

## LXV – 65@65

Stanley Ulijaszek - 65 outdoor swims at the age of 65

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### Digitizing Venice



There is absolutely nothing like visiting a place, to get a sense of it. That is both the beauty and the tragedy of Venice – it is cheaper to go now than it ever has been. I watch, no, I can't avoid watching, the tourists - up to 60,000 per day I am told, against a resident population of the lagoon city of 90,000 – snapping at everything, photo, photo. Tourists coming to Venice want to see it, experience it. Ironically, this has led to a Disnification of Venice, a narrative of the city and its history told according to the nationalist view, or special interest view of the tourist or tour group. I know I am part of it, I am here, taking photos too. With so many photos, the internet is awash with material, information, digital signs of places, structured by the market developers Google, Facebook and the many others But could these millions of photos of Venice be put to a different use than as memory traces, conversation pieces or status markers? I wonder what kind of map would there be of Venice if all the images taken were crowd sourced, location known and mapped. This is certainly possible. St Marks would for sure be the tallest tower block in the world. Maybe it would even reach the moon. Then St Marks Square, as the Central Business District (which it kind of, is), and Santa Maria della Salute, the church across the lagoon from St Marks Square. Rialto Bridge, of course, the biggest bridge in the world, maybe, maybe not. Then the rest of Venice, a sprawling lowland, on this map. What leads me to this thinking is somehow less trivial. Climate change, tidal surges and a sinking Venice make it perhaps the prime candidate for digitisation, systematic visualisation.

Venice was the centre of mapping and cartography in the Renaissance – Italo Calvino wrote about Venice as a place where the maps of the lagoon had to be redrawn constantly. Water always finds its way, in nature if not always in culture, and the relationships between earth and water are constantly shifting in Venice. I am made aware of this through Pauline's rowing in the lagoon – the depths of the lagoon, the boat, river bus and ship channels are well-marked with strong hard-wooden posts of some uncertain antiquity. But beyond these channel markers, if you want a calm row, the water gets shallow very quickly, scooping up mud sometimes. The Serene Republic needed to understand these relationships to maintain its mercantile and shipping power in the region, so it needed to know how to map. So much like the British Empire much later, when resources were put into controlling and understanding time across the world (establishing longitude allowed mapping for navigation to develop on a global scale), so resources were poured into developing the intellectual property for mapping the lagoon. The economy depended on it –the constant change and the need to discipline it, make it navigable, making it a city which experiences and knows environmental uncertainty and change on a daily basis.

Sad to see how Venice is at the call of climatic effects and events that contribute to its demise, and that the Venice economy now depends on tourism – in bucket-loads, to the point of swamping real life there. Of course it exists, once you get away from the tourist 'superhighways' – Rialto to San Marco; Rialto to Ferrovia, etc – but the main daily business of Venice is tourism - to wander, gape, be informed, to eat, and take pictures, lots of them. The millions of photos taken every year are in effect a digitisation of Venice. At the Biennale artist Hito Steyerl has been digitising and using artificial intelligence to create an interactive virtual Venice, past and present. Steyerl's objects of interest and art-making are very contemporary concerns – the media, or media more generally, how technology is changing the human relationship to each other and to the world, and within that the global circulation of images. We all know Venice, don't we? Yes but, usually only through Steyerl's objects of concern. Steyerl's mapping of Venice is fiction, because everything that humans do involves abstraction, a 'fictionalisation' of aspects of the world, focussing on what is of concern to the mapper (mappers have a lot of power, therefore, because they guide our attention to what is to be looked at, and what not to be looked at). The AI she uses is structured in its attention to certain details but not others – the work the AI can do depends on what a human puts into it. It isn't a physical space that you recreate mentally as you walk in it, engage with it in real life, but a set of relationships that are set up by someone or some people, with their own ideas of what is important to reveal or conceal. A virtual Venice, however interactive, would inevitably be a platformized construction of the city, with emphasis on what the artist or programmer finds important and interesting.

Elsewhere in Italy, a month or so ago, in Bologna, Pauline and I went to see a virtual Vivaldi exhibition – could learn something, we thought. Claudio is obsessed by Vivaldi, has been all his life, has wall-to-wall Vivaldi CDs, works you never knew existed, operas you never knew he wrote, because the Vivaldi repertoire in the UK is much edited. We think we know it, but we don't, like a 'best of'. But who decides the 'best of'. An issue not far away from mapping, and the construction of memory. Back to the Vivaldi show in Bologna – this was a digital construction, with a few props,

some film, very scripted music, but nothing tangibly of Vivaldi and his physical presence – no original music scores, no instruments, no Venice.

Venice was the digitised backdrop to a digital concoction – pleasant, interesting, lightweight with little in the way of music. Later in the year we were to go to Leipzig, and the Bach Museum, where they have a digital archive of everything he ever composed, on tap to the museum-goer – I guess you know which I prefer. But it was a great Vivaldi light show, but one type of constructed experience.

What is digesting Venice could be more about creating infrastructure for understanding the city, its history and its politics? The crumbling of Venice is a tragedy that it is impossible to grasp – beyond the buildings, it is impossible to know what you don't know, and this is truer than ever for written knowledge. The internet has a lot of stuff on it, but is full of big holes, making it something like a Swiss cheese of information. However great the technology platform is, unless it is digital, it doesn't exist. So a lot of Venice does not exist in the digital world. Venice is digitising its State Archives, fast, faster than anywhere, using AI to make changing antique language legible and available to search on the web globally. This is a joint Venice-Lausanne project called the Venice Time Machine and is advancing machine reading of ancient writing fast. How could machine reading of the Venice city and landscape help us understand cities in the past and how we navigate them now? Venice is crumbling, but the urgency that this creates for using new methods for understanding the past is pushing the foot down on the accelerator pedal of historical research. Trouble is, we don't know what we don't know.