

Isabelle Young  
Until it Holds



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2021

Illuminated by movement, fluorescent lights flick on in cities across the world as people unlock their front doors. Far above ground there is no salt to destabilise the foundations of their homes in concrete towers. The coast around Venice, Italy was never fixed yet they were all always adrift. The landscape surrounding the lagoon city lies between earth and sea, where sky and water meet. There is no stone, brick or marble that did not arrive by water. Beneath each *calle* and *campo* lie miles of Istrian stone formed by water itself. A type of limestone, it is in part composed of tiny fossils, shell fragments and other fossilised debris compounded together by the force of the sea over eons.

The night I left hospital in Venice we walked through an empty corridor back towards the lagoon. The automatic doors parted and, as the smell of salt and the sound of water against the Fondamenta confronted us, we were reminded of our lack of control upon this artificial island. After my first months living in the lagoon, I had sat down in Campo San Barnaba when a sudden, sharp pain pierced my shoulder. My limbs failed and I could no longer speak clearly. The muscles around my

mouth slowed. Gently accelerating through the city on a water ambulance I glimpsed the Rialto Bridge as we sped beneath it. Hours later a neurologist arrived to review my CT scan bringing with her the smell of cigarette smoke and a sense of a dinner left behind somewhere in the city. All normal and inconclusive - a possible anxiety attack. A fleeting illness had been cleared of all urgency within hours yet in the lagoon a continuing, slow emergency prevails.

“I was at the Venezia FC match on Sunday evening and half way through the match my phone pings to say the water will be rising to 115cm and MOSE ‘might’ close. So there is that enormous introduction of sheer uncertainty on a Sunday evening and as a result I lie awake most of the night wondering what will happen tomorrow, and what they will decide to do on the basis of whose priorities - ours, the Venetian residents or those of the politicians far away? At 4am, I get another text alert informing me that the MOSE barriers are closed.” Jane Da Mosto shares this anecdote with me in the office of her non-profit research/activist organisation We Are Here Venice. We sat just over the bridge from Ospedale SS. Giovanni e Paolo where I had recently spent an evening. In those preceding weeks I had begun to understand this particular type of fear within the lagoon, and begun to understand the casualness of its interruption to Venetian lives.

On the first Monday of November I was preparing to make the long journey south of the Venice Lagoon to Chioggia. An announcement that morning declared that sea levels in the lagoon would reach over 130cm - a level which is categorised as ‘exceptionally high’. Local businesses received a Tidal Alert email to announce the lifting of the MOSE system from 6pm that evening, to push the Adriatic Sea away from the entrances to the lagoon and the islands of Venice. The forecast predicted high water until Friday. As I set off in rubber boots towards the vaporetto stop, heavy rain began to lash Venice and the raised pedestrian platforms were being set up in Piazza San Marco. The historic city felt busier than a normal Monday morning when a certain calm descends as it recovers from a weekend of visitors. That night before I was full of anxiety, remembering the fear I felt in 2018 and the experience of being in the middle of what was, at the time, a historic flood - watching the water rise all day and being trapped at a friend’s apartment overnight. The next morning, lines of salt corroding marble churches. “Nobody directly affected by flooding in Venice and the associated fiasco of the mobile flood barrier system known as MOSE is relieved to see it open” Jane had told me. There is nothing about the whole project that makes the inhabitants of the lagoon feel better or ease their fear of the rising sea.

When *acqua alta* occurs the islands are silent. It is a heavy silence - akin to that which fell across the city during the first lockdown of this, our, pandemic. Yet the presence of the water changes sound. It is insidious and disturbing. When you think of walking through water you find yourself in the sea or in a shallow swimming pool where falling over is of no great consequence. You don't normally walk through water to get to the shops to buy bread and eggs on an errand that should take 10 minutes but becomes 40 because of the slow pace you must observe so as not to let the water cascade over the top of your boots. Walking through water over slippery, uneven stones is hard. It's heavy and exhausting as your balance is constantly thrown out from the weight pushing on your lower limbs. You don't lift your foot from the knee but instead shift your weight from the hip, alternatively raising your feet and slowly pushing down through this element. And it's cold, this water from the sea. All around it gently evaporates into the air, rising and swirling inside loose rubber boots.

Breaking the sound which accompanies *acqua alta* are the sirens. In the city of Venice the sirens emit a series of disturbing tones to indicate the height of the water - one tone indicates a height of 1.1 metres, two 1.2 metres, three 1.3 metres and four 1.4 metres or above. In the town of Chioggia,

in the southern part of the lagoon, the siren is more akin to an attack. Blasting out across the small canals and wide main street it sounds like a World War Two siren. I was sitting on Corso del Popolo and talking to Enrico on the phone when it first sounded. Deafening and shocking I could no longer hear his voice, drowned out by an almighty wail. The Chioggotti continued about their evening, cycling across the cobblestones, *carrelli* loyally trailing behind them. They were already aware of the water's movement around them. Yet with MOSE closed that evening the water did not rise therefore the sirens did not sound. "I saw some people in the street who were singing the siren," Eleonora Sovrani recounts, "because they knew that MOSE was closed and that Venice had avoided the flood."

Just beyond Chioggia to the east and the Adriatic lies Sottomarina and the beginning of the original *murazzi* 'sea walls'. Extending along Sottomarina to connect the entire Venetian coast, the *murazzi* are the 18th Century equivalent of the current €5.4 billion Project MOSE. The scale, height and drama of the 18th Century walls is extraordinary. Every single block of Istrian stone had to be brought from Istria to Venice across the Adriatic Sea. Their construction took 38 years but today they no longer serve a function and appear to make little sense, standing far inland in what is now

a central part of Sottomarina. The *murazzi* ended their purpose at the turn of the 20th century when the sea started receding in Sottomarina, leaving behind a wide, sandy shore, which functioned as a new protective barrier along the peninsular and lagoon beyond. However the reality of transporting and constructing these walls in the 18th Century and the labour involved in keeping the sea at bay is immense. And somebody thought it was worth it.

Walking atop the *murazzi* in Pellestrina on a bright Autumn day, I reached a set of stone stairs which led me up over the wall from the lagoon to the side which greets the Adriatic Sea. Descending towards the sea there appeared a splash too sudden to be a wave. Something in the water had disturbed the surface from beneath. Another splash. A flipper, then a head and a snorkel. Raising his head and looking towards the shore the diver and I waved to each other. He held a small harpoon in one hand and a large fish hung from a metal hook on his belt. "L'acqua è brutta oggi" he shouted from the sea. Away from the floating city men descend into its waters. Back in Chioggia I saw a fisherman jump straight out of his boat into the lagoon. Yet he landed on land - a dune which presented itself beneath the low tide. Surrounded by enormous boats and ships he knew the map of the water well enough to make that casual leap.

I am endlessly searching for maps of Venice that might bring me closer to its topography. But none will ever truly be accurate when land and water exist in a constant state of exchange and negotiation. The land you see in June is not the same as the land you see in November. At a certain point in the not so distant future this gentle negotiation will come to a conclusion. For now, the lagoon city and its islands remain known to us through a heap of hidden images which resist any total understanding.

Cover image:  
Isabelle Young  
*Until it holds II*, 2021  
C-type print  
60 x 45 cm  
23 5/8 x 17 3/4 in

Published on the occasion of *RCA2022*,  
Royal College of Art, London, 25 - 30 June 2022

