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# THE VENICE CRONORAMA RIVUS ALTUS IN 10 YEARS 2013-2023 BY MAX FARINA

## STAKEOUT ON THE WORLD (OR THE WORLD IN A PLACE)

by Adelio Fusé, Italian writer and poet

Does coincidence have to be a moment?  
And how long does it last, the ongoing moment?

Geoff Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment*

Imagine a photographer on the Rialto Bridge in Venice, exactly in the centre of the bridge. The chosen position, first of all, is not just anywhere. Certain symbolic values, which are not unimportant, belong to the centre and, in practice, the sight given is likewise relevant. Our photographer aims his camera at the view and the crowd, inseparable from each other (and the Grand Canal itself is full of traffic from ferries, motorboats, gondolas). The eye, however, sometimes moves to the facades of the buildings lining the canal (a deviation which makes you think of the need for a lateral glance) and follows the clouds (and this looking up can perhaps be interpreted as being the need, furthermore, for an aerial view, a bird's eye view). With the people coming towards him, standing out from the crowd, maybe intent on their own photography, he practices a splitting of his view point. Any splitting is also, and always, a doubling: shots become two, almost simultaneous, separated by a tiny interval of just a few seconds (the ongoing moment here becomes movement). What happens between the first and second click, coming from two different cameras – one of which is sometimes equipped with a flash – working, however, as a single double-fronted camera? Above all, a change occurs – what was just shot has already changed. This change then takes on wider variations, all seen from the same immutable observation point. The stakeout is repeated both by day and night, with different weather conditions and varying water levels (a detail which cannot be ignored in Venice).

Imagining our photographer was not at all difficult – in fact, he really exists. In the decade from 2013 to 2023 Massimiliano “Max” Farina carried out extensive visual stakeouts on the Rialto Bridge, periodically spread out over more than 500 hours, producing approximately 60,600 photographs (*Cronorami Fragments*) and portraying 16,000 people. A photographer with multiple vision – the main view and the lateral view (with the variation of the aerial view), the view of the whole and the portraits, the two shots brought together (more of which later);

the recomposition of the images not only in space but also, and especially, in time – Farina carries out a double rejection: the first regarding the ordinary images of Venice, the second, their propagation in mass photography or, better, in the mass post photography, so frantically intent on the indiscriminate accumulation (a tribute to “iconosphere” as Joan Fontcuberta would say), that the vision is immediately ignored, if not removed, by the urgency to leave a trace not of what has appeared (and what appeared, in fact, is the old oleograph or its imitation). In this voracious accumulation, a distortion of both reality and the view and of the photograph itself operates, which is “post”, as well as a symptom of a cultural and political pathology (Joan Fontcuberta in *La furia de las imágenes. Notas sobre la postfotografía*, 2016).

Nowadays we travel not to see the world – there has been an abdication of our vision – basically not even to photograph but to photograph ourselves in the world and show it to others with us in it. (In the ionosphere, in fact, “we live in the picture and the picture lives on in us”). Vision is left to others. Others, however, behave in the same way, others who after giving up on looking live – seeing as contemplation – throw distracted glances at the heaps of images that invade social networks. The exorbitant photographic trails – think of the millions of visitors who travel to Venice every year – migrating rapidly from the “private gallery” of their mobile phones to the public dimensions of Instagram or Facebook. In the postphotographic world everything is urgently emblematic and nothing is. In the resulting enormous confusion there is equal value without cracks. In photographic shots the “ongoing” of the “ongoing moment” disappears – the moment suspended which makes an experience and the photograph that envelopes it paradigmatic, and there remains just a superficial moment (supposing that among these pictures you can find any that are worthy).







In the era of postphotography – in which postphotography is more and more post, so much does it rage, – any iconic element is actually removed. The iconic, in short, collapses under the weight of the images that it itself inspired. These are images that feed on themselves, creating a forest, regardless of the original.

The frenzy to photograph oneself taking photographs is now so emphasized, and so ridiculous is the quantity of pictures, that the images reduce the icon to an excuse to take a selfie or to have a photo shot of yourself as soon as you arrive at your destination, whether this, talking about Venice, is Piazza San Marco or the Rialto Bridge.

Consider this statement from Farina, incisive and explicit and with an important nuance:

**The view from the Rialto is an icon of the city, an example of reality overwhelmed by its portrayals.**



While the tourist photographs – and we are all at risk of this, even if we deny it – Piazza San Marco with its crowds and its pigeons, the facade of the Basilica and its bell tower – and certainly not neglecting to take a photograph once they arrive at Rialto their attitude changes. Even more iconic than the bridge is the view from the bridge, a view which is linked to another icon, the Grand Canal. The Rialto Bridge is an example of an icon set aside for the advantage of an icon-view, which, however, has now been overwhelmed by its portrayals and by the images that postphotography continually updates.

With the *Rivus Altus* project Farina intended a reimagining, in an openly critical manner, removing any chance of being overwhelmed. The work of a photographer is thus comparable to a form of restoration with the difference being that in the case of an ad hoc restoration of a building or monument, the restorer does not intervene directly and must go no further from the original, whereas for the

photographer it is exactly there – in the restored original – that a new creation takes form.

The original for Farina lies in the royal Venice, which can be reached only by a clean slate. The pop Venice, which has been reduced to a simulacrum, must be dismantled, declassifying pictures which offer just a melancholic parody. The centre of the Rialto Bridge meets the eye of the photographer who plumbs the more ordinary Venice: what counts is focusing on the segments of daily life gradually being collected. It is a refined and subtle approach, with anthropological aspects and is at the complete opposite of any *coup de théâtre* or sensation seeking effects or empty esthetics which can be found in not a few reportage. Photography, it goes without saying, needs objects. And some, more than others, react immediately to stimulus, but photography, above all, is the eye that focuses. And if photography is this, then all that remains is to give up on all that is showy just because it catches the eye.



**Only coincidences exist, said Henri Cartier-Bresson, and here I refer to the quotation from Dyer in the head note. The coincidence – the divisive instant – is the fortunate meeting between the eye of the photographer and the subject to be photographed.**

In the case of Farina, co-incident referred not to a single shot but even an entire project and furthermore, not so much the subject to be shot but the observation point. One afternoon he found himself on the Rialto Bridge and he decided to stay. There were a few hours left before the departure time of his train but he left his Nikon in the bag, feeling pleasure in just being there. He then began to take pictures with his iPhone, pretending to be a tourist. The *Rivus Altus* project began to make an appearance. When intentions become defined, the principle reference becomes extra photographic, even if the suppositions and the practicalities are not at all foreign to photography: that is to say, Georges Perec with his *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* to which we can certainly add *Smoke* (1995), a cult movie much loved by Farina, co-directed by Wayne Wang and Paul Auster and taken from the story by Auster, *Auggie Wren's Christmas Story*. A literary reference is thus accompanied by a second filmic-literary reference, which has an unusual tobacconist/photographer as the protagonist.

A third reference comes into play – in particular for portraits – but this time completely photographic: *the Anders Petersen of Cafe Lehmitz* (1978), not for nothing the furthest away from the imaginary fading which causes damage to Venice. At the end of the 60's the then young photographer Petersen, in his trips between Stockholm where he lived, and Hamburg, made prostitutes, drug addicts, alcoholics and transvestites the protagonists in his harsh black and white photography. *Cafe Lehmitz* was a meeting place for the marginalized and as such remains through the acclaimed book by Petersen, now in a new 2023 edition. This was completely opposite to the Venetian cafes, obligatory stopping places for tourists or to that open air salon available for everyone that is the Rialto Bridge.



The Parisian location that Perec suggests exhausting – and the attempt, shown in the title, is of course impossible and for this reason sounds ironic – is Place Saint-Sulpicien, in the central VI arrondissement of Paris. For three consecutive days the writer sat at the tables of a cafe or on the benches of the square with the intention of objectively recording everything that occurred, even minimal, especially those considered as details, if not frivolous. Perec wants to describe “the rest: that which is normally not noticed, that which is not important, that which happens when nothing happens, if not the time, the people, the cars and the clouds”. The writer behaves as a “photographer of words”, whereas his photographer friend who is with him, apart from snapping the square according to instructions received, shoots Perec himself while he is writing. The tables outside the cafes and Perec's benches become the Rialto Bridge for Farina, and also a challenge to repetition. Repetition, on the other hand, is variable and changeable, therefore generous in its surprises.

The tobacconist/photographer Auggie Wren well knows what repetition is, in which we can find ourselves in everyday Brooklyn. Every morning, at eight

o'clock exactly, Auggie leaves his shop and takes a photo, demonstrating total dedication to the commitment he has made with himself. And this is, he says, the “real” work of his life. He has produced 4,000 photographs, all the same and all different (“they are all the same but each one is different from the others”). That corner of the world is, for him, the world. Perec's Place Saint-Sulpicien and the Rialto Bridge are corners of the world that become the world.

Farina shares with Perec and Auggie an intentional viewpoint restriction: all three of them are stationary observers, although their eyes are not static. They allow others – representing a humanity that is ever more varied – to enter their field of vision. The sense of their experiment consists of catching life in a circumscribed place, as well as an initial restriction leading to an amazing multiplication of possibilities. Perec writes less than forty small format pages in three days. Auggie shoots 4,000 photos corresponding to 4,000 days. Farina selects more than 10,000 photos from among the almost 60,600 taken on his stakeouts of more than 500 hours. The increase in possibilities is not, however, traceable to a simple number or quantity. The three cases given are, each in their own way, a type of demonstrative clue. The clue is that a circumscribed place – wherever it is – already contains within itself a macro cosmos, therefore an infinite potential expansion of possibilities.

When as viewers we look at a photograph, we can detect a story inside. Farina, on his part, seeks the story at the same time as he takes the picture (“Every photo tells a story”). According to John Berger, the primary source of a photo lies in what remains outside (*Understanding a Photograph*, 1968). The visible and the invisible are not solely what is seen or not seen in a space. Rather, the visible and the invisible are related to time before space or “shape”, so much so that Berger goes so far as to say: “The real contents of a photograph are invisible, because they come from a game, not with the shape but with time”. And again: “A photograph, while recording what was seen, always refers, because of its nature, to that which cannot be seen. It isolates, preserves and presents an instant taken away from a continuum.”

A photograph is also, and especially, an illusion. Or better, it is the visible that refers to the invisible. (“What is demonstrated is what is not demonstrated.”) And the invisible, which is outside the margins, is always more conspicuous than the visible. Standing in front of a face which he finds attractive, a writer will ask: “I wonder what life is inside that face. I wonder what life it has had and what future awaits.” These questions are asked and imagination begins. He will write a story, and if it is not possible to carry out detailed research and obtain definite answers, his invented story will overlap reality. The photographer, when asking the same questions, begins to use his imagination and takes photographs. Even more than the writer, he remains more and more anchored to what he sees.

*“The real contents of a photograph are invisible, because they come from a game, not with the shape but with time”*



History is like a closed shell  
until I, as a photographer,  
choose one subject among  
innumerable others.  
And this is when the story emerges  
from its shell and movement  
is created.

In a photograph there is the history of the moment and the history that created the moment. A face that changes expressions, a small series of gestures or the look of something – for example, the facade of a building that changes colour depending on the effect of light or shadow – are stories that we can follow, just as when we follow a story when a window opens and someone looks out. Perhaps that building has historical importance and we know the events that happened there. Or perhaps not. The sky and the clouds supply a similar experience: watch how the blue changes and follow the clouds. If I think of how the sky could have been a hundred years or a few centuries ago I have an empty story to complete. All this leads us to say that history is like a closed shell until I, as a photographer, choose one subject among innumerable others. And this is when the story emerges from its shell and movement is created.

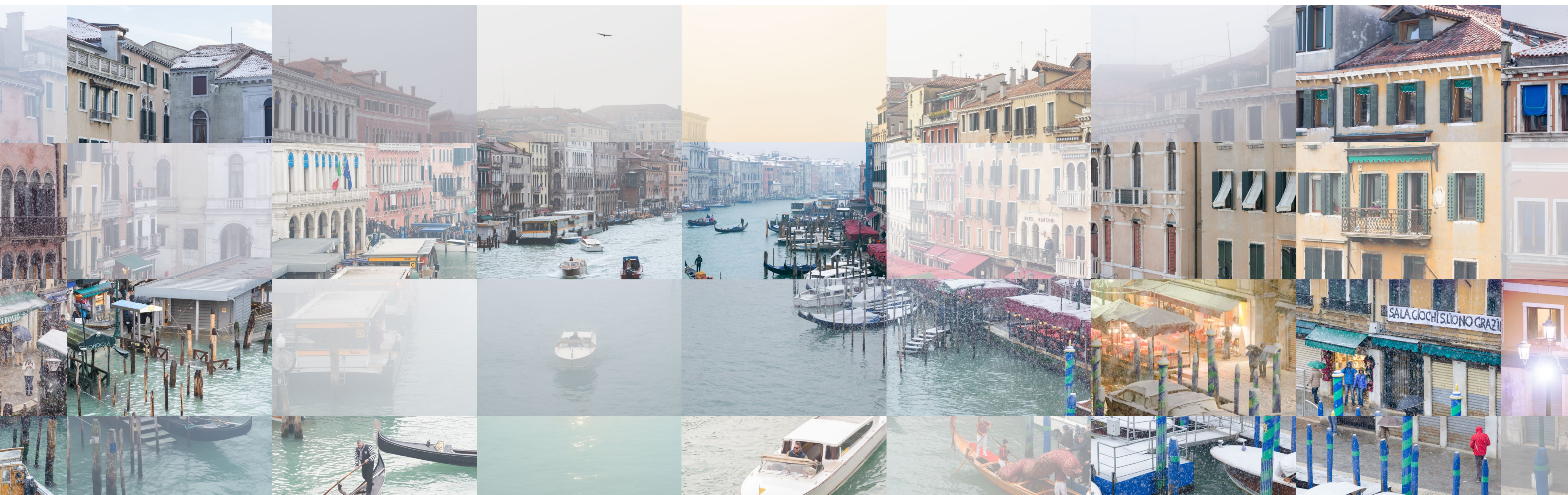


Seeking a story, therefore, means seeking its movement. Apart from this idea of movement, Farina's photography follows one even more specific, up to creating an absolutely unique *modus operandi*. The "visual fragments" (or photo-mosaics or time-capsules) which give life to *Cronorama* – the definition endorsed by the photographer – are inserted into a decomposition-recomposition of reality as regards space, obviously, but above all, the great unwanted guest of photography. The relevance of temporal dimensions are witnessed by neologism *Cronorama*, the initial application of which was seen with the first *Rivus Altus* (2013-2015). This project was followed by many others: from Milan and Rome to New York and Los Angeles, from Paris, London and Copenhagen to Lake Como.

*Cronorama* is a compound word which unites time (crono), specifically, and vision or view, projection (rama), suffix which comes from the Greek as does the prefix chrono. Also not to be forgotten is the presence of rama in a word such as *Panorama*. In this way, *Cronorama* could be seen as "the panorama of time" or "time in a panorama". Or, alternatively, "the vision of time" or "time in the vision" or, even, "the vision of time". Farina's visual fragments are not isolated, to be blown away by a wayward wind, even if this could be interpreted as a suggestive work hypothesis. They are, rather, mobile and approachable fragments, similar to the tiles of a mosaic, and contribute to a shape that is equally fluid and developing. In principle, *Cronorama* is an expandable mosaic-work.

# THE VISION OF TIME

# CRONORAMA





Let us now move into a large salon where a mosaic-screen, formed of 78 individual monitors, has been installed. Each of these monitors emits eighty to two hundred visual fragments on a loop, for a total of more than 10,000 images which have undergone a mixing process. Here, the movement – from each single image and the whole picture that contains it – the dismantling and, above all, the reassembly of space and time, discover a further development. Here, too, that which could be seen as a reduction of the viewpoint and of possibilities – but it is not – leads to an increase of solutions through unexpected and surprising juxtapositions of the fragments. This was proven in Venice, at Fondaco dei Tedeschi (a historic building on the Grand Canal) with the exhibition/installation *The Rivus Altus Cronorama in 10 years* (7th February 2024 – 7th April 2024).

## The “exhaustion attempt” in Venice was thus turned on its head as regards vision and prospective which forms a type of open visual archive.



Accompanying the forever changeable and colorful mosaic-panorama of the Venice monitors, six portraits, lined up two by two, were on the three remaining walls, “ideally” placed facing the installation but in a reverse shot, as was Farina’s intention. The contrast between the whole images seen on the monitors and the portraits was underlined by the size of the portraits (2.5 x 1.7 m), by the choice of using black and white, and their immobility. This was derived from a study on temporality, which is, in fact, the double shot brought together but, above all, by the uniqueness of the event shown: the faces in close-up with their range of expressions. Because a face is always an event. For the history it contains and for what it reveals at a later date: the thoughtful woman, maybe melancholic, who seems to be looking far away; the little girl (or boy) sheltering in their anorak but with mouth half closed and eyes wide open as if in front of something unpleasant (or maybe just a reaction to the cold); the old woman who almost imitates the child’s reaction (but from various clues, beginning with the sunglasses, we realize we are in a different situation); the man who, camera in hand, checks the focus; the man who smiles while intent on catching a glimpse of or following something overhead (we do not know

exactly what or where, but the presence of a camera, belonging, however, to someone else, is to be noted; the man who instead stares at something in front of him, concentrated and serious, or maybe tired.

Each of the six portraits completely fills the space and excludes all traces of Venice. What can be noticed around the faces and which points out their belonging to the crowd from which they emerge, are the details of the nearby bodies. That same Rialto Bridge – the open air salon available to everybody – belongs so much to everybody that it disappears. The photographs take us to Venice because we know that they were taken there but at the same time they transport us all over. There is not a single detail which makes the place recognizable. It is, however, true that a photograph, no matter how its meaning becomes universal, can never be separated from the place where it was taken, regardless of the fact that the place is more or less recognizable. We have proof of this when someone – author or person photographed – shows us a picture and is, in fact, proud to tell us about the place. “Here I was in...” Here we are beyond what is normally, and rhetorically, to be expected from a photograph taken in Venice – we are beyond oleographs.

No place, not even the smallest and at first sight - but only at first sight - completely without facts, is exhaustible. An apparently abandoned village has exhausted its vital and social functions. The photographer who goes there carries out the first act of redevelopment, just as he would if going to a long disused mine. The exploitation of its resources is finished but the place itself is anything but exhausted. What is exhaustible is a type of digital

no-place, like *77 Million Paintings* by Brian Eno, for example, a generative system of abstract images and music which uses different combinations, the final result being shown in the title. Although 77 million is a disorienting number, it is still a final and impassable limit; an exhaustion of possibilities beyond which it is impossible to go, because the system, despite its breadth, is, however, closed.

The exhaustion of a place is decided by the photographer, who by leaving the Rialto Bridge allows you to not have to return the next day, because his eye is already looking elsewhere, towards other places. But nothing forbids you from returning some years from now and picking up the photographic view from when it was interrupted, as, in fact, has already happened and could happen yet again, inasmuch as *Rivus Altus* unfolds as a work in progress.

## The exhaustion of a place is always and only temporary, thus in evolution.



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