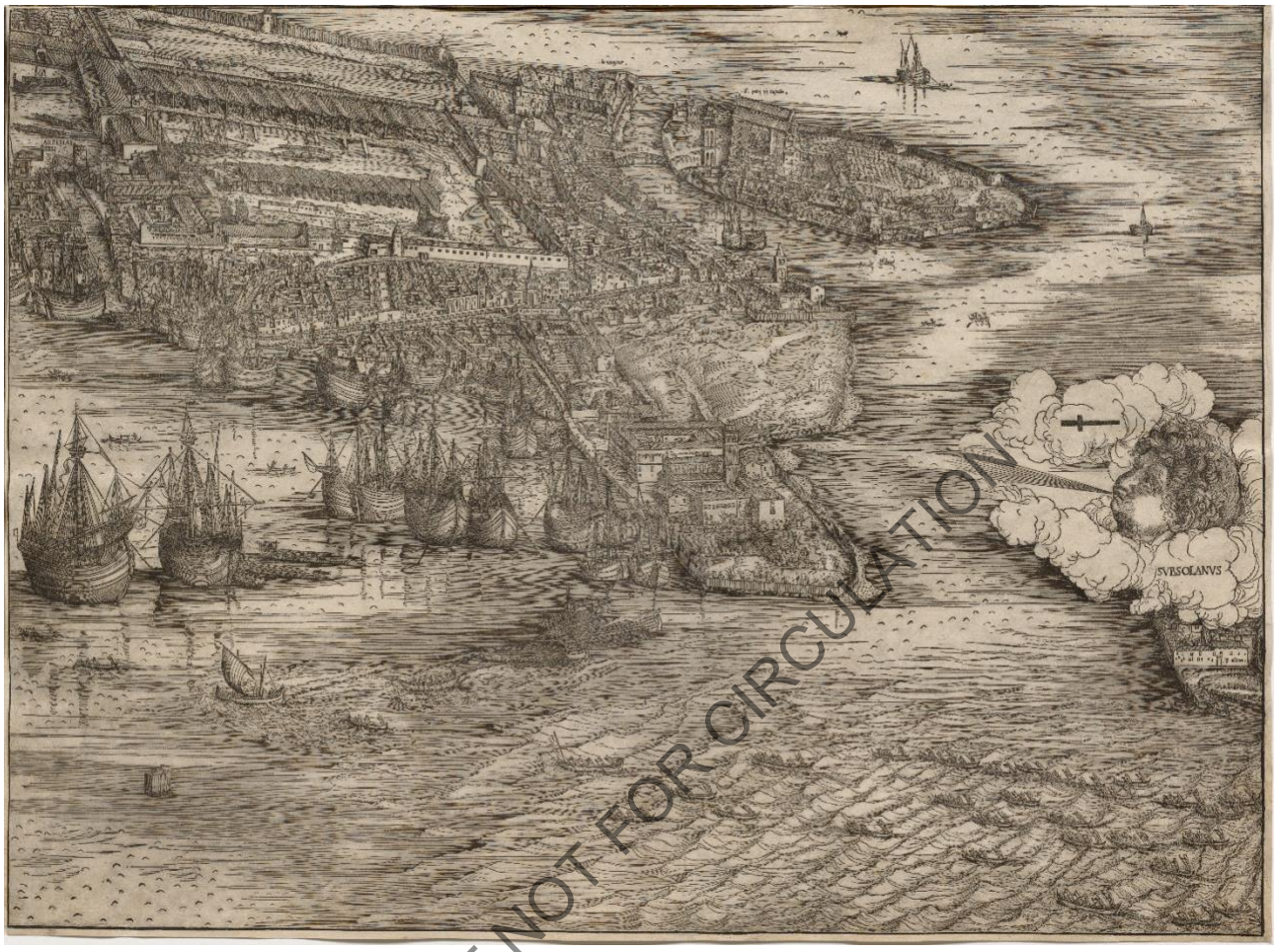
From Marshes to Gardens. Unexpected Encounters at the *Giardini della Biennale*.

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XVI century view of the eastern end of Venice, partially occupied today by the *Giardini della Biennale*.

Jacopo de' Barbari, *View of Venice* (early XVI century), Woodcut, Cleveland Museum of Art. Liechtenstein Collection.

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Place: Giardini della Biennale

Situated in the easternmost area of the Castello *sestiere*, the Biennale Gardens are in many ways exemplary of Venice's historical, cultural and ecological complexity. Here, from spring to fall in alternating years, the Venice Biennales of Art and Architecture attract artists, practitioners and visitors from all over the world. It is historically the oldest and longest-running biennial exhibition and one of the planet's most-visited art events. The permanent structures of the Biennale are split between the Giardini and Arsenale, and include exhibition spaces, a central building, the national pavilions, and a library. In the case of the Giardini, these structures are located within a large green area (Venice's largest) in the middle of the residential neighbourhoods of Castello and Sant'Elena. During winter, when the exhibitions are closed, the spaces of the Biennale remain eerily inaccessible, like an abandoned theme park or a zoo whose animals managed to escape. In his 2009 work *Giardini*, Steve McQueen masterfully documented the feeling of estrangement produced by the Biennale gardens during off-season.

Similar to many other spaces around the lagoon, the gardens were once swamps. Following the French military occupation of 1797, Venice's existence as an independent political entity came to an end. The newly installed Napoleonic government initiated a series of major urban development projects with the

intention of transforming Venice into a modern European city. These projects included the construction of via Eugenia, known today as via Garibaldi — the only *via* in the whole city made of *calli* — and the planning of the first, proper public gardens of Venice. Giannantonio Selva — *nomen omen* —who had previously led the renovations of Palazzo Dolfin Manin and who was the chief architect of La Fenice theatre project (1792), was tasked with radically reimagining and reshaping the swampy area of Insula San Giuseppe. Selva's project required the draining of the marshes on the northern side of the area, and the demolition of the religious buildings that for centuries occupied the southern portion of the island. In fact, between 1809 and 1810, the churches of San Nicolò, the monastery of the Cappuccine di Castello nuns, the Seminario Ducale, and the church and convent of Sant'Antonio Abate were demolished in order to make room for the new Napoleonic gardens.[1] The religious and swampy past of the Giardini has survived to this day in some capacity: in the name of the street connecting the Giardini with Sant'Elena — *Paludo* S. Antonio — and in the arch adorning the *viale* that leads to the Biennale entrance. The latter was originally part of the Lando chapel within the destroyed Sant'Antonio church. The debris from the demolished buildings was also used to create artificial hills around the gardens. It is important to point out that this area was of the utmost importance for Venice's visual identity, as it represented the first encounter with the city for travellers arriving by sea.[2] After Selva's intervention, visitors were no longer greeted to Venice by decaying churches and unruly marshes, but rather by the leisurely secular and modern image of the gardens and their walking boulevards, where orderly trees thrived, providing relief from the sun, stone and water to Venetians and tourists alike.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the Napoleonic gardens were designated as the location for the first edition of the Biennale — the International Art Exhibition of the City of Venice (1895), for which the central pavilion was erected. Soon after, the first permanent buildings hosting individual national pavilions started to be built around the gardens: the oldest being those for Belgium (1907), Hungary, Great Britain, and Germany (1909), France and the Netherlands (1912), and the most recent being Australia (1987) and South Korea (1995).

It has been said that entering the Giardini is like entering a special jurisdiction, like walking into the diplomatic sector of certain world capitals.[3] This liminality also reminds one of a monumental cemetery, filled with mausolea and marble. But of all Venice, this is the space where death is least present. In the subversive Giardini, Venice turns upside-down. Here, the wooden poles that pierce into the *caranto* sustain their vital counterparts: trees that are still alive, trunks and branches that reach into the sky. The Giardini have also been a space of staged encounters with some of the non-human, non-native, captive inhabitants of Venice. Circus animals, horses, Toni the elephant (tributed by Katharina Fritsch at this year's Biennale), who lived in the Giardini until 1895; the sheep of Menashe Kadishman, Antonio Paradiso's Pinco the bull (both from the 1978 Biennale): a zoological cabinet of curiosities. Mariagrazia Dammicco reminds us instead of the hundreds of vegetal species brought here and that today live comfortably in the gardens: platanus (a living fossil from the Paleocene), celtis australis (Homer's amnesiac), hydrangea quercifolia from the American South East, mahonias from California, loropetalum from East Asia, ruscus hypoglossum and aculeatus, iris foetidissima, erigeron, carex pendula, callistemon, grevillea, eucalyptus and metrosideros from Oceania, phormium tenax of the Maori, carpinus japonica.[4]

In the Giardini, the artificial and the natural entangle and grow out of each other by design. Architectural structures and different natures decay, disintegrate, sediment, mutate and stratify according

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[1] Eleonora Charans, "Biennale. from the Insula of San Giuseppe to the Giardini Della Biennale", in Alessandra Ferrighi (ed.) *Visualizing Venice. New Technologies for Urban History*, Venice: IUAV, 2012.

[2] Erin Cusac; Katharine Heg; Valencia Whitehurst; and Alberto Rios de la Rosa , "Sant'Antonio di Castello" (2010). *Art and Architecture of Early Modern Venice: Research and Reconstruction*. 2. http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/artvenice/2

[3] Federica Martini; Vittoria Martini, "The Giardini: Topography of an Exhibition Space" in Adriana Valdés (ed.) *Venezia Venezia*, Barcelona: Actar, 2013.

[4] Mariagrazia Dammicco, "I giardini di Castello, da Napoleone alla Biennale", *Detourism Venezia Magazine* 14 (2015).

to their own timescales and their own logic. But if this is true for all the living bodies and built environments of the Venetian lagoon, in the Giardini these processes manifest in the everyday, becoming visible even to a casual observer. Biennale after Biennale, pavilion after pavilion, the Venetian Anthropocene reveals its strata in its most scenographic fashion.

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