

Abstract [Biennial](#)

The Venice Biennial, founded in 1895, has been the first show of its kind in the world. Its formula is based on a central show and several satellite events, spread in the whole lagoon, among which the National Pavilions are the most discussed and yet the most successful part: as a ‘multicellular show’, it avoids the unique point of view of a single curator. It has been enlarging its influence on the territory of the town of Venice and it has been the trigger for many private foundations focused on contemporary arts. Even if often criticised, specially for its refuse to deny the idea of Nation, it has proven to be a good vehicle for the cultural and economic development of the city. In particular, its capacity to bring in town experimental artistic attitudes matches with the vocation of the town itself: albeit Venice has a reputation for its obsessive link with the past, it actually could survive and still survives as a cultural centre in the world thanks to its capacity to mix the ancient and the new, in a lively overlapping of styles and ideas. The contribution shows both the inclination of the biennial to rethink curatorial practices and its way to reinterpret the everlasting view on the future that, counterintuitively, characterizes the city up to nowadays.

[Biennial](#)

La Biennale di Venezia, fondata nel 1895, è stata la prima mostra di questo genere. La sua formula è basata su di una mostra centrale e molti eventi satellite, sparsi nell'intera laguna, tra cui i Padiglioni Nazionali sono la parte più discussa ma anche quella con maggiore successo: in quanto “mostra multicellulare”, evita il punto di vista unico di un curatore singolo. Essa è andata allargando la sua influenza nella città di Venezia ed è stata lo stimolo efficace per la nascita di molte fondazioni private dedicate alle arti contemporanee. Benché spesso criticata, specialmente per il suo rifiuto di negare l'idea di Nazione, ha dimostrato di essere un buon veicolo per lo sviluppo culturale ed economico della città. In particolare, la sua capacità di portarvi attitudini artistiche sperimentali, si incontra con la vocazione della città medesima: nonostante Venezia abbia una reputazione di legame ossessivo con il passato, in effetti è potuta sopravvivere e ancora sopravvive in quanto centro culturale nel mondo grazie alla sua capacità di mescolare l'antico al nuovo, in un vivace sovrapporsi di stili e idee. Il contributo mostra sia l'inclinazione della Biennale di ripensare le pratiche curatoriali, sia il suo modo di reinterpretare un incessante sguardo verso il futuro che, in modo controintuitivo, caratterizza la città fino a ora.

VESPER No.1

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SUPERVENICE

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*Vesper* è una rivista scientifica semestrale, multidisciplinare e bilingue, si occupa delle relazioni tra forme e processi del progetto e del pensiero. Ponendo lo sguardo al crepuscolo, quando la luce si confonde con il buio e l'oggetto illuminante non è più visibile, *Vesper* intende leggere l'atto progettuale seguendo e rendendo evidente il moto della trasformazione. Pitagora identificò nel pianeta Venere sia la stella della sera (*Hesperos*) che quella del mattino (*Phosphoros*), i due nomi si riferiscono allo stesso astro ma posto in condizioni temporali differenti. *Vesper* dichiara quindi una posizione più che un oggetto e privilegia il situarsi che ne profila lo statuto. Non è qui accesa la luce tagliente dell'alba, che promette giorni completamente nuovi e alti sol dell'avvenire, ma quella che fa intravedere nella penombra una possibilità nell'esistente.

Richiamando e rinnovando la tradizione delle riviste cartacee italiane, *Vesper* ospita un paesaggio articolato di modalità narrative, accoglie forme di scrittura e stili differenti, privilegia l'intelligenza visiva del progetto, dell'espressione grafica, dell'immagine e delle contaminazioni tra linguaggi. La rivista è pensata nella sua successione di numeri tematici come discorso sulla contemporaneità, nello spazio di ogni singolo numero è articolata in un insieme di rubriche che gettano luci differenti sul tema. Nel procedere delle diverse sezioni – editoriale, citazione, progetto, racconto, lezione, saggio, inserto, traduzione, archivio, viaggio, ring, tutorial, dizionario – mutano i riverberi tra idee e realtà, si accende l'intreccio tra evidenze concrete e loro potenzialità, potenziali trasformativi, immaginari. Le rubriche sono pensate non per aggiornare istantaneamente ma per indagare condizioni progettuali e per fornire strumenti e materiali dall'*ombra lunga*.

*Vesper* is a six-monthly, multidisciplinary and bilingual scientific journal which deals with the relationships between forms and processes of thought and of design. Gazing into the dusk, when light slowly merges with darkness and the illuminating object is no longer visible, *Vesper* aims to interpret the act of designing through tracing and revealing the movement of transformation. Pythagoras identified in the planet Venus both the evening star (*Hesperos*) and the morning star (*Phosphoros*), assigning the two names to the same star observed in different temporal conditions. *Vesper* thus states a perspective rather than an object, privileging the condition that defines its status. Rather than the sharp light of dawn, heralding a brand-new day and promising a brighter future, it is the twilight that allows you to have a glimpse at the potential of what is already there.

Following the tradition of Italian paper journals, *Vesper* revives it by hosting a wide spectrum of narratives, welcoming different writings and styles, privileging the visual intelligence of design, of graphic expression, of images and contaminations between different languages. The journal is conceived as a series of thematic issues that build a discourse on the contemporary. Each issue is divided into sections that offer a range of diverse perspectives on the theme analysed: editorial, quote, project, tale, lecture, essay, extra, translation, archive, journey, ring, tutorial, dictionary. Throughout the different sections, reverberations between ideas and reality change, connections emerge between tangible facts and their potentials, transformative prospects, collective perception. The principal aim of these sections is not to provide instant news, but to offer an in-depth investigation of different instances of design and to provide tools and materials that have a long-lasting effect.

## VESPER No. 1

## SUPERVENICE



Armin Linke, *Lagunari Regiment, exercise*, Venezia, 2007.

Editoriale | Editorial  
6 – 7

Sara Marini  
Supervenice

Citazione | Quote  
8 – 12

Manfredo Tafuri  
Nella Tempesta

Breve estratto da un testo critico che definisce la rotta o le coordinate di attraversamento del tema. | Brief excerpt from a critical text concerning different perspectives on the topic.

Progetti | Projects  
14 – 29

Paul O Robinson  
Site Castings: Entwinements in Palazzo Fortuny  
Site Castings. Intrecci con Palazzo Fortuny

Contributi che indagano le ragioni, le *mise-en-scène*, le risultanti di progetti realizzati attraverso le voci degli autori e/o di critici. | Contributions that investigate the reasons, the *mise-en-scènes*, and the results of an accomplished project throughout the voices of the authors and/or the critics.

30 – 45

Luigi Guzzardi  
Casa-studio Scatturin di Carlo Scarpa:  
incontri e relazioni nella Venezia degli anni  
Cinquanta-Sessanta  
Scatturin's Home Studio by Carlo Scarpa:  
Encounters and Relationships in the Venice  
of the Nineteen-Fifties and Sixties

46 – 55

Paolo Ceccon  
Oltre un eloquente silenzio. Progetto per  
l'ex Casa-studio Scatturin di Carlo Scarpa  
Beyond a Revealing Silence. Recondition of  
Scatturin's Home Studio by Carlo Scarpa

56 – 61

Robert Henke  
Venice Dust

62 – 74

Mario Piana  
Un restauro di "lunga durata": il Palazzo dei  
Grimani a Santa Maria Formosa  
A 'Long-lasting' Restoration: the Palazzo dei  
Grimani in Santa Maria Formosa

Racconti | Tales  
76 – 80

Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos  
The Water Constellations  
Costellazioni acquatiche

Narrazioni testuali o per immagini attraverso realtà note o ipotetiche. | Textual or visual narratives exploring actual or hypothetical worlds.

81 – 84

Manuele Fior  
Celestia

Saggi | Essays  
86 – 107

Nicola Emery  
Walter Benjamin e l'aura di Venezia  
Walter Benjamin and the Aura of Venice

Saggi critici articolati in citazioni, note, iconografie e una bibliografia. | Essays including quotes, notes, iconography and bibliography.

108 – 115 Gabriele Monti  
Le Bal. La superficie violenta  
delle feste veneziane  
Le Bal. The Violent Surface  
of the Venetian Parties

116 – 127 Fernando Quesada  
The Superlabyrinth of the Community in Exile  
Il super labirinto della comunità in esilio

128 – 137 Annalisa Sacchi  
Il sipario si alzerà su un incendio.  
Venezia: dal rogo de La Fenice al romanzo  
della cenere  
The Stage Curtain Will Open on a Fire.  
Venice: from the Blaze of La Fenice  
to the Novel of Ashes

138 – 156 Serenella Iovino  
Reading the Bodies of Venice. Journeys  
across the Lagoon's Storied Materialities  
Leggere i corpi di Venezia. Viaggi attraverso  
le narrative materiali della laguna

Insero | Extra  
160 – 169 Riccardo Miotto  
Tornelli  
Turnstiles

Traduzione | Translation  
170 – 175 NOVISSIME  
Giovanni Marras  
Radicalismo inverso: il vuoto come valore,  
gli studi urbani come strumento  
Inverse Radicalism: the Void as a Value,  
Urban Studies as a Tool

176 – 185 Giuseppe Samonà (capogruppo | team leader),  
Costantino Dardi, Emilio Mattioni,  
Valeriano Pastor, Gianugo Polesello,  
Alberto Samonà, Luciano Semerani,  
Gigetta Tamaro, Egle Renata Trincanato  
Explanatory Report motto: NOVISSIME  
Relazione illustrativa motto: NOVISSIME

Viaggio | Journey  
186 – 191 Luca Trevisani  
Costum car commando.  
Ovvero non tutti i viaggi sono vacanze  
Costum Car Commando.  
I.e. Not All Travels Are for Leisure

Ring  
192 – 195 Supervoid+Friel  
I Giardini della Biennale. Dialettica e scontro  
tra aspirazioni nazionali e internazionali  
The Gardens of the Biennale di Venezia.  
Dialogue and Clashes between National and  
International Aspirations

Tutorial  
196 – 203 Fabrizio Antonelli  
Le pietre (di Venezia) raccontano:  
come leggerle  
The Stones (of Venice) Tell Stories:  
How to Read Them

Dizionario | Dictionary  
204 – 205 Massimo Santanicchia  
Amphibious

206 – 207 Angela Vettese  
Biennial

208 – 209 Léa-Catherine Szacka  
Crowd

210 – 211 Milovan Farronato  
Ultra

212 – 213 Lorenzo Calvelli  
Venetiae

214 – 215 Alessandra Pagliano  
Zootropio

Fronteggiamento tra posizioni differenti  
poste sullo stesso "campo di gioco". |  
Different points of view facing each other  
on the same 'playing field'.

Manuale d'uso per l'esecuzione  
di pratiche e/o operazioni. | Instructions  
to carry out practices and/or operations.

Definizioni critiche di tre lemmi in italiano  
e tre lemmi in inglese contribuiscono  
alla precisazione del tema. Il dizionario  
prosegue con l'evolvere di "Vesper",  
si compone in itinere. | Critical definitions  
of three headwords in Italian and three  
headwords in English that contribute to  
point out the issue's topic. The definitions  
through the issues of "Vesper" will compose  
an ongoing dictionary.

Forma e modo d'espressione di questa  
rubrica sono a discrezione dell'autore. |  
The section consists in the original  
contribution of an author.

Traduzione inedita di un documento  
anticipata da un commento critico che  
ne evidenzia l'attuale rilevanza e attualità. |  
Unreleased translation of a document  
introduced by a critical comment  
highlighting its relevance.

Resoconto di un viaggio fisico o  
immaginario e delle sue evoluzioni  
temporali e spaziali. | A physical or  
imaginary journey in its temporal and  
spatial development.

Created in 1895 by mayor Riccardo Selvatico and a group of intellectuals and entrepreneurs that included personalities such as Antonio Fradeletto and Giovanni Bordiga, the Biennale di Venezia was meant to reinstate the primacy of the city. Venice had dominated the seas but following Napoleon's conquest, and even more so after the unification of Italy, it found itself as a non-independent state on the outskirts of a new and powerless country. The exhibition should have revitalised the cultural dynamism of an urban centre, which – despite the 19th century romanticism making it a symbol of the past by emphasising its decadent aspects – had originated and existed in the name of innovation. This propensity for modernity has always been driven by the built environment's need to adapt to the natural territory, given the effects on buildings of the combined action of water and salt, as well as the necessity to invent or collect cutting-edge technologies in order to resell them – be they brocades, coloured glasses, pocket books printing, drugs or shipbuilding. Another vital characteristic in the history of Venice was its relationship with different civilizations. In order to allow a small plot of land reaching out to the sea to survive over time, Venice had to become a port and therefore, a centre for trade and exchange, especially between European, Asian and North African cultures. Money and necessity made Venice a city that was suited for experimentation, open to dialogue and exchange.

We can read this on its walls. As a matter of fact, there is no European architectural or artistic style that *La Serenissima* did not readily appropriate. Therefore, paradoxical as it may seem, no Italian city would have been better suited to host an international contemporary art exhibition. Not by chance, the first edition in 1895 was clearly stated this concept, as it was named the Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte. Although the Biennale's international scope was long opposed by Italian and Venetian artists – who have never stopped feeling marginalised as the controversy over the relocation to of the Italian Pavilion from the Giardini to the Arsenale in the Fascist era demonstrates –, it was also the feature that prevented the exhibition from falling against national competitors such as the Roma Quadriennale. Another key element of the Biennale's ability to perpetuate over time was its openness to many disciplines. In different times and for different reasons, the Biennale di Venezia widened its focus to include music (1930), cinema (1932), theatre (1934), architecture (1980), dance (1999) and even the Kids' Carnival (2009). In particular, the architecture section of the Biennale has enjoyed considerable success over the years; unlike other sections, it was not established as a festival, but as a proper exhibition. Today the Biennale occupies the allocated spaces at the Giardini and at the Arsenale with a six-monthly exhibition every year, alternating between visual arts and architecture. The latter suffers the impossibility of properly displaying artefacts for what they should be, as in the case of display renderings, photographs, partial reconstructions and fragments. However, since its first exhibition (1980), in which the director Paolo Portoghesi showed through the optical tube-like space of the Corderie at the Arsenale in *Strada Novissima* the first expository reading of postmodern trends, the architecture section has enjoyed a good international reputation. The Biennale di Venezia is first in many ways. It is the oldest biennial, and as such, it has provided the model upon which – or, just as importantly, against which – other biennials have been founded. It is the only multidisciplinary event of its kind in the world. In Italy, it is simultaneously the best or, possibly, the only showcase for visual art and cinema renowned at an international level.

This does not mean that the Biennale is exempt from problems, among which is its persistent perspective that tends to 'westernise the other'. Its current organizational asset makes it an international hub, at times hypocritical, with a sort of *peace keeping* function that is similar at a symbolic level to great sporting events such as the Olympics. However, the Biennale di Venezia, though, is not a superficial platform of cultural diplomacy – which explains the steady growth of collateral events and national pavilions, including the Vatican's one (2013). Nevertheless, an official *allure* remains in which, between the lines, the predominance of Western culture is graspable. Moreover, much of the debate around curating and its different approaches, especially from a post-colonial perspective, has found relevant premises or consequences in Venice.

Another of the Biennale's weakness lies in its audience: no matter how much it has increased over the last twenty years, no recent edition of the Biennale di Venezia has managed to reach the million visitors that similar exhibitions, such as the Documenta in Kassel or the Biennale of Sydney, which also host equally specialised languages unsuitable for all palates, managed to achieve. There are understandable reasons for this, including the difficulties experienced by visitors who cannot arrive by car and must negotiate architectural barriers of all kinds. Furthermore, although there is a vast choice of hotel accommodation in Venice, it is often exorbitantly expensive when set against the services offered.

The award prizes have also raised controversy. Except for a suspension due to the 1968 protests, and beginning again in 1986, they have been assigned by a qualified and yet arbitrary jury. It is strange to note how eagerly these awards are coveted by curators and artists, while representing a rather dated form the hierarchisation of creative results.

Finally, and this is perhaps the worst deficiency – but also one for which a remedy may be found – the Biennale has left rather scarce traces in publishing and in the city's heritage. Its Historical Archive (ASAC), founded in 1928, has never taken on the characteristics of a structured research centre, or been able to take advantage of the fact that all the best authors in the world have travelled to Venice, by which, in addition to the materials produced for the Biennale, it could attract external archives and even research funds, following a Getty model. Apart from sporadic cases, the only well curated – albeit always hurried – publications have been the exhibition catalogues. Furthermore, if there was a time when the Venetian museums, especially Ca' Pesaro, acquired at least a few works for each edition, today this form of collecting is also absent. Thus, the event remains ephemeral.

The most solid legacy of the Biennale remains the institutions to which it indirectly gave rise. The Bevilacqua La Masa Foundation was set up and bequeathed to the city by the noblewoman who owned Ca' Pesaro (1898); the Peggy Guggenheim Collection was formed because the collector, committed to promoting American art at the 1948 Biennale, decided to live in a palace on the Grand Canal; Palazzo Grassi was transformed into a centre of culture by the entrepreneur Franco Marinotti in 1951, and has remained thus since then, despite the changes brought by the Fiat and Pinault ownerships. Many other Italian and foreign foundations, almost invariably supported by private capital, have considered their presence in the lagoon to be appropriate.

Collaboration with universities has also been significant and is one of the reasons why important fields of contemporary visual studies are being developed in the universities of the city. Finally, the city found itself hosting a swarm of smaller art centres, from private art galleries to self-managed places and non-profit spaces; as art factories these places constantly rejuvenate Venice's urban environment, which desperately needs to counterbalance the tourism economy.

In short, born as a stranger on the territory open to the *foresti* (foreigners), the Biennale di Venezia turned out to be an excellent exhibitionary device to attract attention and work capable of becoming again a cultural centre. The Venetian case helps an understanding for the reasons why so many other similar events have proliferated in the world: the 'Biennialization' of culture would be difficult to appreciate if these exhibitions did not have, in their own way, a permanent impact on the human and industrial districts in which they take place. Even the giant of specialised fairs, Art Basel, has decided to invest in urban artistic events in Buenos Aires and in other cities. The drive behind the Biennale di Venezia in 1895 is still a good bet today.

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Gaggiandre of the Darsena Novissima, Arsenale, Venezia. Ph. Sissi Cesira Roselli, 2019.

*biennial* (bɪˈɛnɪəl) adj. and noun [early 17th century from Latin *biennis* (from *bi-* 'twice' + *annus* 'year') + *-al*]. | 1.a. taking place every other year. | 2.a. (of a plant) taking two years to grow from seed to fruition and die. | 1.b. a biennial plant. | 2.b. an event celebrated or taking place every two years. Oxford English Dictionary, [www.lexico.com](http://www.lexico.com), accessed 17/07/2019.

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*Contatti | Contacts*  
Per qualsiasi altra informazione | For any further information:  
pard.iride@iuav.it  
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*Autori | Authors*  
Fabrizio Antonelli, *professore associato in Georisorse Minerarie e Applicazioni Mineralogico-petrografiche per l'Ambiente e i Beni Culturali*, Università Iuav di Venezia.

Lorenzo Calvelli, *professore associato in Storia Antica*, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia.

Paolo Ceccon, *architetto*, Venezia.

Agostino De Rosa, *professore ordinario in Disegno*, Università Iuav di Venezia.

Nicola Emery, *docente-ricercatore in Filosofia e Estetica*, Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio, Università della Svizzera italiana.

Milovan Farronato, *direttore e curatore di Fiorucci Art Trust*, London.

*Curatore del Padiglione Italia della 58. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte - Biennale di Venezia 2019.*

Daniela Ferretti, *direttrice del Museo Fortuny*, Venezia.

Manuele Fior, *Cartoonist, Illustrator and Architect*, Paris.

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Armin Linke, *Photographer*, Berlin.

Giovanni Marras, *professore associato in Composizione Architettonica e Urbana*, Università Iuav di Venezia.

Riccardo Miotto, *architetto e illustratore*, Treviso.

Gabriele Monti, *ricercatore in Disegno Industriale*, Università Iuav di Venezia.

Alessandra Pagliano, *professore associato in Disegno*, Università Federico II di Napoli.

Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Professor in History and Theory of Architecture*, McGill University, Montréal.

Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, *Professor in Law & Theory*, University of Westminster, London.

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