

# 'We can't be provincial about Venice': An interview with Jane da Mosto

Julie Ren and Rosa Sancarlo

In 2010, Vicky Richardson commissioned and Liza Fior curated the British Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale with an intent to 'shift[s] our perception of Venice as a historic backdrop to the Biennale, to one of a dynamic participant. muf [architecture/art practice] has introduced many new collaborators to the British Pavilion including the schools of Venice, the scientific community, community activists, historians and artists'.<sup>1</sup> Among these collaborators

was Jane da Mosto, who was tasked with (among other things) helping to facilitate workshops in which Venice Biennale participants were brought into dialogue with local actors. She describes the collaboration as a decisive moment, ultimately leading them to enshrine this work in the form of 'We Are Here Venice', an NGO working on the preservation of Venice as a living city through connecting research and activism since 2015.<sup>2</sup> As an evidence-based organisation, they have published several reports, bringing together useful data for Venice Biennale curators and exhibitors in 'how was it for you?' (2019), and, in the context of the respite Venice had from mass tourism during the pandemic, about the city's human fabric in 'whose city is it anyway?' (2021).<sup>3</sup> The complex relationship between Venetians and the Venice Biennale (and the tourism industry it is also a part of) courses through these reports.<sup>4</sup> Venice residents seem to be



Jane da Mosto holding a campaign poster by 'We Are Here Venice' quoting Hasna, a cultural mediator from Narsingdi, Dhaka, Bangladesh: 'In Bangladesh, people think that floods are a divine punishment, or a matter of bad luck, but what is the real cause?' Bangladeshis are one of the largest immigrant communities in Venice. As part of the project 'ONDEW – Let's address climate change together', 'We Are Here Venice' fosters an exchange of experiences and knowledge about flooding with this Bangladeshi community who are themselves displaced by flooding; photo by Julie Ren

<sup>1</sup> Ellie Smith, 'Venice Biennale 2010', *British Council*, 25 August 2010, <https://design.britishcouncil.org/venice-biennale/venice-biennale-2010-villa-frankenstein/>, accessed 2 March 2023

<sup>2</sup> See [www.weareherevenice.org](http://www.weareherevenice.org)

<sup>3</sup> See [www.weareherevenice.org/how-was-it-for-you/](http://www.weareherevenice.org/how-was-it-for-you/) and [www.weareherevenice.org/whose-city-is-it-anyway/](http://www.weareherevenice.org/whose-city-is-it-anyway/)

<sup>4</sup> This is a growing area of research – see, for example Pier Luigi Sacco, 'Venice, Reloaded? A Tale of Urban Life (and Death)' in Helmut Anheier and Yudhishtir Raj Isar, eds, *Cultures and Globalization: Cities, Cultural Policy and Governance*, Sage, 2012; Alex Ulam 'Our Parks are Not for Sale: From the Gold Coast of new York to the Venice Biennale', *Dissent*, vol 60,

exhausted of tokenising forms of inclusion in the Biennale and the diminishing housing availability driven by the proliferation of private tourist accommodations – yet they also appear as heavily reliant on the service sector jobs and might see restrictions on tourism as a direct threat to their livelihoods, even as less and less of these workers are actually able to live in the city. During the last weeks of the Venice art biennale in 2022, we spoke with Jane da Mosto at this unique junction of possibility, in order to understand the stakes and ways of not returning to the unsustainable forms of tourism endemic to pre-pandemic times.<sup>5</sup>

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**Julie Ren/Rosa Sancarolo:** The report ‘whose city is it anyway?’ contends that it was a unique moment to not go back to the unsustainable relationship with tourism that Venice had before the pandemic. At the same time, you also recognised that Venice has been a destination for tourism since the 1200s, predating even the term ‘tourism’. Venice today is famously dependent on tourism for its economy, as are many cities. You describe this as the problem of ‘tourism-monoculture’. How would you describe in what way these past years, with the travel restrictions during the pandemic, have affected the city? What did that period teach you about what Venice could be?

**Jane da Mosto:** The period taught me a lot about what Venice could be. The first thing was the emptiness. It made us realise that what is missing from Venice are more permanent residents. But it also revealed a very positive thing. I think it reinforced everybody’s commitment to living here, and our appreciation of being able to live here, because Venice was more beautiful than it has ever been during those weeks. And we got to know who our neighbours are, because under normal circumstances there are usually such crowds. You don’t know who lives in your neighbourhood and who is just walking through. But since the pandemic, everybody is much more friendly with each other because you know whose faces to smile at. And I think that has had a significant effect on the social fabric.

**JR/RS:** Speaking of the crowds, you often stress that the issue is not whether Venice should host the Biennale and that there has never been a suggestion to get rid of tourism, but, rather, that it is a question of scale. So how can the Biennale better serve the city? What is the correct scale of that tourism? How do you gauge this problem of over-tourism? Put simply, what is a good amount of tourism?

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no 1, 2013, pp 64-70; Marco Casagrande, ‘Heritage, Tourism, and Demography in the Island City of Venice: Depopulation and Heritagisation’, *Urban Island Studies*, vol 2, 2016, pp 121–141; Fancesco Visentin and Dario Bertocchi, ‘Venice: An Analysis of Tourism Excesses in an Overtourism Icon’ in Claudio Milano, Joseph Cheer and Marina Novelli, eds, *Overtourism: Excesses, Discontents and Measures in Travel and Tourism*, CABI, 2019

<sup>5</sup> Interview has been edited for length and clarity



Venice has been a site for destination tourism since the 1200s but the scale has changed, at least in part as a result of budget airlines;  
photo by Julie Ren

**JdM:** In the report, ‘how was it for you?’, there was an estimate of the building fabric of Venice, taking into consideration how many families there are now compared to how many there used to be. Maybe there used to be nine people in a family and one bathroom, but people don’t live like that anymore. Taking into account changes in lifestyle, the ideal population of Venice is, I think, something like 120,000.

Another way of looking at it is this: if there are more residents, there are more signals that the visitors can pick up in terms of getting input in how to behave. And therefore, I’d like to say that the number of tourists should never exceed the number of residents. And if you want more tourists, you have to counterbalance that with more residents. For Venice today, there probably shouldn’t be more than 50,000 people coming to visit, including the people staying in hotels and B&Bs. And if the city wants more tourists, they need to do more for the living conditions so that the number of residents can build itself up. Ideally, you could have 100,000 residents and 100,000 visitors.

The carrying capacity of the city is also determined by what we call bottlenecks. There are some streets that lead out of Piazza San Marco that are very, very narrow. There are areas of the city... in fact, I have to walk through one to get to work near the Campo San Bartolomeo, where the old post office is, which is now a department store. Just outside that, the streets widen, there’s a big bridge and then it gets very narrow. So, you only need slightly more people than usual, and you can’t fit past. The number of visitors to Venice – I hate the word ‘tourist’ – needs to be determined by the number of residents and these so-called bottlenecks, because in your university, for example, there are fire regulations that you can’t have more than a certain number of people in each space – so why aren’t there fire regulations for Venice?

**JR/RS:** Could you explain that distinction, why you prefer ‘visitor’ over ‘tourist’?

**JdM:** I think ‘tourists’ as a term assumes that the person concerned is coming here to take something, whereas what visitors do is they come with an open mind and a conscientious attitude that they are coming to explore, to learn, to get a sense of place. Tourism is something that I consider to be extractive.

In Italian, it is the same word for guests and hosts: *ospiti*. And that is what I have explained to my children. When you go to somebody’s else’s house, you have to behave; you have to be on your best behaviour and do the same things that they do, that kind of thing. And when somebody comes to visit us, you have to ask them what they want to do and do what they want to do. So that is, I guess, a way of thinking about it.

**JR/RS:** In the ‘how was it for you?’ report, you highlighted not only the extension of the audiences over all of the years of the biennales but also the temporal extension: extending the exhibit for three to six months; the spatial extension: the collateral events that are in different parts of the city; and all these things leading to greater visitor numbers. Events like the Venice Biennale are again drawing crowds. How do you assess the impact of the event on the city and maybe beyond the crowd, not just the people but in terms of the entanglement of capital and politics with media attention as well?

**JdM:** It is a showcase for the same things that afflicts itself, like twists it. Because it is not a mirror, because it is actually everything but that, because they are hosting these issues that they are afflicted by. So, it is the lack of consciousness. I would hate, for example, for the Biennale to start censoring – that would be the end of the end. But the fact that *it is so unaware that the art that the offices of the Biennale are so proud to be putting on show is highlighting some of the things, some of the problems that they are the perpetrators of*, and they don’t even say anything. They could say something. They could say we are thinking about it too, and take the opportunity to dialogue with their exhibitors, the visitors and engage some of the brightest minds on the planet in finding a way through.

**JR/RS:** With all of the things that are going on right now in the world, climate catastrophe, the covid pandemic, war in Europe, there has been a great deal of attention paid to multiple, simultaneous crises. At the same time, people are also, again, drawing attention to more kinds of everyday crises. So, the ways that inequality has always been there, inequalities that are related to the lack of affordable housing, for example, as you have discussed in Venice, the lack of dignified work, the food insecurity, the ongoing wars outside of Europe... there are so many issues around the world, and we are wondering how do you think the discourse of crisis, like apocalyptic crisis, how does this affect activism or your work specifically? Does it help you in terms of increasing the urgency of some of the problems that you are facing, or does it spell a sense of disillusionment?

**JdM:** I think we have to be very careful. That is a really interesting question. First of all, nobody's asked me that before, and I am very aware that Venice attracts all this fascination. But *we can't be provincial about Venice*, and it links in a way to what I said about privilege and responsibility, that if we are going to talk about Venice so much, we can't trick ourselves into thinking that it is just about Venice. It is not just about Venice. Venice shows us things that are happening in so many other places as well. And so this idea of the discourse of crisis, I don't want to overreact for the sake of Venice, but if Venice can help create a bigger response, then that's good, that's important. But it is very difficult. I mean, that is the nature of filling in gaps, if you find yourself doing things without any kind of recipe to take us through it.

The engagement that we started with the Bangladeshi community comes from recognising that there is this visibly invisible, enormous segment of the local population. It is the most numerous segment of the non-Italian residents in Venice. There are about 7,000 registered Bangladeshi citizens. And then there are all those who have taken Italian citizenship, plus all those who don't have papers. So the actual number of people from Bangladesh must be maybe three times that. And they are here because they think they can find economic prosperity. But they are also here because their homes have been flooded. They are technically climate refugees. And so, talking to them about flooding in Venice, I said: 'I'm worried, are we going to hurt their feelings?' Because the flooding in Venice is... well, everything just needs to be rinsed afterwards. The flooding they have takes all their belongings away forever. And so, talking about the scale of problems, thinking about the word 'crisis' is a very delicate issue.

I met some people who are here doing glass-making in Murano from Portland, Oregon, and they said that they have the sense that it is so light being in Venice because there aren't many beggars in the street. Apparently in Portland the streets are carpeted with homeless people. So Venice is a privileged city.



According to Jane da Mosto, Venice shows us things also happening elsewhere, and perhaps the attention to Venice can be leveraged to raise awareness more globally about the consequences of the climate crisis; photo by Julie Ren



**JR/RS:** Understanding that the endurance of Venice is more evidence of the city's resilience than its fragility, the challenges that the city has been facing have always been changing. How do you think the vulnerability of Venice has changed these past years following the pandemic? And what do you project for its future in terms of sustainability?

**JdM:** The vulnerability of Venice has increased exponentially with the increase in the frequency of flooding since before the pandemic. The mobile barriers came into function for the first time in October 2021. They're still not finished. Each time they use them, we don't know if they're going to work. We don't know in advance when they're going to use them. We do know three days in advance when flooding is forecast. For me, Venice was getting more and more vulnerable the longer that it has taken to finish these floodgates. Now that we have the floodgate, it doesn't make me feel less vulnerable. It just makes me realise how badly designed and executed they have been. I wish it wasn't like this. Did you see the speech at the COP25 with Vanessa Nakate, the Ugandan climate activist? She was in the plenary session with all the people from the oil companies and she said: 'Prove me wrong'. And that's how I feel.

The other vulnerability issue is the fact that we have gone beyond what we had before 2020 in terms of bite-and-run tourism. It is so crowded all the time. It is like carnival crowds permanently. Then, of course, when carnival happens, you get even more. I think all this discourse about Venice makes more and more people think they need to come before it disappears. Put it on that bucket list. And also, it's so easy to come to Venice. It is the third biggest airport in Italy. The trains are very efficient, and there are buses if people want a quick away-break.

**JR/RS:** We went right into your activities and your goals, work, and your intentions, but we actually didn't ask a very basic question, and that is, how was 'We Are Here Venice' initiated? Was there a triggering event that led first to the idea and then the concretisation of the project?

**JdM:** It was gradual. Venice does have, in fact, a hugely fertile civil society. There are almost more associations than there are people, because each person might be a member of several associations and that's not a good thing. That kind of fragmentation shows that there's something awry, because otherwise they all get together under one organisation to represent our common aim. The intention with 'We Are Here Venice' was to be more invisible, not necessarily become an association or anything with a legal identity, but just for me and some people I was working with to help facilitate better connections within civil society, to actually see if we could overcome this distinctive fragmentation. That is on the one hand; on the other, when I was working with Liza Fior in the 2010 UK Pavilion, one of the things that was a condition of working with her, imposed by her through the British Council, was that whatever was made for the pavilion had to have some kind of afterlife in Venice. And by helping to research what was going to happen to all the stuff that was in the pavilion, I realised the

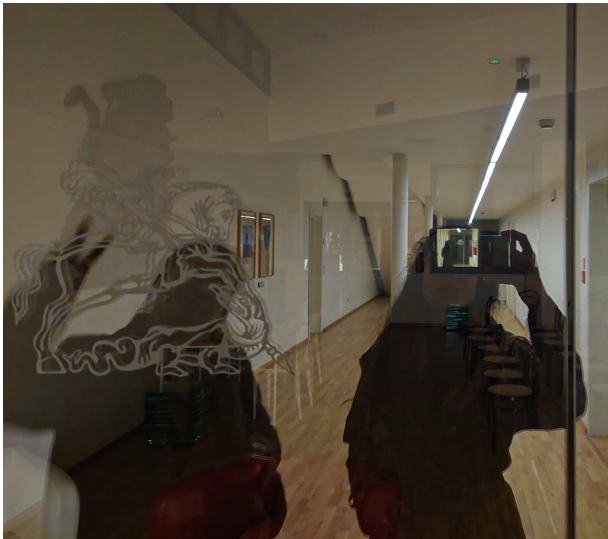
potential of the professional and social fabric of Venice. And that made me believe that the city could be more resilient, could be better at looking after itself.



Inside the Arsenale, one of the main exhibition spaces of the Venice Biennale, during the stage of preparation for a biennale where materials are being collected and stored; one ethical concern for biennale participants is the afterlife of materials used during the biennale, their disposal and environmental impact; photo by Julie Ren

David Chipperfield, who was curating the next architecture Biennale, the 2012 one, asked Richard Sennett to take care of the public programme because he was too busy handling sponsorship for the exhibition. And that's when I met Richard and Adam Kaasa, who wanted to do a public programme as part of their *Theatrum Mundi* work. I said, well, from the Venice side, I can just tell you that it's a pity that the Biennale happens inside this golden cage. So little of the interesting exhibits and ideas that come to Venice under the auspices of the Biennale trickle through into the city. And they said, okay, let's do some workshops. And what was amazing was that I got advance access to what was going to be in the Biennale so that I could think about coupling what was in the Biennale with the right kinds of artisans or activists and other kinds of people here in Venice. At the workshop, the curators and the experts, rather than them being listened to by the locals, they had more questions for the locals than the other way around. And their eyes were out of the sockets, 'Oh, you really do that? Tell me how. Well, I want to see it.' And that was the kind of decisive moment for making 'We Are Here Venice'.

**Jane da Mosto**'s work stems from a passionate alliance between science and activism. She is trained as an environmental scientist (MA University of Oxford, MPhil Imperial College London) and is executive director of the Venice-based NGO 'We Are Here Venice', dedicated to safeguarding Venice as a Living City. Her books include *The Science of Saving Venice* (Umberto Allemandi, 2004), *The Venice Report* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) and *Acqua in Piazza* (Linea d'acqua, 2016).



**Dr Julie Ren** is an urban researcher with the Social and Cultural Geography Unit at the Department of Geography, University of Zurich. Her work on art events has addressed questions of cultural representation, public space and social proximity. Her most recent book is *Engaging Comparative Urbanism: Art Spaces in Beijing and Berlin* (Bristol University Press, 2020).

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