

## because you know you may be under water

Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine in conversation with Fabrizia Vecchione.

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**Fabrizia Vecchione (FV): After watching the film for the first time I couldn't tell if you look at Venice with the eyes of an astonished stranger, or an attentive citizen. How long have you been living in Venice?**

Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine (B&L): We moved to Venice in September 2019, arriving just a couple of months before the *acqua alta*, the devastating high tide which flooded the entire city. Right from the first day, we felt the urge to document this historic event. That's how we ended up producing *Homo Urbanus Venetianus*.

**(FV) As residents of Venice, a city in which the idea of the subterranean floor virtually does not exist, what role does the ground floor play, its public function and vulnerability, linked both to the market dynamics and the climate crisis?**

(B&L): In Venice, public space is arguably the most tangible among all Western cities. Without the need of accommodating cars, public areas function as social catalysts. When you think of it, the perspective of a child living in Venice is very enchanting: nowhere else do children play with such freedom. We are, in fact, tempted to make a film centered around them. While this is one aspect, your mention of market value steers the conversation in a different direction. Something to understand about Venice is that its ground level is not even; the city was built on wooden poles and is gradually sinking. The Piazza San Marco, situated just 31 inches above the sea level, serves as both the city's lowest point and its most extensively paved area, annually traversed by millions of visitors. Despite the presence of the MOSE flood barriers, operating since recently and designed to reduce the severity of water surges exceeding 51 inches, San Marco still faces inundation. Interestingly, the real estate value of ground-floor spaces in this area is extremely high, even though the shops here are the most exposed to water. Elsewhere in the city the ground floor is less appealing, because you know you may eventually be under water... The 2019 *acqua alta* came as a massive shock: a natural disaster as well as a turning point in the collective understanding of Venice's extreme fragility. The MOSE project—which was an endless subject of controversy for decades, and not put to use until that point—was suddenly activated in less than two months after the flood and, since then, it seems to have been working well. The question is—for how long?

**(FV) Conceived as an amphibious city, Venice is the result of continuous adaptation to its lagoon environment. The wooden poles that ensure its existence were meant to be constantly submerged, but their top, most vulnerable sections, exposed to both water and air, display visible signs of erosion. As filmmakers working at the crossroads of architecture and sociology, how do you see the interplay between Venice's intrinsic instability and its almost immutable image?**

(B&L): Living in Venice is like living on a boat, constantly shifting and reacting to the elements. There are specific rules that all Venetians follow. The seasonal high tides have always existed and are typically well managed by the population, but obviously not to the extent of the one of November 2019. You are soon to notice the habits and coping mechanisms at work across the city: the low metal screens in front of ground-floor doors ready to be lifted up, tubes of water pumps on the storefronts, as well as the iconic black-and-yellow striped footbridges installed in the streets as soon as water level rises. There are also less visible clues: the unusual height of electricity sockets to prevent short-circuit in case of flooding, the phone app alerts tracking the water level throughout the day. The local population has refined ad-hoc tools and solutions to adapt to its environmental constraints to co-exist with a sense of the unpredictable. Contrary to the immutable image of Venice, the city is a far more dynamic entity. It constantly deals with corrosion and erosion, with how nature persists in claiming it back.

**(FV) During the *acqua alta* mornings Venice falls dead silent. Despite a sense of urgency signalled by the sound of warning sirens, there's an apparent change to a slower pace, as though the inhabitants simply embrace the natural cycle of the moon and the tides. But these floods have reached a critical point, growing increasingly frequent. How do you see this ongoing tension, also in a broader dynamic of humans negotiating with nature? The crowds in your film move in an orchestrated way, as if they were performing a choreography.**

(B&L): Let's say that each city is defined by its own rhythm shaped by, among others, the landscape, population density, climate. Due to the omnipresence of water and its intricate labyrinthine urban fabric, the extremely narrow streets and numerous bridges, the pace of Venetian life is essentially slow.

But with the *acqua alta*, there's a fascinating paradox—a sense of urgency coexisting with the slowness imposed by the resistance of water. In high water, you can't move neither quickly nor freely. All movement is hampered. And because of the highly corrosive nature of salt water, caution signs are placed virtually everywhere, advising to move as gently as possible so as not to splash the water around. The film captures this collective choreography performed in slow motion. Suddenly, the simple activity of walking, the movement of one's body, implies a different kind of awareness.

**(FV) Throughout the series "Homo Urbanus" you register the resilience of inhabitants of different cities. Venice seems in a constant state of emergency, if not with the excess of water then with excessive tourism, and, surprisingly, there are moments in which the two overlap and compound the danger.**

(B&L): If resilience and adaptation are indeed the central themes structuring all the films of the "Homo Urbanus" series, they manifest most vividly in the one we shot in Venice. The film chronicles the gradual rise of the tide, over the course of several days, nearly a week, with its peak occurring overnight. Initially, we followed groups of tourists who seem to find this new submerged cityscape very appealing. It's striking how even the most alarming signals of an impending environmental crisis are turned into a tourist attraction—which is quite dramatic.

Then, there's this pivotal moment when fear starts to grow among tourists, and they rush to the *vaporetti* trying to flee the nightmare creeping in. We all found ourselves trapped. The film captures these tragicomic scenes of tourists desperately trying to find a way out, with their suitcases floating around them. But it also conveys the impressive spirit of adaptation of the locals in the midst of this crisis. It's filled with surreal moments of submerged bars, yet busy with people drinking, water up to their waists, and even toasting to the water! What better example of resilience? There was also an immediate and incredible sense of community and solidarity among the inhabitants—something we experienced again, just a few months later, with the COVID-19 emergency.

**(FV) The “Homo Urbanus” series is distinct from the majority of other works you made. How did you arrive to the point where you no longer focus on a single character, or a place, but create a portrait of a city and its inhabitants?**

(B&L): Over the years, we have made films that question how people relate to space, on different scales and levels. We are interested in observing how people perceive, connect, and experience space from an emotional, social, and cultural standpoint: from the intimate dimension of a home to the broader urban context. More than portraits of cities, the “Homo Urbanus” series reveals how the built environment shapes our behavior, conditions our attitudes, and influences the way we relate to space and the others. These films put the unique species of homo urbanus under the microscope, closely observing all the forces and social dynamics at play on the grand stage of the city streets.