

Title

Venetian Blind – A New Model for PhD Research in the Creative Arts

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Abstract

The role of the university in building professional development opportunities for creative arts HDR candidates has changed in recent times. Where the notion of academic research in our discipline has largely seen the annexing of a thesis from the idea of industry application, universities are being increasingly encouraged to link research with 'career' opportunity. This paper will examine as a case study, a recent research project developed by Deakin's Public Art Commission that sought to connect researchers and HDR candidates in the making of a large-scale project in conjunction with the Venice Biennale. Titled 'Venetian Blind', this exhibition/ public art work featured 16 researchers and 7 HDR candidates who were each invited to make a site-based, or performative intervention, into the city of Venice responding to a bespoke provocation developed by the curators. Working in small teams that included both academics and PhD candidates, the project (which is still in train) is taking place over six months (one per month). The artists encounter the provocations 'blind' so to speak, with no prior warning of what they are being asked to. The curatorial frame prefaces in situ site analysis and research while highlighting the possibilities of both HDR and academic researchers working collectively to develop new understandings of Venice, its features and history.

Biographies

Associate Professor Cameron Bishop

Cameron Bishop (PhD) is an artist, writer and curator lecturing in Art and Performance at Deakin University. As a curator he has helped initiate a number of public art projects including Treatment (2015/17) at the Western Treatment Plant; Sounding Histories at the Mission to Seafarers Melbourne with Annie Wilson; and the ongoing VACANTGeelong project with architectural and creative arts researchers, and leading Australian artists to explore and activate spaces left behind by de-industrialisation. As the recipient of a number of grants, awards and commissions he has been acknowledged for his community-focused approach to public art.

Professor David Cross

David Cross is an artist, writer and curator based in Melbourne. Working across performance, installation, video and photography, Cross explores the relationship between pleasure, intimacy and the phobic in his works, and often incorporates participation by linking performance art with object-based environments. As a curator Cross has produced a number of temporary public projects, including One Day Sculpture (with Claire Doherty) across New Zealand in 2008-09, and Iteration: Again in Tasmania in 2011. He recently co-founded the research initiative Public Art Commission (PAC) at Deakin University which is devoted to the commissioning and scholarship of temporary public art. Recent PAC projects co-developed with Cameron Bishop include, Treatment with Melbourne Water and City of Wyndham (2015-17), Venetian Blind with European Cultural Centre, Venice (2019), and Six Moments in Kingston for the City of Kingston (2019). Cross is currently Professor of Visual Arts, Faculty of Arts and Education at Deakin University, Melbourne.

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Keywords: Venice Biennale, Public Art, Curatorial Practice, PhD research in the Creative Arts, Professional Practice for PhD

Venetian Blind is a public art project that took place in Venice in 2019, featuring 23 Deakin University researchers and one invited researcher from RMIT. Developed by Public Art Commission at Deakin and curated by Cameron Bishop and David Cross, this hybrid exhibition/public art event has seen six projects commissioned (one per month) and exhibited at the European Cultural Centre in conjunction with the 58th Venice Biennale. All of the works were produced by a team of Deakin artists/academics and Higher Degree by Research candidates who worked collaboratively in Venice responding to one of six provocations provided by the curators. Each team was invited to make a site-based, or performative intervention, into Venice, a city we imagine as a milieu (Andrejevic, 2019; Foucault, 2007; Berry, 2018), in which the environment constitutes an active agent in the curatorial premise and the processes employed by the artists and PhD candidates. The six subject areas each engaged with unique aspects of Venetian history, sociality, materiality and temporality, with a focus on specific sites across the city.



Figure 1: Shaun McLeod, Olivia Millard, Dario Vacirca, Rose Woodcock, *Funereel*, 2019 (photo: Dario Vacirca)

At the beginning of each month, each team, collectively, unfurled a written provocation in the Palazzo Bembo space in the form of a paper banner. The teams were then asked to remove a box from a ledge in the space; it contained a kit of objects, materials and references they could utilize for: site research, the

development of a place-responsive artwork, and then as materials to document the artwork in the gallery space. The artists were encouraged to interpret the provocations in any way they wanted with the only proviso that whatever was produced, performed or conceptualized is captured or documented in the gallery space. Details of any performative or interventionist events designed to be experienced by an audience were posted in the space, and at the team's prerogative, on social media. We argue that the provocations serve to suture this large and amorphous project together and function across a number of registers: firstly, they work where the curator is absent; unfurled, revealed and interpreted in the gallery, they become active agents in the environment artists and candidates are immersed in; and in the critical frames of contemporary art and postgraduate orthodoxy, they profane the usual processes of curation and the gallery – a space that separates, venerates and adds value to the material object (Agamben, 2007).

The project title is a word play on the famous Venetian architectural invention but in this instance refers to artists entering a project without any foreknowledge as to what the specific artistic brief will be. Venetian Blind prefaced the importance of site-based research, teamwork and a compressed temporal register as productive constraints in the making of public artworks and their documentation and location within a gallery space. We compress and analyse these activities using three philosophical concepts to: step through the city, conceptualized as milieu and active agent in (re) shaping candidates' research practice; profane the gallery and the objects we ordinarily find in it; and finally, we suggest that projects like Venetian Blind offer an entrenched research practice dissensus (Rancière, 2010), a moment to recast the work in the world, as misaligned to its imagined trajectory, and in active collaboration with others (academics and artists, not supervisors).

This paper, while focused in part on the wider project will examine Venetian Blind as a case study for how HDR research in the creative arts might be embedded in larger research projects. Specifically, it examines the value of speculative, highly provisional and performative modes in shaping collaborative research projects that link researcher and HDR candidate as both co-artist and co-curator. Without wanting to fall into the rhetoric of higher education language around work-integrated learning or professional practice, this project was very much a pilot study into how HDR candidates across the creative arts might be able to garner new collaborative skills, test existing research methodologies and at the same time establish connections with leading industry partners. The key questions here include:

- How might the specific research parameters of Venetian Blind impact or connect with each candidate's bespoke HDR research investigation?
- In what ways might such knowledge (developed collectively and often with senior researchers) be brought back into the PhD fold?
- How might this model recast the hierarchical system whereby HDR researchers exist often in a junior or mentee space. And,
- What are the professional development responsibilities of HDR study and how might Venetian Blind offer a creative arts version of industry placement or professional practice?

While keen to pick apart the academic training imperatives of the project, there is also a specific focus on curatorial research within what might be described as temporary public art practice. Venetian Blind is part of our ongoing investigation across a series of projects into the ways in which what we call curatorial framing can be utilised to garner complex and multifarious responses by artists working in the field of temporary public art. As a research project for the curators, Venetian Blind examines a number of specific issues including:

- How might artists be encouraged to make place and time-responsive artworks within an exhibition frame (the Venice Biennale) that prefaces Venice as a culturally and historically rich site beyond its status as a backdrop for the showcasing of mostly site-neutral work?
- To what extent is it possible to employ a curatorial frame predicated on constraint (the artists did not necessarily know each other, they had no prior warning as to the specific parameters of their projects and they could only utilise a kit of materials chosen by the curators); and how might this enhance the terms of engagement for each individual artist and by extension each collaborative team?
- What stories should or could be told about such a remarkable and ancient city state and how might these be framed for the artists as productive provocations? And,
- What degree of framing was required to create a holistic -and dare we say- cohesive project and how did this impact on the collective and individual agency of each of the six groups?

We address these questions below and step through the project by presenting it in four stages.

The Problem



Figure 2: Sandy Gibbs, Jondi Keane, Patrick Pound, *The Spacer*, 2019

It is important to place this project within the context of creative arts HDR research in the contemporary Australian higher education setting. The Neo-liberalisation of tertiary education has seen the studio model of teaching diminish over time as the seemingly ever-increasing bureaucratic management of student experience from online enrolment, online coursework, OH&S, intranet and cloud learning instrumentalises the student experience. The current focus on work integrated learning that pervades undergraduate teaching has begun to creep into the HDR

space with increasing calls for PhD candidates to have 'real-world' experiences built into the degree. One senses that the creative arts are being pulled unfairly into this maelstrom underpinned by the encroaching government agenda of making research principally serve the needs of our economic engine over its apriori value as a vehicle for knowledge accumulation in its myriad forms. It is incumbent on the creative arts academic to negotiate these shifts without seeming to be callous about the career prospects of students. It requires, that supervisors, in contradistinction to the controlling euphemisms that neo-liberalism has gifted to the university sector, de-emphasise job training while giving our candidates valuable industry experience extending in productive ways to ensure transferable skills.

When tertiary institutions are run for the benefit of the individual entrepreneur, and as businesses, rather than as places that educate for the greater good through genuine enquiry and cross-disciplinary practice, the tunnel vision that takes hold in the higher degree by research space, particularly in the creative arts, can be blinding. In the worst cases, a PhD research team, of candidate, and two supervisors make-up a blinkered triumvirate that narrows a research project to a point where its ambitions, as Wendy Brown suggests, places "hyperspecialisation and professionalization, tenure, narrow modes of recognition, and the need for a graduate student labour force" at the core of its outcomes (Brown, 285). This is a PhD model, we suggest, that is overdetermined by compliance and unrealistic vocational outcomes, in critical danger of being corrupted by neo-liberal rationalization and bureaucratization. These issues are compounded for us in the creative realm as we are increasingly forced to adapt to scientific methods and business models of accountability to run HDR programs, not to mention super-fast PhDs and industry placements. As the 'value of becoming an educated individual is' increasingly "reduced to its income-earning capacities; being an educated public registers no value at all by this metric" (289).

One potential answer to this lies in the value of embedding creative arts HDR candidates in ambitious research projects where they experience the cut and thrust of having to produce high quality work under the tough conditions of international-standard exhibition. Having to negotiate context, curatorial prerogatives, another language, tight budgets and timelines and the complexities of shared agency (collaboration) offers the candidate genuinely 'realworld', on the job training that could be seen as the ultimate contemporary art boot camp. Such an experience provides privileged access to seeing how professional installers, communication teams and contemporary art organisations more broadly function and how best to

negotiate these and other roles. It also provides a unique insight into how place-based research strategies might be best applied and crucially modified according to specific contexts.

But what of the issue that each candidate's research is bespoke and to a T not about Venice, let alone the specific provocations around projects prompted by arcane architectural features, coloured stones or Venice's filmic histories? What is the value to the candidate of riding in the outer reaches of a relevant research subject when they could or should be spending every productive moment digging in their own research terrain? Here we want to float the idea of latent research value, of the complex and perhaps difficult to pinpoint ways in which *Venetian Blind* offers a moment of dissensus in the candidate's research trajectory and adds genuine dimensions to the candidate's research toolbox or skillset. These latent values straddle a range of territories to do with art as a contextual mode, but perhaps most significantly, the issue of collaboration and of working with practitioners from across the creative arts is prefaced.

As fledgling researchers the latent value a project like *Venetian Blind* can offer an HDR candidate is evident in their situated collaboration with established artists/academics but in this circumstance, there was also an urgency to the work undertaken, not only marked by time, but by place. Venice is a city under siege from the sea with 2019 flooding the worst on record. It is also well-used to siege, as a crucial seat of power in Europe for many centuries. It is also a city that does spectacle like no other, and if we look at the Venice Biennale as the apotheosis of contemporary art we can quickly lose our bearings as creative practitioners. Artists and collaborative groups, by large measure, create works elsewhere for the biennale and ship them to the island for an orgy of self-congratulation and precious little place-reflection. That's not to say there are not great works of art created, or important critiques generated from the event, but rarely are they site-specific, made in real-time alongside the biennale, participatory and genuinely cross-disciplinary, and geared towards the place's contested histories, as an island city, not to mention its contested futures, as a sinking city.

The Conceit

Taking their cue from Giorgio Agamben’s claim that in the age of spectacular capitalism all the world is a museum (this image is profoundly true in Venice), the curators started their research as tourists (2007, 82) – what else could they be? Working out of an Airbnb – which is inexorably subsuming housing in the city, and thus pushing Venetians onto the mainland – the curators followed their nose, gearing projects to the collective research methodologies that each group offered. As historical, environmental, architectural, archival and social prompts came into view for individual projects, the make-up of each team of artists would change. It became evident that the curator’s situated research affected the gravitational push and pull between the nature of the provocation and the make-up of each team. The text for the banners and selection of artefacts were therefore similarly shaped, each responding to an evolving assemblage, or milieu, the strengths and weaknesses of which were long debated and negotiated on by the curators while in Venice.



Figure 3: Venetian Blind Hub and Provocation Space During Installation, European Cultural Centre, Palazzo Bembo, 2019. Image: David Cross

Hans Ulrich Orbrist reminds us that to curate is to care (2014), and as situated as the curators were in this project, they shaped their provocations to manage rapport and frisson, play and experimentation, constraint and freedom in the groups’

collaborations, much more than the aesthetic outcome. Just as Giorgio Agamben traced the drift from the sacred to the profane, whereby objects and places are returned to ‘the common use of all’ people (Agamben, 73), the curators built the frame and play-space for researchers to work in. In the gallery and in the city, the curators left their toys behind. The object inside the gallery space, in text, or as artefact/prompt (as found in the boxes), was intended, in the hands of the artists, to be put in the service of a special kind of neglect. The object, inside the gallery (the pavilions of the Venice Biennale), ordinarily caught up in a system of exchange that on the face of it renders it sacred and literally outside of the reach of the commons, was given a ‘new dimension of use’ (74). In willful ignorance, the curators profaned the usual conversational and spatial relations that brings a work into being in a gallery, and left the artists/researchers to play.

This is evident in the final works of the *Death in Venice (Werribee)* group, in which the box containing their artefacts, minimalist and out of reach to audiences, or in Agamben’s words, ‘unavailable and separate, loses its aura and is returned to use’ (77). In a project directly addressing the water issues facing Venice and Werribee, in sewage and in rising seas, the group in iterative performances, unpacked all of the boxes and used them to carry water back up into the gallery on the 4th floor of Palazzo Bembo. They are both profound and profane acts with the water later returned to the canals during an *acqua alta* on the last day of the project.



Figure 4: Mick Douglas, Tasha Haines, Anotnia Pont, Martin Potter 'Writing on Water', *Depth in Venice*, 2019

Curation's etymology, continuing the Obrist thread, comes through the Latin, to care. 'In Roman times, it meant to take care of the bath houses. In medieval times, it designated the priest who cared for souls. Later, in the 18th century, it meant looking after collections of art and artifacts' (Orbrist, 2014). In *Venetian Blind* the curators cared, but not about the artistic outcomes and their critical reception in a questionable system of exchange. They profaned the curatorial process to allow for play, the latent transfer of methodologies and collaborative techniques. The artists/researchers and candidates, free to play inside the space without the curator, curated themselves, using their diverse technical skills and social attributes to collaborate and respond to the prompts that Cross and Bishop had left behind. In a sense, the curators lack of care (or more specifically dismantling of its conventional precepts), for what unfolded in the space, defined the project.

The Milieu



Figure 5: Aqua Alta 2019 (photo: Cameron Bishop)

We could use the term situation to describe what the artists/candidates encountered in Venice. As Claire Doherty asserts the 'genesis of a "situation", as a convergence of theorisations of site, non-site, place, non-place, locality, public space, context and time, and as a means of rethinking the ways contemporary artists respond to,

produce and destabilise place and locality' (2009, 13), gives us an effective way of critically framing this project. The works were indeed 'situated' but they had a n additional quality implicit in Doherty's description. The bodies in this project, deployed in Venice, affected the city's environment as much as it impacted on them. The city is redolent with affect, a key notion we wanted to pick up on in the processes HDR candidates enacted with their team. Venice is a living system, much of which is artificial, but we are connected to biologically. And anybody that enters it is immediately made aware of this by the smell – the one we all share.

A neo-materialist approach to the milieu might argue for a flat ontology where the researchers and their social relations are de-subjectified, to be merely things amongst other things (Andrejevic, 2020, 150). We argue however that in the human relations between the researchers and the things they encountered – city, people, google maps, smartphones, smells, others, selves, workers, tourists, artists, con-artists, conversation, sound, stone, mosaics, paintings, art, height (St Marks Belltower), boats, waves, wind, vistas, bespoke objects in boxes, directive texts, rebellious attitudes, passive repose and poseurs – that a productive milieu, operating in contra-distinction to neo-liberal capitalism and the spectacle that supports it, can be identified. Michel Foucault introduced the notion of the milieu in his lectures on bio-power, analyzing the city that allows for 'temporal and uncertain elements' to be inserted into it: 'It is what is needed to account for action at a distance of one body on another (Foucault, 2007, 20-21). It is therefore the medium of an action and the element in which it circulates'. The milieu, in the redolent form of Venice, for all of its histories and its unique, island environment, hosts a 'multiplicity of individuals biologically bound to the materiality in which they' act (21). This can be said of its residents, its tourists, and the artists that flock to the city.

Drawing on Foucault, Jacques Rancière, and the 19th century biologist Jean Baptiste Lamarck, Josephine Berry talks about our affective relationship to constructed systems as a sensible milieu that allows for culture, social histories, our politics and artefacts to be read alongside our biological realities – something we readily forget about, caught up as we are in our various ideologies and worlds . Berry sees the milieu as a 'socio-natural' container that 'reveals deep connections between organisms and their environment' (Berry, 2018, 27). At human scale, this is what we sought to do and in co-opting Berry's question, we ask, to what degree can both the processes and the artifact of art affect the life (and in this case the research) of the

living subject and 'where does vital resistance lie within this spectrum (Berry, 2018, 22)'? The milieu, to be sure, is a conditioning sphere, but in the closed dome of Venice city, for the artists, a liberating one. Our shared biology has been politicised for millenia, and in this most politicised, now thoroughly de-politicized, city, the project conjured the biopolitical body. Not to stamp the project as definitively activated against the spectacle of the Biennale, but perhaps as a modest kind of durational resistance to the sublime indifference of much contemporary art. In some ways the artists that went in there were biopolitical envoys, literally testing the water and the soil, enjoining and informing the public of the hidden histories they walk and boat over.

The Process:

As a pedagogical tool the image of Venice as milieu reveals other immanent concepts, such as dissensus. In challenging some of the biopolitical practices, evident in the city's histories, artists/researchers and HDR candidates were required to confront their own, and embrace others', working methodologies. As a 'dissensual sensible element ... torn from the ordinarily sensible' milieu the 'aesthetic regime of art' described by Rancière gives us a frame through which to analyse the HDR's experience as disjointed, diffracted and resistant to their research trajectory (Rancière, 2010, 173). The 'paradox of the politics of art', as Rancière postulates, resides in 'the things called art', that can no longer be defined, as before, 'by the rules of a practice' (178). In higher degrees by research, the rules of a creative practice are further constricted by bureaucracy, neo-liberal metrics and the push towards professionalism, but in dissensus, what Rancière calls a 'sensible weave subtracted from the ordinary forms of sensory experience' practiced in the milieu that is Venice, we might find a liberating, but latent, situated pedagogy (179).

While it is possible to engage in collaboration within a PhD framework, it is complex to say the least. Yet the skills of working collectively in teams plotting how to approach a subject, how to delineate research boundaries, how to use limited time wisely and how to pinpoint an appropriate research methodology that works for all parties, is crucial both to contemporary art practice and to allied creative pursuits. Collaboration is a complex and multi-layered syntax that has been proven to enhance self-reflexivity and critical acuity and to build greater resilience to problem solving or identifying problems that warrant sustained engagement. Although these skills could be seen to sit outside the realm of a candidates PhD scope, we suggest they

significantly enhance research knowledge and the skill of sharpening and/or thickening focus.

In addition to collaboration, we would argue that time and in particular its compression offers an important perspective to candidates around how to work diligently and productively. In many instances in this project, teams had as little as five days together to absorb the provocation, strategise an approach or a series of approaches, make the work in response to various sites around Venice and then document it in the gallery space. Considering how productive each team was (some made as many as seven different works across media), then they clearly found a way to make the limited duration work. While this may seem cloyingly close to the premise of a reality television production, the artists have already reflected on how surprised they were that this model led to heightened efficiencies. Considering that the long duration of a PhD seems to reward slowness over many years, this model shakes up doctoral temporality and suggests a different way of working, a different flow and rhythm, more staccato and less drone.

In reflecting (with limited hindsight) on Venetian Blind, the artists and HDR candidates often spoke of their surprise that such a model might be conducive to creative processes and outcomes. They articulated the assorted challenges of the Palazzo Bembo space with its labyrinthine series of galleries as well as having to negotiate a literal link to the iterations of the project that were made in preceding provocations or nodes. A number also pointed to the ways in which the materiality of the provocations dominated the space and how it was challenging to bring the experiences of the provocation 'from out and about in Venice' into a documented form in the exhibition space. And perhaps the most complex negotiation related to the logistical challenge of teams being in Venice at the same time. Where some of the teams worked together in situ, others were forced to build a working method based on virtual communication and relayed instruction. Here the space between individual agency and group method was rendered especially contingent, yet the artists while finding it challenging, saw it as a specific contextual constraint to be interrogated. The extremity of the context for the participants, especially the HDR candidates, required the implementation of a tactical working method very much in keeping with the requirements of place-based contemporary art events where contextual compression (time, place, space, appropriate material forms, to name just some) is a staple feature. This mode of working is arduous and laden with risks but as the project outlines these dimensions cannot be easily understood as abstract terms nor can they be easily separated from

one another. They are difficult to be taught in a holistic sense except perhaps through the practical (fieldwork) prism of a project such as this.

Steven Corcoran in his introduction to Rancière's *Dissensus: On Art and Politics* points to an aspect of dissensus that has particular cadence to *Venetian Blind* as a hybrid research/HDR project (2010, 2). Specifically, he points out that the disruption inherent in both art and politics is not simply a reordering of the relations of power between existing groups; dissensus, following Rancière, is not an institutional overturning. It is 'an activity that cuts across forms of cultural and identity belonging and hierarchies between discourses and genres, working to introduce new subjects and heterogeneous objects into the field of perception'. As university education continues to struggle against a designation that prefaces its role largely as a provider of knowledge and skill for capital, the idea of building new subjects and heterogeneous objects through experimental curatorial practice and educational projects takes on ever greater importance.

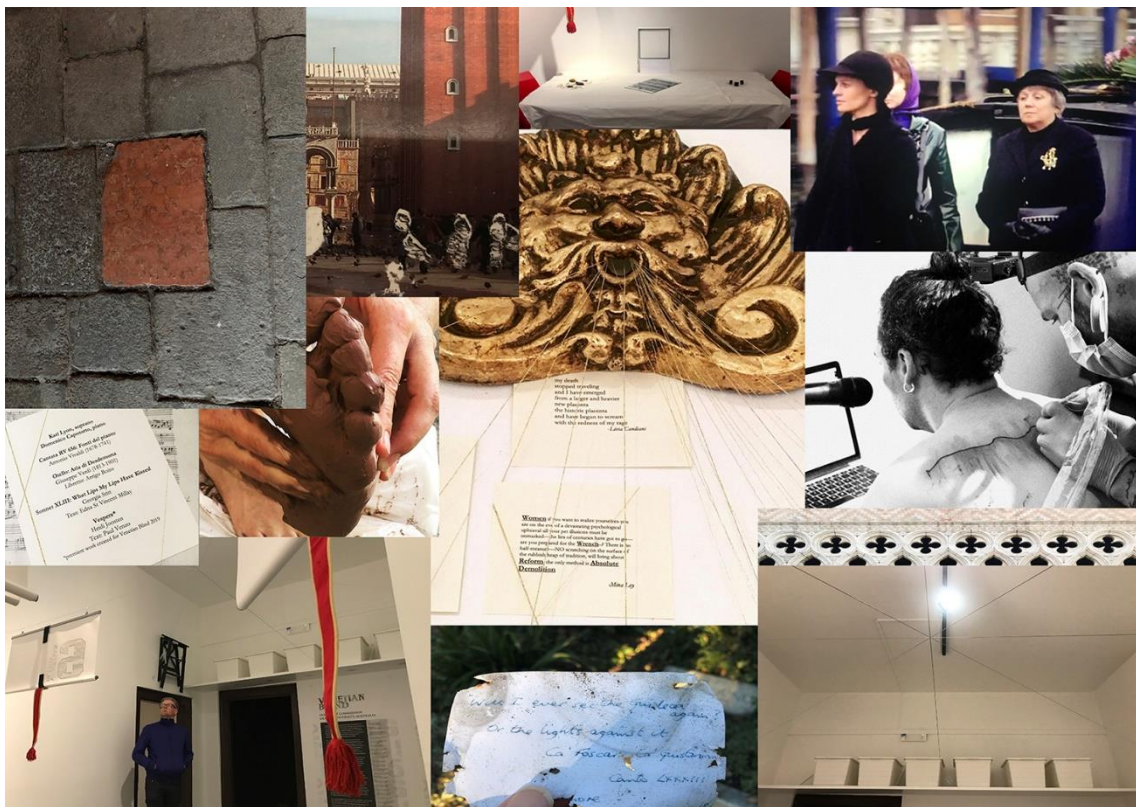


Figure 6: Compendium/Milieu

Associate Professor Cameron Bishop and Professor David Cross

Thanks to all of the artists who participated in this project, as well as Ilana Russell,
Public Art Commission Research Fellow.

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