic attempt to map play at work or to be playful in its own right: 'it failed to yield anything remotely like "data", its author struggling to explain the significance of his encounters with children and old acquaintances, account for the romance of Venice, and identify "sinister", "depressing" and "beautiful" zones' (Sadler 1998, 78). As the documentation draws to a close – or, more accurately, breaks off abruptly – reference is made to an unexplained 'sinister episode' that 'interrupted this study at a crucial stage and disgusted the author forever with psychogeography' (Rumney 1989, 49), thus appearing to cancel out the exercise entirely. Sadler points out that Rumney's flawed project was published in part in a British art journal in 1958, but had actually been commissioned originally by the SI in Paris. Unfortunately, he missed the set deadline for submission and was, as Simon Ford puts it, 'summarily excommunicated' from the movement for good as a result. The SI suggested rather pompously that 'the Venetian jungle has shown itself to be the stronger, closing over a young man full of life and promise': in other words, and not without irony, Rumney was deemed to have been affected psychically by his geographical surroundings to the point of losing sight of the seriousness of his endeavour (Ford 2005, 52-3).¹

There are two principal aspects of this anecdote I wish to draw out. The first relates to the continuing significance of situationist ideas and practice in questions concerning the nature of modern urban life – the SI movement itself having formally expired in 1972 –

whilst the second picks up on the specific impulses of Rumney's Venice project. Both factors propose forms of 'unfinished business' and, as such, served as implicit points of departure for a funded research experiment undertaken in Venice with 24 undergraduate theatre and performance studies students from Warwick University (Coventry, UK) in early November 2009. In the last instance the purpose of this article is to present brief tasters of the realisation of this two-part venture, which was premised on engaging in a form of in situ 'relational tourism' as field work (phase 1), with the subsequent aim of producing a studio-based 'performative cartography' of the city (phase 2). Above all, however, I wish to discuss the influencing factors on this project, not least those derived from situationist practice. Thus, where the students' work sought to meet head on the problem of a city mediated inexorably by the spectacle of the tourist experience – not ignoring their own implication in this as visitors themselves – the article's main focus will be on contextualising their practical approaches in terms of a discourse around encountering and responding creatively to 'strange urban places', as opposed to evaluating outcomes. My purpose, then, is far less to analyse pedagogical methods as applied in work with undergraduates than to contribute to a groundswell of interest, both scholarly and artistic, around interrogating performance's relationship to the city, not least within the emerging area of practice/performance as research. As Laura Levin suggests:

While research/creation focuses on the university as performance lab [and] is designed to advance knowledge in the fine arts, urban intervention takes its cue from a much broader range of disciplines, including environmental studies,

cultural studies, and sociology. Here, the experience of urban life is the central object of study, with a particular focus on the ways in which bodies shape and are shaped by the environments that they inhabit.

(Levin 2009, 65)

Identifying and rationalising theoretical factors and artistic influences ‘in play’ – and, therefore, instrumental in determining the students’ chosen approaches to Venice – is the priority here and readers are encouraged to draw their own conclusions about the two excerpts with which the article ends, in the same way as they might be left to do so by the ‘provocation’ of an artwork.

‘Unfinished journeys’

As Andrew Hussey has pointed out, within the context of the growing prevalence in the twenty-first century of urban populations on a global scale, the situationists long ago recognised ‘the city as a future battleground for the conflict over the meaning of modernity’. And it was ‘this battle for urban space, in a literal and metaphorical sense’ that was ‘in many ways the defining moment in the development of situationist strategy’ (Hussey 2002, 217). The situationists' urban project was above all provocatively revolutionary in a socio-political sense, which is what marked out the significance of its contribution to an already existing preoccupation within the arts at the time with the everyday life of citizens on the one hand, and with *space* on the other. As Sadler elucidates in *The Situationist City*, the radicalism of the movement’s practice, effected via the 'constructed situation' – with its related psychogeographical strategies of

détournement and *dérive* – is, in fact,

best thought of as a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art). Each constructed situation would provide a decor and ambiance of such power that it would stimulate new sorts of behaviour, a glimpse into an improved future social life based upon human encounter and play [...] It would clearly be some form of performance, one that would treat all space as performance space and all people as performers. In this respect, situationism postured as the ultimate development of twentieth-century experimental theatre, the energies of which had been dedicated to the integration of players and audience, of performance space and spectator space, of theatrical experience and “real” experience.

(Sadler 1998, 105)

The situationists developed the notion of the *dérive* (drift) as a form of embodied reconceptualisation and remapping of the city based on a performative practice of walking without *functional* aim, yet walking ‘productively’ or ‘creatively’. The drift is perhaps best understood, then, as the attempt to sensitise the body and its desires to existing but submerged ‘force fields’ within the urban environment that imply a tension between prohibition and opportunity. An aspect of walking with creative rather than functional intent might involve inducing impromptu ‘diversions’ (*détournement*) or ‘situations’ (*situation construite*): that is, drawing out responses or contriving incidents in public places that momentarily produced ruptures in and subversions of the environment of the urban everyday (or aspects of the so-called ‘society of the spectacle’). Carl Lavery

offers 'creative hijacking' as a more usable contemporary translation of the term *détournement* (Lavery 2006, 113), not least in an electronic era of text and image sampling and virals. That helps to elucidate the situationists' tactical concepts of 'negation and prelude' (Knabb 2006, 67-8): via a technique of subversive reconfiguration (negation) – in this instance of the urban environment or urban spectacle – creating the conditions (prelude), at least temporarily, for something re-formed or new to emerge. To give a contemporary example: the urban cyclists movement Critical Mass, whose tactic is periodically to take over the streets of a given city centre via sheer force of numbers (of bicycles), refunctions urban traffic flow – slowing it down, making it safer – above all by wresting control from the car. Whilst this act represents a negation of existing practice in the first instance, in the second it presages a reconceived perception of what might legitimately constitute 'traffic'. As the movement's slogan asserts: We aren't blocking traffic, we *are* traffic.

Situationist practices imply, then, 'first of all a negation of the value of the previous organisation of expression' (Knabb 2006, 67); ultimately they are 'political acts which aim to reinstate lived experience as the true map of the city' (Hussey 2002, 218). As such, the situationists' aims certainly had socio-political change in cities in mind, but their preoccupation was also with the complex role of desire in the playing out of any such revolution. So, rather than providing a rational blueprint for an improved urban ecology, the situationists' stated intention was to produce '*disruptive* mappings' premised on spontaneous encounters and events. Sadler refers to psychogeography as 'a reverie, a state of mind' (Sadler 1998, 76). However, if it *was* that, it was intended as a shared

dreaming of urban space, recognising that 'the self cannot be divorced from the urban environment', but that 'it had to pertain to more than just the psyche of the individual if it was to be useful in the collective rethinking of the city' (77). Situationist practices were then precisely 'a negation of the city as a site which invites the subject to remain detached from the object of its gaze' (Hussey 2002, 218).

‘Performing Venice: Questions of a Sinking City’

If there is one thing we might thank Ralph Rumney for it is that he has provided some form of tangible document of what a psychogeographical urban mapping might entail. Where the SI's preference may have been to 'present serious data' relating to the psychogeographic experience, Rumney may be said to *perform* the latter playfully: his protagonist, ultimately, is not Alan Ansen – who disappears over the brow of the Rialto Bridge, never to be seen again – but *himself* as author/artist. As such, the montage can be said to offer a performed instance of 'negation and prelude': a death in Venice, presaging a new lease of 'lived experience' in the city.

[1. Poster image for ‘Performing Venice: Questions of a Sinking City’]

That figurative sentiment implicitly provided a jumping-off point for the project devised with the group of finalist students at Warwick University. Entitled 'Performing Venice: Questions of a Sinking City' it formed part of an academic fellowship set up under the auspices of the University's Reinvention Centre: a cross-disciplinary initiative (sponsored by the Higher Education Funding Council of England), whose purpose is to institute innovative research projects at undergraduate level. Over the period of a long weekend,

the group made use of Warwick University's own Palazzo Pesaro-Papafava teaching and conference resource in Venice as the headquarters for a site-based exploration of the city. One of the statistical points of departure for the project as a whole was the tension between the tourist industry, which witnesses a continuous stream of temporary visitors to the city (16.5 million annually), and the 'leaking' resident population (some 61,000). The city conveys an impression of *sinking*: it is known to be doing so literally – with the fabric and foundations of buildings being eroded and the seasonal floods of the so-called *acqua alta* on the increase – whilst figuratively the weight of tourists can be said to be forcing the city down and its citizens to 'jump ship' in desperation. According to Anna Somers Cocks, a leading figure in the long-standing 'Venice in Peril' campaign to save the city from becoming merely a heritage-style *centro storico*, one of the reasons for the exodus is that there is a concerted drive by the combined powers of the city council and 'big business' precisely to turn the six central parts (*sestieri*) of Venice into a milch-cow for the tourist industry, as opposed to investing in residential infrastructure and amenities. In Somers Cocks' view, the town hall's own recent withdrawal to the mainland of Mestre – where seventy per cent of the population of the city now lives – is indicative of such a strategy actively to foster a myth of the death of indigenous Venice (Somers Cocks 2010).

Warwick's Palazzo effectively served as an 'incident room': a daily evidence-gathering, feedback and stock-taking point for students working in six teams of four to investigate the 'slow submersion of Venice'. These groups spent the majority of the time, though, working independently on the streets of the city. Each had devised a particular set of

questions and techniques of interaction in advance of the visit, the latter involving, for instance, making use of aural and visual recording technologies, mobile phones, social networking sites and identity disguises. In that regard the brief was straightforward: carry out the pre-planned exercises – modifying them *in situ* if necessary, in accordance with responses received – bring this data back to Warwick, evaluate how and to what extent pre-set questions had been answered, and, via means of performance, film, installation, exhibition, creative writing and lecture-demonstration tell the story of the ‘Venice interrogation’ as a component of a collectively-curated ‘psychogeographical environment’.² The implicit debt to Rumney’s playful story-board mapping became apparent in both the ‘collecting’ and ‘showing’ phases of this work. Having introduced its protagonist ‘A’ – with a photograph of Alan Ansen’s ‘leaning head’ against the backdrop of one of the city’s looming *campanili* – Rumney’s montage sets its tale in train by plotting an ‘ideal trajectory through the zones of main psychogeographic interest’ on a map of Venice, ending inconclusively on the Rialto Bridge (Rumney 1989, 45). The students’ work effectively picked up the figurative baton of Rumney’s ‘unfinished journey’ half a century later, but there were other influencing factors, too.

Relational Tourism

Marco Polo: ‘You take delight not in a city’s seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours’.

Kublai Khan: ‘Or the question it asks you’.

(Calvino 1997, 44)

The main cue supplied to the 'Performing Venice' project group was the imagined exchange above between the medieval explorer Marco Polo and the emperor Kublai Khan in Italo Calvino's urban meditation *Invisible Cities*. Whilst Marco Polo alludes to a multitude of cities in the accounts he offers of his global travels – abstracted ones of 'memory' and 'desire', as well as 'trading cities', 'continuous cities', 'hidden cities' and so on – in the end it is always Venice that serves as the implicit, 'invisible' point of reference and measurement: a city whose spectre governs the visitor's experience of all other cities (86). The implied premise of Calvino's 'reciprocal' questioning in the instance of this quoted duologue is that there are many questions to ask of this city, not least the unexpected one of what it may in turn have to ask *you*. In other words, that which makes a city – this one of Venice in particular – appealing, ultimately, relates very much to the way the visitor permits him or herself to be cast, indeed *challenged*, by it. And that form of positioning incorporates both the self's desire to see beyond the shimmering surface of the city – to look 'aside' – and the self's acknowledgement at the same time of its embodied implication in and contingency upon the space of the specific urban environment in which it finds itself.

One way of interpreting Calvino's duologue is to extrapolate it as the modern-day explorer's antidote to the tourist 'ethic'. Arguably the latter does *not* involve asking questions of place or self but merely seeks to affirm pre-cooked perceptions and images. Kaja Silverman has delineated this dichotomy in terms of modes of identification in the encounter with 'strange places', which, in Jane Rendell's succinct summary, amount to heteropathic on the one hand – 'where the subject aims to go outside the self, to identify

with something/someone/somewhere different' – and cannibalistic on the other – 'where the subject brings something other into the self to make it the same' (Rendell 2002a, 259). For the visitor, the former clearly implies putting the self 'at risk': being prepared temporarily to displace one's sense of self – to lose sight of oneself – potentially to rewarding ends. The cannibal traveller, meanwhile, opts for the safety of the known. In the case of Venice specifically, the city has arguably slipped so far down the greasy gondola pole of selling out to tourism that any supposed 'otherness' is already positively pre-digested, let alone pre-cooked, for the cannibal-visitor. (Everyone 'knows' Venice, even if they haven't been.) Conscious of that, many 'enlightened tourists' go there with the stated intention of discovering an 'alternative Venice' – *not* San Marco, *not* the Rialto Bridge – which, arguably, always already runs the risk of simply amounting to the next reiteration of a cliché.

In their chapter 'Venice: Masking the Real' (in *The Hieroglyphics of Space*), Curtis and Pajaczkowska identify the central, troubling paradox that Venice is 'a city that provokes curiosity whilst at the same time threatening to permit only repetitions of experience' (2002, 157). From the point of view of framing the students' field work, the observation served as a further cue: is the 'Venice experience' a mediated inevitability? This was the conundrum at least to be addressed if not resolved. The challenge the research groups set themselves, then, was not so much to discover 'another Venice', but rather to take the city and its mythology 'for granted', even as Marco Polo seems to suggest, to 'ignore' the city's specificity as exotic, historic place entirely. Their performed tactics varied from group to group, but one principle seemed to be held in common, which was to seek out

conversations. Indeed, in the spirit of the situationists: to instigate playful, interactive encounters that may or may not yield moments of potential insight. As visitors to Venice they went there with the aim of making something happen – indeed, ‘constructing situations’ – not merely of letting the mythical waters of the city wash over them.

In retrospect this basic principle proposes the term ‘relational tourism’. It is derived from the concept of ‘the relational’ as applied to the realms of art and aesthetics by Nicolas Bourriaud, though it is also being allied now, for instance, with geography (or geographies).³ Bourriaud defines his application as follows: ‘Aesthetic theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt [...] A set of practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent private space’ (Bourriaud 2002, 112-13). In other words, relational artworks ‘achieve form’ via creating situations of encounter or participation within certain contextual conditions. Without that they cannot be said to exist. Bourriaud deems relational aesthetics to represent a ‘radical upheaval’ in contemporary art, attributing the latter to ‘the birth of a worldwide urban culture’ in the second half of the twentieth century and to ‘the extension of this city model to more or less all cultural phenomena’ (Bourriaud 2002, 14). Based essentially on a rapid increase in *movement* – that is, in the possibilities of social communication and exchange, as well as individual mobility – Bourriaud effectively describes the turn from the artwork as object (a ‘lordly item in this urban setting’) to that of event:

the development of the function of artworks and the way they are shown attests to a growing *urbanisation* of the artistic experiment. What is collapsing before our very eyes is nothing other than this falsely aristocratic conception of the arrangement of works of art [...] The city has ushered in and spread the hands-on experience: it is the tangible symbol and historical setting of the state of society, that "*state of encounter imposed on people*".

(15)

In a sense what the Venice researchers were attempting to institute, therefore, was tourism as relational art (or performance). Looping back to Silverman's heteropathic mode of identification, this form of tourism can be said to be premised on 'going out of its way' to make things occur, to engineer *scenes*. It reaches out to the site in question – the city of Venice and its population, both resident and itinerant – but its motive is not to do the work of 'unmasking' it or exposing its specificity as site (or, indeed, of 'absorbing' it), but to perform it into a form of 'temporary being'. In short, to provoke 'live moments' or 'playful interludes of exchange' that may not have any consequences, but that are always likely to be revealing.

'Ex-plainning' Venice

Another useful derivative term is provided by Curtis and Pajaczkowska, who point out that the (Latin) etymology of the term 'explanation', *ex planere*, implies an unfolding of a map, 'where the map is more a folded piece of material – tactile and sensuous – rather than an instrumental, two-dimensional triumph of cartography' (2002, 153). Such a

definition has a hint of ‘seduction’ about it – pertinent here with regard to the situationists’ preoccupation with desire – but it also paves the way for mappings to take the form of embodied responses to the city and, hence, to direct us towards performance.

By way of conclusion, then, I wish to give an indication of some of the ways in which the undergraduate research groups implicitly worked through the precepts I have delineated, devising applied strategies and eventually ‘explaining’ their outcomes via the creation of a collective psychogeographical environment – or ‘shared dreaming’ – back at Warwick.

[2. and 3. ‘Performing Venice’ project installation details]

That two-phase process consciously sought to take into account the fact of the University nurturing a Warwick-in-Venice satellite identity in the city, one principally exploited by the departments of History and Art History, whose students can spend whole terms there. For the theatre and performance studies students the motive was rather to emphasise their presence as a short-term event – a temporary ‘infiltration’ that played off, *détourned*, if you will, the tourist’s long-weekend/city break syndrome – and then to give the tables one more turn by subsequently creating a mapping of Venice-in-Warwick. The ‘conclusion’, it should be said, is very much in the spirit of Rumney’s unfinished Venice journey; in other words, it is a performative mapping whose purpose is not to be conclusive but, via presenting narrative traces of the students’ practice (using their words and images as far as they have been available to me), to tease and to inspire ‘continued play’ in the realm of exploratory performance in urban contexts.

The first example concentrates on strategy mainly from a conceptual point of view (before the event of visiting the city), though it also incorporates some of the firsthand field notes. As with the creative hijacking of the ‘city break’ syndrome, this group’s adoption of the phenomenon of ‘couch surfing’ arguably subverted the notion of ‘experiencing the world from the comfort and safety of your sofa’ (or ‘being a couch potato’) by effectively doing the opposite. Unconsciously it also capitalised on the interrogative methodology of the ‘directed gaze’ as theorised by the Turkish artist Can Altay wherein the inquisitive visitor to the unknown city submits themselves to an agenda of activity and encounter set by a willing local resident: ‘It can be a tour of interests, of problems, of change, of life, of possibilities, impossibilities, of magical or mysterious realities, but most importantly, the tour has to be meaningful to the tour guide’ (Altay 2008, 250). Perhaps the most startling ‘discovery’ by this group was of the matter-of-fact assertion by one of its local interlocutors that the city was under Mafia control, suggesting that the whole ‘Venice performance’ experienced by its visitors is effectively in the hands of ‘sinister puppeteers’.

The second example is made up largely of extracts of the working script performed as part of the psychogeographical mapping (after the visit), concentrating in this instance on the ‘gendered gaze’. As the script itself indicates, this group was heavily influenced by the architecture theorist Jane Rendell’s explication of the way certain urban spaces function as the sites of highly-charged gendered encounters in which women are treated as the objects of exchange. This led the group to engage in comparative exercises of gendered role play, but it was also fascinated by the frequent mythical references to

Venice as a whole in gendered terms, not least that of the modern-day city 'selling itself to tourism like a whore'. In terms of 'rooting out intriguing data' about the city, this group became conscious of the degree to which instances of open theatricality, in the form of flamboyant costume and behaviour seemed almost to be an accepted norm; indeed, that the attention its various droll capers as dolled-up 'ladies' attracted on the first day appeared to define the group as epitomising Venice in the eyes of gawping tourists, who were hungry, out of season, for a piece of the city's mythical carnival atmosphere. By contrast, the all-female group's masquerade as men on the second day operated at a more covert, serious level with the performers' realistic disguises either engendering acute public uncertainty in their ambiguity or, when they really worked as disguises, offering illuminating comparative insights for the students in terms of both the unaccustomed male powers it suddenly gave them and the responses it solicited in that role.

1. Couch surfing

(Group: Janey Foster, Jesse Meadows, Caitlin Ince, Sophie Gilpin)

During the long weekend of 6-9 November 2009 we spent our time meeting up with some Venice inhabitants. They were complete strangers to us whom we had contacted beforehand via the online Couch Surfing network. Couch surfing is a fairly recent global phenomenon. Via its website it enables signed up members to contact other members in other parts of the world to request a free bed for the night or simply just to meet up. A process of 'exchange' is set in train, then, whereby members make themselves and/or their spare couches available but simultaneously benefit by their hospitality being reciprocated when they themselves go on their travels. More importantly for us it afforded a ready means of meeting people in a strange city and asking them to act as local hosts and guides.

Our aim was to see if we could map Venice by using the anecdotes and memories generated when we asked our respective hosts to take us to certain places with associations of significance to them personally. However, we did not feel we could disclose what our true purpose was, owing to the way it might change the nature of the relationship, so we were, in a sense, constantly performing – or simultaneously being and not being ourselves. Controversially, perhaps, this gave us licence to do things we might not normally do. Or, indeed, to claim things ‘in character’ that were not true *of* or *to* ourselves. The resulting installation of photographs, notebooks, texts, emails and artefacts documented our experience and the events that were triggered by our encounters: a web of Venice interludes, a ‘living memorialisation’ of our short time there.

[4. and 5. *Couch surfing* installation details]

Part of the risk involved was the way in which matters are inevitably subject to chance: there are no guarantees that meetings will be honoured nor that willing participants will provide worthwhile material relating to Venice ‘sites’. The possibility of failure is not merely something against which to brace oneself but actually becomes an assumed part of the work’s infrastructure – a story to tell. In the event, this hit-and-miss aspect is precisely how things played out, compounded by other unexpected factors such as the weather: brilliant sunshine one day, followed by relentless rain and inevitable high floods the next. Emotional states vacillated between exhilaration at a successful ‘connection’ to a form of devastation after a long wait for someone who simply neglected to appear. Accompanying all the encounters was a sense of guilt at *pretending* to a certain role in the relationships sought, when the motive was in fact always the ulterior one of ‘gathering material’.

One group member’s diary extract:

Sunday, 1.56pm

Text from Marta: ‘I’m very sorry but I won’t manage to get over to central Venice this afternoon. How long are you going to stay? Tomorrow I’ll have more time’.

Damn! I hate it when this happens. I was really looking forward to meeting her. She probably doesn't want to come in the rain. [...] I'm so glad I arranged to meet with Marco as well...

5pm

I meet Marco on Rialto Bridge. I have no idea what he looks like, or anything about him. It's pouring with rain. [...] We go to a very nice café-bar. I have a hot chocolate. Marco has an espresso. He pays. We have to stand at the bar. I don't mind what we do next. Nor does he. But nor do I! I want him to take me places he would normally go. I want to walk because I hope this will remind him of stories and memories as we go along.

He leads me to Campo di S. Margherita. A piece of roof falls from a building just behind me. Opposite S. Polo church he points to a wooden boat that looks, he says, like the one he used to own before going to Milan to study. With his friends they used to go to some of the many tiny islands off Venice for parties – island raves! He went to one with about a thousand people, he says. The police came and broke it up. It was a real shame because they confiscated the sound system. Now they just have smaller parties.

A bar near Rialto has changed hands five times in the last five years, Marco says. It's because the other bars nearby are all owned by the Mafia. They don't want to lose business, so they threaten them: 'We will burn down your house, kill your wife and kids'. The Mafia run everything, all the shops, the gondolas. Not just anyone can acquire a gondola. A very risky business. Venice is a hub of Mafia activities. [...]

Venice, according to Marco, is not a good place to live as a young adult, but it was great as a child because it felt so safe. He used to be allowed out on his own – no cars, enclosed squares to play in with friends. At the moment Marco works at La Fenice Opera House, one of the top three in the world. It's good, he says, because other young people work there too. And it pays well. Very hard to get a job in Venice – all tourism. Half of his former school class have left the city. Statistically, one person moves away from Venice per day, he claims. [...]

Marco has lived in Venice nearly all his life. Generally, he is very negative about it, though: nothing to do, hardly anyone young lives here, too expensive, too touristy, run by the Mafia. No-one interesting wants to come anymore. Not a place for residents. No normal shops left. But, he says, when he was a student in Milan, he was reminded of all the things he likes about Venice: everything very close by, no traffic, easy to get around lots of different bars. [...]

He brushes his blonde hair back with his hands, smokes whenever we walk, tells me how high he's seen the water in his time.

2. Gender in Venice/Gendering Venice

(Group: Tanya Wells, Caitlin McLeod, Natalia Rossetti, Hannah Woolner)

'In contemporary urban and architectural discourse, we are increasingly obsessed by figures which traverse space: the *flâneur*, the spy, the detective, the prostitute, the rambler, the Cyprian. These are all spatial metaphors, representing urban explorations, passages of revelation, journeys of discovery – “spatial stories” (Rendell 2002b, 104).

We decided to explore gender-determined prohibitions and privileges of urban space use premised upon the (male) mythologising of Venice as 'whore', selling itself shamelessly as a place of trade and tourism. We re-imagined Venice as the body of womanhood, simultaneously the Virgin Mary and prostitute, both sacred and exploited. We would adopt the roles of playful 'ladies' on the one hand, and – more daringly and ambiguously, since we were all women – cross-dressed men on the other. How would these contrasting gender roles facilitate our responses to this city and, in turn, determine the responses we received? Here is what we found.

Saturday

Task: Allow your femininity to be drawn out by the city and to drive your actions.

[6. 'Ladies' in St Mark's Square]

7.30am:

We try to find the sunrise, but we miss it. Empty streets but for the clacking of heels. Women and young boys look away as if they are ashamed. I feel ashamed; the patterns and colours of my dress reflect the painted walls around me. We buy cigarettes because we feel dirty. A cleaner at the hotel delights in us.

8.30am: The first exchange.

Man passes us and whispers, 'Ciao'. I turn round and loudly reply, 'Ciao!' He doesn't respond or turn around. I insist, louder, 'CIAO!' He turns round, confused, and shyly says, 'Ciao', but carries on walking.

10.30am: Four French women.

- When I say water, you say:

-Fear of falling in.

-When I say bridge, you say:

- I feel for women, having to lug their children up and down, up and down.

11.30am: Man struggling with huge cart.

- Le do una mano?

- Can I help you?

- No, no, pesa troppo e poi ti sporchi le mani.

- No, no, it's too heavy and you'll get your hands dirty.

The handles were pristine.

Noon:

We dance tango in St Mark's Square. A crowd forms. People want photographs with us. To them we are Venice. Even the pigeons know where the most attention is: they land on our heads. A man steps in and says, 'I'll show you how to tango'. He immediately took the lead as if two women tangoing is incomplete. The sexuality of this strikes us straight away: just like watching lesbian porn, men feel that only with their intervention will the women be completely satisfied.

[7. Tango in St Mark's Square]

[8. Pigeons in St Mark's Square]

12.30pm:

A Canadian couple approaches us. We ask the woman what her view is on women in Venice. Her husband interrupts her:

- Women are objects here. In Canada, women are emancipated.*
- Shut up. Women are objects everywhere.*

Later she finds us again.

- One thing you are doing correctly is you are quiet; just bringing your beauty and enjoyment to people.*

We feel saddened. Men are allowed to see and not be seen, but women are always on display.

4pm:

Remembering the Canadian woman's comment, we noisily run down dark alleyways, getting lost and shamelessly addressing some men on a balcony. We try to get invited to their party. They are not interested. We are not their kind of feminine.

'[T]he spatial patterns composed between [male and female], both materially and metaphorically, are choreographies of exchange, consumption, display, where men and women represent different relations of moving and looking – moving/being moved and looking, being looked at. Men move and look, whereas women are objects to be looked at, exchangeable commodities, moved between men as objects and signs of exchange, as commodities and values' (Rendell 2002b, 120).

[9. Women posing as men, unwittingly in exactly the leaning tower shot with which Rumney's piece opens]

Sunday

Task: translate yourself into a 'masculine language'. Do not play caricatures. Does Venice provide more scope for attraction and distraction for men than it did for women? Can you go places you wouldn't be able to access as a woman?

10.30am:

We set out from the hotel. We are nervous and overacting. We expect a huge reaction. We feel like a spectacle but no-one seems to notice. Their glances slide straight past. Never have we experienced such anonymity. Young women, though, hold eye contact; we start to feel in control; we realise that the dynamics of the heterosexual relationship are now on our terms. We start to exploit this.

Noon:

We stumble across the only androgynously orientated shop in Venice. We feel welcome and comfortable. We ask the shop assistant what she thinks we are. She is unperturbed:
- You are just fashionable. Look around, everything here is bisexual. So what?

[10. 'Men' outside 'androgynous shop']

1pm:

We go for lunch. The waiter calls to us:

- Prego, ragazzi.*
- Come in, boys.*

As we get closer, he falters. We start to feel insecure. We feel our hands give us away. Three men take a seat at a table next to us. They look over curiously. We decide to ask them what they think we are. They are embarrassed to admit that they were wondering whether we are boys or girls. They think we are from Amsterdam. Now that we are closer, they say, they can tell we are girls. We explain to them what we are doing. One of them, a gay man in his thirties, is delighted. He says, 'That's wonderful'. We feel invigorated.

3pm:

Back at the hotel. The staff are confused. The receptionist only recognises us by our room key number. They think we cannot understand them and they say:

- Sono uomini o donne?*
- Are they men or women?*
- Ieri erano donne.*
- They were women yesterday.*

Notes

1. See also Sadler (1998, 78-9 and 181, nn.31-32) for details of these events. 'The Leaning Tower of Venice' was originally published in abridged form in *ARK: The Journal of the Royal College of Art*, 24, 1958, vi-ix.
2. The 'Performing Venice' installation took place over the course of a day (9 December 2009) in two adjoining studio spaces in the Theatre and Performance Studies department's Millburn House facilities.
3. See Irit Rogoff. 2009. Geo-cultures: Circuits of arts and globalizations. *Open (The Art Biennale as a Global Phenomenon)*, 16, 106-15.

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