

LIMINAL TOPOGRAPHY

DRAWING THE INTANGIBLE

“Venice is eternity itself”

Joseph Brodsky

Joseph Brodsky once famously asserted that time is water and as such the Venetians had conquered both by constructing a city upon the largest wetland in the mediterranean basin. Driving millions of timber poles into the mud flats and salt marshes of the lagoon, the city's architects constructed a finite perimeter, subduing the sea and enveloping time within. This almost incomprehensible phenomena of urban existence has for centuries constructed a vision of Venice as the transgressive 'other', forcing the city to exist in a paradoxical relationship between interior and exterior, between prospect and refuge and between image and reality.

Proliferated incessantly through the arts, literature and humanities, Venice has been copied and reproduced across vastly differing contexts to such an extent that no one true image of the city exists. This endless repetition is the protagonist in a process which has, at least to the distant observer, reduced the city to an image of itself, rendering it as an exportable identity, irrespective of time and place.

Externally banalised precisely because of its exceptionality, this reflective static vision is however an unfaithful mirror of a city perpetually in motion. Venice derides every search for urban logic, manifesting itself as a place of transition between the planned and unplanned, the fixed and temporal, and the city and nature. The rules of its foundation have been enriched over time with each successive incarnation incrementally contributing to an urbanity which renders any observer uncertain of their (geo)graphic coordinates and suspends them somewhere between the familiar and the entirely unknown. Venice then is a continuous epiphany, eliciting a visceral and corporeal engagement with any person who breaches its perimeter.

Here the canals, calli, campi, ponti, fondamenta and sotoportego coalesce to orchestrate and condition a passage through the city that is defined by transition between elevation and ground, and between removal and release. Venice, then, is a continuous unevenness where vennels, sharp turns, bottlenecks, bridges and

passageways allow the city to consume you and throw you back out. The calli, paved in grey trachae boulders are smooth yet never flat, constantly undulating in response to the subtle subsidence of the foundations below. Roughly every one hundred meters a bridge, seemingly out of kilter to adjust to the misaligned calli on either side of the canal, emerges from the ground requiring at least twenty steps up and down to transport us from one body of water to another. The vaporetto, at the mercy of the sea, constantly forces you to alternate the weight of your body from one leg to the other, inducing a kind of infantile comfort in the boat's gentle cradle. It would seem then, that the only true and honest means of experiencing Venice is to get lost, that is to say, to embrace the illegibility and disorientation of the street pattern and drift aimlessly through the city's varicose veins.

It is in direct response to this tension between the static exterior and the mobile interior that this research seeks to explore our physical and sensory engagement with Venice as a continuous topographic territory. As we move through space, we are in constant dialogue with our environment, a dialogue that is undeniably sensory. A place's inherent identity cannot be determined by only visible formal elements, nor does there exist a collective visual interpretation of a place's identity shared by its inhabitants. Here, environmental comprehension emerges in the context of body-space encounters, where subjective experience of; physical contact, happening, movement, climate, topography and circumstance, condition a form of simultaneous perception that is the foundation of knowledge specific to person and place - both individual and collective.

Thus defined as corporeal sensing, these experiences describe a holistic means of comprehending three-dimensional space.¹ By observing the body both in relation to its position within an environment and to its own condition, this system of environmental perception explores architecture beyond visual spatial recognition and refers to a more complex network of socio-geographical encounters. Recognising the discrimination of the body to itself, termed 'somasthesis',² psychologist Edwin Boring proposed that anatomic engagement with a landscape embeds within a person an internal corporeal knowledge of the slope, texture, or dimension of a given terrain. Somasthetic and haptic perceptions then are gained directly as a result of corporeal (inter)activity. They inherently enable us to tangibly comprehend places in personal, unselfconscious ways, which visual sensibilities fail to describe.

¹ Jean Piaget, 'The Child's Conception of Space' (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1956).

² Edwin Garrigues Boring, 'The Physical Dimension of Consciousness' (New York: Dover, 1963).

Within the discourse regarding environmental place perception there, on the one hand, exists a conceptual understanding of place (mind) and on the other, the precognitive experience of it (body).³ This mind/body duality is defined by Erwin Straus as two modes of personal experience; gnostic and pathic.⁴ The gnostic mode of interaction is structured around observing objects as distinct from the self whilst establishing cognition of the object. The pathic mode thus directs our perception through touch, emphasising pre-conceptual phenomenal experiences and conditions how objects appear directly to the senses as a body transitions through space. It is through this unselfconscious knowledge registered through a physical body that there evolves an intense understanding of a place's identity and an individual's sense of place.⁵

While urban life may be examined at a variety of scales and through many different lenses, the notions of time, memory and phenomenological environment embodied within everyday experiences of the city have long been of interest to architects, academics, artists and scientists alike. Our urban experience is not fixed but malleable, fragmented, uneven and constantly in a state of flux. It is a dynamic exchange in which the environment informs human knowledge, and human experiences shape the way the environment is viewed. The desire to observe, record and transcribe our physical and sensory existence within the environment surrounding us brings into question the conflict present between objective and subjective perception but also challenges the significance, relevance and efficacy of different forms of representational image.

The diagram converts data into finite and measurable lines and geometrical patterns. A diagram's primary language translates logical and measurable temporal relations into spatial relations. In this regard, the diagram is not only the deliberate evacuation of the body and subjectivity, or at least its discipline and control, but also a form of representation that involves abstraction from the phenomena recorded.⁶ In contrast the index has a closed, causal or existential connection to its referent, directing and focusing attention through manipulating the perception of a subject. Most indexical marks are traces of something that was present in the past.

³ Maire Elthe O'Neill, 'Corporeal Experience: A Haptic Way of Knowing' (Journal of Architectural Education: ACSA, 2001) p, 3-12.

⁴ Erwin W. Straus, 'The Forms of Spatiality' in Erling Eng, trans., Selected Papers of Erwin W. Straus: Phenomenological Psychology (New York: Basic Books, 1966), p. 11.

⁵ Maire Elthe O'Neill, Corporeal Experience: A Haptic Way of Knowing (Journal of Architectural Education: ACSA, 2001) p, 3-12.

⁶ Ibid.

As such, the index and the diagram are two seemingly incompatible types of sign. However, if we are to agree that all forms of sign are a combination of types, then from the amalgamation of the diagram and the index arises a hybrid type of representation. Referred to here on as the 'graphic trace' this composite takes from the index a registration of something unique and integrates a diagrams abstraction. This graphic trace is generated by the body and as such combines the symbolic, the line and the body into an authentic corporeal trace. Two distinct forms of graphic trace exist, those which are produced autographically, mediated through the hand of the author, and those which employ a system of automatism to produce a direct and unmediated recording.

The output of this research exists somewhere in between an autographic and automatic graphic trace. As an exploration and investigation into non-conventional methods of recording physical interactions with the topography of Venice, the drawings displayed, present traces of ten comparative journeys across Venice and Glasgow in respect of time and / or distance. The apparatus constructed to record my physical movements through the cities of Venice and Glasgow, can be viewed as a research method; a set of exploratory procedures that organise and control practice but do not determine outcomes. The graphic method offered registers the passage of time through a layering of successive traces. The machine in this regard functions as a neutral and transparent operator, serving as an instrument of registration without intervention.⁷ These automatic transcriptions are not simply tools for making visible something that exists out with the human perceptual threshold, but rather apparatus for producing a visual analogue and translation of forces and phenomena that do not themselves belong to a visual order of things.⁸ At the heart of this graphic method is the production of a visible trace or even "the language of the phenomena themselves."⁹

⁷ Lorraine Dalston and Peter Galison, 'The Image of Objectivity', *Representations* 40, fall 1992, 81-128.

⁸ Joel Snyder in 'Visualisation and Visibility', in Caroline Jones and Peter Galison (eds.), 'Picturing Science, Producing Art' (New York, London: 1998), pp.379-97.

⁹ Etienne-Jules Marey, 'La Méthode graphique dans les sciences expérimentales et principalement en physiologie et en médecine' (Paris, 1875) p.iii.