

# Barena Bianca

## *Atensión!*

text by Benedetta d'Ettorre

Venice-based artists' collective Barena Bianca brings to the CLCC Foyer Gallery *Atensión!*, an installation that catalyses the power of language to respond to the programme of events part of Humanities@70.

The artworks on display are the result of the visual elaboration of historical data of various trends associated with the Venetian Lagoon: the erosion of saltmarshes, flooding frequency, the capacity of the lagoon to absorb CO2 and the diminishing population. Barena Bianca processed raw data, spanning from the 17th century to today, to transform them into abstract images colour gradients.

Each poster combines statistical information - to which each phase of the gradient corresponds - to a value that intersects the others, forming shades of colour that become more or less intense depending on the proportions of the represented data. Each poster juxtaposes quantitative data and a quote by a specific thinker of the past, relating either to the city of Venice or to the world as a whole. What was once prophetised in words and metaphors, now translates into numbers. This creates an unsettling mirrored image of the romantic projection of poets and philosophers that is echoed by scientific and statistical observation of the future in Venice, resonating globally in the age of Anthropocene and climate's Great Acceleration.

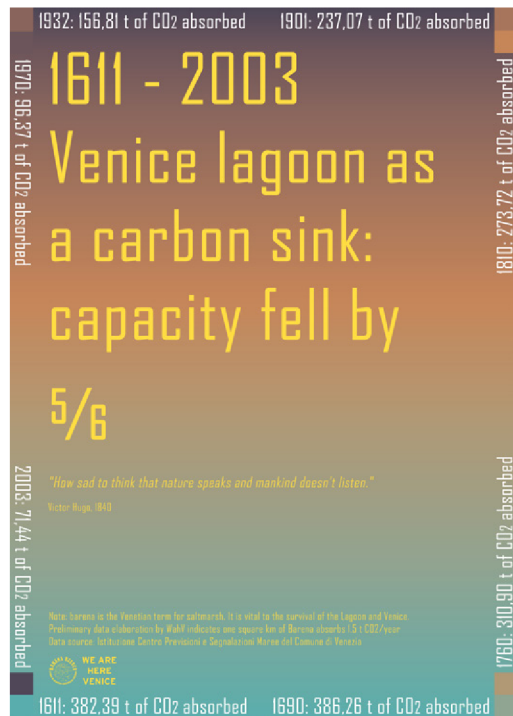
*Atensión!* is designed each time to be site-specific, in fact it only works when it is put in dialogue with its context. In Venice, the artists carried around the posters on self-made carts made with recycled materials, trying to pass through crowds in the city's narrow streets (*calli*). They re-enacted a daily scene, almost a survival ritual in Venice: locals, needing to move quickly through the city, attract distracted passersby's attention by shouting in Venetian dialect "*atensión!*". Literally a call to pay attention, as they are trying to pass through.

Here, in the CLCC Foyer Gallery, the installation works in a similar way. The installation is positioned in a transitory space, however it relies on its visual language to attract general visitors and Imperial staff and students' attention on the powerful communication that art and sciences can achieve when they are put in dialogue.

Regular floodings are not new in Venice, however their frequency and intensity have recently increased to the point that last November's flooding hit the world's headlines as the worst flooding in over 50 years. The posters are accompanied by photographic documentation of the performances in specific sites of Venice: a yacht harbor, the large Canale della Giudecca where cruiseships pass, the ancient Greenhouse. While the photos speak of a unique city, the increasing threats posed by climate change speak to all of us. Local and global issues are inextricably tied together, this is also reflected in the choice of language for the posters: Italian or Venetian terms break through the English text. The former are used because they are unique to describe the Lagoon's environment, whilst English language functions as a *lingua franca* allowing people to communicate globally.

Venice has a powerful symbolic meaning, whilst being one of the most famous and unique cities in the world, it is also one of the most fragile and difficult to protect. Barena Bianca work as local activists and artists to raise awareness and protect their city. The exhibition, today, asks us to pay attention to the human and natural costs of Venice's unsustainable evolution, however Venice's survival only depends on the survival of the wider ecosystem.

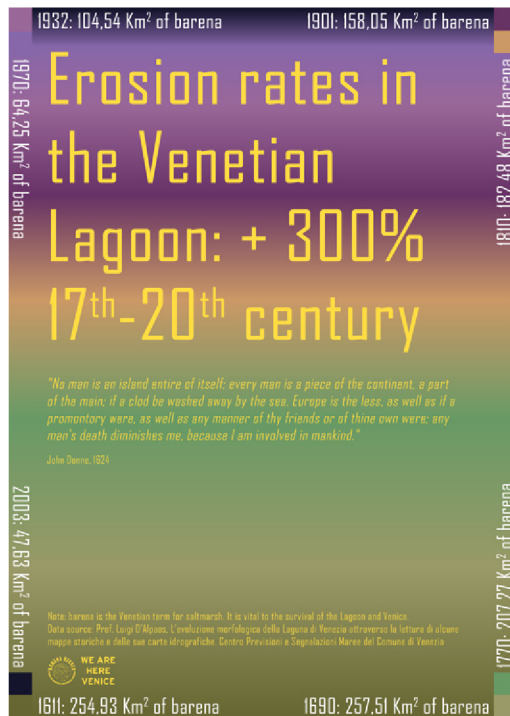
In 'The art and science of saving Venice' Jane da Mosto, founder of We are Here Venice and Imperial alumna, explores the relationship between Venice's past and future and urgent global issues, asking "How much of our fascination with Venice derives from its unique beauty and peculiar features, or is it a microcosm of global challenges mirroring the world and carrying the fate of humanity?"



## Venice Lagoon as a Carbon Sink

The *barena*, venetian term for saltmarsh, is essential for the survival of the venetian lagoon's ecosystem. It has an impressive capacity of CO<sub>2</sub> absorption from our atmosphere: some data elaboration seem to point out that 1 square km of *barena* can absorb about 1 tonne and a half of greenhouse gases each year, outpacing by far the rhythm of forests. From 1611 to 2003 the destruction of salt marshes directly caused a fall in the CO<sub>2</sub> absorption capacity of our lagoon of 5/6, with obvious consequences on Venice's air pollution also caused by an increase in emissions caused by technological and economical development, both on a local and a broader global level.

Data by Centro Previsioni e Segnalazioni Maree - Comune di Venezia



## Erosion in the Lagoon

In general, we can observe a growing trend in the erosion rate of the *barena* (salt marshes) in the venetian lagoon: from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century such rhythm increased by 300%, mainly because of human intervention in the lagoon's hydrodynamics, the growing traffic of motor ships and the consequent wave intensity and movement of massive amounts of water.

Data by Centro Previsioni e Segnalazioni Maree - Comune di Venezia



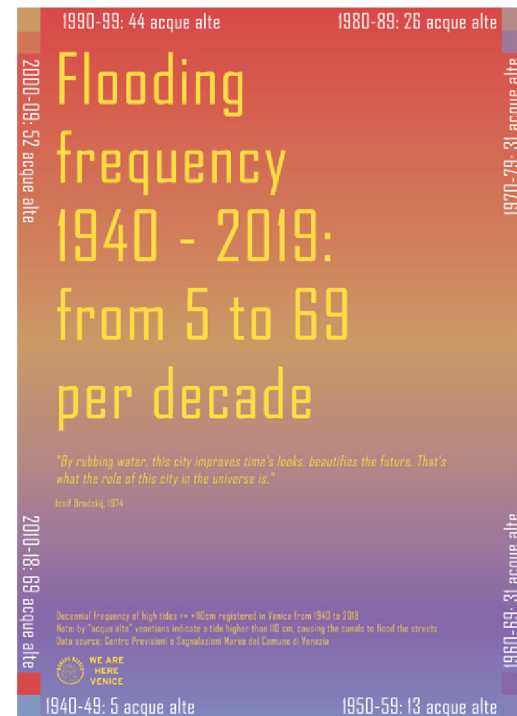
This exhibition is presented by the Centre for Languages, Culture and Communication at Imperial College London as part of the Humanities@70 celebrations. Website: [www.imperial.ac.uk/clcc](http://www.imperial.ac.uk/clcc)



## The Residents

This message tackles more explicitly the sociological analysis of the city of Venice, analyzing it under a demographical point of view. The founding idea of this is the alarming similarity of the numerical curves related to the historical center's residents and the presence of *barena* in the lagoon: in both cases the decrease in the last century is about 70%, highlighting the deep correlation between mankind and environment that lies at the core of Venice's very existence. The direct causes of this demographic and ecologic disaster are clearly different but equally related to an irresponsible and careless development of Venice and its Lagoon.

Data by Servizio Statistica e Ricerca - Comune di Venezia



## Acqua Alta

The definition of *acqua alta* in Venice is each time that the tide grows in an anomalous way, of 110 cm or more than usual, causing the city's streets to flood more and more as the tide grows stronger. Such phenomenon was historically limited to the first and last months of winter, specifically November and February, but with modernity the city witnessed a progressive exasperation and growing frequency and unpredictability of *acqua alta*. Specifically, this study analyses modern times thanks to the more reliable and scientific source of data: between the 40s and the years between 2010 and 2018 the frequency grew about 14 times greater.

Data by Centro Previsioni e Segnalazioni Maree - Comune di Venezia