

A PRECARIOUS BALANCE BETWEEN DISASTER AND MIRACLE

*Extragarbo Collective: Est Coulon, Cosimo Ferrigolo,
Gaia Ginevra Giorgi, Edoardo Lazzari*



Figure 1. Call Monica rehearsal @ Argo 16. Photographer: Giulia LaRepubblica.

The performing arts festival Il Divertimento per li Regazzi (Entertainment for Kids or Fun for Kids) took place on December 6–7, 2019, at Il Cerchio, a cooperative located in Sacca Fisola, part of Giudecca Island, in Venice.¹ The following are a few thoughts, at times in the form of a dramatic dialogue made in retrospect, with flashbacks and glances into the future. From the memorable to the prefigurable.

We got inside making our way through debris. There were a lot of pieces of things that had been whole until recently. A lot of aluminum furniture stood side by side with large, dark, wooden armoires and frosted-glass dressers with zoomorphic paws. There were disconnected hoses, very big pots and pans, and a lot of chairs and plastic tables with folding legs. Everything was carelessly piled up at the entrance, concealing almost completely a dismal reception.

The sea level is due to the combination of three factors. In addition to the typical tidal range, one must take into account the astronomical aspect and the meteorological influence determined by wind speed and air pressure. Very low pressure produces an inverse barometer effect, so that when atmospheric pressure at sea level goes down, the sea level goes up. The passage of this cyclone was observed eight nautical miles off the coast, and it quickly reached the lagoon cities. The highest level recorded in Venice amounted to 187 cm—that is, the second highest value in collective memory.

On one side of the room, large windows covered the entire width of the wall. Their frames projected a long straight shadow on the green concrete floor, fractured by the clearly defined volumes of the bleachers that ran along the opposite wall. The yellow light that streamed in lent the room a greenhouse-like air; the muffled screams of amateur football players were coming from the outside. The alley and the netting which surrounded the field increased the distance that separated us from them. We were all bathing in the same light—the light coming from the high lighting columns of the sports fields in front of the building. Yet, where we were—inside—the sound of our footsteps was so magnified by the echo that it felt like being inside a cathedral, protected, as in a sacred place governed by universal laws—except it was dust, instead of saints, that watched over us.

The structure of the building was in excellent condition. Sturdy beams supported the precast corrugated metal roofing, fitting perfectly with the trusses' steel beams. The red-brick walls spoke of Venice, though without splendor or ostentation. This is an

anomalous place compared to the typical images of Venice. Once you turn your back on the Giudecca Canal and walk away from Sacca Fisola pier, each building speaks of the proletariat and of modernism, of bygone days when the state was wealthier, and of social unrest.

Here the ancient admixture typical of Saint Mark's city—where there are no ghettos, where everything is confused by virtue of a proven system based on mutual control—no longer exists.

Inside, the heat was on—it was a dream. Once the big neon lights that were hanging from the ceiling at regular intervals were lit, the space amplified its voice, thereby declaring its primary vocation for sports, and it did not lose any of its charm. Its rawness displayed the suffering dignity of the contemporary building—decaying functionalism—devoid of any decoration, made of fireproof materials bound to wear out.

Behind the reception, a huge ventilation system occupied substantial space. It was yet another sign added to the heap of meanings the place was made of. It resembled a small corner of Beaubourg. Everything of this space left a distinct yet soft imprint on the developing aesthetics of each artistic work that took shape within these walls. Many days went by between the green of the floor and ceiling, the earthy red of the bricks, the light blue of the window frames, and the silver of the railings and iron and aluminum systems.

We shall often return to this place, we are still returning, we go and say hi to our barmaid friends Chiara, Laura, and Donatella; we still go there for underground meetings. Our long coats set us apart, arousing local diffidence and the usual nonchalance of children, as well as interest and laughter.

This former boxing gym is now a fortuitous gathering place for people interested in the present and future of art and of city culture; it is the occasional headquarters of a spontaneous commu-

nity that took shape from December 6 to 8, 2019. These were the days of the public presentation of projects developed in four other cultural spaces during the residency period promoted by *Il Divertimento per li ragazzi*.

The gym of Sacca Fisola sports center is a heterotopia, a perimeter that escapes bureaucratization, a place where the reasons for our presence are not put under scrutiny. Here an ancient logic still endures; a logic whereby there is no reason why an empty space should remain so when someone shows up and requires to use it, even sporadically. Here hospitality is not a formal concession, but a verbal agreement based on trust and mutual respect between the applicants and the administrators. Sometimes improper spaces respond to the urgent needs of an independent community in a most appropriate manner. This is one of the things we learned.

Leo: One of the questions that inspired us to act was the need to have a space where we could develop our projects and where those projects could enter into dialogue with one another. What we wanted to do was to join forces and to bring various practices together in a perspective of exchange and relationship that would create the opportunity to open up to new points of view. Then there was the need to kindle a dialogue with the city, because we feel we're part of it and we want to contribute to the shaping of its identity; one way of doing this is to address our needs. That's how we had the idea of getting other associations involved—associations that work in a local dimension with the will to promote the growth of local cultural realities and to network.

Cosimo: As a matter of fact, we wanted to speak to realities with different cultural and economic policies and so to set up a process of horizontalization.

Edo: Well, yeah, the political aim was somehow to *equalize*. The essence of *Il Divertimento* has been to some extent the idea of embodied knowledge. I think that theory and practice need to be combined.

Cosimo: We have to rid ourselves of the practice-theory binary. These two things are coextensive. One doesn't exist without the other—at least, not in our methodology.

Gaia: We acted out of necessity, we got inspired by desire, by possibilities and contingencies. These were our incentives. Only later did we single out what we had got started politically, theoretically, and philosophically: *the scope of the action*.

Edo: These were the criteria within which invention and creation arose.

Gaia: Theory emerged through the practices, but our first impulse already combined the two aspirations. It wasn't an a priori structure.

Leo: Each institution thinks for itself and very often there is no fruitful dialogue with the community. Spaces are only relatively available for use, so there needs to be a bond and a dialogue between the various realities in order for them to get acquainted and to recognize one another.

Est: I think that for us the key word really is space. Personally, I feel the urgency of finding a place as well as enough time to focus on working. As young artists, we always have a hard time finding places where we can work on our projects, places available for long enough and that are not for rent. I think this is a problem that young artists encounter in every city, but maybe it is more tangible in Venice. Here you truly perceive a lack of space.

Gaia: This text is from December of last year? *Disabitare*² existed already!

Edo: It is hard to create a regular audience, a community of spectators that grows throughout the year, because there is limited access to the events relating to performing arts, which are also very sporadic. The institutions that have the means to produce and to host projects do not answer such requests. Only the independent realities intermittently offer residen-

cies, performances, or devices that are more relevant to our field, but it never has a truly local dimension.

Leo: We want to present ourselves as an alternative and to defend the everyday needs of artistic research. Sporadic events certainly get something going and leave an important marker for the community, but they do not answer that everyday need to get in touch with the performance scene.

Paola: What curatorial operation have you performed in building the project?

Edo: The curatorial approach was very much present in the choice of the spaces of residence. What we wanted to do, as far as possible, was to place the various spaces on a horizontal plane. In this regard, I would like to point out that all the spaces hosted us for free. We talked to spaces that were very different from one another—at the institutional level as well—spaces that work in various fields of research: a private foundation, two cultural associations, a former students' residence and, finally, a cooperative nonprofit organization, which hosted us for the final events.

And then another crucial operation was certainly the decision to involve mentors and to bring them into contact with the projects in residency. We have invited five figures different from one another: Silvia Calderoni and Ilenia Caleo, who are performers, activists, and researchers; theorist, dramaturg, and performative curator Piersandra di Matteo; researcher, theorist, and dance scholar Stefano Tomassini; and Mara Oscar Cassiani, an artist who explores the border between visual, performing, digital, and net arts.

The curatorial operation also certainly consisted in connecting them to the projects we had chosen, based not so much on our personal taste, but rather on each work's characteristics.

Gaia: We need to address the mentor's issue. During the first roundtable, some directors had expressed a very critical view on the presence of such figures.

Cosimo: *Il Divertimento* is also an educational project—not merely because it is supported by the university, but above all because it seeks to make up for the study program’s structural deficiencies.

Edo: The decision to have mentors is linked to the search for a continuous dialogue. Creation mostly stems from dialogues. Research and development require us to set up dialogues with more or less like-minded people.

Cosimo: The process of building a temporary community was interesting. . .

Gaia: If in the future we consider the idea of organizing workshops open to people that aren’t part of the university, we may then speak of a further broadening of the community, of an ephemeral space, of a time of “the festival” that is the only moment in which the city and the community are one and the same thing. For us it is urgent to consider the festival as a methodology for revolt. Like the riot, the festive experience generates a time of unusual quality, in which every event seems to be happening both here and now and forever. We are interested in examining this characteristic of the festive experience: this capacity to suspend historical time, to open the reservoir of possibilities wide and to generate imaginary spaces that can actually be realized.

Edo: When it is situated, this quality becomes an opportunity to fully take part in a community and, having learned from the lesson of Furio Jesi, to consider the time of revolt as the only moment when people are no longer alone in the city (Jesi 2013). We always try to act in this regard through our curatorial and performance projects.

“In Europe, I see the difference between art, culture and entertainment vanish. The artists now have to follow the policy and the rules of the houses instead of the other way around. We urgently have to reconsider the role of theatres and festivals, as instruments to facilitate and valorize artists again. And we need more flexible structures. Art should not please. On the contrary. Art has to show where it hurts in our societies. We urgently need the courage back to pick up this role of disturbers again.” (Leyson 2015).

Gaia: That's right, that is precisely what we were! And then in Venice too, speaking of fun in the midst of all that rhetoric of decency and prohibition . . .

Paola: What is fun in relation to the stage in your opinion?

Leo: Fun stems from the space we were talking about earlier. A space open to experimentation, where one can set aside the logic of production and take the liberty to create with no purpose.

Est: In our view, fun is about getting out of the system in which you produce something in order for it to be sold and going beyond the mere demonstration of your skills. Fun is a value that has the power to generate possibilities and new ideas; it allows us to get in touch with the issues that surround us and to address them.

Edo: It gives us the possibility not to set limits on our style, to make room for new works in progress, for projects, for experiences that are not yet defined and that may develop or transform and then eventually be presented to a gaze that will inevitably alter them, though without destroying them—because they have some kind of protection, as something that isn't inherently closed.

Gaia: Right, how could you destroy something that is fluid? Fun is an unprofitable practice, a form of resistance to a system that is based on the logic of the product and of consumption. We are in favor of lengthy time and of an open space where not doing anything is itself a fundamentally generative process.

Gaia: This makes me think of a passage from *Manifesto of the Third Landscape* by Gilles Clément. I'll read it to you: "Instruct the spirit of the non-doing as we instruct the spirit of the doing. Raise indecision to political heights. Balance it with power. Imagine the project as a space including reserves and questions. Consider the lack of organization as

a vital principle by which every organization is passed through by the flashes of life. Approach diversity in amazement” (Clément 2003, 59) (Translation by Extragarbo).

Edo: At what point does the theme affect the process? At what point does the process affect the theme? Methodologically, it happens when need and desire drive you to do things. We could also say that a word is also a vector of creation, a note that you may instill into what you are doing.

Cosimo: I agree with the fact that fun was a theme, that our aim was to advocate for fun and to revalorize it in order to restore its emotional value. It was an umbrella theme, something like an area where things happen without violence. Where things are called to react to stimuli.

Edo: A suggestion.

Cosimo: An atmosphere . . .

Gaia: That is one of the focal points of the project: creating an atmosphere that enables things to get going, to happen. Not a theme that levels out everything but, on the contrary, something that opens up possibilities and generative processes.

Edo: With specific paths.

Cosimo: Tim Ingold speaks of a form of inquiry that has nothing to do with trying to illustrate what you have theorized or what you’ve planned, as is the case in a scientific experiment. In his opinion, inquiring consists in opening a door and watching where the corridor leads. Letting yourself be guided by the tracks you chose to follow without wishing to be sure you know where you’re going (Ingold 2013, 7).

Edo: For me, the curatorial attitude is to open that door. This is the very gesture. The curator’s task is to make sure that you can go through

that door, so that you are free to decide how you will proceed along the path. It is about putting yourself on the line, embracing uncertainty.

Gaia: It is important to learn to relate to failure, to be aware that it doesn't necessarily mean depletion, but rather a shift in perspective.

Est: Talking about risk also means talking about precariousness. I can take a risk only when I know it won't have a negative consequence on my position, which already is precarious. Maybe here there is also an aspect that has to do with care: we create the circumstances under which one may take a risk that will not, in case of failure, transform into a condemnation.

Gaia: By adopting this perspective, from which failure is no longer something frightening, we can dismantle the success-failure binary. Almost all of the places we frequent and the projects we follow partly rely on the free work of volunteers and interns. Free or underpaid work is a structural component of these realities. In a context where the public funds allocated to artistic realities decrease from year to year, the guiding principles are the requirement of excellence and virtuosity: you have to show that you can do more and more and better and better with less and less funds.

Est: We're not interested in being efficient, we're not interested in surpassing ourselves. By refusing to do the same thing we did last time at any cost, we turn our back on the logic of production and competitiveness. Betting that a curatorial project made by students/young artists can be sustainable—that is, it can protect all the workers it involves—is the form of resistance that we choose to enact in this period and in this particular context.

Venice, October 14, 2020.

(Translation by Est Coulon and Theresa Maria Schlichtherle.)

Extragarbo is an artistic and curatorial platform, founded in Venice in 2019 by Est Coulon, Cosimo Ferrigolo, Gaia Ginevra Giorgi, Edoardo Lazzari, Leonardo Schifino, and Theresa Maria Schlichtherle. They produce and support the performative projects of its members. The col-

lective has adopted a horizontal method, working as a shared system of research, imagination and desire.

Notes

1. This event was curated by the collective Extragarbo and produced in collaboration with IUAV University's Student Senate. From November 25 to December 5, 2019, *Il Divertimento per li Regazzi* produced and offered residencies to eight performance projects: *Call Monica* by Call Monica, *Il Ginnasio delle Perle di Vetro* by Jabberwocky, *Rovinati* by Leonardo Schifino, *Repeating Eutrophia* by Collettivo Confluenze, *OH MY GHOST!* by-ness, *24H* by Miami Safari, *Tutorial* by Avatāra, and *Se le Regole non sono Usate per Governarci* by Nuvola Ravera. All artists were from the Università Iuav di Venezia masters programs in Visual Arts, Theatre and Performing Arts. During the two-week period of creation, each work inhabited one of four different spaces of the metropolitan city of Venice: C32 performingartworkspace, V-A-C Foundation, Argo 16, and Combo Venezia. Parallel to the residency project, Edoardo Lazzari and Leonardo Schifino worked together with Zoe Francia Lamattina to develop an educational project for children named *Oltre la Rete* (Beyond the Net) in the kindergarten adjacent to the headquarters of their university. The project engaged the pupils in a series of workshops that led them to realize part of the communications materials of the festival.
2. *Disabitare* (a neologism that literally translates as "dis-inhabit") is a collective project promoted by Extragarbo. It was born from the desire to start a joint, horizontal discussion between people who work in the artistic, cultural, and scientific fields at independent and institutional levels in Venice. The project involves many of the city's associations with the aim of reinforcing a network of alliances and of promoting a mutualistic approach that allows participants to make individual claims as well as fight for common causes. *Disabitare* seeks to foster a reflection on the initiatives already underway and on future prospects in light of the latest changes and the severe restrictions produced by the COVID-19 pandemic in the field of arts and culture.

References

- Clément, Gilles. 2003. *Manifesto del Terzo Paesaggio* (Translated from French to Italian by Guiseppe Lucchesini), 59. Paris: Éditions Sujet/Objet.
- Ingold, Tim. 2013. *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. London: Routledge.
- Jesi, Furio. 2013. *Il Tempo della Festa*. Milano: Nottetempo.
- Leysen, Frie. 2015. "Embracing the Elusive, Or, the necessity of the superfluous." Closing keynote address, presented at Australian Theatre Forum, Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House, Sydney, January 23, 2015.