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TRACING WASTE
ENVISIONING SUSTAINABILITY
Reflections on Tourism and Community Practices
for Collective Futures

edited by
Chiara Carolina Donelli
Francesca Pangallo
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foreword
Marco Armiero

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Foreword

*Marco Armiero**

The editors and authors of this volume have been very generous with me and my work, mobilizing—from the earliest stages of the project—the concept of the Wasteocene as a key to understanding the impact of the tourist boom in the city of Venice and the Veneto region. It may therefore be useful to spare a few words to introduce the concept and its genesis.

Although the Wasteocene is clearly linked to the flourishing debate around the Anthropocene and the critical reactions to it, it did not originate within the Anthropocene framework; I had been working on waste and toxicity for many years before formulating the notion. In other words, it did not arise as a theory *per se* but rather as the outcome of in-depth empirical research, largely focused on Naples and the Campania region. It was through my work on toxic contamination and grassroots resistance in Campania that I began to investigate the creation of ‘wasted communities’ and the forms of resistance that emerge in response to them. In my interpretation, that crisis was not an error or simply a sign of inefficiency or corruption. I saw it as literally the way the system functions. Capitalism needs cheap sinks for its waste and operates by converting costs into social costs, and privatizing profits. These resulting wasted communities are the much-needed infernos that make paradise possible.

* Research Professor University of Santiago de Compostela.

In 2017, I published an article with my dear friend Massimo de Angelis where we began using the term *Wasteocene* to describe the embodiment of the Anthropocene's violence in the organosphere—that is, in the sphere of life. From that first elaboration, it was clear that exploring the Wasteocene required reflecting both on the 'wasting' relationships that produce 'wasted' communities, and on the multifold ways in which those communities resist this process and reinvent themselves while sabotaging the dynamics of the Wasteocene.

In 2021, I developed the concept further in a short volume, where I attempted to outline a constellation of ideas orbiting around this central category. I linked the Wasteocene to the imposition of what I called a *toxic narrative infrastructure*—a set of discursive mechanisms that silence and normalize injustices. However - faithful to the idea that the Wasteocene concerns oppression as much as resistance - I also wrote about *guerrilla narrative* as an ensemble of practices that sabotage the toxic narrative infrastructure through counterhegemonic storytelling.

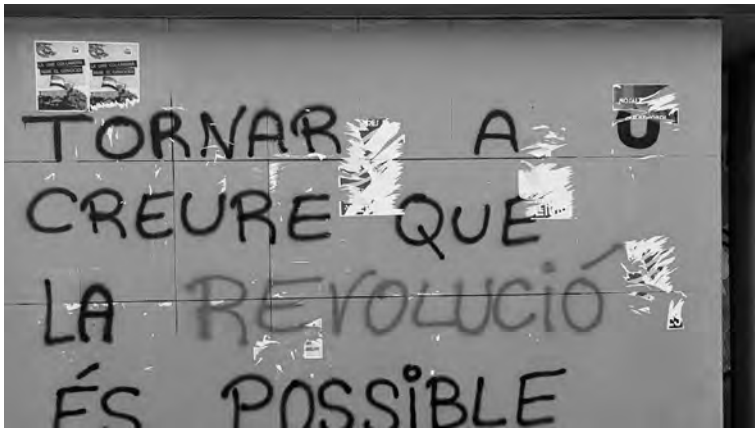
The editors and authors of this volume have mobilized this concept in original ways—as should be done, for the best fate of any concept is to be adapted and reinvented. I am especially pleased that the Wasteocene has become a relevant category within a project developed as part of the post-COVID resilience plan. As I recount in my book, I wrote it during my long convalescence after a devastating COVID-19 infection. I felt a strong connection between the experience of the pandemic and the concept of the Wasteocene.

Yet if the pandemic shook our world deeply, the challenge before us is not to return to where we were before the crisis. Activists everywhere repeated that we could not aspire to a return to normality, because *normality was the problem*.

This volume, with its interdisciplinary approach and strong commitment to reflecting on the concrete challenges of a specific geographical area, provides an excellent demonstration of how it

is possible to imagine solutions without falling into a 'solutionist' mode. Perhaps it is a question of what the aim is: do we seek to *solve* the problems of the Wasteocene, or do we work to *sabotage* the Wasteocene and create new socioecological relationships?

Walking through the streets of Barcelona, I see the imposition of a tourist monoculture unfolding, but also the seeds of other possible worlds—urban gardens, neighborhood associations, renters' struggles, and students' *acampadas*. Arriving at my office at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, a work of graffiti on the wall reminds me that no matter how pervasive and powerful the Wasteocene may be, a return to normality will not save us. And so, every time I go to work or return home, it urges me to *Tornar a creure que la revolució és possible*—*Believe once again that the revolution is possible*.



Graffiti on a wall at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, now erased

INTRODUCTION

From Chemical Elements to Sustainable Practices: Rewriting Waste Through Interdisciplinarity

*Chiara Carolina Donelli, Francesca Pangallo, Olga
Tzazadaki*

*"One can demonstrate that this story, while
completely arbitrary, is nevertheless true."*

Primo Levi, "Carbon", *The Periodic Table*
[1975], in *The Complete Works of Primo
Levi*, p. 614
[Norton- Liveright NY - Digital edition:
2019]

In 1975, a collection of short stories was published in Italy that would, roughly a decade later, establish its author - a Turin-based chemist and Holocaust survivor - as one of the most internationally recognized figures in contemporary Italian literature. The book that brought Primo Levi global acclaim is not, as one might assume, *If This Is a Man* (the account that made him famous within the Italian context at the end of the 1950s for his testimony on Auschwitz), but rather a different work, whose narrative construction was singular for its time and that subsequently reshaped and inspired new approaches to storytelling. *The Periodic Table*, first translated into English in 1984, is a short story collection where each chapter, also functioning as an autonomous narrative, takes its title from Mendeleev's periodic table - the schema traditionally used to organize chemical elements by atomic number and electron configuration. In doing so, Levi thus weaves a dual thematic thread throughout the book: each of the twenty-one autobiographically inspired stories is structured around a specific chemical element, which both supplies the

chapter title (for example, Argon, Lead, Gold, Iron, or Carbon) and appears as the protagonist or as a central, sometimes metaphorical, narrative device. From a narratological perspective, this structure allows each chapter to attract or repel the others - much like atoms themselves - depending on the order in which the reader approaches them, thereby revealing new connections, insights, and interpretive possibilities across contexts that may initially appear disparate.

Tracing Waste, Envisioning Sustainability: Reflections on Tourism and Community Practices for Collective Futures draws on this principle both as inspiration and as a structural model, likewise operating on a dual track. Beginning with a specific case study - the regeneration of waste cooking oil into biodegradable and sustainable compounds and products - the volume nevertheless incorporates “atoms” from diverse disciplinary domains, spanning the hard sciences, such as chemistry and economics, as well as the traditional humanities, including literature and the arts. The rationale for assembling such a multifaceted set of subjects and perspectives within a single publication emerged from the development of a dedicated project, one of the many “Young Researchers” (YR) projects funded within the iNEST (Interconnected Northeast Innovation Ecosystem) Consortium, titled *Sustainable Business Models for Tourism with a Culture-Based Approach* (2024-2025).¹ This initiative brought together a team of early-career researchers to examine sustainability practices aimed at counteracting the production of waste, in a broad spectrum of declinations, generated by the tourism industry in conditions of overtourism. The primary focus involved material waste, especially in the form of waste cooking oil: representing the quintessential by-product of the restaurant sector - a business that plays an especially central role

¹ For the official iNEST consortium website, please refer to: <https://www.consortzioinest.it/>; for Young Researchers projects funded through iNEST-Spoke 6, please check: <https://pric.unive.it/progetti/spoke-6-inest/young-researchers> (Last Access: 19/11/2025).

in the tourism economy of the Italian peninsula - waste cooking oil also reveals the challenges and limits to recycling strategies, as EU policy and regulations prove, in terms of disposal and product regeneration within circular economic efforts.

Through its nine chapters divided into two sections, this volume gathers and critically discusses the Young Researchers (YR) project's results, presenting insights and outcomes that collectively hope to serve as a reference for the dissemination of sustainable tourism strategies mediated through culture and the creative industries. The YR project was developed in the broader framework of the PNRR - Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza, which began with the promise of recovering from the losses caused by one of the most severe health and ecological crises in our recent times: the Covid-19 pandemic. Eleven university ecosystems were then established to tackle, through research, the multi-layered crises that followed this unprecedented event within Modernity. iNEST-Spoke 6 specifically addressed emerging issues related to tourism, culture, and creativity under the mantra of sustainability.

Whether the PNRR fulfilled its original expectations or instead compounded pre-existing structural problems—such as the increasing fragmentation and precarisation of academic labour, the growing projectification of sectors already structurally fragile, the pervasive overload of administrative duties that diverts time and energy away from research and teaching, and the persistent short-termism shaping research agendas and evaluation practices—was acknowledged but ultimately fell outside the analytical scope of this project. Nevertheless, the YR project engaged critically with the themes identified as central to the strategy—tourism, culture, and sustainability—seeking to move beyond the current state of the art and prompting the research group to address a fundamental question: are sustainable practices and circular economy truly able to restore cultural and social appropriation by communities affected by overtourism, or

do they arm or repropose the same logic of profit and production behind extractive Capitalism?

The interdisciplinary research team identified the concept of *waste* as the most effective element, a form of critical waste-based epistemology (Corvellec & Bevan, 2025) around which to discuss and engage with local communities in order to find possible answers to the question addressed above. Waste is not only maybe the most evident sign of tourist presence in selected contexts, in terms of disposable and residual leftovers daily produced by visitors, but it can also carry a powerful, symbolic connotation: referring back to communities and individuals, it was particularly enlightening to move from what professor Marco Armiero labeled as “wasting relationships” (2021), in order to understand the logic of exploitation behind places and privileges at a social and economic level. Where a new, attractive business or successful event is designed for visitors to have their money worth to be spent, there it is also where cultural traditions, local crafts, small enterprises and individuals are potentially excluded or rejected from their own homeland or neighborhood. Eventually, in order to explore and reflect on the extent to which the tourism industry - the “younger sibling” of the capitalist system according to scholar Marco D’Eramo (2025)² - either affects or benefits local communities, the research effort had to deal with multiple disciplines and dynamics entangled into this scenario, where the popular Anthropocene definition here identifies more with the definition of Armiero’s Wasteocene: an era in which waste works “rather as a set of socio-ecological relationships aiming to (re) produce exclusion and inequalities” (Armiero, 2021:1).

The INEST Young Researchers project therefore embraced the concept of waste, both in its formal and symbolic dimensions, as a lens to interrogate tourism dynamics. In line with

² See: <https://www.iltascabile.com/linguaggi/iperturismo-disperazione/> (Last Access: 19/11/2025).

these premises, the YR project originated from critically recognizing the *unsustainability* of contemporary tourist flows, together with the ongoing climate emergency. These challenges have recently prompted scholars to examine the complex relationship between tourism, economic growth, and territorial development (Milano, Novelli & Cheer, 2019), highlighting the fragile links between tourism and local communities in environmental and ethical terms (Jones & Wynn, 2018; Power et al., 2024). Monocultural tourism often reduces territories to commodified experiences for visitors, reinforcing stereotypical representations and distancing tourist encounters from the authentic local context (Bender et al., 2013; Rickly, 2022). As a result, local communities frequently bear a “social cost” (Pizam et al., 1978), manifested in increased waste production, gentrification, and transformations of urban and natural habitats, while often remaining excluded from tourism planning processes (Faulkner & Tideswell, 1997).

The project’s effort thus began with the aim of addressing these interconnected social, cultural, and environmental issues by exploring sustainable and culture-based approaches to tourism development. Building on this as a possible investigation strategy, the team researched and enhanced sustainable initiatives that promoted socio-economic, cultural, and environmental resilience. Central to this endeavor were two Living Labs (LLs) established in specific territorial contexts. These LLs fostered synergistic, equitable, and inclusive processes, with a particular focus on waste and reuse - both material and symbolic - within the tourism sector. Interactions with artistic practices and creative languages guided these processes, allowing communities to participate actively in co-design and re-signification of local narratives. The actors involved in the living lab are the actors that although usually being at the center of attention, in overcrowded, over-touristified, over-observed places, are stories that stay at the margin. Empirically, the LLs structured experimental research activities, fostering co-creation of material and immaterial

artefacts derived from physical and symbolic residues, ranging from agro-food by-products to perceptions and narratives marginalized in mainstream tourism communication. Theoretically, the results were collected in this edited volume, which now we hope will serve as a reference not only for the dissemination of sustainable tourism strategies mediated through culture and the creative industries, but especially as the result of a shared, collective effort in questioning from an interdisciplinary perspective the contradictions laying around touristy economies and sustainability and as a methodological tool for inquisition (Corvellec & Bevan, 2025).

This critical stance emerged not only from theoretical engagement but also from the lived experience of a multidisciplinary team working together for more than a year, often sharing approaches, concepts, and terminology only to find out that the same word, or the same dynamic, can mean and imply different things according to each discipline and area of expertise involved. The project final event, that took place on Oct 27th, 2025, and artist book that eventually took shape under the name *ES-AUSTE* (2025)³, realised by artist Elena Mazzi who followed the team during this two-year project, crystallized this experience. Although the researchers come from different disciplinary perspectives—management, visual arts, literature, linguistics, anthropology, and material sciences—they all reflected critically on the complex and often problematic dynamics underpinning tourism's logics. Finally, working as a multidisciplinary team required constructing a shared language—or better yet, a common terrain of

³ For the event details, please check the official poster document at: https://pric.unive.it/fileadmin/user_upload/Spoke_6_iNEST/doc/Esau-ste_27-ottobre-YR-Spoke6.pdf; the book is available in Open Access for free download at: <https://magonzaeditore.it/it/product/esauste/> ; and the video of the event: youtube.com/watch?si=CEJD23DJI-EK_rhZ&v=C2h-54q09Cm4&feature=youtu.be (Last Access: 19/11/2025).

action—where diverse disciplinary languages could be expressed. This volume seeks to capture and reflect that collaborative effort.

The book is divided into two sections, recalling both the project's keywords and main accomplishments. The first section, titled *Tracing Waste in Tourist Destinations*, explores how tourism contributes to the production of waste beyond material residues, investing material, cultural and symbolic domains. practices. Tourism is frequently celebrated as a generator of cultural exchange and economic growth, yet its contributions to waste in a broad spectrum remain understudied. The chapters collected under this first part purposely interrogates the multifaceted ways in which tourism produces forms of residue that go beyond discarded objects or environmental degradation, extending into landscapes, identities, narratives, and language practices. By examining territories as varied as the Venetian Lagoon, the North-East Dolomite Alps, and urban and suburban contexts, this section highlights how extractive economies, aesthetic commodification, and the rhetoric of sustainability can obscure new forms of exploitation. Drawing on artistic, narrative, sociological, translational, and ecological perspectives, the chapters collectively map the contradictions inherent in tourism's promise of renewal, showing that sustainability can sometimes reproduce, instead of reducing, patterns of waste.

Across these diverse contexts, it becomes clear that tourism not only reshapes physical and ecological spaces but also mediates cultural, social, and epistemic forms of value. Local identities, heritage narratives, and accessibility practices are constantly negotiated, commodified, or erased, revealing that the residues of tourism extend into the very ways communities experience, represent, and communicate their own spaces. By tracing these entanglements, the first book section illuminates the systemic tensions between the promise of sustainability and the persistence of extraction, setting the stage for a closer examination of how these dynamics manifest in specific territories, practices, and institutions.

In particular, chapter one opens by examining the aesthetic and narrative dimensions of tourism-generated waste. Francesca Pangallo surveys literary representations of the Venetian Lagoon, highlighting how contemporary writers expose the contradictions of tourist experience with outcomes of degradation, industrialisation, and ecological collapse of Venice and its surrounding ecosystem through fictional work. Supported and influenced by recent studies in the field of Environmental Humanities, Pangallo considers the dimension of *wasteland* as a critical literary lens for addressing present issues of liveability and sustainability within the Venetian lagoon area. By cutting through the familiar tourist imagery and promotional gloss attached to the city, the *wasteland* category reveals the systemic and unsustainable exploitation of collective memory, local traditions, and local communities by the tourism-driven economy.

Following the conversation, Linda Armano presents an analysis of two traditional figures in two specific mountain sites - the character of *Rollate* in Sappada (Udine), and the one of *Saltner* in Merano (Bolzano) - that have become subjects of cultural extraction in relation to “authentic” tourism practices. Local traditions and heritage are mobilized as consumable experiences, revealing a tension between community agency and external demand. This chapter establishes a thematic foundation for the section by showing how tourism transforms culture into a resource, producing intangible waste in the form of altered identities and commodified authenticity. Together, chapters one and two illustrate a continuum of extraction in terms of storytelling and social anthropology perspectives: in both cases, from the commodification of culture to the visual and narrative framing of ecological decline, what is left behind - cultural, material, and ecological residue - reveals the hidden costs of leisure economies.

Marco Baravalle’s chapter on Porto Marghera deepens this analysis by locating the category of waste within a dialectical interplay of art, ecology, and social struggle. Whereas Pangal-

lo shows representations of environmental decline, Baravalle focuses on the industrial remnants themselves as both sites of exploitation and spaces of critical reflection. In chapter three, tourism intersects with the legacy of industrialization, and waste becomes a medium through which artists, residents, and activists negotiate visibility, memory, and ecological responsibility. Baravalle's research leads back to Armano and Pangallo by showing how cultural and environmental extraction are intertwined, and how sites of waste can simultaneously produce critical awareness and social tension.

In line with these three case-studies, the last chapter included in Section One shifts the focus to cultural heritage accessibility. Federica Alabiso considers the accessibility strategies included as of today in a selection of museums located in both Venice and Vicenza, extending the conversation to the epistemic and communicative dimensions of tourism. Even though museums mediate access to culture and heritage for a large public, yet linguistic and sensory barriers often render local knowledge partially invisible to visitors. This chapter links to Armano's exploration of authenticity and Pangallo's focus on representation by highlighting how tourism shapes not only what is consumed but also who can participate in cultural narratives. Together, these studies demonstrate that waste is not merely environmental discharge or residual matter: its social, cultural and narrative components are as much as important. By tracing the threads that connect these chapters, Section I reveals a systemic logic of tourism-induced waste: the chapters collectively argue that sustainability discourse often masks these entanglements, producing the illusion of renewal while reproducing exploitation at various levels. In mapping these interconnections, the section's goal is to make the readers familiar with the many and different angles through which tourism reshapes landscapes, identities, and knowledge, highlighting both its destructive potential and its capacity to provoke resilience and resistance actions.

The second section takes a multidisciplinary step into these potential actions of resistance developed by local communities and businesses affected by over-tourism wasting dynamics, and is complementary to the previous one by mapping the various strategies monitored by the YR research team. Titled *Resistance Practices to Waste and Tourism for Collective Futures*, Section Two turns from analyzing tourism-induced waste to exploring various practices that communities, artists, and local initiatives have been developing to counter and re-balance mass-tourism effects. The theme of sustainability is approached here as a participatory and creative process rather than a top-down framework: by engaging with local knowledge, material residues, and cultural practices, communities reclaim agency over territories marked by depletion, overexposure, or commodification. Along with this premise, crafts, chemical compositions, and artistic interventions emerge as laboratories of sustainability, where what might otherwise be wasted—materials, voices, and traditions—is reintegrated into collective narratives and local economies.

Matteo Baldan presents the core element of our investigation, waste cooking oil, demonstrating how circular economic practices can transform a by-product of daily life into a valuable resource. This chapter outlines the regulatory and market context for products derived from waste cooking oil (WCO), highlighting their role in preventing improper disposal. It examines EU policies, market dynamics, and how circular-economy models enhance the value of WCO-based products. More broadly, it underscores the importance of collaboration among industry, researchers, policymakers, and citizens. The shift toward a circular economy shows how collective action can reshape production and consumption, reduce waste, and support environmental and social sustainability for present and future generations. Baldan's research illustrates how local communities and administrations can generate environmental and social benefits simultaneously, highlighting the potential of small-scale, targeted sustainability measures.

Donelli, Armano and Mazzi explore how artistic practices critically engage with “sustainable” tourism’s rhetoric of circularity. By making visible both material and symbolic forms of waste, art provokes reflection on the contradictions inherent in attempts to reconcile leisure economies with environmental responsibility. Creative interventions thus function as tools of resistance, fostering dialogue around sustainability and consumption in tourist contexts. The chapter uses the Wasteocene framework (Armiero, 2021) to interrogate how overtourism and the commodification of local cultures produce material and symbolic forms of waste. Two communities, Venice and the Belluno Dolomites, serve as experimental sites of inquisition of both research and artistic practice. The artists Elena Mazzi, together with the researchers, investigated, interrogated and observed the territories in order to later establish a participatory forum of discussion and experimentation, in the form of Cultural Living Labs. The Cultural Living Labs (CLLs), are presented as methodological alternatives where art-led, participatory methods enabled participants to rethink waste—in this case waste cooking oil (WCO)—as a metaphor and material tool for questioning mainstream ideas of circularity, wasted memories and issues related to tourism. Through shared practices such as cooking, drawing, and storytelling, waste was reimagined as a generator of care, memory, and critical awareness rather than as mere discard. Elena Mazzi played a central role in the project, coordinating the three Living Labs, which took place in Venice (March 11-12, 2025) and Arabba-Colle Santa Lucia (June 20th, 2025), and guiding the artistic processes that shaped their outcomes. As an artist, Mazzi explores specific territories by reinterpreting their cultural and natural heritage through the stories and memories of local communities. With an approach informed by anthropology, she weaves together diverse forms of knowledge to imagine new relationships between humans, nature, and culture. Her contribution was fundamental in investigating both the tangibility of waste and the mark it leaves on local communities and their environments.

This chapter includes a graphic section containing visual materials from the Living Labs: photographs and drawings by Mazzi, which offer an additional interpretive layer to the themes discussed and visually articulate the collective experience emerging from the project.

Valeria Bruzzi focuses on participatory and art-based approaches to sustainable tourism, showing how community engagement and creative expression can valorize local knowledge and co-create meaningful cultural experiences. Similarly, Margherita De Luca and Camilla Ferri investigate craft and artisanal practices in Venice through an art-based research approach, revealing how challenging stereotypical representations of “authenticity” can transform tourist encounters into reflective, participatory spaces, where local skills and narratives are recognized rather than commodified. The central thesis is that participatory and site-specific cultural practices can support regenerative territorial development. *Art Tourism* is presented as a transformative paradigm that moves beyond passive consumption by engaging communities in creative processes that generate social, economic, and symbolic value, clearly differing from traditional cultural tourism centered on the passive consumption of pre-existing heritage assets. It redefines tourism through participatory artistic practices that re-narrate places, co-create shared meanings, and foster sustainable territorial development, while addressing risks of commodification and gentrification. Pilot projects in Lavarone, Tonezza del Cimone, and Roana illustrate how cultural prototypes can narrate intangible and relational heritage through artistic languages and community involvement. Nonetheless, challenges persist, including risks of performative participation, difficulties in measuring long-term impact, and the need to balance artistic authorship with community agency.

Eventually, the final chapter of this section examines micro-regeneration initiatives in the Po Delta and Polesine, illus-

trating the power of proximity-based social innovation. By reactivating neglected spaces through small-scale interventions, Olga Tzazadaki illustrates how communities reclaim agency and transform residual or marginalized resources into opportunities for sustainable development, demonstrating that localized action can counter broader pressures of touristification. Facing issues such as unemployment, depopulation, overtourism, and declining social cohesion, community-led tourism initiatives in this region have increasingly turned to proximity-based social innovation. Driven by small, bottom-up actors - including entrepreneurs, family firms, cooperatives, museums, and social enterprises - these efforts centre on preserving and revaluing diverse forms of cultural heritage. Research on social innovation in tourism highlights how such community practices mobilize tangible and intangible heritage to foster micro-regeneration and sustainable local development. Based on interviews and life-story narratives, in her chapter, Dr. Tzazadaki shows how key stakeholders act as custodians of local memory, generating community benefits and triggering wider processes of territorial micro-regeneration.

Taken together, all chapters collected in Section II show how communities, artists, researchers, and local actors actively resist the extractive and wasting dynamics of contemporary tourism by reclaiming materials, spaces, and narratives. Across the diverse case studies—from circular practices based on waste reuse, to participatory art, craft-based re-signification, and proximity-driven social innovation—emerges a shared commitment to transforming residues into resources and marginality into opportunity. These contributions demonstrate that sustainability becomes meaningful when rooted in situated knowledge, collaborative experimentation, and care for local ecosystems. Rather than proposing universal solutions, the section highlights a plurality of grounded practices that redefine tourism as a relational, community-centered, and regenerative process.

In conclusion, we hope readers will appreciate the multiple perspectives offered in the present volume, not just in terms of research development practices, but as efforts in looking at present eco-challenges with an open, interdisciplinary and collaborative attitude. The findings of the iNEST-Young Researchers project underscore the need for further research to interrogate the complex and multidimensional nature of tourism-induced waste. Material, cultural, and symbolic residues are intertwined, shaped by extraction, commodification, and selective accessibility, and their impacts extend beyond immediate ecological or economic concerns. Future studies could build on these insights by adopting longitudinal and comparative approaches, exploring how different territorial, social, and cultural contexts mediate the production and circulation of waste in tourism. In particular, research that bridges disciplinary perspectives—combining management, visual arts, narrative, linguistics, anthropology, and material sciences—can continue to illuminate the ways in which creative, participatory, and culturally grounded interventions reshape the relationships between local communities, visitors, and heritage resources. Emphasis on co-creation and collaborative methodologies may further clarify the conditions under which sustainability practices move from symbolic rhetoric to tangible, socially inclusive outcomes.

Finally, as the epigraph quotation at the beginning of this introduction recites, we hope that both our individual and collective attempts into exploring waste and tourism relationships might shine some truth for the public, suggesting further initiatives in the direction of sustainable practices in those fragile, hyper-tourist contexts, but also in a way that re-think our impact in terms of waste production and resource consumption. Being each discipline and chapter arbitrarily moving from the same issue, as editors of this collective volume, we as well wish readers to deliberately and purposely take whatever suggestions they please, and make from them more true, inspired and ambitious actions for a more socially and environmentally sustainable planet/future.

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SECTION I: Tracing Waste in Tourist Destinations

The first section examines to what extent the tourism industry contributes to waste production not only in terms of residual materials, but also as landscapes, identities, narratives, and language barriers. The chapters collected under this section analyse diverse territories - from the Venetian Lagoon to the North-East Alps, moving also through urban and suburban contexts - in order to reveal how extractive economies, aesthetic commodification, and circular narratives of sustainability often conceal new forms of exploitation. By merging artistic, narrative, sociological, translation and ecological perspectives, this first part of the volume maps the systemic contradictions of tourism's promise of renewal, showing how the rhetoric of "sustainability" may reproduce sometimes, rather than overcome, the same logic of waste.

1. Reshaping Wastelands: Contemporary Representations and Accounts from the Venetian Lagoon

Francesca Pangallo

Abstract:

This chapter examines how Venice and its lagoon are represented in contemporary literary narratives, often in contrast to the promotional and tourist imagery associated with the city. Using the concept of *wasteland* as a cultural and literary reference, the chapter first examines T. S. Eliot's depiction of desolate land (1922) in a post-World War context, tracing how it has evolved into a major cultural touchstone, informing subsequent reinterpretations of the term. This includes the documentary *Waste Land* (2010), in which disposable waste is transformed into art both physically and symbolically, exemplifying contemporary understandings of *wastelands* shaped by environmental crises and Anthropocene dynamics. Drawing on Armiero's concept of the *Wasteocene* (2021) and other scholarship in the Environmental Humanities, the analysis then turns to contemporary narratives and significant events located in the Venetian lagoon. Two major trends in tourist perception are examined: the pursuit of authenticity, central to the visitor experience, and the fascination with collapse, exemplified by scenarios of Venice sinking underwater, both of which inspire urgency to visit. Through these perspectives, literary representations of the lagoon are read as wastelands – spaces where cultural, ecological, and social dynamics intersect, often absent or distorted in tourist narratives. This chapter ultimately presents Venice not merely as an idyllic or deteriorating site, but as a complex, multifaceted territory, where literature illuminates the city's ecological fragility, social tensions, and broader challenges for contemporary humanity.

Keywords: Venice, Venetian Lagoon, Wasteland, Waste, Contemporary Literature, Environmental Humanities, Italian Literature, Tourism, Tourist Storytelling, Tourist Communication.

“Unreal city,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn”

T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*,
vv. 60-61, 1922.

1.1 Introduction: what is a “wasteland” and how it applies to present scenarios

The term *wasteland* is, in many respects, inherently poetic: while its primary definition conveys a geological or utilitarian meaning, referring to a desert (WASTELAND Synonyms: 17 Similar Words | Merriam-Webster Thesaurus) or to a devastated, uncultivated land (WASTELAND Definition & Meaning | Dictionary.com), it also carries remarkable literary resonance and allegorical potential. To describe a term as “poetic” implies that it is not only evocative, but also multi-layered and symbolically charged. Supporting this interpretation of the term, we might consider how most readers would not associate this word with a specific location (on Google Maps, for example), but rather with T. S. Eliot’s iconic poem *The Waste Land* (1922). In modern and contemporary discourse, the meaning of *wasteland* has further evolved from these literary origins, acquiring historical and metaphorical significance within ongoing debates on humanity’s global challenges. My line of inquiry employs the term *wasteland* as a critical lens through which to examine contemporary representations of the Venetian lagoon in Italian 20th and 21st century literature. The purpose is to monitor the evolution of this unique cultural landscape when depicted as a land rendered desolate

due to human industrial intervention, mass tourism, and climate change. Ultimately, the main goal is to critically engage with contemporary literary portraits of Venice and its lagoon, in order to question and unmask the contradictions often inherent in tourist-driven narratives.

Before dealing with the authors and literary accounts selected for this research, I will briefly discuss two illustrative examples of the *wasteland* concept from fictional and artistic perspectives, placing them in the context of current debates in Environmental Humanities. This premise serves to establish a broader critical framework for those who are approaching these themes for the first time, and to highlight the semantic range and cultural influence of the term *wasteland* itself to justify its use as a category for investigation. Ultimately, this introduction provides an overview on how the term *wasteland* functions as a compelling, allegorical device for interpreting ecological crisis, historical trauma, and overall, the fractured relationship between humans and the natural world.

1.1.1 *Wasteland as a literary landscape*

As briefly mentioned, one of the most significant references highlighting the multiple uses, meanings, and connotations of the term *wasteland* can be found in the homonymous poem by Thomas Stearns Eliot: *The Waste Land* was first published in October 1922 in the inaugural issue of the journal *The Criterion* (Melchionda, 1976: 7; Lane, 2022) – a quarterly British magazine edited by Eliot himself.¹ The poem's influence reached well be-

¹ “*The Criterion*, which I edited throughout the whole seventeen years during which it appeared, was founded by (Lilian) Lady Rothermere at the end of 1921: in the first number appeared *The Waste Land*.” T.S. Eliot's *Preface* to the magazine's Collected Edition (1922-1939), available in a digitalized edition on *The Internet Archive* library: <https://archive.org/details/criterion19221930007unse/page/n7/mode/1up> (Last access: July 23rd, 2025).

yond the First Post-war period, resonating throughout the entire 20th century, especially after the Second World War. Although the word *wasteland* never appears in the body of Eliot's poem – neither in its compound nor separated form – its presence is nonetheless evoked throughout: from the epigraph to the final section, the poem immerses the reader in a constellation of scenes and symbols that conjure what might be termed *wastelanding* – a landscape not only marked by ruin, but also engaged in an ongoing process of fragmentation and decline.

Scholars who have sought thematic or formal unity in Eliot's work seem to agree that despite the diversity of the *fragments* (as Ezra Pound referred to the poem's lines due to the high number of scenes) and the reader's sense of disorientation, the main thrust of Eliot's argument is that both hope and renovation are lost for the world and its living creatures:

L'unità del poema è stata cercata a lungo a livello tematico. Si può dire anzi che un momento essenziale della critica eliotiana vecchia e nuova sia costituito dall'identificazione del tema o dei temi di base e dalla valutazione della loro portata in vista della comprensione totale dell'opera. [...]. L'enunciato di base del poema è che *tutta* la Terra, scenario di *tutta* la Storia, ha perso la sua capacità generativa, è inaridita. La condizione del suolo è figura fedele dei personaggi che vi si aggirano. (Melchionda, 1976: 17, emphasis in the original)

One of the most explicitly developed themes central to the poem (and one that echoes well with the multifaceted connotations of the word *wasteland*) is death. Two of the five sections have titles referring directly to mortality and loss.² Moreover, the spectres of Europe's devastation following the First World War weigh on Eliot's verses, even those which adopt a Biblical or classicist tone. The poem, largely studied for its intertextual richness, is full of allusions and implicit quotations from many

² I refer in detail to the following section titles: "The Burial of the Dead" (41), and "Death by Water" (53).

other relevant authors, most included in what Harold Bloom defined as the “Western canon” (1994). While Eliot’s sources are key to the Western literary tradition, they do not all originate from the work’s period of publication. Among the figures whose voices echo throughout the poem are Geoffrey Chaucer, Dante Alighieri, and William Shakespeare. These references serve not merely as literary homage, but as vital components in Eliot’s portrayal of the spiritual and existential wasteland of the modern world.

Thanks to T. S. Eliot’s poem, and to his complex and critical reworking of scenes drawn from a wide intertextual tradition, the concept of the *wasteland* in twentieth-century Western literature has come to denote more than a site of physical desolation or death. Conditioned by the historical moment of its emergence, it has assumed the quality of an affection: an atmosphere engaged with cultural and existential significance. In Eliot’s poetics, *wastelanding* may manifest as an urban condition (ll. 60–76), a temporal rupture (ll. 1–18), or a state of psychological dislocation (ll. 360–366), extending its resonance beyond the text and into the critical lexicon of modernity.

1.1.2 *Wasteland as an artistic laboratory*

The second example originates from the film industry: the documentary *Waste Land* (2010) - *Lixo Extraordinário*, in Portuguese – directed by Lucy Walker, was filmed in Jardim Gramacho, a neighbourhood north of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where until 2012 one of the largest landfills in the world was located. The film follows Brazilian artist and photographer Vik Muniz as he interacts with a team of waste recycling collectors – *catadores* in the movie – who vary in age, sex, and personal background. Through a series of interviews and collaborative art projects, Muniz shares their stories as individuals while inviting reflection on what their job means to them,

as well as focusing on the broader implications of their work as members of the working class and as persons with dignity, agency, and resilience.

At the beginning of film, Muniz explains that at this stage of his career, after some previous experiments in mixing materials and social projects for art purposes,³ he feels the need to challenge himself, claiming that his purpose as an artist should “be able to change the life of a group of people, with the same materials that they deal with every day.” (Muniz in Walker, 2010: 7’15’). Together with the *catadores*, Muniz begins a collaborative project where he photographs each individual in a pose that reflects their personality and story. Together they then reproduce each photograph on a large-scale portrait, where the images are then filled with residual waste of all sorts: glass, metals, PVC, and more. This process transforms the discarded materials into an artistic medium, making the subjects co-creators, reframing both the concept of waste and those who manage it.

The choice of waste as the primary medium in the collaborative process leads the viewer to reflect on the landfill workers’ social status, and more generally on how their living conditions are perceived. Jardim Gramacho is portrayed not simply as a dump site, but as a wasteland in an Eliotian sense: a no man’s land, inhabited by people who are often regarded from an external perspective as ‘disposable’, as ‘lost souls’. Before Muniz’s involvement, the community of waste pickers and the ACAMJG association - “Associação dos Catadores do Aterro Metropolitano de Jardim Gramacho” - had mostly remained invisible, despite their dignity, wisdom, and their essential contribution to recycling and environmental sustainability of their land.

³ (see the portraits from the *Sugar Children Series*, 1996 - for reference: Vik Muniz | Valentina, The Fastest | The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

1.1.3 *Wasteland as a place of relationships and individual crisis*

The conditions experienced by Rio's *catadores*, together with their stories (including the initial interest Muniz showed in them) represent an apt, impactful example of what scholar Marco Armiero would ten years later call "wasting relationships":

Waste as a relation (wasting) *produces* the targeted community rather than solely selecting it as the ideal place for an unwanted facility [...]. The production of waste is connected to the production of the other, or the outside, and of the "us." [...] Othering means to change the "nature" of the other while simultaneously using it to preserve a privilege. (Armiero, 2021: 2, emphasis in the original)

For Armiero, waste becomes the element through which the mechanisms of capitalist and neo-colonialist exploitation are revealed, mechanisms which renders both the planet and its living beings disposable for the benefit of a small, wealthy – and predominantly white – minority: "through the Wasteocene, I intend to stress the contaminated nature of capitalism and its endurance within the texture of life" (Armiero 2021: 10). Later in the book, Armiero directly mentions and discusses the film *Waste Land*. Despite acknowledging the limitations and controversies of some of its dynamics, pointed out by other scholars (see: Mil-lar 2018 and Kantaris 2016, in Armiero, 2021: 51), the author recognises Muniz's initiative as "a beautiful act of resistance against the Wasteocene" (51), not only because of its ripple effect on the community, but on a deeper level due to its symbolic reversal of the dominant logic of disposability:

As the Wasteocene imposes that these people are garbage, Muniz's project appropriates this assumption and overturns it. The powerful portraits of those *catadores* are made of recycled materials but they are not garbage at all; actually, one of them was sold in an auction in London, while altogether they became an extremely successful exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio. The selling of the

portraits and the prizes received for the movie helped the association of waste pickers to realize some of their objectives, including the acquisition of some trucks and the creation of a public library in the favela. However, more than for the material support for the catadores, I believe that Muniz's project was successful in challenging the main pillar of the Wasteocene, that is, the othering regime which produces worthless people who not only work with waste but are deemed waste themselves. [...] The exhibition at the Modern Art Museum in Rio de Janeiro is an occupation of the cultural space of the city; for the catadores it was the first time they set foot in a museum and they did so through both their portraits and their bodies. (Armiero, 2021: 51-52)

Armiero's Wasteocene description resonates with Ernesto De Martino's formula "*crisi della presenza*" (1959) – *crisis of presence* in English (De Martino 2015: 85) – recently used by scholar Federico Luisetti to reflect on earth-beings' legal status during the climate emergency (2023). De Martino originally used this formula in the 1960s to describe how, in certain rural regions of Southern Italy (specifically Lucania, which today largely corresponds to the Basilicata region), communities affected by natural and existential trauma responded through practices such as magic, spells, and trance states as methods to cope. The *crisis of presence* is essentially a breakdown of an individual's sense of self, identity, and agency in the face of overwhelming cultural or existential pressures.

One could argue that the community of *catadores* in Walker's documentary have a similar experience: in the precarious living conditions of the favelas, as the workers struggle with both material deprivation and the stigmatizing gaze of society, the art-making works as a magical practice of empowerment and relief, providing support for the difficulties encountered in daily life at the landfill. Scenes illustrate how pickers are aware of the social stigma attached to their work: one character emphasizes moments such as riding the bus as a constant reminder of her disturbing

work conditions, and how other passengers perceive her appearance (Magna de França Santos in Walker, 2010: 39'26"). Early on in the project, another character expresses her anxiety and pain in response to the idea of going back to work as a *catadora* once the portraits are completed, and asks Muniz and his staff if they can employ her, even with a small salary, so she can keep working with them rather than going back to the dump (Isis Rodrigues Garros in Walker, 2010: 1h 8'1"). Yet, these feelings of shame and invisibility coexist with a sense of pride in their work, given that their money is earned in an honest way. Often, pickers arrive at Jardim Gramacho after terrible family tragedies, and see their work not only as decent but also as a morally preferable alternative to drug trafficking or prostitution – often constituting the only other viable options for survival in such environments.

The *crisis of presence* is well demonstrated here as a response to Armiero's *wasting relationship* dynamics, or even as a consequence of that mechanism, with humans and communities being caught in the Wasteocene's vortex. As briefly mentioned earlier, Professor Federico Luisetti has built on De Martino's formula to express a new, updated feeling of existential crisis, currently linked to climate change:

My thesis is that the implosion of the sense of reality and individuality captured by De Martino in post-World War II Italy has now escalated into a geohistorical dimension: climate change and the environmental catastrophe have caused a crisis of presence of planetary proportions, which is reframing the experience of being a subject in the age of global ecological disruption. (Luisetti, 2023: 2)

It is possible to see how the sense of desolation and crisis expressed by Eliot's *Waste Land* aligns with De Martino's post-WWII *crisis of presence*, and ultimately with Luisetti's statement. A century earlier, Eliot's poem had already extended the feeling of crises and collapse (a feeling that cities, cultures, nature and all aspects of human society endured after WWI) to a *geohistor-*

ical dimension. Ultimately, between Eliot's poem and Muniz's project, it is possible to spot how the term *wasteland* evolved into a metaphor not only for material decay and spiritual emptiness, but also as a metaphor for "global ecological disruption" (Luisetti, 2023: 2). The word "waste-land" intertwines the meaning of "waste" as both desolate and disposable garbage, and the meaning of "land" as a specific location (Jardim Gramacho) that reflects broader environmental and social issues such as pollution, displacement, war, and systemic marginalisation.

From a humanities and cultural perspective, *wasteland* has thus become an increasingly layered and paradoxical concept: it addresses the absence of life, meaning the destruction of urban and human landscapes due to belligerent actions (Eliot), but also the presence of both causes and effects related to global issues and environmental disasters (Luisetti). It focuses on the collective dimension of injustice established by the Wasteocene (Armiero), while including a strong sense of individual deadlock and impasse (De Martino) due to the contemporary scenario and the transformation of society.

Keeping in mind these various meanings and circumstances surrounding the term *wasteland*, the next section will present it as a semantic and literary category applicable to a specific site of interest: the city of Venice and its lagoon. Through a selection of narrative representations of the Venetian environment from contemporary literature, I will argue how the lagoon landscape and the so-called "City of Water" represent paradigmatic examples of contemporary *wastelands*. This interpretation contrasts sharply with the prevailing tourist imagery of Venice, which continues to promote a romanticised and commodified vision. Ultimately, this research effort is addressed to present alternatives to dominant narratives, proposing that tourist-driven storytelling itself can become a *wastelanding* mechanism: by producing and promoting appeal at all costs, it contributes to the erosion of local identity, the displacement of communities, and the transforma-

tion of cultural sites into desolate spaces filled with pollution, unaffordable housing, and souvenir shops.

1.2 The city of unique, wasteful experiences

There have been countless representations of Venice in literature, arts, and film throughout history. More recently, the issue of tourism has been included more frequently in narratives and cultural activity, often representing a platform for debate rather than merely presenting a background issue. As the number of daily visitors to Venice keeps increasing while the number of residents declines (see § 3.1, Baravalle: 74), many authors, artists, and activists have been monitoring the inevitable change of the city-landscape, often denouncing the situation through acts of public resistance⁴ and proposing alternative accounts⁵ which focus on the authenticity and ‘true calling’ of the Lagoon city – being a small yet very liveable urban centre – in contrast to the glazed, artificial scene created for visitors and profit. One element often attributed to tourists’ perception of Venice is how they find ordinary, everyday activities to be fascinating, and think of everything as being extraordinary: canals, bridges, wells, houses and buildings, colours or materials – collectively, it all communicates uniqueness and ‘bizarreness’ at the same time. As proof of this tourist craving for uniqueness, it is significant that the official municipality’s tourist website is called “Venezia é Unica”: Venice is *unique* (<https://www.veneziaunica.it/it>).

⁴ See, for example, the protests for the wedding of Jeff Bezos and Lauren Sanchez, involving the actions and performances of the group “Extinction Rebellion Venezia” and the initiatives and the town meetings organized by the local committee “No space for Bezos”.

⁵ See, for example, the movies *Molecole* (2020) and *Welcome Venice* (2021) by Andrea Segre, or *Cielo aperto* (2023) by Ruggero Romano. For further references within this volume, see Baravalle: 84–85.

It is true that as tourists, the hope and craving for authenticity has become a driving factor in choosing the type of place, food, or activity to experience (see § 8.2.2, De Luca-Ferri: 194-197). However, in an urban environment where every single corner or business has been devoted to profit, expectations of authenticity are bound to remain unmet. In his most recent novel, writer Tiziano Scarpa expresses this genuine feeling from an unusual perspective: a Venetian citizen - born and raised in one of the most tourist-saturated destinations worldwide - abroad for vacation, as a visitor himself:

I turisti sono pochissimi. E così abbiamo l'illusione di aver trovato un posto in disparte, più autentico, meno sdato [*sic*] e anche meno sporto sulle nostre aspettative: ciò che viviamo in questa spiaggia non è stato organizzato per compiacere noi turisti, offrendoci ciò che i greci pensano possa far piacere agli stranieri, ma qualcosa che funziona così di per sé e casomai, se capita, può accogliere anche ciò che non c'entra, ciò che non era previsto: noi. I turisti sperano sempre di trovare qualcosa che non li prevedeva, un posto, una situazione *tourist free*, e di entrarci dentro, di viverla. (Scarpa, 2023: 86)

In this quote, Scarpa articulates this contradiction of wanting to feel included – to have a pleasurable experience while away from home – whilst reflecting that a certain level of discomfort, or an unexpected event, can enormously benefit a visitor's experience. This dynamic fits well into an example of storytelling: the stories that one is more eager to share on social media are often about the uniqueness of places, found outside the usual tourist routes. This attitude is especially encouraged in a city like Venice, where the maze-like geometry of its canals and *calli*, the silent atmosphere at night, and many other common features are seen as exceptional elements by visitors, even if they are normal urban features for residents.

This type of altered, conflicted fascination is visible for example in the overview of experiences in Venice offered through Airbnb (<https://www.airbnb.com/s/Venice--Italy/experiences>), where

in order to be memorable and authentic (see § 2.1, Armano: 48-50), any activity package stresses the “local” element as being unique and privileged: the “hidden canals”, “secret gardens”, “small groups/guided-tour only”, and “authentic glass-making classes” constitute nowadays a distinctly average and ‘synthetic’ visitor experience. How can both tourist communication and proposed tourist experiences form the basis of a ‘truthful’ visit to the lagoon city, without falling into predictable stereotypes? Literature has definitely engaged with this question, presenting some significant ideas that depict extreme expectations of authenticity.

1.2.1 Waste collection: tourist or local business?

Benvenuti a Ultra-Venezia is a fictional, dystopian essay authored again by Tiziano Scarpa (2023b). In this literary piece, which opens the Iperborea “Passenger” volume about Venice (Scarpa *et. Al.*, 2023), the discussion starts openly with concern for over-tourism within the city’s historic centre. A first-person narrator acts as a guide around the lagoon for a group of rich, important guests, explaining the problems of urban life in Venice and what surviving in such a landscape means, starting with its altered social profile:

Abbiamo raggiunto una soglia epocale: i visitatori quotidiani sono pari agli abitanti stabili. [...] E che cosa sono, i turisti? La parte che guarda una città, la fotografa e la riflette come uno specchio. C’è Venezia, gli abitanti; e c’è Meta-Venezia, i turisti. Due parti di un organismo simbiotico, in cui azione e immaginazione riflessa convivono. Considerate questo corpo demografico, fatto per metà di muscoli e ossa, e per l’altra metà di grappoli d’occhi e smartphone. Possiamo ancora chiamarlo corpo? (Scarpa, 2023b: 10)

In this narrative, while the purpose is still to demonstrate the remarkable and dramatic uniqueness of Venice through its canals and islands, the narrator proposes an “exceptional guided tour”

[it. “una guida d’eccezione”] (Scarpa, 2023b: 9) of a very unusual and well-hidden local site: the Veritas⁶ dump centres of the Municipality of Venice, one located at Sacca San Biagio – a part of Sacca Fisola Island (Giudecca, Venice) – and the other in Fusina (Marghera), on the mainland. “Ultra-Venezia” is the place where everything, especially the tourist presence, is turned into a *wasteland* in a literal yet inverse sense: not a landfill, but a place that survives thanks to garbage production and accumulation. Not a poor, desolate land, but rather an intriguing opportunity for business:

Saltiamo il fosso, evolviamoci: la fabbrica dei forestieri deve diventare l’industria della produzione turistica di rifiuti. Venezia, e con lei l’Italia, non può immalinconirsi nella nostalgia del suo passato industriale. Noi siamo ancora una potenza che fabbrica, che produce! [...] Allevare turisti, come pesci attirati in laguna: vale a dire allevare produttori di rifiuti. (Scarpa, 2023b: 25)

Whether tourists or citizens like it or not, Scarpa’s fictional guided tour suggests that even with the complete transformation of Venice into what the author defines as “Meta-Venice” – an ecosystem skewed towards *reflection* (tourists) rather than *action* (citizens) – the commercial aspect of Venice, historically a “business-city” [it. “città-azienda”] (Scarpa, 2023 b: 10), will never decrease. The city will only change its modes of production, investing in a different, but still unique, product: residual waste. “Ultra-Venezia” provides readers with a vision that strongly contrasts with the most frequent images shown on promotional campaigns or social media about the city of Venice. In this case, the use of waste as a narrative tool further develops connections with and implications for a real, practical challenge in the city. The presence of tourists produces a daily quantity of garbage that has an impact on both locals’ and visitors’ perspectives, especially when looking at how waste collection is carried out in

⁶ See: Veritas Group: Waste Management and Water Services in Veneto: [Gruppo Veritas](#) (Last access: July 25th, 2025).

Venice – unique due to the city's geographic features. Waste collectors go door to door, six days a week, to pick up both recycled and general waste. There are several rules to adhere to in terms of recycling and disposing of garbage bags in the historic centre, like in every other urban environment. In Venice, however, a rigid schedule and timetable for pickup and street cleaning is employed to reduce the accumulation of garbage and to limit infestations of animals such as seagulls, pigeons, and rats.

The waste collection process in Venice also provided a research interest for writer and photographer Andrea Semplici. In his latest publication, titled *MaterVenezia. Racconto di due città* (2024), Semplici attempts to prove how the cities of Venice and Matera – the former in the North and the latter in the South (one city being based on water and the other being made out of stones) – share more stories and features than one can imagine. Currently, in both places, tourism represents simultaneously the strongest attraction and the most significant threat to their unique urban setting and hybrid relationship with the natural ecosystem in which they are located. Semplici's perception of waste collection in Venice apparently clashes with the simple assumption 'that tourists leave trash everywhere': in the book, he actually claims the opposite: that Venice is a very clean city compared to many other urban environments in Italy. The only plausible evidence for such a statement might derive not from the waste-maker's perspective, as Scarpa presents (the tourist view), but from the waste collector, the "spazzino". In Semplici's narrative-reportage, Venice becomes a virtuous example of a clean city through an understanding and acknowledgement of the difficult and meticulous working system undertaken by pickers and street cleaners (both meanings are included in the local term *spazzino*). In the quote below, Semplici describes a part of his waste-related research, following the character of Grazia, one of the 84 women waste-collectors (Semplici, 2024: 37) currently hired by the local waste-management company "Veritas":

Mestiere di forza, lo spazzino. E qui sei a Venezia: ci vogliono braccia, gambe, ostinazione, una buona destrezza, molta pazienza. Ho una sensazione: che gli spazzini siano tutti belli, giovani, forti, allegri. Ne ho incontrati tanti nei miei giorni veneziani. Alle sei del mattino mi sono sembrati i soli abitanti della città.

Si comincia a spazzare. Grazia prepara la scopa di saggina. La liscia, ne allunga gli "stecchi", li allinea. Mi fa vedere il movimento che il corpo deve fare. L'arco che la scopa deve percorrere per non lasciare indietro nemmeno una cartaccia, nemmeno la polvere. Fa dei mucchi a ogni angolo. Bisogna ripassare a raccogliarli. [...]. Saluta i negozianti che stanno aprendo bottega. Si chiamano per nome "Ciao, Davide". "Ciao, Grazia". Le consegnano i rifiuti depositandoli nel carrello. [...] Penso che a Matera, città piccola, non conosco il nome di chi pulisce il mio vicolo. Viva il paese di Venezia. (Semplici, 2024: 37)

From Semplici's portrait, it feels possible to pose a contrast to Venice's 'wastelanding' processes by depicting (or supporting) this safe space, where human relationships can still be saved, and the complete transformation of the city into a tourist money-making trap - or into a waste-making business, as suggested in Scarpa's short story - can be prevented, with a place of mutual support and quiet living taking its place. The *crisis of presence* that Venetian residents are experiencing due to overtourism could be then contained by collective actions, or *commoning practices*, as per Armiero's contribution, opposed to 'wasting' relationships:

[...] as my focus is on wasting rather than waste, I maintain that commoning is the antidote. By "commoning" I mean the ensemble of socio-ecological practices which (re) produce commons, transforming it from a "thing" into a collective practice, a relationship. [...] I argue that commoning is to (re)production through sharing as wasting is to extraction through othering. In other words, while wasting relationships are based on consuming and "other- ing," that is, on sorting out what and who is waste, commoning practices are based on reproducing resources and communities. (Armiero 2021: 13)

1.2.2 *Wasteland as utopia*

An excellent example of commoning practices in contemporary Venice is represented by the case of *Poveglia per tutti*: the true story of an island of the Venetian lagoon, Poveglia, that was put up for sale by auction in 2014 by the local state property administration, and a group of Venetian citizens. The group created a committee *Poveglia per tutti* ("Poveglia for all") and collected money to make an offer to manage the island, to prevent it from becoming private property and to keep it as a public space for locals (Cavallo and Visentin, 2021). The case raised international attention at the time (Davies 2014), and again recently (Nadeau, 2025). After more than 10 years of political neglect, court appeals, and delayed decisions by the local administration, on July 2nd, 2025, the management of Poveglia island was officially assigned to the association *Poveglia per tutti* for the next six years, with the aim of creating a park and a space accessible for all citizens (Agenzia del Demanio - Venezia: l'Isola di Poveglia in concessione all'Associazione Poveglia per tutti).

Poveglia, (an actual *wasteland*, as the island was abandoned during the 1960s), thanks to the private initiative and efforts of Venetian residents, will now benefit from a concrete plan to guarantee its maintenance and liveability, becoming a symbol of Armiero's *commoning* and social action within the Venetian lagoon. The case of Poveglia was of widespread interest, as the whole dynamic upholds a powerful storytelling appeal. From a narrative perspective, Poveglia's hardships and ultimate happy ending perfectly follows the pattern of Christopher Vogler's "hero's journey" (1992, 2007).⁷ The symbolic weight of the actions and events linked to *Poveglia per tutti*'s committee are not part of what Vogler labels as the "Ordinary World" – in this context, where the dominant *status quo* operates, Poveglia would have been sold out to private

⁷ As further reference, note that Vogler was respectively influenced by Joseph Campbell's studies (who was in turn inspired by Jungian archetypes) on the monomyths (Campbell, 1949).

investors. This happened to other islands of the Venetian lagoon's archipelago, such as Sacca Sessola and San Clemente, for example (see Mantegoli, 2023: 156-157). Instead, the residents' calls to action to save Poveglia belong to Vogler's "Special World" – an extraordinary story in which the hero needs to change in order to change the world too, as the only way to save themselves and fulfil their destiny. Unlike traditional tourist narratives, however, the outcome of Poveglia's story is a positive one due to the difficulties encountered and overcome by the local community, who unified to collect money and (above all) preserve cultural identity as a form of resistance to the politics of overtourism within public and private investments.

The removal of disturbing elements and hardships in favour of displaying an untouched, decadent beauty – which underpins Venice's tourist image – actually prevents visitors from witnessing the complexity involved in living in such a unique city, as well as removing the collective richness that accompanies it. Venice could be eventually narrated not by focusing on the economic perspective, but by enhancing the human element that characterises and protects the true authenticity of the city. From Scarpa's dystopia, all the way to Poveglia's utopia, the *wasteland* dimension is a key image of both degradation and emancipation. In these examples – whether they are fictional or factual – Venice and its islands share an element of crisis that ties together all *wastelanding* features mentioned above. The place represents not only an evocative, symbolic landscape in its desolation, but also a place of relationship and individual commitment, emerging as a result of the dire circumstances and emergency situation which affects the lagoon ecosystem.

1.3 The collapse of an artificial ecosystem

The accounts mentioned in the previous paragraphs involve both environmental features (lagoon topography, waste

pollution) and cultural traits (resident identity, collectives vs overtourism) that are linked to active wastelanding processes in contemporary Venice and its lagoon. From a communication perspective, referring to Venice as an *ecosystem* in recent public discourse⁸ is relevant, as it acknowledges the presence of both human and non-human subjects⁹ as fundamental agents. Stones, water, wood, specific flora and fauna, and of course human intervention, have created a unique landscape over the centuries, which now requires protection from future dangers such as (primarily) global warming. Literature has also been investigating the alterations and transformation of the Venetian lagoon environment in relation to climate change and industrialisation processes: it is from these narratives' perspectives that new declinations of the wasteland concept within the Venice lagoon ecosystem emerge, especially in connection with the phenomenon of the high tide.

The idea that the city of Venice can disappear underwater is an appalling (and yet fascinating) scenario from fictional, scientific, and tourism perspectives. A trend known as *last-tourism destination*, or *last-chance tourism* – a definition that originally emerged in the 2000s with the increasing demand for visiting glaciers in the Arctic regions before they melt (see Lemelin *et. al.*, 2012) – has also impacted the Venetian lagoon, signalling it as a place to visit urgently – not only because of its uniqueness, but because of its fragility. Given the present threat of global warming, the risk of the city sinking due to the sea levels rising is becoming less of an improbable catastrophe – as a collateral, controversial effect, this environmental emergency has been attracting

⁸ As a reference, see the project “Ecosistema futuro” launched in S. Marco Square, Venice, on May 14th, 2025 within the Future Day Festival: Future Day 2025. Mettere il futuro al centro del dibattito pubblico, politico e culturale (Last Access: Aug 10th, 2025).

⁹ About the juridical definition of non-human subject, or *earth-being*, see Luisetti, 2023: 10-14.

even more tourists, who are taking the opportunity to visit the ‘City on Water’ before it is too late.¹⁰ Last-chance tourism carries multiple paradoxes as a socio-economic phenomenon, the most important being a matter of sustainability, as “tourists travelling long distances [...] are disproportionately responsible (per capita) for increased emissions, which ironically impact the health of the very resource they are there to see” (Lemelin *et al.*, 2010: 488).

In recent years, the local administration in Venice has been taking action to safeguard the city from both natural and human agents. A key measure has been the installation of M.O.S.E. – *Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico* – a system of mobile dams for limiting the seawater level, active since October 2020. Another measure has been the introduction of paid entrance to the city,¹¹ adopted during spring of years 2024 and 2025, for any visitor coming from outside the Veneto region and not staying overnight in the city. Both these methods provoked widespread criticism from local and international communities, raising the critical question of what it means to protect an ecosystem in danger, and to what extent humans have interfered – or can keep interfering – with the natural development and conservation of such ecosystems.

While British author and journalist Simon Jenkins claimed in *The Guardian* that “some 49,000 remaining Venetian residents cannot possibly pay for the salvation of their city. Thirty million visitors to Venice can” (Jenkins, 2024), Venetian residents have positioned themselves mostly against this measure, especially in relation to the increasing housing request and the eviction pol-

¹⁰ See, for example, the ranking of the following last-chance tourist destinations compiled in 2024: Last Chance tourism: The trend that is pushing people to visit destinations likely to disappear | Times of India Travel (Last Access: Aug 7th, 2025).

¹¹ In Italian: “cda” – which stands for *contributo di accesso*. For further info, see: Cos’è il Contributo di accesso - Venezia Unica (Last Access: Aug 10th, 2025).

icy carried out by the administration. In a report provocatively titled ["Per Venezia ci vorrebbe un ticket d'uscita"](#), the association "Ocio" – *Osservatorio CivicO sulla casa e la residenza – Venezia*, denounced the contradictory attitude of the poor, unsupportive housing policy for residents compared to the intricate systems established for the entrance ticket fee payment and monitoring system:

Per quanto riguarda Venezia e lo spopolamento che la caratterizza, soprattutto delle famiglie più deboli economicamente, viene lecito chiedersi se l'imponente apparato di gestione e controllo di chi arriva in città messo a punto per il ticket d'ingresso non possa essere più utile se orientato a conoscere i motivi e le condizioni di chi dalla città è costretto ad andarsene: un monitoraggio della questione abitativa e della reale efficacia delle proprie politiche sulla casa aiuterebbe l'amministrazione a guardare in faccia la realtà e agire di conseguenza (Ocio, May 18th, 2024).

As for the functioning and maintenance of MO.S.E., writer and contributor Alessandro Marzo Magno offered a thorough overview of the controversial approaches and of the hydrogeological consequences spawned by human interventions in the lagoon since the 1200s. In his piece *Terra e acqua* (2023: 48-67), Marzo Magno claims that, despite the alleged innovative mechanism employed by MO.S.E. and the confidence placed in the project by politicians, the strategy of using artificial dams to preserve the lagoon area is nothing new. The idea has been around since the 16th century (2023: 57), given the risk of silt ingress caused by the nearby Alpine rivers (such as the Piave or Brenta), independently of the many interventions in and alterations to river beds that Venetians have been carrying out in the region. Today, the nature of the hydrogeological risk has changed: rivers are no longer as dangerous as the Adriatic sea currently is, representing the biggest danger to the lagoon (which explains the positioning of the MO.S.E. dams along the inlets between the islands of

Lido and Pellestrina, towards the open-sea side of the lagoon). However, the concept of safeguarding the natural shape of the lagoon environment has been pursued less for quite some time, according to Marzo Magno: “Dalla fine del Seicento la Laguna è ormai un ambiente artificiale, totalmente disegnato dall’intervento umano per bloccarne la naturale evoluzione” (60).

1.3.1 *Lagoon wastelands as science fiction*

The idea that Venice and its lagoon have been relentlessly losing their unique environmental features due to anthropic intervention through engineering and industrialisation processes brings us back to the *wasteland* scenario. A certain familiarity with this scenario and its language is due to science fiction. In his last academic work, exploring ecological features within contemporary Italian science fiction, Marco Malvestio dedicates the first part of his investigation to “Post-Boom Wastelands” (2025: 30-85), analysing to what extent “Italian science fiction interacts with the environmental and social changes” (2025: 23) occurring between the 1950s and the early 2010s. Interestingly, Malvestio identifies oil and waste production as the two most relevant factors influencing the way selected authors described wastelanding processes in the post WWII years – proving again, as for T.S. Eliot, how war represents the most essential condition for constructing both literal and metaphorical wasteland conditions.

As discussed earlier in response to Scarpa’s literary piece, in the same way in which disposable waste in Venice possesses narrative agency, oil and its related industrial production processes can be seen as active agents in the transformation of the Venetian lagoon into a post-war, factory dystopia.¹² The petro-

¹² As an image reference, see the introductory sequences to Andrea Segre’s documentary *Il pianeta in mare* (04’-06’-21’’), available on RayPlay: <https://www.raipplay.it/video/2024/03/il-pianeta-in-mare-fc0ea657-d5fc-4d2f-abdc-b711c64df245.html> (Last Access: Aug 11th, 2025).

chemical plant of Porto Marghera for example – today inactive – had previously shaped the lagoon environment and its iconic skyline since the early 1900s. This industrial development turned Venice into one of the most industrialised areas of Italy, which reached its apex during the 1960s, permanently altering the lagoon’s biogeological shape and equilibrium (see § 3.2, Baravalle: 74 ff.). In particular, by excavating two water routes from the mainland into and through the lagoon – the Vittorio Emanuele canal from Marghera to the city of Venice, and the canale dei Petroli from Marghera to the Alberoni far end of the Lido island – the lagoon seabed has been subject to constant erosion and to the persistent draining operations employed as a countermeasure (see Longhin, 2022: 52-53).

The potential collapse of Venice due to high tide or the erosion of the lagoon seabed is deeply intertwined with human intervention in the lagoon’s landscape. The effects and implications of such actions have been presented through literature by author and engineer Paolo Barbaro, who depicted a very science fiction influenced wasteland-lagoon in his short story collection *Ultime isole*. First published in 1992 for Marsilio, the collection has been re-published after 30 years by Wetlands books (2022) as part of the collection “Fondamenta”, which includes titles that provide a “counter-narration of the city’s past that illuminates its present, deconstructing the easy mask of myth and restoring awareness of how the margin is actually the founding stone of urban events” (<https://wetlandsbooks.com/en/catalogo>). In *Ultime isole*, fictional characters are always trying to change their own fates – and those of the lagoon space – by carrying out technical and engineering work over the same period of time identified in Malvestio’s “Post-boom wastelands”. The series of pioneering projects described in Barbaro’s stories were, in the 1990s, considered pure science-fiction madness, even if they had their basis in fact: a good example can be found in the short story *Isola delle Polveri*, the second work in the collection. In this account, the

situation is the same as for today's 'last-chance tourism': Venice is sinking, and therefore the urgency of saving the lagoon archipelago becomes a great challenge to be embraced.

Venezia affonda – dicono in giro per il mondo – duecento isole con tutte le loro bellezze, eccetera, bisogna intervenire. 'Operazione in laguna/Salvare un'isola' è l'idea delle Grandi Imprese. E noi eccoci qui. 'Cominciare con un'isola, una sola, ma cominciare' (Barbaro, 2022: 77).

This story recounts the attempt to save the island Poveglia (called "Isola delle Polveri" in the narration) by raising its foundations with a vertical countermovement of the lagoon floor from below. Today, thanks to an article submitted by Barbaro himself and published in the national newspaper *La Stampa* on November 8th, 1989, we know that a similar experiment was actually conducted on Poveglia, as the island was "lifted up by 10 centimetres, through injections of cement" (It. "alzata di 10 centimetri con iniezioni di cemento". Barbaro, 1989). Tiziano Scarpa, in the essay *La città sospesa* (which serves as the introduction to Barbaro's collection in the 2022 edition), talks about this technological utopia, referring to the experimental uplift executed at Poveglia in 1989, and connects these accounts with Barbaro's narrative to propose a way of seeing the lagoon and Venice:

Era propagandistica, era aziendalistica, era fantascientifica questa fiducia di Paolo Barbaro nella possibilità di preservare Venezia dalle acque alte con una spinta geotecnica infera? Forse. Ma non bisogna dimenticare una cosa: Barbaro ha sempre guardato Venezia da sotto in su; ha dedicato (a Venezia e alla vita) un'attenzione quasi ossessiva per ciò che sta sotto la superficie: il sottosuolo e gli ambienti sottomarini; anzi, sottolagunari. [...] Alla superficiale Venezia, alle sue acque poco profonde, Barbaro ha restituito ciò che più di tutto le manca: l'abisso, l'inconscio, le grotte archetipiche, i substrati che pochi riuscivano a vedere. (Scarpa, 2022: 8).

Reflecting on Scarpa's words, Venice still needs – maybe now more than ever – an overview that privileges the 'up-

side-down' perspective: a city that can still survive thanks to its dust, waste, darkness and smell – a literal *wasteland*, in our context – and not because of its wonderful palazzi and churches, as the narrator's voice in "Isola delle polveri" notes:

Una luce riflessa, un faro lontano: case e case, una accanto all'altra, compaiono finalmente nel buio non più buio, a un soffio dalla terrazza, dalla finestra, dal balconcino. Muri disastriati, tetti a onde, finestrone sbilenchi. Ma nonostante tutto, case: roba abitata, con fischi e sospiri. Pietre marce, acqua in agguato, turbini di polvere; però sta in piedi, sta in piedi. Dev'essere questa, Venezia. (Barbaro, 2022: 79).

According to Barbaro's literary view, it is necessary for the mud foundations of the city to be highlighted, recounted and dissected once again, taking into account all its possible angles and snags, to replace the estrangement that connects it with humans (as a species living in the age of extinction threats) with a propulsive, intellectually useful attitude, rather than a feeling of immobilisation. From this perspective, Venice and its lagoon, with all its problems and all its virtuous initiatives (such as the collective set up by residents on the real Poveglia Island) has not yet exhausted ways to communicate with our cultural unconscious: it is in this 'upside-down' zone, where the most conflictual and problematic aspects of Venice are buried, where new solutions – and new stories – could be found. As Engineer Pino, a character from Barbaro's tale, says to the narrator: "Chissà – mi batte sulla spalla – se Venezia sprofonda sul serio: il marcio, caro mio, non sprofonda mai" (Barbaro 2022, 80).

1.4 Conclusions: Venice's far/near future

Through this investigation, we have seen how the term *wasteland* has evolved far beyond its literal meaning of barren land, acquiring layered literary, cultural, and ecological signifi-

cance. From Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which transformed it into a metaphor for historical trauma and existential desolation, to Muniz's *Waste Land* documentary, which reclaims waste as an artistic item with dignity and a tool for social resistance, the concept has become a lens for understanding both collective crises and individual struggles. Scholar Armiero extended its scope to the "Wasteocene" and global climate emergency, and through Luisetti's study we can frame the word *wasteland* as an allegory for exploitation, displacement, and ecological collapse. In this chapter, a *wasteland* is not merely absence, but a paradoxical space where cultural, social, and environmental contradictions converge, making it a powerful container to analyse representations of Venice and its lagoon as contemporary sites of decay under the pressures of tourism, industrialisation, and climate change.

Looking at the literary examples, readers could perceive that the Venetian lagoon is in some way a compromised wasteland, but that it also retains potential to evolve, not necessarily in a way that always represents positive models (see the case of *Ultra-Venezia*), but in a way that will at least grant some form of survival. This feeling, observed alongside the perspective and communications related to tourism, prompts a rethinking of business and its connections with Venice's cultural heritage, with the aim of conserving any possibility of its endurance (even outside the actual lagoon area) for visitors and visitor experiences. Veneto's latest tourist campaign emphasised this aspect by using Venice as the main element of the region's tourism business strategy, summarised by the slogan "Veneto – the land of Venice" (Veneto EU). Here, the city has openly become more than a symbol: it has evolved into a *brand*, suitable for linking every other tourist destination back to the city – for example, the Dolomites can be promoted as "the mountain of Venice" (The land of Venice, il nuovo brand di Regione Veneto - Latitudes). In line with this approach, since the 30th of July 2024 the slogan had officially been registered as a brand (Marchio turistico regionale - Regione del Veneto) and will be val-

id for a period of at least ten years, with the possibility of renewal. However, literature suggests that what will happen to the city in the near future may differ significantly from such a vision.

In the same year that “The Land of Venice” was registered as a brand by the regional administration, writer Ginevra Lamberti published *Il pozzo vale più del tempo*, a climate fiction book (February 2024), based on the survival adventures of young Dalia Masiero, a female protagonist growing up in a hypothetical near future where temperatures have reached over 50 degrees Celsius during the summer. For Lamberti, the same Veneto region has turned from “The Land of Venice” into a “Far West”, as the book’s back cover cites,¹³ providing a fictional setting where human communities struggle for survival and have to move across valleys within the forest. In Lamberti’s dystopia, the city of Venice didn’t find a way to resist Anthropocenic changes, and indeed collapsed underwater, while its populations fled due to the impact of tourism and the rising sea water levels. In the following quote, the character of Orsola provides a record of what the city used to be before its decay:

Deve sapere, Dalia, che io vengo da un’isola costruita sull’acqua salmastra. Lei, da quanto ho capito, ha conosciuto solo residui di acqua dolce chiusi nei confini di un lago. Noi nell’acqua avevamo il sale che consumava la pietra e condiva anche l’aria. Era un sale diverso da quello del mare aperto, con un gusto diluito e sporcato dal torbido della laguna. La laguna, forse lei non lo sa, è un finto lago e una premonizione di mare. La mia isola stava nella moltitudine dell’esistenza e al confine con tutto il resto. (Lamberti, 2024: 113).

In the story, the lagoon – beautifully recounted as a “fake lake” and a “premonition of the sea” by one of its natives – has transformed into an impossible landscape to inhabit: a wasteland beyond the re-definition of Luisetti’s “crisis of presence”, where

¹³ As reference, see the online book outline: <https://www.marsilioeditori.it/libri/scheda-libro/2972066/il-pozzo-vale-pi-del-tempo>.

animals become aggressive towards each another, and both temperature and sea-levels are doomed to increase exponentially:

L'ho lasciata più di vent'anni fa, quando ho capito che il tempo che ci è dato vivere non è qualcosa di ciclico. Niente di quello che è stato tornerà. Non possiamo fare altro che andare avanti. Ho capito che la temperatura non sarebbe diminuita e che l'acqua non avrebbe smesso di salire, che gli insetti non avrebbero smesso di essere malsani e io non avrei smesso di affacciarmi alla finestra e, guardando giù, vedere il piccolo canale delle monachelle punteggiato da carcasse di pesci beccati da gabbiani sempre più folli e aggressivi. [...]

Ho venduto la mia casa, che era grande e bella e in alto e luminosa, a una famiglia tutta tonda di ottimismo che veniva dall'altra parte dell'oceano. [...] Del resto, la mia città di pietra sull'acqua era già da tempo popolata dai nostri stessi fantasmi. (Lamberti, 2024: 113-114).

Significantly, Orsola's account of what Venice and the lagoon used to be like ends with a reference to mass tourism – in this case Americans buying off properties in the city, with a note of “optimism” that clashes in Lamberti's narration with the general feeling of desolation her characters are forced to deal with. The sense of optimism seems to match, instead, the tones of the Veneto Region's “Land of Venice” format, a synergy confirming that, once again, literature has further explored representations of the ‘City on Water’ with outcomes that fundamentally differ from tourist imagery. Nevertheless, it is key to acknowledge how contemporary representations of Venice and its lagoon as a wasteland, from a literary perspective, can ultimately have a positive impact in helping to rethink tourist communication from both visitors and local businesses' points of view. Wasting relationships are at the very base of the Wasteocene – we can think of *wastelanding* narratives as a core vision for the near future of the Venetian lagoon, a scenario which does not match the grandiose, optimistic storytelling designed for most visitor experiences perhaps, but certainly an alternative, unorthodox view that could also spur visitors' interest.

As Danston brilliantly illustrates in her work *Against nature* (2019), the three main passions humans activate in response to any breakdown of normal laws or orders in nature are *horror*, *terror* and *wonder* (2019: 33-43). After analysing the previous narratives, one might argue that contemporary literature, in a similar way, is strongly oriented towards turning the standard and positivist vision of Venice into its opposite, implying that our reactions to such scenarios can also be passionate in the way Daston describes them: “things that befall rather than move us, not so much states as sieges of the soul.” (34). When it comes to lagoon-wastelands, the most anomalous landscape of desolation and collapse (which unfortunately also represents the most natural and likely evolution of such territories, given their environmental and economic challenges) could potentially provoke similar reactions to those investigated in Danston’s work. Readers may be horrified and disgusted (as per Scarpa’s promising waste-production business), or feel terror, as in the case of Lamberti’s post-apocalyptic vision. They might eventually experience wonder, in line with Barbaro’s science fiction approach to the deformation of the lagoon’s landscape. Each case, however – despite its fictional nature – is key to envision new answers and connections, to avoid the complete exploitation and decay of the city of Venice and its fragile ecosystem.

In conclusion, the literary reimagining of Venice and its lagoon as a *wasteland* reveals more than just dystopian speculation: it offers a necessary counter-narrative to tourist branding and optimistic marketing strategies. By confronting us with horror, terror, and wonder, these texts compel readers to engage with ecological fragility, cultural erosion, and the contradictions of global capitalism. If official discourse reduces Venice to a consumable image, literature insists instead on its role as a warning, a mirror, and a site of possibility: a place where rethinking our relationship to environment, heritage, and survival becomes urgent. Ultimately, to read Venice through the lens of the *waste-*

land is not only to witness its decline, but to confront the urgent question of how its story – and our own relationship to fragile environments – might still be rewritten.

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2. Practices of Cultural Extraction and Notions of Authenticity in Sustainable Tourism: *Rollate* in Sappada and *Saltner* in Merano

Linda Armano

Abstract:

The article analyses the figures of Saltner, the guardian of the orchards in Merano, and Rollate, a traditional carnival figure from Sappada, through the lens of cultural extractivism. Since the late 19th century, these two Dolomite locations have taken different paths for the development of tourism. Merano experienced an early and intensive transformation, while Sappada only witnessed significant growth after the Second World War. The study applies the concepts of “high” and “low” cultural extractivism to analyse how authenticity is constructed, based on the degree of local community involvement in the redefinition of traditional figures for tourism. In Merano, there is evidence of high extractivism, visible in how Saltner has been repurposed as an advertising icon by the tourist board, detached from the original context. The low involvement of the local population in this process leads to an idea of authenticity that is mainly characterised by external marketing strategies. Conversely, in Sappada, a low extractivist approach is exemplified by the community’s active role in adapting the Rollate beyond its carnival setting to align with sustainable tourism goals. Here, authenticity remains linked to local values as the community retains control over the meaning and use of its cultural symbols.

Keywords: Authenticity; High cultural extractivism; Low cultural extractivism; Saltner of Merano; Rollate of Sappada; Sustainable tourism; Dolomites

2.1 Introduction

The concept of authenticity is central to studies of sustainable tourism, which focus primarily on how tourists associate this concept with the places they visit and their personal emotional experiences (Rickly-Boyd, 2013). Authenticity is seen as the result of complex negotiations between tourists, local communities and institutions to protect cultural and environmental heritage, and is not generally associated with mass tourism or practises that exploit cultural resources for tourism purposes (Canavan and McCamley, 2021). This study critically engages with these assumptions and argues that conceptual and discursive constructs that associate authenticity solely with the preservation of cultural heritage (while addressing the needs of local populations) are potentially limiting, and contribute to the formation of an underlying theoretical bias. This seems to be at least partly due to the prevalence of theoretical studies that are not sufficiently supported by in-depth empirical analyses capable of reconstructing the historical and socio-cultural processes through which certain notions of authenticity are shaped and consolidated in the tourism sector. The Alps represent a particularly relevant area for critical analysis, as it is often associated with experiential and sustainable tourism practises that combine the economic competitiveness of rural mountain areas with respect for the specific culture of local communities (Martini & Buffa, 2016). This study therefore considers the area of the Alps as privileged analytical terrain to reveal the internal contradictions of the various discourses on the concept of authenticity. The Alps have profound regional differences which have influenced institutionalisation processes and tourism development since the mid-19th century. These have evolved in two main ways. Firstly, the early integration of some areas into the emerging tourism circuits, and secondly the persistent marginalisation of certain areas. This has led to heterogeneous tourism promotion, strongly influenced by the

morphology of the land and the degree of infrastructural isolation. This in turn has various effects on visibility, attractiveness, and local economic development. Based on these considerations, this study aims to investigate the dynamics - often ambivalent - through which discourses on authenticity (which are historically and culturally contextualised) can be the result of strategies of the cultural extraction and the exploitation of traditions (Smith, 2025). In this case, a cultural extraction can be understood not so much as a use of natural resources, but as a useful analytical lens to observe the processes of appropriation of tangible and intangible elements of local culture, extracted from their original context and subsequently recontextualised in tourism practises and narratives.

This research is based on an ethnographic methodology, consisting of collecting information through in-depth interviews, combined with archival research. This made it possible to carry out a comparative and diachronic study in the geographical context of the eastern Dolomites in the German-speaking area. The analysis reconstructs the historical processes from the mid-19th century, a period in which a growing interest in the development of Alpine areas as tourist and spa destinations emerged within the borders of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The two cases analysed are Merano in South Tyrol and Sappada in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, historically and culturally border areas between Austria and Italy. Despite their common past under Habsburg rule, and albeit at different times and with different methods, the two places have taken different paths in their development of tourism. Specifically, the focus is on two figures of local culture, the Saltner, the guardian of the orchards in South Tyrol, and the Rollate, a ritual character of the carnival in Sappada. Both figures were subject to symbolic and semantic extraction processes, removing them from their original professional and ritual contexts and subsequently reused in tourism initiatives (i.e. the Saltner in the autumn Grape Festival and the Rollate in the summer beer

festival called Plodar Fest). By analysing these two examples comparatively, this study examines how two different extractive tendencies (either 'high' or 'low' as described above), contribute to the construction of two different concepts of authenticity in the sphere of sustainable tourism. The article is organised as follows: In the Methodology and Findings section, the process of data collection and analysis are explained, as well as how the theoretical perspective of cultural extraction has been applied. In the Discussion, after describing the different strategies of tourism development in the contexts studied, the concepts of 'high' and 'low' cultural extraction are applied respectively to the figures of Saltner of Merano and Rollate of Sappada to illustrate two different concepts of authenticity in the field of tourism. Based on the results, the Conclusions finally outline some proposals for the field of sustainable tourism.

2.2 Methodology and findings

In recent years, the concept of extraction has expanded beyond its traditional association with the extractive industry to encompass broader processes of resource appropriation in various economic and social sectors. The 'extractive paradigm' thus highlights the mechanisms and actors that sustain extractive dynamics, understood as forms of exercising power through dispossession, exploitation and marginalisation of local communities that are often obscured by rhetoric of participation and inclusion (Artiga-Purcell 2024). In line with Smith's (2025) proposal, cultural extraction consists of the strategic appropriation of cultural elements inserted into artificially constructed contexts, and centres on "the anticipation of profits obtained through the accumulation of symbolic goods" (p. 654). Smith emphasises that the mobilisation of fragments of traditional culture outside their original context is a crucial indicator of the power dynamics

underlying cultural value enhancement for economic and tourism purposes.

Within the theoretical extractive paradigm, this study introduces the concepts of 'high' and 'low' extraction to analyse the nuanced ways in which elements of cultural heritage are re-interpreted in tourism. These conceptual constructs allow us to examine the processes of selection and reintegration of symbolic figures and traditional practises, and shed light on the power dynamics that determine their transformation. High extraction refers to situations where institutions, such as tourism authorities, operate at a distance from the local community and reshape cultural features with minimal or no community participation. This process leads to a form of authenticity that is constructed from the outside and focused on promotional and economic goals. In contrast, low extraction refers to processes in which communities retain agency and interpretation and actively negotiate the symbolic transformation of their own cultural elements. This distinction opens a critical reflection on how tourism influences concepts of authenticity through the appropriation of features of traditional culture by certain actors, and highlights the complexity of the relationship between preservation, transformation and economic exploitation of culture.

This study therefore considers the locations of Sappada and Merano as metaphors and cultural repositories. Through these repositories, the processes by which the figures of Saltner and Rollate are extracted from their original professional and ritual contexts – and subsequently repositioned in tourist events for an external audience – are analysed. In order to investigate this different re-articulation of the two figures, and to understand which concepts of authenticity result from their transfer, ethnographic research based on interviews and participant observation was conducted. The field research phase began in March 2025 and is still ongoing. In particular, the observation was carried out during several editions of the Sappada Carnival and the Plodar

Fest, where it was possible to directly observe the role of Rollate in these events. As for Saltner, who made an appearance at some past editions of the Grape Festival (which takes place every year in October in Merano), the observation was based on secondary sources such as videos and photographic documentation.

In this first phase of the research, the interviewees were selected based on their participation in the festivals and their direct knowledge of how the figures of Rollate and Saltner have been used and modified. In Sappada, the sample included five men who actively dress up as Rollate during the carnival, a representative of the Plodn Association, which promotes the traditional carnival and the local dialect in the municipality, and three people responsible for promoting tourism. In Merano, interviews were carried out with a former Saltner who had practised the profession between 1986 and 1988, an archivist from the Historical Archive of Merano (who helped reconstruct the transformation of Saltner as a professional figure to Saltner as a tourist figure), and two representatives of the *Azienda di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo di Merano* (the Merano Tourism, Accommodation and Healthcare company), responsible for managing and promoting the city's tourist offer. The ethnographic research was supported by preliminary archival research in the Historical Archives of Merano, where relevant documents dating from the Middle Ages to the 19th century were found. Documents with transcribed testimonies of tourists on verbal and physical encounters with a Saltner during their service in the orchards were also analysed, as well as documents that describe the process of redefining the Saltner figure outside its original context for tourism purposes from the 19th century onwards. Other contemporary materials were analysed, including local newspapers, municipal archives, bulletins and advertising content from tourism agencies. No research was carried out in the municipal archives of Sappada, as the carnival is a predominantly oral tradition - no systematic cataloguing of the archives has yet begun which analyse documents or testimo-

nies that refer to fragments of old editions of the rite. However, sources such as documents on tourism promotion from the 1990s to the present day were also analysed, important for reconstructing the development of Sappada's promotional strategies as a sustainable tourist destination.

In this study, the integration of ethnographic research with a diachronic approach aims to reconstruct the emergence and evolution of the cultural extraction of Rollate and Saltner in the municipalities of Sappada and Merano. This methodological approach allows for the capture the contemporary configurations of these processes, but also helps understand their historical roots. Overall, the sinterviews in both municipalities have shown that citizens not linked to tourism promotion agencies tend to interpret the concept of authenticity as a process directly experienced through the profession of Saltner and in the ritual framework of the Rollate. According to these interviewees, an in-depth sense of authenticity can only be understood by starting from the specific social fabric of symbolic, historical, cultural and economic values, directly linked to the body of knowledge that constitutes the profession of Saltner, or to the cultural meanings of the ritual in which the Rollate plays a particular role. These specific meanings of authenticity are therefore difficult to extract, institutionalise and explain to an external audience without losing their immersive dimension. In contrast, tourism promotion agency staff tend to construct the concept of authenticity through an extractive approach. This involves breaking down the dense network of meanings and practises that make up the socio-cultural fabric, selecting, staging and narrating certain cultural elements in order to make them accessible and attractive to a visiting audience.

Discussion

Placing different degrees of cultural extraction in context: 'hight' cultural extraction and 'low' cultural extraction

In the mid-19th century, the spread of tourism in the Eastern Alps, which at the time belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, led to forms of hospitality that were strongly influenced by an idealised vision of rural mountain life. This period saw the emergence of numerous tourist resorts, known in the language of the time as “Bauernbadln” - an ironic but evocative term, used especially in Tyrol and Bavaria to describe places where the tourist experience was associated with a simple and natural life, perceived as pre-modern and an alternative to the accelerated pace of the cities (Leonardi, 2018). The first forms of family-run mountain tourism developed around this idea and were mainly aimed at an aristocratic and urban bourgeois clientele (Balestracci and Causarano 2018). In addition, climatic health resorts and mountain spas emerged, whose appeal was based on the healthy, fresh air and the weather. In South Tyrol in particular, the spread of climatotherapy in the second half of the 19th century contributed to the creation of a tourist offer based on a new naturalist, health-conscious ethos that viewed the mountain world as a privileged therapeutic space. Specialist infrastructure, such as health resorts, sanatoriums and guesthouses were often built in the bottom of the valleys, for example in Merano, which established itself as a spa destination for the European aristocracy. However, the therapeutic component was not the only motivation for a holiday. Visitors were also looking for opportunities to interact with a culture that was considered ‘traditional’, and radically different from urban modernity. This desire was reflected in the development of a hospitality culture that not only received holidaymakers in places like Merano, but also contributed to the transformation of elements of local culture in line with tourists’ expectations (Leonardi, 2018). With this backdrop, while the Saltner continued to perform daily surveillance duties in the orchards according to local regulations and normative customs dating back to the Middle Ages (R.L.P. Tirol und Vorarlberg Nr. 168/1819, §§ 12-13), his image was used by the *Azienda di Cura*,

Soggiorno e Turismo di Merano, founded in 1855, for promotional purposes and transformed into a figurative topos intended to epitomise the 'typical' characteristics of the town. His portrayal was reproduced on postcards and souvenirs, and the Saltner was also narrated in operettas (Plant 1908), creating a figure that met the exotic-archaic expectations of visitors. However, this tourist figure stood in stark contrast to the real orchard guard, who, armed with a knife (*runnggel*) and sometimes resorting to aggression, did not hesitate to intervene against tourists entering private property. The traditional profession of Saltner was rooted in the broader socio-economic structure of the Tyrolean farm, a traditional institution consisting of connected plots of land and various farm buildings (Gramm, Hoffmann, and Cattivelli, 2019). This system, still preserved by complex provincial legislation, guaranteed the cohesion of the farm by regulating succession, typically in favour of the male first-born, while the remaining male children traditionally entered the labour market as farm workers or miners (Armano, 2025). Within this socio-economic context, the Saltners were offered in rotation by the various landowners to work in the different municipalities of South Tyrol. During his service, the Saltner was responsible for the maintenance of the roads in the area and supervised the orchards to ensure that no wild or farm animals interfered. His main task, however, was to prevent the theft of fruit by those who entered the property. The ambivalence between the Saltner's actual duties and his tourist representation was the cause of numerous conflicts between orchard guards and tourists, so much so that the press of the time labelled the Saltners as "tourist molesters" (Kofler, Profanter, and Sapelza, 2022). After the Field Protection Act of 1860, which officially recognised the Saltner as a public guard (RGI, no. 28/1860), this figure's costume, consisting of fox tails (a symbol of cunning), a triangular hat with capercaillie tails (a symbol of vigilance) and peacock tails (a symbol of professional pride), was used almost exclusively in tour-

ist parades, especially from the 1930s onwards, as part of fascist policies aimed at promoting local folkloristic characteristics for creating identity and propaganda.

Over time, the folkloric version of the Saltner has become fully established in public parades (such as the Grape Festival), where the figure appears in spectacular form. In recent editions of the festival, however, its presence has been replaced by depictions of figures of Tyrolean nobility, indicating that the Saltner has also finally disappeared for tourist purposes.

At the same time, other Alpine regions under Austrian rule, such as Sappada, began to develop forms of mountain tourism linked to hiking and mountaineering, promoted by associations and specialised publications (Caria, 2023). In this context, however, the Rollate remained an exclusively ritual figure linked to the ceremonial cycle of the carnival. In line with Sordi's interpretation (1982), the carnival of Sappada fits into a broader European dynamic in which the sequence of traditional festivals alternates pagan and Christian elements. If Christmas represents the celebration of family unity and excludes strangers, the carnival is instead a moment of public openness in which masks invade the collective space of the city. In this sense, the presence of the Rollate solely during the Carnival is largely the result of long-term religious control within the community that has prevented their detachment from their original ceremonial context almost up to the present day. Since the 1950s, thanks to the construction of the state road and the improvement of the road network, the village has become more accessible for and attractive to visiting families. The carnival has also undergone some structural changes, and is only celebrated on three specific Sundays (the Sunday of the Poor, the Sunday of the Peasants and the Sunday of the Lords), each dedicated to a social class that was once represented in the town, taking place in three different squares in Sappada. In addition to the masks, the Rollate, parading in groups of boys in the squares, represent the main character of the carnival ritual. If these public masquer-

ades are intended to present this popular festival to tourists for a few hours, the offertory is still considered a traditional element of the carnival. This consists of mask-wearers being taken to the village houses, where tourists are not admitted. The Rollate tradition in Sappada is an exclusively male masque in which participants must impersonate a tall, imposing figure, typically dressed in distinctive clothing consisting of horizontally striped trousers (*hilhouzn*) traditionally made from cow blankets, a fur coat (*pelz*) made from sheepskins and a tuft of red wool, a wooden mask (*lorve*), a sorghum broom (*pesn*) which serves as a symbolic sceptre, a white or red handkerchief which, depending on the colour, indicates the marital status of the masked person. The Rollate is also characterised by two large spherical bells (*rolln*), from which it takes its name, which are tied around the waist.

Until the middle of the 20th century, however, Sappada's accommodation was limited to inns and post offices, which mainly welcomed merchants and occasional travellers. Interaction with foreigners was minimal and the facilities represented a basic level of hospitality which didn't help dissipate distrust of the outside world. In the 1970s, the development of winter tourism began with the introduction of ski lifts. As part of this, the promotion and enhancement of the local culture - especially the carnival - became a central element of tourism promotion. While the figure of the Rollate has undergone an aesthetic revaluation in terms of the costumes, it has not been completely decontextualised, as the local community still exerts strong control over its management and representation, as evidenced by the exclusion of tourists from the carnival's ritual offerings in private dwellings. Even when the Rollate is used in summer events such as the Plodar Fest (the beer festival that takes place in Sappada every August) or in other events to promote local culture, the use of the figure remains subject to strong internal control.

A comparison between Merano and Sappada shows how two very different methods of cultural extraction and symbolic

re-contextualisation of these traditional figures are applied. The following table contains some key passages from the interviews conducted in Merano and Sappada, showing the differing perspectives of tourist boards and community members on the concept of authenticity and how these perspectives derive from two different extractive approaches.

Table 1 – Interpretative comparison of the concept of authenticity in Sappada and in Merano, and how it relates to Rollate and Saltner

Merano		Sappada	
Concept of Authenticity		Concept of Authenticity	
<i>Facilities for the promotion of tourism</i>	<i>Citizens</i>	<i>Facilities for the promotion of tourism</i>	<i>Citizens</i>
<i>Active role of the institutions vs Local collective management</i>			
Authenticity is a concept that recalls the local culture and even tourists takes part in the cultural component of Merano as an interested spectator. (Interview with D., member of the staff of the <i>Azienda di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo</i>)	Authenticity is linked to those who create it and to those who preserve it, therefore it must be conceived within the community (Interview with E.M., archivist at the Historical Archive of Merano)	The task of tourism promotion is to actively shape tourism development that is compatible with the cultural values of the community. This results in an idea of authenticity. (Interview with M. tourism manager, <i>Consorzio Sappada Dolomiti Turismo</i>)	Authenticity is conveyed through daily immersion in the cultural context, and not through institutionalisation. (Interview with C., Plodar Association)
<i>Historical memory as a resource</i>			
Authenticity is linked to the re-presentation of a past that must be preserved. (Interview with D., member of the staff of the <i>Azienda di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo</i>)	The meaning of authenticity changes over time, but it is always interwoven with the lived history and social changes of our community. (Interview with P., Ex Saltner)	Authenticity is a collective good that needs to be defended, passed on and appropriately ascribed value to by the community. (Interview with M., tourism manager, <i>Consorzio Sappada Dolomiti Turismo</i>)	Authenticity as an everyday, relational, non-codified or formalisable experience that inevitably arises from our connection with the past history that has shaped us. (Interview with C., participant in the carnival as Rollate)

<i>Spectacularisation vs Internal regeneration</i>			
It is also important to utilise authenticity to support economic enhancement and cultural attractiveness. Authenticity must be told, because the tourist must be accompanied into the culture of Merano. (Interview with E., member of the staff of the <i>Azienda di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo</i>)	The authenticity lies in the oral tradition, in the memory of the family and the community. From this we can understand that it is not always positive, because it can be linked to something difficult from our past. (Interview with E.M., archivist at the Historical Archive of Merano)	The design of authenticity meanings for tourism offers must be constantly coordinated with the municipality and the community. (Interview with local councillor S., <i>Consorzio Sappada Dolomiti Turismo</i>)	The community is not interested in showing off, but authenticity is experienced as an intimate component that regenerates the community from within. Authenticity and tourism are in conflict, there is always a risk of compromising real authenticity. The concept of cannot be represented, but is lived. (Interview with E., participant in the carnival as Rollate)
Concept of authenticity in connection with the Saltner			
<i>Institutional tourism governance that is not sustained as an embodied practice</i>			
The Saltner is one of the symbols of Merano culture which can be shown to our tourists. (Interview with E., member of the staff of the <i>Azienda di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo</i>)	The Saltner was the keeper of the orchards, it was a profession and had nothing to do with tourism. (Interview with P., ex-Saltner)	Rollate retains its symbolic importance in the tourism sector if it is also managed by the municipality and community. (Interview with local councillor S., <i>Consorzio Sappada Dolomiti Turismo</i>)	Rollate is not the costume you see, but its ritual behaviour and the context in which we want to place it. (Interview with S., a participant in the carnival as Rollate)
<i>Local community unacknowledged for its role in representing traditional culture in tourism</i>			
Saltner is one of the characters which promotes an authentic tourist experience. (Interview with D., member of the staff of the <i>Azienda di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo</i>)	Today there is also a tendency to replace the Saltner at tourist events such as the Grape Festival because gentler figures are favoured, such as the depiction of Empress Sissi, to evoke the culture of Merano. (Interview with E.M., archivist at the Historical Archive of Merano)	The community monitors and filters how and when the Rollate is used. The tourists adapt to this logic, and thus automatically there is selectivity in tourism. (Interview with M.B., Councillor, <i>Consorzio Sappada Dolomiti Turismo</i>)	The deeper meaning is not to organise an event for tourists which the Rollate can be introduced into, but the event takes shape spontaneously because the community itself decides. In this case, the Rollate can subsequently be introduced. (Interview with D., participant in the carnival as Rollate)

High cultural extraction in Merano

Based on the data in Table 1, we can assume that in Merano, tourism promotion fully constructs and manages the definition of authenticity. Therefore, this concept does not correspond to how it is experienced and interpreted by the interviewees in the community. Indeed, at the local level, authenticity is often associated with the concrete and sometimes arduous reality of daily life, especially regarding agricultural labour. The concept of authenticity constructed by the tourism agency is configured as a category that can reproduce stereotypes and power relations that exclude the community, based on a simplified and spectacular narrative of the past and local culture. In this context, the figure of Saltner was gradually reinterpreted for tourists. His behaviour, which was originally brusque, as the historical rules suggested, was softened to better meet the expectations of cultural tourism. The original costume was also transformed into hyperbolic and spectacular forms. In relation to this, the last Saltner in Merano interviewed for this study emphasised a particularly important element about the different ways in which this figure was portrayed. In particular, he highlighted the difference between the Saltner in his historical function as guardian of the orchards, who acted in an everyday agricultural environment, and the Saltner who is reused as a folkloristic figure for tourist 'consumption'. This observation allows us to analyse the different contexts the figure is placed in, and to distinguish between a functional use linked to the work and protection of local cultural resources and a representative use aimed at creating an image intended for tourist consumption:

P: «The Saltner appeared as a guard in the orchards and as a figure for tourists»

«But what did the Saltner do when he had to perform for the tourists? Did he quit his service?»

P. «No, no! The interesting thing is that those who worked as Saltners for tourists were never really Saltners! Because that's only for tourists. Those who did this job as Saltners could not leave the orchards. The Saltner is a historical figure who worked as a guard in the orchards and another who was employed for tourists as if he were a fictional character. The Saltner has nothing to do with tourism, even though he is supposed to welcome tourists. Here, however, he is in disguise» (Interview with P., former Saltner).

In Merano, then, we can recognise a process that can be traced to a form of high cultural extraction based on the idea of a cultural 'deposit'. This is conceived as having a series of features that are exploited and reused for the construction of targeted tourist products. The Saltner is thus one of the many cultural features that can be extracted to be transformed into a cultural representation, having a representative and welcoming function. This high cultural extraction, based on selective re-contextualisation, is accompanied by a re-manipulation of traditional memory. This is then defined as a set of practices through which communities preserve, transmit and reinterpret knowledge, experiences and cultural codes (Ivančič Kutin and Kropelj Telban, 2021). This vision is reflected in the words of those who work at the *Azienda di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo*:

«D. Every year is a challenge, of course. We have a solid body of work behind us, but we have to listen to the needs of our guests from time to time. And the city always responds well. (...) The Merano Grape Festival is one of the most popular autumn events not only in Merano but also in South Tyrol and is celebrated every year on the third weekend in October. On this occasion, a rich selection of traditions, music and gastronomy is offered. And this attracts numerous visitors, both locals and tourists. (...) The festival consists of parades with decorated floats, performances by bands and traditional costume groups as well as food stalls with local specialities. (...) A few years ago there was also the figure of the Saltner, which was a traditional profession in South Tyrol, even if it no longer exists today.

Tourists expect to see these figures of local tradition to enable them to understand the customs and traditions of the place» (D. member of the staff of the Azienda di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo).

From the tourist office staff interviews, we can understand how authenticity is understood primarily on an aesthetic level. It is not considered as a 'speaker' of cultural expressions embedded in a social and value-orientated structure, but rather the performative result of a series of adaptations which tend to the needs of an external audience. Another consequence of adapting to tourist desires is that in recent years the figure of the Saltner, who until a decade ago played a key role in the representation of local culture, has been excluded from the Grape Festival. In recent years, he has been replaced by idealised depictions of Tyrolean nobility from the late 19th century, including Empress Sissi. Visitor expectations, fuelled by narratives geared towards tourism consumption, have manifested themselves over a long period of time, developing from early forms of tourism in Mera-
no from the second half of the 19th century.

At the centre of this dynamic is a process of symbolic extraction of traditional cultural traits that are often interpreted as expressions of the archaic, and forms of cultural survival. These elements are categorised as "living fossils" (Ligi, 2011, p. 134), - cultural forms that are perceived as remnants of a distant past and persist in the present. From this perspective, these features acquire an instrumental function within tourist narratives, which tend to simplify, decontextualize, and subordinate them to the logic of economic enhancement derived from tourist consumption. This process is closely linked to an idea of progress that is understood in a linear and unambiguous sense. It contributes to the creation of specific imagery, where some communities that are culturally considered "harsher" or "more backward" are presented as guardians of a still-living past. The tangible and non-tangible culture of those communities has often been shaped by difficult geographical con-

ditions, manifesting in beliefs, habits and customs that are considered exotic or picturesque. As Ligi (2011) points out, the idea of a living fossil is not reduced to the representation of the “primitive”, but evokes an earlier phase of human history, an evolutionary phase that visitors would also have passed through over the centuries. Tourist hospitality thus involves a kind of archaic ‘staging’ in which figures such as Saltner represent a minimum level of civilisation and modernity sufficient to be comprehensible and accessible to a contemporary audience, whilst maintaining archaic external traits that serve to define the difference between him and the visitors. In this example, high cultural extraction is configured as a strategy which appropriates and structures a certain notion of time. This is done by organising tourist encounters which make the link between past and present visible in a unidirectional way. Authenticity thus emerges from the dialectical relationship between the modern ‘self’ of the tourist and the traditional ‘other’ of the community. Where high cultural extraction takes place, where the local community does not participate in the promotion of its own culture in collaboration with tourism promotion agencies, authenticity is therefore linked to the idea of a culture which is ‘frozen in time’, that the tourist is supposed to become familiar with. This temporal construction carries an implicitly paternalistic or intellectualistic tone. This is because recognising the survival of archaic elements in a contemporary culture is tantamount to returning them to a past historical stage. In this sense, the functioning of high cultural extraction is expressed not only as a journey through space, but also as a journey through time, where the past is evoked and consumed without activating critical reflection.

Low cultural extraction in Sappada

In the case of Sappada, the management of tourist events – and therefore the definition of what is considered authentic in the context of those events – as well as the use of the figure of

the Rollate, remain firmly rooted in the community. This form of collective organisation, whilst secular and contemporary, seems to reproduce the regulation of rituals in a similar way to how the Church traditionally carried out this role in the past. The concept of low cultural extraction highlights a form of mediation between the inside and the outside of the community via tourism practises. In contrast to more invasive forms of cultural extraction, the low extraction process here is characterised by selective and reflexive control by community actors who determine which cultural elements are made accessible, in what form and to which audience. Initiatives promoted by the tourism agency are often perceived as alien by the local community, even though the tourism agency aims to promote and protect the intrinsic and 'unspectacular' character of traditional cultural expressions. This central role of the inhabitants is the reason why the tourist office is largely subordinate to the community organisation, which makes it difficult to independently manage the way in which Rollate is presented to tourists. In fact, the tourist board is almost exclusively limited to a mere channel for publicising events. While the importance of the role of the local community is underlined as an essential condition for welcoming visitors in a truly sustainable tourism dynamic, the control exercised by community members over the management of their cultural expressions has in some cases been met with criticism and objections from tourism stakeholders. The latter complain about the excessive closed-mindedness of the inhabitants of Sappada towards tourism planning, which is perceived as rigidly filtered through them as 'gatekeepers':

«M. This form of closure is perhaps the secret that has preserved the authenticity of the territory and culture for so many years. But is this method a salvation for the territory and for the community itself? The fact that no intrusion has been allowed has meant that Sappada now offers a form of authentic tourism, but this closure is risky! Because things can go well or badly and you can find yourself isolated, without the training to then open up to tourism if one day there is a

need. Unfortunately, they are isolating themselves more and more and are in the process of sinking. (...) So, they were intelligent and lucky to combine their tradition with this form of tourism, but it is undeniable that Sappada today has enormous potential and must grow on a qualitative level. (...) The risk lies above all in the lack of generational change. Young people are happy in Sappada today, but they are not investing in their future. I fear that there will be nothing left for the next generation and the only thing they can improve is tourism, but they don't want to be educated» (Interview with M., tourism manager, Consorzio Sappada Dolomiti Turismo).

However, the Sappada community responds to these objections by stating that the tourism promotion agency is unable to enhance the value of the authentical cultural aspects defined by tradition, and the ritualistic and identity-forming significance of the Rollate. Despite this distrust of forms of external 'spectacle creation', the presence of the iconic mask has gradually spread to other events during the year, such as the Plodar Fest (a beer festival that takes place in August). Such a detachment of the figure from its original context would have been unthinkable until a few decades ago. But even on such occasions, the Rollate is still recognised by the community as a strong symbol of identity. As one interviewee from Sappada explained:

G: «Carnival was the festival of the year. There were no other festivals, so it embodied the spirit of the festival. When people in Sappada think of the festival, they automatically think of the carnival, which in the past was called The Festival. So, when we decide that Rollate is present at other events that are open to tourists, Rollate brings the power of the carnival of our past and projects it into other festivals» (Interview with G., Plodar Association).

However, the use of Rollate outside the carnival oscillates between an approach centred on greater openness to tourists and more conservative instances linked to the protection of local traditions. This oscillation reflects a dynamic balance between enhancing the value of culture and protecting identity:

S: «In recent years, Rollate has been used in various situations. Originally it was associated exclusively with the carnival, then its image was used for tourist advertising purposes. Even all the street lamps in Sappada bear the Rollate logo in wrought iron. However, its presence in the carnival, or even outside the carnival, consists of one step forward and one step back. In terms of the step backwards, it is felt that Rollate should only be present in the carnival, as it is more of a communal and intimate event. (...) It depends a bit on who organises the carnival unofficially. There is always someone who pulls the strings and on whom the use of Rollate partly depends. So, look at the periods when Rollate has been used for tourist purposes, because those who managed the image were also open to tourism. Then there is the period of closure, when the people managing the image didn't want to interact with tourism» (interview with Councillor S., *Consortio Sappada Dolomiti Turismo*).

Although Rollate remains anchored in a local realm of meaning that guarantees its recognisability and symbolic coherence in the eyes of the community, low cultural extraction functions as a demarcation between inclusion and exclusion, which is implemented in the tourist encounter. However, it is important to emphasise that the resistance of the Sappada community to forms of appropriation by tourist organisations perceived as alien to that same community does not imply total closure or cultural isolation. In fact, interaction with tourism has favoured a creative repositioning of the figure of Rollate and prevented its exclusive confinement to the carnival. Without this process of opening up to tourism, Rollate would probably have suffered a similar fate to the figures of other Alpine carnivals (for example the masks of the Sauris carnival), whose appearance gradually diminished until they finally vanished. Low cultural extraction represents a viable compromise between continuity of tradition, symbolic self-determination and outward development as part of sustainable tourism practises. In Sappada, and particularly in relation to the figure of Rollate, the emerging concept of authenticity is not based on the immutable preservation of an ide-

alised past, but rather on a relational and situational meaning. It unfolds in a constant dialogue between perspectives inside and outside the community and takes shape under specific conditions in which elements of tradition are reinterpreted and adapted to contemporary tourism, remaining in line with local values.

2.3 Conclusions

The comparative analysis of the figures of Saltner, from Merano, and Rollate, from Sappada, shows to what extent the construction of authenticity within sustainable tourism is influenced by the relational and contextual dynamics of representations of time and the involvement of the local community. In Saltner's case, authenticity results from a high cultural extraction model in which this figure is selected and presented as a timeless element of cultural heritage intended for an audience of visitors. This unidirectional approach tends to 'freeze' characteristics of local cultures in stereotypical archaic forms. In this process, the tourism agency assumes the role of exclusive mediator of the cultural narrative, excluding the local community from the processes of defining and creating or protecting the value of its heritage. On the contrary, the Rollate figures from Sappada exemplify low cultural extraction processes, where the local community retains control over the methods of transmission and reinterpretation of its cultural elements. Authenticity in this case is the result of a living, constantly changing reflexive practice that integrates cultural memory and tourism without reducing cultural icons to timeless representations.

Based on these two case studies, we can outline some proposals for sustainable tourism based on a deeper negotiation of notions of authenticity. Firstly, the active participation of local communities in the management of cultural heritage must be

ensured. Secondly, it is necessary to counteract narratives that reduce traditions to mythologised images of a static past. Finally, interpretative tools must be developed that restore the complexity and historic sense of local cultures, and strengthen the communities' capacity to act.

From this perspective, tourism can evolve from a location of symbolic extraction to a space for cultural co-construction, where the dialogue between visitors and local communities creates new practices with shared meaning.

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3. An Entanglement of Art, Ecology, and Social Struggles: Porto Marghera as Dialectical Image

Marco Baravalle

Abstract:

Firstly, from a political ecology point of view, this article develops a critique of the concept of sustainability. It then focuses on the (often overlooked) role of social struggles in the Northeast of Italy, looking at the transition from Fordism to the 'district economy' (comprised of small to medium enterprises). Within this transition, the refusal of certain kinds of work both contributes to the transformation of the production model, and is also inextricably linked to denouncing the environmental and social unsustainability of factory work. Art has also played a significant role in highlighting the contradictions of the Veneto production model. Spanning the period from 1968 to the present day, narrowing the scope to Venice (in particular Porto Marghera), this article examines a number of case studies that belong to the spheres of art, social conflict, and the environment. It is not simply a matter of evoking the Fordist past of cities with its accompanying struggles and seeing how this intersects with aesthetics and politics. Rather, the endeavour emphasises how the interest of contemporary artists and critics in workers' struggles against oppression responds to the need to discover an alternative 'genealogy' for present-day Venice. Past struggles are summoned as dialectical images to redeem a city reduced to a symbolic example of extractive policies (firstly executed via heavy industry, then through overtourism), highlighting deep-rooted and persistent subjectivities.

Keywords: Social Struggle, Art, Venice, Porto Marghera, Noxiousness.

3.1 The unsustainable continuity of industrial and tourist paradigms in Venice

Is it still possible to rely on the concept of sustainability without first criticising it as an ideologically mobilised concept within (and created by) neoliberal discourse? The great wave of the European climate movement seems to have broken on the rocks of the pandemic and war. European institutions are snubbing green issues and focusing firmly on rearmament.¹ The serial failures of the various COPs, in the absence of millions of young people demanding accountability, are once again no longer making the news. One wonders whether, despite its resilience (another buzzword) within policy vocabulary, the word ‘sustainability’ has not now been definitively emptied of meaning. The increasingly dramatic data on global warming and the political choices of the major global powers seem to confirm this impression.

Criticism of the concept is nothing new. In the field of political ecology, almost thirty years ago, John Bellamy Foster problematised the mantra of sustainable development, arguing that nothing would change without a prior critique of the concept of development:

Nevertheless, the emphasis throughout remains on sustaining development. In contrast, for those who are concerned primarily with sustaining the earth and creating liveable, sustainable communities, rather than with sustaining development or expanding profits, the conflict between economic growth and the environment is much more likely to be emphasized. (Foster, 1996: 130).

¹ In negotiations underway with the European Parliament, Member States have whittled a €10 billion climate fund down to €1.5 billion and aimed it at defense instead.” Paddy Belton, “EU shifts budget priorities from climate to defense as Ukraine takes center stage,” Brussels Signal, February 1, 2024. [1] https://brusselssignal.eu/2024/02/eu-shifts-budget-priorities-from-climate-to-defence-as-ukraine-takes-centre-stage/?utm_source=chatgpt.com (Accessed, 28/04/2025)

Can we think of green capitalism as a model of sustainability? Some scholars are sceptical, as the concept is essentially about turning 'sustainability' into new terrain for accumulation of capital. As early as 1998, James O'Connor argued: "One scenario is that the destruction of the environment can lead to vast new industries designed to restore it. Imagine lake dredging equipment, forest cleaning machines, land revitalizers, air restorers, acid rain combatants." (O'Connor, 1998: 27)

Even on a local level, the situation is dramatic. In Venice, the effects on health and the environment of the industrial development of Porto Marghera are well known, especially during the period of rapid growth between the 1920s and the 1970s. Lag-ambiente writes:

The contamination of various environments was mainly caused by industrial activities and industrial waste, which were used and dumped in the area throughout the last century. In the 1970s, for example, 22,000 tons of toxic waste were disposed of in the sea each year, increasingly further from the coast and finally also on land in a myriad of uncontrolled sites. But the spills continued over the following years. (Legambiente, 2025: 2)

In 1998, Porto Marghera was declared a site of national interest (S.I.N.). As part of this designation, the state identified large, polluted areas that have been declared dangerous. SINs should be subject to urgent remediation, but after almost thirty years, Marghera is still waiting.

In terms of the negative impact on health, in 2003 there were 248 deaths of EniChem workers, linked to exposure to CVM - vinyl chloride monomer (Pirastu et al., 2003). Another noteworthy case is when Felice Casson (then public prosecutor) brought a group of Motedison executives to trial using data collected by former worker Gabriele Bortolozzo. The executives were accused of having concealed the harmful effects of CVM on workers' health, despite being aware of them. In 2001, the court

acquitted all the defendants. In subsequent appeals, the verdict was overturned to some extent, but only minor sentences were handed down (Bettin, Dianese, 2002).

In the city of Venice, particularly the historic part, two key trends highlight the unsustainability of mass tourism:

These [trends] are the depopulation of the city, because of local residents leaving, and the continuous growth of the tourism sector, represented by an increase in the number of day trippers and overnight stays. Some data can easily demonstrate this. In 1951, the historic city of Venice reached its highest number of residents. Almost 174,800 people were living in its six districts. Today, on the one hand, only 30% of that number remain, namely 52,988 inhabitants. On the other hand, the number of tourists from all over the world grows every year (with a trend of +3% of overnight stays in 2017 compared to the previous year. [...]). From 2008 to 2018, the number of tourists arriving in the historic city increased from 2,075,000 to 3,156,000. This growth is astounding if we also take into account overnight stays, which have grown from 5,677,000 to 7,862,000. (Bertocchi, Visentin, 2019: 6)

In the same article, the authors highlight the key role of social movements in responding to this dramatic situation of over-tourism. For example, since 2012 the *No Grandi Navi* Committee has transformed the fight against the passage of cruise ships into a battle that “became a sort of synecdoche of the tourism problem’s complexity” (Bertocchi, Visentin, 2019: 3). The committee’s battles, blockades, and demonstrations are an excellent starting point for understanding an often overlooked aspect of the history of a place - not only of the city of Venice but of the entire Northeast industrial model. The significant repercussions that these acts of resistance have had on environmental and social sustainability should be noted. The role of social struggles and the role of large (or small) factories should be taken into account when reconstructing this area’s history - in addition, the biopolitical conflict arising from rejecting ways of living that character-

ised the Veneto region on a cultural and social level during the transition from Fordism to industrial districts. Social struggles have thus played an active role in the socio-economic evolution of the territory.

3.2 Refusal of work. Social struggles and the formation of the Veneto model

Let us start with the idea of ‘the absence of conflict’ in our analysis of the Veneto model. The definition of “industrialization without fractures” (Fuà, 1983) is well known, describing the process of transition from a rural to an industrial economy in the NEC (Northeast and Centre) area. The author argues that the pre-existing characteristics of an agrarian culture, organised across small-holdings, sharecropping, and land rental, have contributed to the ‘DNA’ of this area, which favours self-employment, and explains the subsequent success of the ‘district’ model. Fuà highlights some characteristics that have shielded this area from the bitter class struggles that characterised the large Fordist factories. These include the proximity of the workplace to workers’ place of birth, the frequent presence of family ties that characterise working relationships, the possibility of taking on ‘extra’ jobs in agriculture and commerce, and the mobility (and reduced hierarchical distance) between the positions of the *padroncino* (small business owner) and the workforce. A key element contributing to the success of the district economy was the presence of taking initiative, a sense of responsibility and a certain anthropological proximity between employers and their workforce. There is also a recurring reference to the work ethic, a real pillar of the Northeastern entrepreneur identity, inherited from the pre-existing society build on agriculture and craft (Fuà, 1983).

Enzo Rullani and Bruno Anastasia are among the major contributors to the definition of district economy theory. It would be

incorrect to say that they never considered the role of conflict, but they only did so partially. In a 2011 text, they reject a thesis that unilaterally defines the development of the district economy as a reaction to the labour struggles of Fordism. In any case, their stance is somewhat simplistic, given that the complex socio-economic dynamics of such an economy cannot be explained either as a mere response to social struggles or as the unexplained presence of a mythical 'work ethic' that contributes to a climate of unchallenged social cohesion.

In *Dove Va il Nordest* (Where is the Northeast Going?), published in 2005, Rullani looks at the crisis in the various conglomerates of small to medium enterprises - evident well before the global financial collapse of 2008 - and argues that, given the molecular nature of this system, thinking in terms of top-down organizational strategies is unhelpful. Rather, the author argues that to address the crisis we need to think about enhancing the organising forces that the system already possesses, with particular emphasis on self-organization. However, self-organization was precisely the prerogative of certain autonomous worker groups that marked the conflicts of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was in the Marghera petrochemical district that a vast movement of worker self-organization took shape during this period, flouting the guidelines of the traditional trade unions and the Communist Party, the latter of which was clearly perceived as an organization distant from the real needs of the workers. It was these workers that viewed, and suffered, the orders of institutions as impositions, far removed from the reality of the territory. It was these same workers that fought against the damaging effects of large-scale industry, reacting or refusing to work. This resistance was linked to the physical working conditions and exploitation, but was also linked to a culture that rejected the work ethic that paradoxically united the conservative, catholic and property-owning Veneto with socialist orthodoxy. Many of the first instances of outsourcing - the so-called *imprese*

system – which involved various tasks being delegated from large industry to small businesses, took place to undermine the demands of workers. On the other hand, the spatial spread of production and the boom in self-employment also occurred because of the workers' rejection of the harsh conditions of wage labour.

Starting in the early 1970s, work began to expand beyond the confines of the factory and spread out in a network across the territory (transforming from wage labour to self-employment). Similarly, workers' struggles crossed the threshold of the factory gates, spilling into the social sphere. Acts of resistance such as the autonomous reduction of utility bills and the occupation of houses were carried out in working-class neighbourhoods, and, together with women, people fought for the recognition of care work.

Economists forget that conflicts within the so-called 'soft transition' affected small factories as well as large ones. Significantly, the magazine *Venetica* dedicated an issue to these peripheral (but widespread) struggles, with the title *Rivoluzioni di Paese* (Countryside Revolutions). The bearers of demands within these struggles were not limited to factory workers, but included entire communities, groups of women, and educated figures motivated by a pioneering ethical vision of work. By identifying these struggles as an example of the decentralisation of production, it loses the denigrating traits of "basement capitalism" (*capitalismo da sottoscala*) (Rullani, 2021: 10) and takes on those (systematically ignored) of a "small-scale conflict" (Boschiero, Favero, Zazzara, 2010).

In general, the greatest limitation of the approach of scholars such as Rullani or Fuà, lies in their ignorance of the contribution that these new, educated and precariously employed individuals made to the definition of the Veneto model. From the mid-1970s onwards, these people challenged the ways of life that characterised the Northeast at the dawn of post-Fordism.

The philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato, a native of Treviso and the son of a bus driver and a seamstress, moved to the small village of Meduna di Livenza at a very young age. In an interesting biographical text, he recounts his family's working conditions and his own personal political and cultural education, painting a different picture compared to those of the soft transition. Lazzarato argues that the social struggles of the 1970s contributed to the Northeast's transition from a Fordist-agricultural economy to a district-based one, whereas official theorists of industrial districts tend to erase this role to construct a fictional continuity between tradition and post-Fordism (Lazzarato, 1997).

Lazzarato's position may seem paradoxical, but it is not. In fact, Lazzarato's theoretical matrix can be traced back to *Operaismo*, a heterodox faction of Italian Marxism developed during the 1960s that counts Tronti's assumption of the so-called 'primacy of resistance' among its founding principles (Tronti, 2019). This assumption subverted orthodox Marxist methodology, which interpreted workers' struggles as a consequence of capitalist development, suggesting instead that it was precisely these struggles, by challenging the status quo, that drove capitalist development forward, forcing the other side to respond through organizational and technological leaps. This 'discovery' was based on the great vitality and radicalism of the struggles of the so-called 'mass worker' during the 1960s. Lazzarato's discourse must therefore be placed within this timeline. He does not claim credit for having defined the Veneto model as an effective business model. On the contrary, the author is aware of the defeat of the movements of 1968 - and even more so the defeat of those in the 1970s (which he had helped to animate), but he nevertheless intends to claim an active role in struggles as part of how capitalist modes of production developed.

The critique of the concept of 'industrialisation without fractures' has already been discussed in part, but Lazzarato re-constructs the painful story of the emigration of some of his rel-

atives. In retracing a typical day for his parents, a way of life emerges that forced his father to work gruelling shifts and his mother to support the family, not only in a caring role but also with additional paid work as a knitter at home - a commitment that doubled during periods when her husband, a factory worker, was on strike. Moreover, even the theory of seamless industrialization recognises the NEC area as being characterised by large-scale exploitation of so-called 'half-strength labour' (i.e., given the informality of relationships, the possibility of employing housewives, students, and the elderly) and the overuse of full labour, starting with the example of the small business owner who often willingly works beyond normal working hours (Fuà, 1983).

But despite emigration, harsh dynamics of self-exploitation, and permanent (albeit latent) conflict within his family, the young Maurizio gains the opportunity to attend school. The author recounts how his political identity was formed in two ways - the first being a generational rejection of his parents' way of life as wage workers. Lazzarato, like many young people from Veneto, attended church and played soccer. But when rock music began to spread, the soccer team turned into a band, and it is through this form of expression that countercultures were introduced. These began to transform the young man's (and an entire generation's) view of reality, criticizing established values, including that of wage labour. It was a bipartisan critique that didn't spare the conservative point of view, the Catholic work-force ethic, or the official socialist ideology. Furthermore, as we have seen previously, the struggles of the large Fordist factories had also spread far beyond the factory gates. Although still in its infancy, the sprawling metropolis was not only spreading a certain (still unconscious) way of doing business, but also a conscious way of organizing social conflict.

It was always in the shadow of the bell tower, at dusk, that the first generation of educated Veneto proletarians met

the young and not-so-young workers returning to the village after their shift. And the parish unintentionally provided fertile ground for an encounter between generations, but above all between two phases of production that were overlapping. Many of these workers, especially the younger ones, were conscious interpreters of what was called the 'refusal of work', a strategy that produced a break (as we have seen) both with the employers and with the parties and trade unions that were the guardians of socialist ideology.

The point of Lazzarato's text is that this encounter between different worlds and subjects, this singular series of connections within the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, was not only completely ignored by the analysis of 'district' theory, but also played a fundamental role in triggering the decentralization of production. The refusal of work, expressed both against conditions of exploitation and directly in the social sphere, is therefore at least as useful a concept as the work ethic for the North-east model.

Having clarified the general impact of social struggles and refusal of work in the productive decentralisation of the North-east, a specific aspect should be emphasised, namely the worker mobilisations in Porto Marghera. They brought the unsustainability of large-scale industry in Veneto to the fore, especially through their actions of resistance against the harmful working conditions in the 1960s and 1970s.

This is not the place to reconstruct in detail the story of petrochemical workers who were part of *Potere Operaio* (and subsequently, from 1972, organised within the *Assemblea Autonoma di Porto Marghera*), but it was these autonomous vanguards who organised struggles and protests against factory pollution. Feltrin and Sacchetto summarise that season as follows:

Over the 1970s, the quantitative demand for 'more money, less work' proposed by early workerism in its strategy of refusal appeared insufficient, because reductions in working hours might spare work-

ers from workplace-based noxiousness but would not necessarily halt environmental degradation. This problem called for a qualitative struggle over ‘what, how, and how much to produce’ to impose a transition to a system based on collective needs, understood as involving a sustainable relationship between humanity and the environment. In other words, it was deemed ‘more valid to change the content of production rather than taking over the productive apparatus’ (CL, January 1980, 1). Such shift was reflected upon in Contro lavoro’s second to last issue in the following terms: “The contradiction existing within every one of us between a ‘desire to produce’ and the ‘refusal of work’ pushed us to attempt ‘productive’ experiments that were qualitatively and quantitatively different from the production we endured every day. (Feltrin, Sacchetto, 2021: 831)

3.3 Art + workers. Assemblage and intervention in Porto Marghera

On February 27, 1973, artist Giovanni Rubino and poet Corrado Costa (soon to become members of the *Collettivo autonomo pittori di Porta Ticinese*), together with worker Italo Sbrogio and the *Assemblea Autonoma di Porto Marghera* (Autonomous Assembly of Porto Marghera), hoisted a mannequin wearing a gas mask on a wooden crucifix and carried it in procession through the port, planting it in front of the Montedison factory gates. As Jacopo Galimberti recalls:

The specific trigger for Mortedison was a labor inspection that required Porto Marghera’s factory workers to always keep a gas mask within reach. Such a security measure glaringly contradicted the management’s attempts to undermine the risks of chlorine and mercury vapour.” (Galimberti, 2022: 239)

In addition to the mannequin, the protesters painted a large sign on the factory wall that read “Mortedison” (*morte* means death in Italian), a play on words that distorts the real name of

the company: Montedison. The action lasted just over an hour. It seems that a local priest, scandalised by the blasphemy of the artifact, called the police, who intervened to clear the demonstration and remove the crucifix. In fact, there is a photograph showing the worker 'Christ' surrounded by riot police in full gear, complete with helmets, shields, and batons.

In addition to the action, Rubino had exhibited a series of preparatory drawings at the Galleria Apollinaire in Milan, an exhibition that opened the day before the action. The exhibition closed the following day for fear of retaliation. The artist also produced a booklet entitled *Mortedison. Cos'è nocività* (Mortedison. What Is Harm), co-written with Corrado Costa, Italo Sbrogiò, Dario Paccino, and Ettore Tibaldi. The volume included photographs of the demonstration, texts, and photos. Finally, a film of the intervention was included by Enrico Crispolti in the exhibition *L'ambiente come sociale* (The Environment as Social), a sum of the intertwining of aesthetics and politics during the so called 'Long Italian 1968' (the period from 1968 to the end of the 1970s), as well as Italy's participation in the 1976 Venice Art Biennale.

The story of *Mortedison* introduces the role of art in denouncing the harmful impact of Venetian industry and the social unsustainability of its production model. As evidenced by the story of PFAS pollution² and tourism-based extractivism in Venice and the lagoon, these themes continued throughout the transition to the district economy.

² PFAS stands for Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances, a large group of human-made chemicals used in industry and consumer products for their water, grease, and heat resistance. In Veneto, massive PFAS contamination, linked to decades of chemical dumping by the Miteni plant in Trissino, polluted groundwater across three provinces. The crisis exposed over 300,000 residents to health risks: See: Mastrantonio, M., Bai, E., Uccelli, R., Cordiano, V., Screpanti, A., & Crosignani, P. (2018). Drinking water contamination from perfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS): an ecological mortality study in the Veneto Region, Italy. *The European Journal of Public Health*, 28(1), 180-185.

What role does art play, then? To answer this question, a brief methodological digression is necessary. In this article, the word art is used as a mobile concept, including practices that fall within and disrupt institutional phenomenology. *Mortedison* is simultaneously an exhibition by an artist in a Milanese gallery, a demonstration by an autonomous assembly of petrochemical workers against pollution, a publication, and a short documentary presented at the Venice Biennale. What prevails, therefore, is the hybrid phenomenology that Gerald Raunig, referring to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, defines as “transversal concatenation” (Raunig, 2007) between artistic and revolutionary ‘machines’:

“temporary overlaps, micropolitical attempts at transversal concatenation of art machines and revolutionary machines, in which both overlap, not to incorporate one another, but rather to enter into a concrete exchange relationship for a limited time.” (Raunig, 2007: 18)

It is therefore a question of de-localising common notions of art and politics to create (albeit temporarily) locations of fruitful indistinction, where disciplinary roles and boundaries are implicitly overcome. It is (with *Mortedison* in mind), a matter of ‘comings and goings’: from the gallery to the square, from the news (with the echo of the initiative in local and non-local newspapers) to the exhibition, from the factory to the Biennale, from the margins to the centre, from the mainland to the lagoon.

Recently, Claire Bishop, looking at the tradition of Latin American militant art of the 1970s, has isolated a specific type of artistic practice that she has defined using the category of ‘intervention’: “I define interventions as self-initiated actions that address the polis through the use of public space, employing an everyday visual language, and harnessing the media to force an issue into public consciousness and spark debate.” (Bishop, 2022: 115).

This category would include, for example, a proto-environmentalist performance by Nicolás García Urriburu. In 1968,

during the Venice Biennale, the Argentine artist poured a large quantity of fluorescein into the Grand Canal. This is a non-polluting pigment whose effect is to colour the water an intense fluorescent green. Uriburu repeated the action in various places around the world as a warning against the endemic problem of water pollution. Between 1968 and 1970 alone, he carried this out in the East River in New York, the Seine in Paris, and the Rio de la Plata in Buenos Aires.

For the purposes of this article, which focuses on the link between art, social struggles, and sustainability (social and environmental) in Venice, it is important to mention that this same intervention (in the Lagoon), has been repeated recently by Extinction Rebellion, an international movement fighting for climate justice. On December 9, 2023, fifty-five years after Uriburu, the waters of the Grand Canal (along with other waterways in Milan, Turin, Bologna, and Rome) were dyed green. Through this widespread action, dubbed *Acque verdi* (Green Waters), Extinction Rebellion activists sought to denounce the failure of COP 28, the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties, held that year in Dubai. An analysis of the press coverage shows that the images of the Grand Canal coloured green were the most circulated, due to Venice's status as a global icon - not only as a generic symbol of beauty, but also as a symbol of extractive policies and their effects. In the Fordist era, these effects manifested in the polluting impact of Porto Marghera, with the associated harmful consequences discussed previously. Subsequently, from the 1980s onwards, Venice became an emblematic case of the effects of overtourism, which has caused (and continues to cause) a progressive depopulation of the historic city. It was in large part the *No Grandi Navi* Committee that posed a challenge to the image of Venice as a place at the mercy of tourist extractivism and exploitation. It did so over twelve years of protest, with mobilisations often conducted through performative means – including practices such as collective dives, naval battles, and water

parades led by large carnival puppets. Similarly, the action of Extinction Rebellion, beyond the theme that the organisers intended to convey (the failure of COP 28 to address the global challenges of the climate crisis), found itself highlighting local contradictions. On the one hand, the city (like any coastal settlement) is threatened by rising sea levels, which also calls into question the stability of the Mo.S.E. (the system of underwater dams that protects the lagoon from high waters), a technological device designed decades ago without taking into account the effects of global warming on sea levels.³ On the other hand, the mysterious colouring of the Grand Canal has led the media and citizens to wonder whether this gesture was not a blatant protest against the social unsustainability of an extractive tourism model, responsible for the increasing exodus of the population from the historic city to the mainland. It is worth noting that these complaints and issues were raised by Extinction Rebellion through a re-enactment (using the same substance, fluorescein, used by Uriburu) of an artistic performance that took place in the midst of the 1968 protests.

In 2011, coinciding with the 54th Venice Biennale, Marinella Senatore presented a radio drama entitled *Estman Radio Drama*. The work is divided into four chapters and reconstructs the history of the workers' struggles of the 1960s and 1970s at the Marghera petrochemical plant. It does so through the voices of the protagonists, a group of former workers, some of whom belonged to the same Autonomous Assembly with which Rubino and Costa had collaborated on *Mortedison* in 1972. The track alternates between excerpts of conversations between the artist and the workers, and parts read by a narrator (who, from their diction, appears to be a professional actor). The interviews touch

³ See: Mel, Riccardo A., Luca Carniello, and Luigi D'Alpaos. "How long the Mo.SE barriers will be effective in protecting all urban settlements within the Venice Lagoon? The wind setup constraint." *Coastal engineering* 168 (2021): 103923.

on the themes of factory life, recounted in the first person: the impact of the working environment on young people, the disorientation, the role of women in political organization, the criminal neglect and excessive power of the managers, the beginning of the struggles, the rebellion against the bosses, the harmful working conditions, and the importance of study and worker knowledge. The narrator, on the other hand, reads letters from prison written by an unidentified worker to Adriana (possibly his wife or partner?). We know that he is thirty-six years old and has just spent his second New Year's Eve in Rebibbia prison. We know that he is from Venice, and that he is mobilizing for many improvements in the lives of prisoners. He misses the Lagoon, the Veneto mountains, his comrades, and his loved ones.

The material for the production is actually sourced from of a montage of letters from two militants from *Potere Operaio* and the Autonomous Assembly of Porto Marghera, arrested during the investigation of April 7, 1979, aimed at dismantling the Autonomia movement (of which Toni Negri was also a member). Although the last words of this letter are words of hope, when the sender bids farewell to the recipient, the voice of the prisoner inevitably brings to mind *Gli Invisibili* (The invisible), a novel in which Nanni Balestrini, writer and militant of *Potere Operaio*, describes the prison life of militants in the 1970s and their disorientation when they return to freedom after the traumatic decline of the long Italian 1968.

The artist intended to construct a non-invasive, tense soundscape - as is customary in radio dramas - to contextualise the voices of the workers and the narrator. The soundscape depicts Porto Marghera, where the lapping of the water and the blowing of the wind mix with the noises of the factory, the assembly line, metallic sounds, hammering, and sirens (those of the factories and those of the police). We are not listening to a piece of music, but the factory sounds that open the radio drama bring *La Fabbrica illuminata* (1967) to mind - a composition for

soprano and four magnetic tapes, composed by Luigi Nono with lyrics by Giuliano Scabia. *La Fabbrica Illuminata* was developed from an ambient recording of the Italsider factory in Genoa, and the lyrics are taken from workers' statements, for example from union leaflets, as well as from a quote by Cesare Pavese. The aim of the two artists was to denounce the harsh working conditions at the plant. The first verse, in fact, reads:

They called it the factory of the dead
workers exposed
to burns
to harmful fumes
to large masses of molten steel
exposure of workers
to extremely high temperatures
out of eight hours only two are paid to the worker
exposure of workers
to projected materials
human relations to speed up the pace
exposure of workers
to falls
to glaring lights
to high voltage current
how many MAN-MINUTES to die?

(Nono, Scabia, 2010: XXXVI,) ⁴

As the conversation between Marinella Senatore and the former workers of the petrochemical plant focuses on the effects of chemical agents on the workers' bodies, on the diseases and deaths caused by the compounds used in the manufacturing process, the link between *La Fabbrica e Illuminata* and *Estman Radio Drama* becomes more evident: both focus on denouncing the noxiousness and unsustainability of factory life.

4 My transl.

Estman Radio Drama was broadcast by 75 radio stations in Italian. There is also an English version, performed by students of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow.

In the exhibition, Marinella Senatore presented the radio drama in the form of an installation with a minimalist setting: an old factory desk leaning against the wall, a chair and a radio from the same period, four MP3 players on the wall, equipped with headphones, texts, and archival photographs.

Porto Marghera and the Venetian mainland were also the backdrop of three experiences combining participatory theatre, animation, and dance. Two date back to the 1970s, and one to between 2017 and 2018 – let's take a brief look at these.

In 1974, Giuliano Scabia and his class from the DAMS course in Bologna arrived in Mira (a town in the Venetian mainland) with the *Gorilla Quadrumano*. This was a travelling theatre *dispositivo* that was simultaneously a research project on 'peasant theatre' (*teatro di stalla* - in English: barn theatre), a performance in the public space, and a tool for engaging in dialogue with local communities to investigate ancient cultural traditions and current social issues. Mira, a small town on the Brenta Riviera, a few kilometres from Porto Marghera and the Venice Lagoon, was undergoing a period of transition at that time. Farmers were becoming factory workers and the traditions of those who worked the land were disappearing, but at the same time, a new class consciousness was emerging in the struggles within the petrochemical industry and Mira Lanza (a local factory). The *Gorilla's* presence in Mira took the form of an urban parade with floats and puppets (part of the stage design created by the DAMS troupe), meetings with local political representatives (Mira was one of the few municipalities governed by the Communist Party in the deeply Catholic Veneto region), several assemblies, and a performance during the local Festival dell'Unità (the PCI's popular festival format, widespread throughout Italy).

The same year, Luca Ronconi, the director of an edition of the Theatre Biennale which had a focus on decentralisation, invited three different directors to stage three versions of *Othello* in three different venues. One of these, *Cassio Governa a Cipro* (Cassius rules in Cyprus), written by Giorgio Manganelli and directed by Gianni Serra, was staged at the *Petrolchimico* factory. Maurizio Massabò clearly underlines the political stakes of the play:

Cassio governa a Cipro was a decentralized show, meaning it was staged outside of any space normally used for theatrical performances, or even for any other kind of performance or fiction. The premiere took place in a fully operational factory, the *Petrolchimico*, with an audience mainly made up of workers, invited by the factory committee and the group responsible for the 150-hour courses⁵, thus within very specific social contexts that played a particular role in the framework of everyone's "right to culture." It was a difficult culture, in this specific case, commencing with Manganella's text of 'Othello', which was part of a civil and political gamble by the entire Biennale. (Massabò, 2006: 64)

More recently, between 2017 and 2018, in celebration of the centenary of Porto Marghera, choreographer Laura Boato led an urban walking performance involving dancers, singers, musicians, and actors. Working along a 2km stretch of railway inside the industrial area, the performers recalled the protests against harmful working conditions. The event involved over 100 people.

5 The so-called 150 hours were one of the achievements of the workers' struggles during the hot autumn of 1969. Through this measure, workers were entitled to 150 paid hours every three years to devote to study, training, or cultural activities.

3.4 Nostalgia VS Subjectivity. Marghera as a dialectical image

Even art sometimes views factories with nostalgia and complacency. This is the case, for example, with Gian Maria Tosatti's *Storia della notte e destino delle comete* (History of the Night and Destiny of Comets), an Italian work at the 2022 Venice Art Biennale. For the occasion, the Roman artist purchased machines and furniture from various bankrupt factories and reassembled them in the *Tese Delle Vergini* (of which the Italian Pavilion occupies a portion totalling 1,800 square metres) at the Arsenale, creating a mammoth installation that reproduced the spaces of a factory: offices, workshops, and service rooms. The visit consisted of a journey through this evocative Fordist setting. However, what Tosatti presented was not the Italsider factory in Genoa, nor Petrolchimico. On the contrary, it was a generic factory, reconstructed with the indulgence of someone assembling a beautiful ruin. One would be tempted to compare the artist's gaze to that (*si parva licet*) of Benjamin's Angelus Novus. Perhaps it was the winds of the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine that caught Tosatti's wings, pushing him toward the future, with his back turned, offering him the spectacle of a landscape in ruins. The difference is that while the gaze of Benjamin's angel melancholic gaze is an invitation to revolution, to the radical organization of pessimism (Löwy, 2016), Tosatti's point of view is simply nostalgic. He aestheticises the spectacle of the Fordist ruins, because his sophisticated taste is enough to transfigure the factory into an ethereal, poetic, lyrical, and moving space. An operation that appears Pasolinian, but is however far removed from the poet originally from *Casarsa della Delizia*. Pasolini, at least, was nostalgic for the roughness of a certain proletariat, the offspring of a disappearing world straddling the countryside and the city. Tosatti's factory, on the other hand, is full of visitors but empty of subjectivity. Fordism becomes a banal dream, the epic, the tragedy of the clash between classes is lost, but so is every testimony,

every bodily memory, every singular experience. There is no genealogy - it is genre 'painting', a taste for ruin, an adherence to the picturesque. A new manifestation of old academicism.

This is not the case, however, for those who are revisiting the archives of the workers' struggles in Porto Marghera, from the point of view of research and art. The workers' mobilizations of the 1960s and 1970s highlighted the issue of noxiousness. This challenge united workers and artists in a peculiar intertwining of politics and aesthetics during those years. Over the last ten years, various critics and artists have been engaged in a rediscovery of those struggles.

The thesis of this article is that this rediscovery is not tinged with nostalgia, but rather that Marghera functions today as a dialectical image. The notion of dialectical image was developed, albeit in a non-systematic way, by Walter Benjamin in the *The Arcades Project* (1999), and *The Theses on The Philosophy of History* (2020). The dialectical image appears when the materialist historian (who is also a revolutionary) captures the fleeting moment when the past (a certain specific moment in the history of the struggles of the oppressed) connects with the present and opens up the possibility for its transformation. As Michael Löwy argues:

The concept of dialectics is borrowed here by Benjamin from Hegel-Marxist phraseology: he is attempting to account for the nature of a 'salutary image' that seeks to achieve the sublation -*Aufhebung*- of the contradictions between past and present, theory and practice (Löwy, 2016: 40)

Let's go back to Porto Marghera. The defeat of those past movements re-appears, reopening a perspective on the city's present, projecting it beyond the legacy of decades of extractive policies, beyond past and present harmfulness and unsustainability. In this work of research and reactivation through art, the cliché that the contradiction between work and the envi-

ronment is irreconcilable does not hold up. Not that this dialectic is non-existent - on the contrary, it has historically marked various rifts between the spheres of trade unions and environmentalists. Yet artistic practice proves this contradiction to be short-sighted. What shines through instead is the pioneering aspect of the protests against noxiousness, principally organised by *Potere Operaio* and the Autonomous Assembly of Porto Marghera during the long Italian 1968. These mobilisations were ahead of their time, occurring many decades before the climate crisis became an issue on the agenda. They operated at the intersection of social and environmental unsustainability, highlighting not only the need to safeguard jobs (in fact, they did not adhere to the labour ideology of the official workers' movement), but also the need to transform a mode of production characterised by noxiousness.

While the economy of the Northeast was transforming according to the district model, the decline of Porto Marghera left room for mass tourism in the historic city, big business that coincided with a radical depopulation of the island. Those who fight on the front lines of activism, those who pursue artistic or research work, today must contend with industrial decline and the Fordist legacy of a polluted territory, but also with the realities of the depopulation of the historic city and a sense of collective uprooting. This is the real price to pay for the uninterrupted cascade of money that the tourism industry pours into the city of Venice. It is difficult to imagine that the current model will ever become sustainable. After all, in the 1960s and 1970s, large petrochemical companies considered their production model to be sustainable for the environment and health, and only social struggles called this assumption into question. Never before has there been so much talk of sustainable tourism as there is today, while Venice is becoming depopulated, while there is a refusal to regulate tourist rentals, while the Port is planning new excavations, the con-

struction of large islands of toxic sludge⁶, and the return of large cruise ships to the lagoon.

So, looking at the workers' struggles of the past through the lens of art means rediscovering a rootedness in today's protests and struggles - a space for social agency that appears crushed by the combined effects of tourism and security measures that characterise urban policies in this conjuncture⁷ - and means not settling for "dreams and comets". It means rediscovering genealogies from the past that provide the conditions for imagining a different present. This is exactly what Giuliano Scabia, reflecting on his work in Mira, suggests, providing an apt quote to close this chapter:

"It is not a question of recovery, but of research. First and foremost, it is a way of positioning ourselves, of creating our own culture, without delegating it to encyclopaedias or culture producers, to those who already know and come to show us their knowledge. All culture, in all the forms we have described, must first be relived." (Gruppo di drammaturgia 2 dell'Università di Bologna, Scabia: 198)

6 The so-called "Trezze 2" project envisages constructing a new artificial island—an expanded version of the existing Tresse island in front of Porto Marghera—designed to hold dredged materials, industrial sludge and polluted mud. This is part of the plan to bring back the cruise ships to the city, after their ban in 2021.

7 I am referring to the new Italian security law, Decreto Sicurezza (D.L. 4 aprile 2025, n. 44), converted into L. 9 giugno 2025, n. 80. Recently the Italian Supreme Court warned about the decree's heterogeneous scope and disproportionate sanctions, including criminalizing peaceful protests, violated principles of proportionality, clarity, and equality before the law. Read the full text here: <https://www.giurisprudenzapenale.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Rel.33-2025.pdf>

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4. The Social Role of Museums in Venice and Vicenza: Comparing Linguacultural and Sensory Accessibility Practices

Federica Alabiso

Abstract:

Although the first Italian law on accessibility was passed over 35 years ago, accessible practices in Italian museums are “fragmented and occasional” (Istat, 2019a:98). As a result, a large number of visitors are disabled by architectural, cognitive or other types of barriers, which deny them the right to participation and an active cultural life, as established by the UN *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* and the G7 Solfagnano Charter. This chapter analyses a sample of 19 exhibition spaces in Venice and Vicenza (in Northeast Italy), focusing on the practices adopted to ensure access for foreigners and visitors with visual or hearing disabilities. The collected data are summarised in two tables, analysed, and then compared with data on Italian museum accessibility published by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat).

Keywords: Accessibility, Cultural Heritage, Disability, Human Rights Model, Italian Museums, Social Model, Venice, Vicenza.

4.1 Introduction

In 2005, the Council of Europe adopted the *Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*, commonly known as “Faro Convention” (Council of Europe, 2005). The convention

describes cultural heritage and the meanings attached to it as a cornerstone of identity and cohesion within a community, and in article 1 recognises everyone's right to participate in cultural life as defined by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948). A year later, in 2006, the United Nations produced the first international agreement to be entirely concerned with the rights of people with disabilities. The document – which is still considered a milestone for disability rights – is titled *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) and establishes “the right of persons with disabilities to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life” (United Nations, 2006). As of April 2025, it has 164 signatories, including Italy¹.

Much more recently, in 2024, the right of every individual to participation and inclusion in all aspects of her or his country's way of life – including its cultural offerings – was recognised again by the group of G7 countries (which Italy is part of) in the Solfagnano Charter (G7 Italia, 2024).

The cultural life of a society is multifaceted, involving a large number of diverse players operating at different levels. At the forefront are the museums, whose role has been evolving over the years from repositories of artifacts, artworks and knowledge to institutions for education and entertainment and, more recently, promoters of social relations and inclusion, critical thinking and active citizenship (Ciaccheri, 2015; Solima *et al.*, 2021). The 2022 definition of “museum” by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) describes it as “a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society” that has to be “open to the public, accessible and inclusive, [...] foster diversity and sustainability [and] operate with the participation of communities” (International Council of Museums, 2022).

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convention_on_the_Rights_of_Persons_with_Disabilities (Last accessed: July 07, 2025).

Moreover, by taking on this social role, museums could help dismantle processes of exclusion, othering and marginalisation (in this case of disabled people), which are integral to capitalism in the Wasteocene, as discussed by Armano and Donelli in this volume². This is especially true in tourism-stricken Italian cities such as Venice, where masses of tourists seek to explore the local cultural heritage.

The only way for museums to fulfil their essential social role is through accessibility (Solima *et al.*, 2021), a wide and complex set of practices that aims to redesign the museum experience to suit the characteristics of its diverse public.

4.2 A definition of museum accessibility

The concept of accessibility rests upon the so-called social and human rights models of disability (Lawson and Beckett, 2021). The former describes disability as a consequence of a society and environment that were not designed for all its inhabitants. People are not disabled due to a personal condition or characteristic, but rather, they are disabled by barriers in their environment. Shifting the focus from individual to social responsibility, the social model has also replaced the previous medical model in the discussion on disability and served as the basis for the CRPD. More recently, the human rights model has emerged alongside these other perspectives. It places human dignity at the centre, and claims the right of every individual to participate in decision-making processes.

Solima (Solima and Tani, 2016) has identified four different dimensions of museum accessibility: physical, economic, digital and cognitive. The first dimension is concerned with the physical

² Donelli, Armano and Mazzi, “Circularity in the Wasteocene: Art’s uncomfortable answer” in this volume.

and architectural barriers that can hinder a visit. The second considers all costs incurred in the planning and execution of a visit, including the costs related to time and effort. The third relates to the museum's level of technological advancement and its use of digital tools for community participation. Finally, the fourth dimension is concerned with how understandable all museum services are by people with different communication abilities and habits. Among the most common barriers within the cognitive dimension are sensory and linguacultural ones. Sensory barriers marginalise visitors with sensory disabilities – such as blindness, deafness or low vision/hearing – when the information is communicated via a sensory channel which these visitors cannot access. On the other hand, linguacultural barriers arise when foreign visitors encounter information and communications that do not take into account their different language and culturally-related knowledge and values (Agorni, 2012, 2018a; Katan, 2012; Neather, 2024).

4.3 Paper overview

The present paper focuses on accessibility practices implemented by museums in Venice and Vicenza (in Northeast Italy) to overcome or remove sensory and linguacultural barriers, in relation to Solima's cognitive dimension of accessibility (Solima and Tani, 2016). This research is part of the TICH0 (“Translating Italian Cultural Heritage for Outsiders”) project, which aimed to develop and test multimodal communication strategies to make museums accessible to visitors using English as a lingua franca or having visual or hearing disabilities. The study sample is located in the area of the Interconnected Nord-Est Innovation Ecosystem (iNEST), a project funded by the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan and within which TICH0 operated.

The following section, number 3, offers a brief overview of the laws regulating accessibility in Italy. Section 4 reports official data on the accessibility of Italian museums. Section 5 analyses the accessibility offering in a 19-museum sample in the cities of Venice and Vicenza. Finally, section 6 compares the sample with data on Italian museum accessibility.

4.4 Legislation on cultural heritage accessibility in Italy

The first Italian law concerning accessibility in private buildings was adopted in 1989 with the title *Disposizioni per favorire il superamento e l'eliminazione delle barriere architettoniche negli edifici privati*. With private buildings including exhibition spaces, this law contains a series of guidelines to adapt the buildings' architecture to the needs of people with disabilities.

In 2008, the Italian Culture Ministry complemented the 1989 law with a series of *Guidelines to overcome architectural barriers in cultural heritage sites* (Pane *et al.*, 2011). This document ends with a section focusing on museums and exhibition spaces, where suggestions are given on how to design or improve buildings and exhibition halls so that they are accessible for people with disabilities.

In 2024, the National Research Council (CNR) published a handbook on cultural heritage accessibility ("*Manuale di progettazione per l'accessibilità e la fruizione ampliata del patrimonio culturale. Dai funzionamenti della persona ai funzionamenti dei luoghi della cultura*"), a comprehensive document addressing several aspects of accessibility.

4.5 An overview of Italian museums' accessibility

Although over 35 years have passed since the first Italian law on accessibility, accessible practices adopted in Italian muse-

ums are inconsistent and often short-lived, as they generally rely on limited, temporary funding. (Ciaccheri, 2025; Di Giovanni, 2024). Implemented solutions and technologies differ between museums (Di Giovanni, 2024) and accessibility planning lacks an integrated, cultural and cross-disciplinary approach (Ciaccheri, 2025).

This state of affairs is even more apparent when consulting recent data from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat, 2022). It would seem that in terms of accessibility, Italian museums have mainly catered to the needs of visitors with motor disabilities, with 61.6% of public and private museums having adapted their infrastructures to overcome architectural barriers. Contrarily, tactile maps for visitors with visual disabilities are only available in about 8% of museums (although 20.4% already had specific tactile materials, such as replicas and Braille texts, in 2015: Istat, 2015). Figures are even lower when considering accessibility for hearing-impaired persons using Italian Sign language (LIS): only 4.4% of museums feature videos in LIS, while data on sign language-guided tours is unavailable. Just over 10% of museums (20% in metropolitan areas) provide assistance, activities and guided tours to visitors with visual, cognitive or communicative disabilities.

A glance at the data on language availability, published by Istat in 2019 (Istat, 2019b), shows that English is spoken in 63.7% of Italian museums, French in 29.9%, German in 11.6%, and Spanish in 10.5%. Information and material in languages other than Italian is available in 73.1% of museums, whereas multilingual audio guides are offered in 73.4% of museums.

However, having translated materials does not necessarily make a museum accessible for foreigners, if translations were not undertaken in a way that factors in culturally-informed knowledge and communication differences – the translation strategy Katan and Agorni have called “mindful” (Agorni, 2018a, 2018b; Katan, 2012, 2016). There are no data available on the use of

mindful translation in Italian museums, but studies have shown that it is still rarely adopted (Fina, 2018; Katan, 2016).

4.6 Sample and data

Venice represents an ideal case study thanks to its extremely rich and varied cultural and artistic heritage, which makes it a unique and ‘must-visit’ destination for both Italian and foreign tourists. The smaller and lesser-known town of Vicenza – located around 70 kilometres away – is included in the cultural and architectural routes that domestic and foreign tourists tend to follow when travelling from Venice to Milan. Due to its size, population, and tourist flow, it more closely resembles an average historic Italian city.

The sample includes 19 exhibition spaces (18 museums and one villa) located in the cities of Venice and Vicenza, in Northeast Italy. The sites for the sample were chosen from the cities’ most important exhibition spaces in terms of numbers of visitors and collections, and include privately-owned, national and diocesan exhibition spaces. 11 out of the 19 locations are in Venice’s old town. They can be divided into three categories: private museums (one), national museums (five), and municipal museums (five). The remaining eight museums, in Vicenza’s old town, include: municipal museums (four), private museums (two), one diocesan museum and one privately-owned villa.

In the first part of the research, information and data were collected from the museums’ websites and other related online resources (from city administrations and tourism consortia). This information was then verified (with more data being collected) through semi-structured interviews with museum staff including curators, directors and social media managers, held between February and April 2023. Main topics for questions included: linguistic accessibility, accessibility for people with visual disabilities, and accessibility for people with hearing disabilities.

This research was conducted as a preliminary phase of the TICH0 project. The aim was to observe and analyse what accessible communication strategies were already in place in museums within the project's geographical scope, providing an overview of the context as well as compiling a small database of local practices. The governance strategies underlying each museum's choices in terms of accessibility were not investigated.

Results are summarised in the following tables.

Table 1 – Accessibility of 11 museums in Venice.

Key: ✓ fully accessible / partially accessible; - not accessible; ? unavailable data.

	<i>Museum</i>	<i>Linguistic accessibility (English + others)</i>	<i>Visitors with visual disabilities</i>	<i>Visitors with hearing disabilities</i>
<i>Private</i>	Peggy Guggenheim Collection	✓	✓	-
<i>National</i>	Gallerie dell'Accademia	✓	✓	✓
	Galleria Giorgio Franchetti a Ca' d'Oro	✓	✓	-
	Museo di Palazzo Grimani	✓	✓	-
	Museo Archeologico Nazionale	✓	✓	✓
	Museo d'Arte Orientale a Ca' Pesaro	✓	✓	✓
<i>Municipal (MUVE foundation)</i>	Museo Correr	✓	/	/
	Museo di Storia Naturale di Venezia Giancarlo Ligabue	✓	✓	?
	Palazzo Mocenigo	✓	✓	/
	Ca' Pesaro - Galleria Interna- zionale d'Arte Moderna	✓	✓	/
	Palazzo Ducale	✓	✓	/

Table 2 – Accessibility of 8 museums in Vicenza.

Key: ✓ fully accessible; / partially accessible; - not accessible; ? unavailable data.

	<i>Museum</i>	<i>Linguistic accessibility (English + others)</i>	<i>Visitors with visual disabilities</i>	<i>Visitors with hearing disabilities</i>
<i>Private</i>	Gallerie d'Italia – Vicenza	✓	✓	✓
	Palladio Museum	✓	✓	-
	Basilica Palladiana	-	-	-
<i>Municipal</i>	Teatro Olimpico	✓	-	-
	Museo Civico di Palazzo Chiericati	✓	✓	/
	Museo Naturalistico Archeologico	✓	✓	-
<i>Diocesan Ville</i>	Museo Diocesano	✓	✓	-
	Villa Valmarana ai Nani	✓	-	-

4.7 Data analysis and comparison

Exhibition spaces in Venice and Vicenza are diverse, and include a variety of players and stakeholders. These stakeholders belong to both private and public sectors and also include church-related entities. Results were consistent when looking at accessible experiences in the two cities. The only significant difference lies in the fact that museums in Vicenza have joined forces and organise networked activities, which has not happened in Venice. This is probably due to the different sizes and numbers of players in each city.

In Venice, the cultural sector is made up of a high number of museums, foundations, institutions and private stakeholders, resulting in a rather fragmented landscape. The main exhibition spaces in the city can be divided into three categories: a network of national museums, a network of municipal museums (MUVE foundation) and private spaces. Unlike the first two categories, private exhibition spaces seem not to collaborate and generally work independently, adapting their activities in line with the funds available. On the contrary, in the smaller landscape of Vicenza, museums have worked together over the last few years towards making the city's entire cultural heritage accessible. As a result, they launched the networked "Musei per tutti" (Museums for everyone) project, which was supported by the local tourism consortium "Vicenza è"³. The project was implemented in different forms in each museum: for instance, municipal museums launched "Vicenza Inclusion", the diocesan museum promoted "MuseoxTutti", and the Palladio Museum has its own "Palladio per mano/Touch" initiative for visitors with visual disabilities.

In the following sections, we will analyse our research results, which (for clarity purposes) will be divided into the cate-

³ Vicenza è, Museums for everyone (Musei per tutti). <https://www.vicenzae.org/en/vicenza-for-everyone>

gories of linguistic accessibility and sensory accessibility (visual and hearing disabilities).

4.7.1 Linguistic accessibility

All museums in the sample have translated their content into English, and often into French, German and other (mostly European) languages. The only exception is the Basilica Palladiana in Vicenza, which has no display boards or sheets. It is important to notice that informative material is often available in German and French both in Venice and in Vicenza, demonstrating the town's significance on the European tourist routes connecting Venice to Lombardy.

Nonetheless, a more detailed analysis of texts and audio guides is needed to verify whether communication is genuinely accessible for foreign visitors – that is, whether writing and translating have been carried out according to Katan's mindfulness criteria (Katan, 2016). A first indication of this was shared by our interviewee at Venice's Museo Archeologico. By observing visitors over the years, she has noticed that even unaccompanied adult visitors tend to discard exhibition sheets designed and produced for adults, as they are full of information and technical language and thus more difficult to decipher. They prefer to read texts intended for children, which they find more accessible. Our interviewee has seen this happen with both international visitors reading texts in translation and Italian visitors reading the original texts written by the museum curators: it is a sign that even in intracultural communication, this 'mindful' approach is lacking.

4.7.2 Sensory accessibility

We decided to group visual accessibility and hearing accessibility together to better compare the museum experience offered to each visitor group. Ideally, accessibility initiatives should address

all visitor groups equally. However, a quick glance at tables 1 and 2 is enough to notice that museums in both Venice and Vicenza tend to cater more to the needs of blind people, rather than deaf people. Almost all museums included in this research – except the Teatro Olimpico and Villa Valmarana ai Nani in Vicenza – offer tactile tours or workshops and, in some cases, also tactile books, Braille texts and tactile replicas (for example the Guggenheim Collection in Venice, and the Gallerie d'Italia, Museo di Palazzo Chiericati and Museo Naturalistico Archeologico in Vicenza). Conversely, accessibility for people with visual disabilities has only been complemented by accessible communication for the deaf and hard of hearing in a few cases. This took the form of Italian Sign Language videos or guided tours (at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Museo d'Arte Orientale a Ca' Pesaro and Gallerie d'Italia), or special headphones which can be connected to hearing aids (at the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice). Further research is needed to investigate the reason for this difference, which has also been recorded on a national level (see Section 4), albeit with a smaller percentage difference.

Nevertheless, efforts also seem to have been more limited providing accessible information for visitors with visual disabilities. Although most museums feature some kind of tactile tour or sensory materials, only one of them (the Gallerie d'Italia in Vicenza) has designed lighting with those visitors in mind. In all the other cases, halls were often poorly lit and information materials were not easy to read.

Our results seem to confirm what several scholars have already observed: accessibility practices in Italy are “fragmented and occasional” (Istat, 2019a:98) (see Ciaccheri, 2025; Di Giovanni, 2024).

4.7.3 Comparison with official data on accessibility in Italian museums

In section 4, we reported the official statistics on accessibility in Italian museums, released in 2015, 2019 and 2022 by the

Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat). We will now compare our data on the 19 exhibition spaces in Venice and Vicenza with those data.

Outstanding results are obtained when looking at accessibility for persons with sensory or intellectual disabilities. While only about 8% of Italian museums in 2022 offered tactile maps for use during visits (although in 2015, 20.4% made specific materials available), 78.9% of museums (15 out of 19) in our sample have at least some tactile materials, which can be either exhibited alongside the original artworks or used during tactile workshops. Moreover, most museums offer guided tours or workshops to persons with visual disabilities. As regards accessibility for people with hearing disabilities, 21% (four out of 19) are accessible, with 15.8% (three) featuring videos in Italian Sign language, against a national average of 4.4%.

In terms of linguistic accessibility, informative materials and explanations were available in English in 56.7% of Italian museums, in French or German in just over 20%, and in Spanish in 7.9%; covering 95.7% of our sample. Only one museum has no information in English, because it does not provide any informative material at all - the Basilica Palladiana in Vicenza. Information in the form of exhibition sheets, audio guides or display boards, was available in French in 63.2% (12 out of 19), in German in 26.3% (five out of 19) and in Spanish in 15.8% (three out of 19) of the sample.

Data show a quite promising situation in Venice and Vicenza. The 19 museums in our sample outperformed the national average in terms of linguistic and sensory accessibility, with all indicators being above (often significantly above) average.

4.8 Conclusions

Italy is a country with numerous cultural heritage sites, which shape the landscapes of towns and cities as well as rural

areas. Anyone living in Italy interacts with this cultural heritage on a daily basis - these sites are not exclusively visitor sites, but often host public services such as schools, government offices and post offices.

This paper has analysed a sample of museums, traditionally considered as key locations for cultural activity. More specifically, it has focused on the museums' levels of sensory and linguacultural accessibility. These are related to just one of the four dimensions of accessibility identified by Solima (Solima and Tani, 2016). Further research is needed to investigate the remaining three dimensions (physical, economic and digital) as well as other aspects of the cognitive dimension (for example text readability, translation effectiveness, etc.)

Considering the lingua-cultural and sensory aspects that this research has covered, the museums in the sample outperform most Italian museums, being generally more accessible than the national average (see previous section). Nonetheless, if we adopt Di Giovanni's distinction between "accessibility" and "inclusion" (2021)⁴, the question arises of whether those museums have simply found ways to overcome their barriers (accessibility) or have co-designed their services with their stakeholders (inclusion). The latter practice - ensuring that people with differing abilities have a voice and influence in these processes - is certainly more desirable, as it fulfils the social role of museums as promoters of social relations and inclusion, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter⁵.

⁴ Di Giovanni draws a distinction between "accessibility" and "inclusion". The former is defined as a series of actions meant to adapt inaccessible places, services or events so as to allow people with disabilities to access them. Thus, accessibility is an addition to the original design. On the other hand, "inclusion" refers to a set of practices meant to design places, services or events that can be enjoyed by as many people as possible from the outset. Inclusive practices also aim to empower different visitor groups by involving them in each step of the design process.

⁵ Moreover, the "inclusion" model, with its focus on ongoing stakeholder collaboration, would foster Social Innovation in Tourism, an emerging

However, as explained in section 5, the governance practices — and the resulting decision-making processes — adopted by the museums in the sample were not analysed. An in-depth analysis would certainly help shed light on the processes behind creating accessible spaces and materials, help answer the question of whether the museums are being “accessible” or “inclusive”, and, ultimately, provide the administrations with a clearer idea of what still needs to be done to move forward on the ongoing path of inclusion.

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SECTION II: Resistance Practices to Waste and Tourism for Collective Futures

The second section is dedicated to those chapters where community-based and art-based approaches suggest possible resistance actions against wasting dynamics and touristification of places. When sustainability involves creative interventions, participatory processes, and social innovation, it is also possible to reclaim agency by local communities and administrations in contexts marked by depletion and overexposure. Chemical compositions, crafts, and local initiatives appear as laboratories of sustainability where wasted voices and materials are not erased, but rather reintegrated into the collective narrative and economy of a specific site.

5. New Approaches to a Sustainable Economy: The Waste Cooking Oil Case

Matteo Baldan

Abstract:

The aim of this chapter is to provide a general overview of EU policies and regulations, market impact and value enhancements through a circular economy model, regarding the creation of new products derived from used cooking oil (WCO), avoiding its inappropriate disposal in the environment. There has never been a greater need for collaboration and interaction between industry, the scientific community, policymakers, and citizens. In this context of cooperation, the ongoing transition towards a circular economy demonstrates how joint efforts can reshape production and consumption patterns, reduce waste, and foster sustainability. Such cooperation has become crucial for shaping shared political choices, safeguarding human heritage and the environment, and ensuring a decent future for generations to come.

PROPOSED ALTERNATIVE ABSTRACT (SB)

This chapter provides a general overview of the regulatory and market context for new products derived from used cooking oil (or WCO – waste cooking oil). These products help to prevent inappropriate disposal of WCO. The chapter deals with EU policy and regulations, market impact, and the enhancement of value via a circular economy model.

On a broader level, the need for collaboration and interaction between industry, the scientific community, policymakers, and citizens has never been greater. The ongoing transition towards a circular economy demonstrates how joint efforts can reshape patterns of production and consumption, reducing waste and fostering sustain-

ability. This cooperation is increasingly crucial - to shape shared political decisions, safeguard human heritage, protect the environment and ensure a decent future for generations to come.

Keywords: Sustainability; Circular Economy; Waste Cooking Oil; EU Policies on Waste Cooking Oil; Bio-based Products.

5.1 Introduction

Scientific and industrial advancements over the past century have significantly contributed to global economic and technological development. However, these achievements have also indirectly led to a wide range of environmental, social, and public health challenges. In recent decades, increasing awareness of the negative consequences of human activities on the planet has prompted the development of new strategies aimed at reducing resource depletion and minimising the ecological footprint of industrial systems. Key concepts such as sustainability, circular economy, and eco-design have emerged as founding principles to rethink traditional models of production and consumption. These approaches promote a systemic transformation aimed at decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation. Among the most promising strategies is to create new value and uses for end-of-life products as secondary raw materials—an approach that not only mitigates environmental impact but also generates added economic value from both household and industrial waste streams.

Within this context, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, launched by the United Nations and endorsed by all 193 member states, constitutes a comprehensive framework for achieving sustainability in its environmental, social, and economic dimensions. The Agenda includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 specific targets, encouraging each member state to develop national strategies that actively involve public institutions, private actors, and civil society.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first presents a state-of-the-art review of Waste Cooking Oil (WCO) management in Europe, with particular emphasis on the hospitality and tourism sectors, analysed through the lens of circular economy principles. The second section examines academic research and case studies focused on the transformation of WCO into innovative “second-life products,” highlighting the potential of this waste stream as a valuable input in sustainable product development and industrial symbiosis.

5.2 Method

In this study, various European initiatives related to Waste Cooking Oil (WCO), as well as relevant EU Directives and legislation concerning the use and management of WCO, were systematically mapped. The analysis also considered the impact of raw materials and waste management/recycling practices. To gather relevant information, a comprehensive search strategy was employed using a combination of keywords such as “Waste Cooking Oil,” “Circular economy of oil waste,” “EU directives for WCO,” and “New products from WCO.”

This research was conducted using established academic databases and search engines, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science, to ensure coverage of peer-reviewed and up-to-date scientific literature. To complement this, official websites of key European institutions and organizations were consulted to identify current regulations and policies. These sources included the European Commission portal (https://commission.europa.eu/index_en), the EU Law Portal (EU Law Portal, 2021), the European Parliament (<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en>), the European Commission Press Corner (https://commission.europa.eu/index_en), the Council of the European Union portal, the Directorate-General for Environment (DG Environ-

ment, https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/departments-and-executive-agencies/environment_en), the European Environment Agency (EEA), the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA, <https://echa.europa.eu/it/home>), Statista, Eurostat, and the World Bank databases.

After identifying relevant documents and sources, an in-depth review of their references was performed to locate additional relevant material. Only currently active directives, laws, and regulations were included in the analysis to ensure that the study's findings were relevant and up to date.

5.3 EU Directive and regulations for WCO

Waste cooking oil (WCO), often overlooked in public environmental discourse, represents a key challenge and opportunity within the circular economy paradigm. Improper disposal of WCO, especially into sewage systems or landfills, leads to severe environmental consequences, including water pollution, clogged drainage, and adverse effects on ecosystems. In contrast, its recovery and re-use —particularly in biodiesel production— support EU climate and energy goals. This chapter examines the regulatory framework governing WCO in the European Union, its national implementations, and implications for sustainability and circular economy transitions.

WCO is legally categorised under the European Waste Catalogue (EWC) as 20 01 25 – Edible Oil and Fat, falling within the broader category of Municipal Waste (European Commission, 2014). The EWC system, established by Commission Decision 2000/532/EC and subsequently amended by Decision 2014/955/EU, standardises waste classification using a six-digit coding scheme. This scheme allows for precise identification of the waste source and type, thereby facilitating proper management procedures such as collection, treatment, and disposal.

Although not classified as hazardous waste, WCO can cause significant ecological harm if mismanaged. Its improper disposal can lead to eutrophication, harm to aquatic organisms, and interference with wastewater treatment systems (Tuser et al., 2021). Consequently, it falls under the scope of Directive 2008/98/EC on waste, which establishes the waste hierarchy and prioritises prevention, reuse, and recycling over disposal methods (European Parliament, 2008).

Directive 2008/98/EC provides the backbone for EU waste policy, emphasising environmental protection and efficient use of resources. It mandates Member States to implement national waste management plans and ensure the separate collection of waste oils, barring its mixing with other waste streams (Art. 21). This is reaffirmed by Directive 2018/851/EU, which amended the original directive to enhance circularity and promote waste-to-resource strategies.

Importantly, WCO is also cited in the Renewable Energy Directive (RED II – 2018/2001/EU), which lists used cooking oils among the feedstocks eligible for the production of advanced biofuels. This inclusion allows Member States to double count WCO-based biodiesel towards renewable energy targets, incentivizing its collection and transformation (Nasr et al., 2020).

Although EU law encourages WCO recovery, there are currently no binding EU-wide quantitative targets for WCO regeneration. However, the European Commission Communication suggests an 85% regeneration target by 2025, while forbidding energy recovery as a primary method unless regeneration is technically unfeasible. Moreover, the 2018 revision of the Waste Framework Directive required the Commission to evaluate the feasibility of setting specific regeneration targets by 2022—a step not yet completed on a legislative level (European Commission, 2018).

Traceability remains a critical challenge. The lack of a unified EU database makes it difficult to distinguish between WCO

collected within the EU and imported material used for biofuel production. Voluntary certification schemes like ISCC (International Sustainability & Carbon Certification) attempt to bridge this gap, but a standardized EU-wide traceability platform is still under development (Milios et al., 2017).

In Italy, WCO is governed by Legislative Decree 152/2006, which mandates that all actors involved in WCO collection, transport, treatment, and regeneration must register with the CONOE Consortium (Consorzio Nazionale di Raccolta e Trattamento degli Oli e dei Grassi Vegetali e Animali Esausti). Established under Legislative Decree 22/1997 and reinforced by Art. 233 of the 2006 Decree, CONOE oversees the national logistics chain, ensuring environmental compliance and traceability. The Italian system is characterised by a centralised, consortia-based model that combines public oversight with private participation (CONOE, 2022).

France adopts a producer responsibility model, in line with Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) principles. Since 2012, WCO producers are obligated to ensure collection through certified collectors and maintain accurate documentation of recovery and recycling processes. The French Environmental Code imposes administrative and financial penalties for non-compliance. Furthermore, France supports decentralised collection points, especially for domestic WCO, in supermarkets and public recycling centres (ADEME, 2020).

Spain transposed Directive 2008/98/EC through Law 22/2011 on Waste and Contaminated Soils. This law establishes regional competences in waste management, leading to diverse approaches across autonomous communities. Most regions, however, have integrated WCO into biofuel production frameworks, recognizing its economic and environmental value. Public-private partnerships are common, particularly in the HORECA sector (Sánchez et al., 2018).

From an environmental standpoint, WCO recovery mitigates pollution and supports GHG emission reductions through

biodiesel substitution. According to estimates, one litre of improperly disposed WCO can contaminate up to 1,000 litres of water, underlining the importance of organised collection (Tuser et al., 2021).

Economically, the WCO market is expanding, driven by EU biofuel mandates and the circular economy agenda. However, major gaps persist, especially in domestic collection, which remains underdeveloped in most Member States due to logistical and behavioural barriers (Milios et al., 2017). Policies promoting citizen engagement, containerised drop-off points, and targeted subsidies could improve performance in this area.

The EU's regulatory landscape on WCO is robust in principle but fragmented in practice. Harmonising national approaches, introducing binding collection/recovery targets, and establishing a pan-European traceability system are urgent steps. In addition, expanding domestic collection infrastructure and clarifying certification of imported WCO are essential for ensuring the integrity of biofuel value chains.

In a broader sense, WCO exemplifies the transition from waste management to resource governance—a shift that lies at the heart of the circular economy.

5.4 The example of waste cooking oil

Waste Cooking Oil (WCO), primarily generated through vegetable oil use in the hospitality industry, presents considerable challenges from both environmental and economic perspectives. During repeated use, vegetable oils undergo oxidative degradation, resulting in the loss of essential chemical and physical properties, which renders them unfit for human consumption and classifies them as waste.

According to recent data, global vegetable oil production in 2021/2022 amounted to approximately 209 million metric tons,

while in Europe alone, consumption reached 24 million tons in 2022 (Global vegetable oil production since 2000; Vegetable oil consumed in the European Union, 2022). These figures suggest the generation of large volumes of WCO requiring appropriate collection, treatment, and disposal. If improperly managed, WCO can have detrimental effects on the environment. As Jafari (2010) points out, the release of waste oils into aquatic ecosystems can result in the formation of surface films that hinder oxygen exchange and trigger oxidative and photochemical reactions. These processes contribute to increased chemical oxygen demand (COD), disruption of aquatic life, and widespread ecological degradation.

The potential for reusing and obtaining value from WCO therefore represents a critical area of interest for both environmental protection and economic optimisation. From a sustainability standpoint, recovering WCO helps reduce the ecological impact associated with its disposal, while simultaneously decreasing the financial burden of waste management (Cárdenas et al., 2021). In recent years, researchers and industry stakeholders have increasingly focused on developing innovative methods to convert WCO into valuable secondary raw materials. These approaches align with circular economy principles and aim to produce energy or high value-added products from what would otherwise be a waste stream.

More broadly, the valorisation of WCO contributes to the development of a bio-based economy, as it can serve as a sustainable feedstock to produce biodiesel, bioplastics, surfactants, lubricants, and other renewable materials. Importantly, the use of virgin vegetable oils for such purposes raises concerns related to sustainability and competition with the food supply chain. As a result, the scientific community and industrial sector have, over the past two decades, invested in the development and market placement of technologies for biodiesel production from WCO, highlighting its strategic importance as a renewable and non-food-based resource.

5.5 Properties and chemical composition of waste cooking oil (WCO)

Waste Cooking Oil (WCO) primarily consists of approximately 95% triglycerides with aliphatic chains typically ranging from 16 to 18 carbon atoms, derived from various vegetable oils including palm, soybean, canola, sunflower, peanut, cottonseed, coconut, olive, and corn (Foo et al., 2022). The composition and quality of WCO depend largely on the original feedstock and the conditions under which the oil has been used. Presently, the principal application of WCO is in the biofuel sector, particularly for biodiesel production, where it serves as a sustainable alternative to virgin feedstocks, contributing to reducing dependence on fossil fuels and mitigating greenhouse gas emissions.

During cooking, typically conducted at temperatures between 150°C and 200°C, vegetable oils undergo complex physical and chemical changes due to thermal and oxidative degradation. This process generates several by-products such as free fatty acids, glycerol, monoglycerides, diglycerides, and terpenes, which significantly alter the initial characteristics of the oil (Foo et al., 2022). The main chemical degradation pathways involve oxidation, hydrolysis, and polymerization reactions (Carmona-Cabello et al., 2018). Oxidation results in the formation of alkanes, alkenes, symmetric ketones, and dimeric compounds, while hydrolysis increases the concentration of polar compounds including free fatty acids and glycerol. Polymerisation leads to the formation of high-molecular-weight triacyl glycerides, dimers, and oligomers, which contribute to the increased viscosity and darkening of the oil.

These chemical changes manifest as modifications in physical properties such as colour, viscosity, density, and acidity, often making the oil unsuitable for human consumption. Furthermore, the cooking and oxidative processes produce toxic aromatic and heterocyclic compounds, which pose serious health and environmental risks. These contaminants, together with residual food

particles that remain suspended in the oil, complicate the management and potential reuse of WCO, excluding its re-entry into the food supply chain due to safety concerns.

The pre-treatment process of WCO is fundamental to enable its efficient reuse as a biobased raw material (Carmona-Cabello et al., 2019). Pre-treatment aims to remove impurities and degradation products that negatively affect the quality and performance of WCO-derived materials. A broad range of purification techniques have been developed and reported in the literature, often used in combination to meet the specifications required for different applications.

The selection of pre-treatment methods depends primarily on the intended downstream use of the WCO. For example, biodiesel production requires WCO with controlled levels of acidity, moisture, and oxidative degradation to ensure process efficiency and fuel quality. When WCO is used as an additive in plastics or other materials, specific standards related to the presence of volatile organic compounds must be met to prevent negative effects on material properties and safety.

Pre-treatment strategies can be broadly categorized into three main groups:

- **Separation by solubility:** Water extraction is commonly employed to remove polar contaminants such as free fatty acids and glycerol, exploiting their higher solubility in water relative to the oil phase.
- **Separation by filtration:** Filtration processes utilise a variety of methods including membranes, activated carbon, cellulose, and silicates to remove suspended solids and other particulate impurities. The efficiency of filtration depends on the physicochemical characteristics of the contaminants (e.g., particle size, density, viscosity). Advances in membrane technology, such as ultrafiltration and nanofiltration, have improved the removal of fine impurities but also increased operational costs.

- **Separation by distillation:** Vacuum distillation enables the removal of volatile organic compounds and other low-boiling contaminants from WCO under reduced pressure, minimizing thermal degradation of the oil during purification. This technique enhances the quality of WCO by reducing odour, colour, and unwanted chemical species, though it requires significant energy input and equipment investment.

In Europe, the **Waste Framework Directive (Directive 2008/98/EC)** establishes the legislative basis for waste management, including specific requirements for the collection, treatment, and recovery of waste oils such as WCO. This directive promotes the principles of waste hierarchy—prioritising prevention, reuse, recycling, and recovery—and sets stringent targets for the sustainable management of waste oils (European Parliament and Council, 2008).

Additionally, the **Renewable Energy Directive (RED II, Directive (EU) 2018/2001)** encourages the use of advanced bio-fuels derived from waste materials, including WCO, by defining sustainability criteria and greenhouse gas emission savings thresholds for biofuel production (European Parliament and Council, 2018). This directive has significantly influenced the biodiesel sector in Europe by incentivising the value enhancement of WCO and other non-food feedstocks.

From an academic standpoint, recent studies have explored various methods for innovative pre-treatment and value creation. For instance, Cárdenas et al. (2021) reviewed physico-chemical purification techniques and their effects on biodiesel yield and quality, highlighting the importance of efficient contaminant removal to meet fuel standards. Similarly, Foo et al. (2022) analysed the molecular composition of WCO from diverse sources and the impact of degradation products on downstream applications.

Emerging research also addresses the potential of coupling physical pre-treatment with biochemical or catalytic processes to enhance the conversion efficiency of WCO into high-value products, such as bio-lubricants, bioplastics, and surfactants (Carmona-Cabello et al., 2019). These approaches contribute to expanding the circular economy potential of WCO beyond biofuels, fostering diversified and sustainable industrial applications.

5.6 Waste cooking oil as oleochemical feedstock into valuable products

From a waste-to-energy perspective, waste cooking oil (WCO) represents a valuable feedstock for energy generation due to its high heating value. Currently, WCO is employed in various industrial processes, such as the production of syngas through gasification (Carmona-Cabello et al., 2019; Naik et al., 2010) and as a renewable feedstock for biofuel production (Ortner et al., 2015). Increasing knowledge about the average chemical composition of WCO has prompted both academia and industry to explore novel bio-based applications, thereby expanding the portfolio of high-value products derived from this waste stream.

5.6.1 Main industrial uses of waste cooking oil

Diesel fuel remains one of the most widely used fossil fuels globally, powering vehicles, industrial machinery, and electricity generation. To mitigate environmental impacts and reduce dependency on fossil resources, there has been a significant shift toward biofuels. Biofuels typically produce fewer harmful emissions compared to petroleum diesel; for instance, as demonstrated by the Biodiesel Council of the United States and reported by Nascimento et al. (2021), biodiesel combustion results in approx-

imately 48% less carbon monoxide, 47% less particulate matter, and 67% fewer hydrocarbons than traditional diesel.

In the European Union, Fatty Acid Methyl Esters (FAME) are the predominant biofuels, primarily synthesized from vegetable oils and animal fats. The transesterification process, wherein glycerides react with alcohols (usually methanol or ethanol), converts triglycerides into FAMEs. Conventional feedstocks include soybean, palm, and sunflower oils. However, high production costs linked to virgin oils hinder widespread biodiesel adoption. Thus, the use of waste cooking oil as an alternative feedstock holds significant potential, as highlighted by Sahar et al. (2018), who demonstrated efficient FAME production from WCO via alkali-catalysed transesterification.

Local-scale applications of WCO biodiesel (Russi, 2008; Amin, 2019; Caldeira et al., 2016) can enhance cost competitiveness and reduce the negative effects associated with edible oil usage (Cordero-Ravelo and Schallenberg-Rodriguez, 2018). Beyond biodiesel, Nascimento (2021) reports emerging technologies producing various biofuels, deriving value from WCO, including hydrogen-rich syngas via gasification or hydrocracking, bio-oils through pyrolysis, and biokerosene.

Direct combustion of WCO as fuel is documented in the literature, though with varied opinions due to challenges posed by its inherent viscosity and free fatty acid content (Aransiola et al., 2014; Tsoutsos et al., 2019; Singhabhandhu and Tezuka, 2010). While this review does not elaborate on direct combustion, Capuano et al. (2017) note that CO₂ emissions from WCO combustion are lower than fossil fuels, yet generally higher than biodiesel emissions.

Beyond its predominant use in biodiesel production, WCO offers promising opportunities as a precursor for various “second life” bio-based products. These include bio-based plasticisers (Suzuki et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2018; Jia et al., 2018), polymeric materials (Xia and Larock, 2010; Moretti et al., 2020;

Kim et al., 2021), bio-lubricants (Mannu et al., 2019a, 2020b), detergents (Lucchetti et al., 2019; Panadare and Rathod, 2015), soaps (Panadare and Rathod, 2015; Mannu et al., 2020b), cosmetics (Escobar Lanzuela et al., 2015), bio-solvents for pollutant remediation (Mannu et al., 2019a), polyamide dyes (Glover, 2020), and binder additives for aged bitumen (Sun et al., 2017; Asli et al., 2012; Aghazadeh Dokandari et al., 2017; Hossain and Bin Ahmed, 2019; Ingrassia et al., 2019). This review explores these recent approaches to recovery and recycling, highlighting innovative products such as plasticisers for plastics, polyurethanes, asphalt rejuvenators, and biosurfactants.

5.6.2 Polyurethane synthesis from waste cooking oil

Polyurethanes (PUs) are versatile polymers synthesised through the polymerisation of di-isocyanates and diols, resulting in products ranging from flexible foams to rigid and nonporous materials. These have applications across automotive, construction, and other industrial sectors. The global PU market reached nearly 26 million tons in 2022, with projections estimating 31 million tons by 2030 (Mannu et al., 2020; Market volume of polyurethane worldwide, 2015–2030).

Traditionally derived from virgin naphtha, PU production is shifting toward renewable raw materials to meet sustainability goals driven by fossil resource depletion and stricter environmental regulations. Agricultural feedstocks such as lignin, cellulose, starch, and vegetable oils are attractive due to their biodegradability, availability, and low toxicity. Specifically, significant research efforts have focused on producing polyols from WCO, enabling the synthesis of polyesteramides, polyetheramides, epoxy resins, and diverse PU materials (Fareeha Mariama et al., 2023; Orjuela et al., 2020).

Asare et al. (2022) demonstrated that epoxidation and ring-opening modifications of locally sourced WCO enabled

the production of rigid PU foams with properties comparable to conventional materials used in building applications. Lubis et al. (2021) reported the fabrication of polyurethane foam reinforced with sugar palm fibre (*Arenga pinnata*) via compounding WCO-derived polyols and toluene di-isocyanate, achieving enhanced interfacial adhesion. Additionally, WCO has been investigated as a precursor for superhydrophobic coatings through amidation followed by functionalisation with isocyanates and dimer fatty acids (Paraskar et al., 2020) or amino-terminated polydimethylsiloxane (ATP) (Cheng et al., 2019).

5.6.3 Waste cooking oil as an asphalt rejuvenator

The paving industry increasingly utilises reclaimed asphalt pavement (RAP) to reduce reliance on petroleum-based binders. Long-term exposure to heat, air, and moisture causes degradation of asphalt binders, necessitating rejuvenators to restore performance (Ahmed et al., 2019). WCO, containing lighter oil fractions which are similar to asphalt components, has emerged as an eco-friendly rejuvenator.

Studies confirm WCO's efficacy in hot mix asphalt (HMA), though untreated WCO with high free fatty acid (FFA) content, measured via acid value tests (ASTM D1980-87), can adversely affect penetration, softening point, and viscosity (Azahar et al.). Chemical modification, such as transesterification to reduce FFAs, improves WCO's rejuvenating performance by lowering penetration values and increasing softening points.

5.6.4 Biosurfactants derived from waste cooking oil

Surfactants, amphipathic molecules with hydrophobic and hydrophilic moieties, play vital roles in emulsification, solubilisation, lubrication, foaming, and detergency in industrial processes (Cameotra and Makkar, 2010). The growing demand for

sustainable surfactants has prompted interest in biosurfactants derived from renewable resources like WCO.

Yusuff et al. (2021) reported successful synthesis of anionic surfactants, specifically fatty acid methyl ester sulfonates, via transesterification-sulfonation of WCO. The feedstock's richness in oleic, palmitic, and linoleic acids makes it a valuable resource for bio-based detergent production. Furthermore, Permadani et al. developed a bio-detergent employing methyl ester sulfonate surfactants derived from WCO, catalysed by titanium dioxide nanoparticles.

In non-ionic surfactants, Dong et al. synthesised ethoxylated dihydroxy stearic acid methyl ester (DMOE) from oleic acid in WCO. Their characterisation demonstrated low foaming, strong defoaming ability, excellent wetting, and emulsifying properties, supporting potential applications in industrial cleaning.

5.6.5 WCO-Derived additives for polymers

Increasingly stringent regulations limiting toxic additives (e.g., REACH Annex XVII restrictions on phthalates) have spurred research into bio-based, non-toxic alternatives for polymer additives (Jia et al., 2018). Plasticisers, which reduce polymer chain intermolecular forces to enhance flexibility, are critical for manufacturing flexible plastics such as polyvinyl chloride (PVC). Dioctyl phthalate, the conventional plasticiser, is toxic and subject to restrictions, especially in food packaging and medical applications (Bider et al., 2020; Cheng et al., 2020). Its propensity to migrate into adjacent materials, particularly those with high fat content, poses additional risks (Zygoura et al., 2007).

WCO-based additives offer a biodegradable, non-toxic, and readily available alternative. Liu et al. (2020) developed an acetylated fatty acid methyl ester-trimellitic acid ester (AC-FAME-TAE) from modified WCO, demonstrating comparable chemical and physical performance to traditional phthalate plasticisers, while enhancing product and environmental safety.

The main scope of this study is to explore a new approach to a sustainability model focusing on incorporating WCO into biopolymer, with an analysis of its chemical and technical properties. This could enhance the reuse of this type of waste in common sectors such as restaurants.

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6. Art's Uncomfortable Answer: Rethinking Tourism circularity through Waste

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Abstract

This chapter explores the paradoxes of sustainability and circularity in tourism through the conceptual and material lens of waste. Drawing on the Wasteocene framework (Armiero, 2021), it critically examines how both material and symbolic waste—generated by over-tourism and the commodification of local cultures—reflect structural inequalities embedded in contemporary capitalism. Two contrasting case studies in the Veneto region, Venice and the Dolomites, serve as experimental contexts for Cultural Living Labs (CLLs) based on art-led, participatory methodologies. Within these labs, waste cooking oil (WCO) became a central metaphor and material for rethinking circular economy narratives and activating situated, collective forms of knowledge. Through creative practices such as cooking, drawing, and storytelling, local participants reimagined waste as a cultural, affective, and epistemological resource rather than as residue. The artistic process revealed how communities can “care for waste” by transforming discarded materials and memories into critical and imaginative tools for resistance, belonging, and sustainability. The chapter proposes an alternative model of circularity—one grounded in care, relationality, and cultural re-signification rather than in techno-managerial efficiency.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, circular economy, Wasteocene, art-based research, community resilience, symbolic waste, cultural heritage, participatory methodology, care, Venice and Dolomites

6.1 Introduction

Tourism is one of the sectors most subject to tensions and contradictions. On the one hand, there are opportunities for economic growth, strategies to promote environmental sustainability and recognition of unique local cultures; on the other hand, there are negative impacts on both socio-cultural and environmental levels. One of the main problems associated with tourism is the huge amount of material waste (single-use plastic, food packaging, and organic waste from restaurants and accommodation), considered real “social costs” (Pizam, 1978). Added to this is the symbolic and cultural waste generated from commercialising territories, often for tourism purposes. This often contributes to damaging local cultures and silencing community voices in favour of narratives and stereotypes that serve the consumption and commodification of memories and landscapes (Bender et al., 2013; Rickly, 2022).

The Veneto region is a suitable context for observing and comparing these dynamics, where common challenges emerge despite the differences between areas in the region. The project *Sustainable Business Models for Tourism with a Culture-Based Approach*, supported by funding awarded to young researchers from Ca’ Foscari University of Venice within the PNRR iNEST (Interconnected Nord-Est Innovation Ecosystem) was developed by an interdisciplinary team of researchers from fields including management, linguistics, chemistry, fine arts, anthropology, among others. The project analysed two case studies, chosen for their complicated and contradictory relationship with tourism. The first was Venice, the heritage city par excellence, which still attracts millions of tourists every year, located in a fragile socio-ecological environment characterised by mass tourism, gentrification and declining residential population. The second case study dealt with the Dolomites of Belluno, with particular attention paid to Colle Santa Lucia and Arabba, small

Ladin communities strongly linked to natural heritage, affected by depopulation and strongly dependent on a tourist monoculture. The team decided to draw inspiration from the concept of the Wasteocene (Armiero, 2021; Armiero and De Angelis, 2017) and use it as a basic theoretical framework to problematise the category of “waste”, central to their analysis. Unlike other concepts such as the Anthropocene (Hecht, 2018), which tends to homogenise ecological responsibility by attributing the impact on the planet to the generic *Anthropos*, and its alternatives, which seek to problematise the concept - such as the Capitalocene (Davis et al., 2019), the Plantationocene (Paredes, 2021; Manjapra, 2018), or the Chthulucene (Haraway, 2015), the Wasteocene highlights the systemic production and disposal of waste as characteristic features of contemporary socio-ecological relations. This theoretical perspective enabled the team to reflect on the structural inequalities and practices of marginalisation that generate both material and symbolic waste, and to demonstrate how the concept of waste, both as tangible matter and as a system of wasteful relations, is constitutive of modern capitalism. Following Armiero (2021) and Armerio and De Angelis (2017), the concept enabled the research group to interpret material and cultural refuse as indicators of the power structures that shape territories, economies, and imaginaries, and to show how people and communities themselves can become waste by being marginalised through profit-driven models of development.

The researchers posed a central question: How can waste serve as a theoretical and methodological framework to imagine a new understanding of the cultural and environmental impacts of tourism, and to support truly sustainable, circular alternative models? The category of waste has proven to be a useful tool for illustrating how practices, knowledge, and landscapes are devalued or transformed into stereotyped and commodified versions of local culture (Jones and Wynn, 2018; Power et al., 2024).

Cultural Living Labs (CLLs) were developed within the project, led primarily by an artist. These labs served as spaces for participatory experimentation where local communities, researchers, and the leading artist collaborated to co-create knowledge, reactivate narratives, and identify tourism-related issues. The CLLs adopted an art-based methodological approach, in which artistic practices were conceived not only as means of expression but also as tools for investigating and experimenting with nonlinear, affective, and performative forms of knowledge. This approach enabled participants to engage critically, allowing them to articulate alternative narratives and imaginaries about how sustainable tourism practices are conceived. Unlike the quantitative and qualitative methodologies typical of the social sciences, artistic research thus allowed us to focus on both inefability and the processes of knowledge construction (Boyd and Barry, 2024). Within the workshops, the concept of waste was used as a theoretical framework to analyse and interpret the processes of socio-material and symbolic marginalisation of social groups and local communities marked by the advent of monocultural tourism, as well as to reactivate memories, values, and practices.

The reflection started from a tangible object and issue: the disposal and necessary reuse of a specific type of waste - used cooking oil - as produced by the catering industry. On the one hand, it was considered a concrete environmental problem as it is difficult to collect and dispose of, especially in sensitive areas such as Venice and the Alpine regions. On the other hand, it represents a potential resource that can be recycled as part of circular production models (for a detailed description of the process, please refer to Baldan, 2025, Chapter 5).

This dual nature has highlighted that both tangible and intangible aspects of local culture are at risk of being marginalised by unsustainable tourism models, while also allowing the research team and interlocutors to imagine alternative links be-

tween tourism, community, and the environment. It is precisely because of the link between waste oil and gastronomy that the artist and the other researchers decided to work in CLLs primarily in this sector - of key importance to the tourism industry - involving restaurant businesses and kitchen staff. During the CLLs, the research group adopted a methodological approach that encouraged the spontaneous emergence of informants' reflections through non-linear and 'rhizomatic' thought processes (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980). These processes enabled the combination of material, symbolic, and conceptual elements across multiple connections, generating new possibilities for interpretation. In this context, the creative transformation of used oils emerged as both a theoretical and methodological tool, capable of fostering critical reflection on business models related to sustainable tourism.

6.2 Paradox in tourism

Tourism has historically been promoted as a sustainable alternative to other industries, particularly heavy manufacturing and petrochemical plants. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was envisioned as a way to provide economic diversification and foster the cultural identity of territories, without the destructive consequences associated with industrial development (Favero and Moretti, 2017). This early framing positioned tourism as a sector capable of ensuring economic growth for places and marginal regions (as part of a rhetoric of regeneration), and it quickly became central to discourses on local development and sustainability. Tourism is widely recognised as an important driver of economic growth, providing employment and opportunities for host communities (UNWTO, 2017). Its role in supporting regional economies was especially emphasised in peripheral or remote areas, where it is often perceived as vital for development (Hall,

2008). From this perspective, tourism has been presented not only as a source of income but also as a catalyst for positive change, capable of alleviating poverty and contributing to the long-term viability of natural and human resources (Bramwell and Lane, 1993). However, from as early as the 1980s, scholars had started to address issues relating to tourism, raising concerns about the capacity of places to sustain it (O'Reilly, 1986).

In response to these concerns, the concept of “sustainable tourism” gained traction as an alternative to the main tourism industry. Bramwell and Lane (1993: 2) were the first to define sustainable tourism as:

“[...] a positive approach intended to reduce the tensions and friction created by the complex interactions between the tourism industry, visitors, the environment and the communities which are host to holidaymakers. It is an approach which involves working for the long-term viability and quality of both natural and human resources. It is not anti-growth, but it acknowledges that there are limits to growth.”

Despite its aura of “sustainability”, this narrative tends to obscure the contradictions and structural limitations of tourism as a vehicle for sustainable development (Boluk et al., 2019), as well as the inequitable distribution of resources and wealth accumulation among a small elite (Buscher and Fletcher, 2017). Despite its promises, the sector has been slow to reinvent its business models in ways that genuinely address socio-environmental and cultural dilemmas (Power et al., 2024). While it continues to promise sustainability, tourism remains heavily dependent on fossil fuels, energy-intensive infrastructure, and globalised supply chains (Hollenhorst, Houge-Mackenzie, and Ostergren, 2014). Rather than overcoming industrial logics, it reproduces the linear “take-make-waste” model of production and consumption (Singer, 2017). Consequently, the tourism industry continues to contribute significantly to environmental

degradation through practices such as inadequate waste management, biodiversity loss, and increased carbon emissions. Tourism monoculture, in addition to generating material waste due to poor waste management, also produces symbolic and cultural waste resulting from the commercialisation of experiences and gentrification processes that devalue the intrinsic meaning of destinations, transforming them into commodities for visitors. As a result, landscapes are stereotyped and local voices silenced, leading to their marginalisation in decision-making processes (Freire-Medeiros, 2013). These dynamics entail significant environmental and social costs for communities (Bender et al., 2013), exacerbate existing inequalities, perpetuate stereotypical representations, and distance the tourist experience from the authenticity of local cultures and environments (Bender et al., 2013; Rickly, 2022), thus compromising the very promise of sustainability. These processes can be traced back to what Armiero calls wasted relationships (Armiero, 2021), referring to the tendency to devalue the identities of destinations and reproduce stereotypes that distance tourists from the authenticity of local cultures (Rickly, 2022).

Hollinshead (1992) described the tourist encounter as an “objectifying gaze”, echoing concerns about inequality (Turner and Ash, 1975), power, and the lack of morality in tourism consumption and production (Weeden and Boluk, 2014). In light of these contradictions, scholars have increasingly focused on the ephemeral nature of sustainability goals (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010; Moscardo and Hughes, 2018) and have sought to deconstruct the dominant narratives of sustainable tourism by focusing on power relations (Boluk et al., 2019), postcolonial dynamics (Hall and Tucker, 2004), gender inequality (Ferguson and Alarcón, 2015), and environmental justice (Higgins-Desbiolles and Powys Whyte, 2014) to examine tourism systems from different perspectives, such as marginalised communities and underrepresented populations (Boluk et al., 2019). Critical

tourism research has also highlighted the need to rethink governance models and promote greater inclusion of marginalised or underrepresented social groups. These new perspectives aim to incorporate pluralistic worldviews into decision-making processes and recognise the active role of humans and non-humans in ecosystems (Boluk et al., 2019). However, the sector still lacks a radical restructuring of its business models capable of addressing the deepest socio-ecological and cultural dilemmas.

6.2.1 The paradox of the sustainable business model in the tourism industry

The challenges posed by tourism thus highlight an institutional complexity (Greenwood et al., 2011) that cannot be solved by maintaining current business models. In response to these critical issues, the dominant narrative in sustainability management discourses has increasingly emphasised the circular economy paradigm, which has become central to business model innovation, and in particular to the ideal of transforming waste into a resource (Fedele and Formisano, 2023; Moalem et al., 2022). This view, first theorised in the work of Havlicek et al. (1969) to reflect the idea that waste is a resource and not a problem, became increasingly important in waste management in the 1990s (e.g. Stessel 1996; Tammemagi 1999), and has subsequently been institutionalised through legal frameworks such as Directive 2008/98/EC. The circular economy prescribes a hierarchy of avoidance, reuse, recycling, and finally disposal. This utilitarian perspective has become widely accepted, including the use of waste as an input for green energy production (Veolia, 2023). The approach reflects what Hultman et al. (2021) describe as a fundamental assertion of human efficiency: The optimistic belief that even discarded, broken, or devaluated materials can be reused as valuable resources through innovation. However, as Corvellec (2025) convincingly argues,

such models are based on what the philosopher François Jullien (2004) calls heroic efficiency, a Western notion based on goal-orientation, planning, and the pursuit of an ideal future. From this perspective, circular business models are not only a practical response to environmental degradation. They also embody a management ideology that celebrates the ability to turn failure into opportunity and neutralise the negativity of waste. Narratives of closed material loops and zero waste ambitions are based on valorising waste itself as the limit of entrepreneurial ingenuity. This vision risks obscuring the deeper structural causes of overproduction, consumption, and environmental injustice (Gregson and Crang, 2015). Moreover, the circular economy promotes an ecomodernism concept in which society and nature are formally integrated, while materials are treated as separable and controllable flows (Levidow and Raman, 2020). We can, therefore, also recognise an important paradox in the circular economy: instead of questioning the logic of accumulation, the circular economy often reproduces it more subtly by introducing new waste into the cycle and ignoring the costs of transformation. Waste is re-commodified and integrated into systems that prioritise efficiency and value creation. The re-commodification of waste into a cycle can even lead to rebound effects that increase overall material production, contradicting the very goal they claim to achieve. Indeed, the pursuit of zero waste remains a symbolic horizon rather than a viable transition strategy (Kirchherr et al., 2023). This tendency to ascribe value to waste in narratives about the circular economy reflects what Mary Douglas (1966) describes as the social construction of *dirt*, which is understood as *out of place* and as such represents a danger that needs to be controlled. According to Douglas, what appears as dirt is the product of a society's categories and symbolic boundaries. This 'classifying' dimension is related to what Corvellec (2025) observed: the heroic notion of circular efficiency tends to place the unintended consequences

of its own effectiveness outside its epistemological boundaries, relegating everything that exceeds this framework to the dimension of “waste”. In this way, not only are alternative forms of knowledge and practices excluded, but also the geopolitical asymmetries and socio-material inequalities inherent in waste management. In this context, the symbolic and material marginalisation caused by circular economy narratives finds a parallel in the dynamics of tourism: The same classificatory logic that defines what is valuable and what is “waste” also operates in decision-making processes, and excludes local knowledge and diverse visions. Given this structural lack of empowerment of local communities, critical tourism research has highlighted the need to rethink governance models and promote greater inclusion of marginalised or underrepresented social groups. These new considerations aim to promote greater openness to plural worldviews in decision-making processes while recognising the active roles of humans and non-humans in ecosystems (Boluk et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the sector lacks a radical restructuring of its business models that could address these profound socio-ecological and cultural dilemmas.

6.3 Contexts of research, methodology, and findings

6.3.1 Contexts of research

The geographical areas selected for this project - Venice and the Dolomites (particularly Colle Santa Lucia and Arabba) - were chosen because of their complex and conflictual relationship with tourism. In Venice, the effects of mass tourism are closely linked to depopulation processes which accelerated during the second half of the 20th century (Favero and Moretti, 2017). Both depopulation and the emergence of a tourism monoculture can be traced to the unforeseen consequences of the “Greater Ven-

ice" intervention project, which envisaged the industrial and residential development of Mestre and Marghera as playing a part in promoting the cultural and tourist transformation of Venice and its Lido. The combination of the exodus, the socio-political changes of the time, and the rapid growth of mass tourism prevented the continuation of many social practices that historically and culturally characterised the daily use of urban spaces (e.g. local markets and craft workshops as places of exchange and interaction, field festivals and religious celebrations experienced as communal moments, forms of neighbourly conviviality in the small squares and streets, and children playing in public spaces). The lack of a critical mass of inhabitants, combined with the economic dominance of tourism today, undermines the authenticity of the place (Montanari, 2011) and makes the development of a truly creative territory almost impossible (Scott, 2006), as any initiative is quickly absorbed in the process of touristification. At the same time, the Dolomites, which include the areas of Colle Santa Lucia and Arabba, have experienced particularly critical forms of mass tourism in the last half-century (e.g. Tre Cime di Lavaredo), involving a significant impact on the environment and infrastructures (Montanari 2011). In the specific area of the Agordina Valley (which includes Colle Santa Lucia and Arabba), demographic analysis carried out between 2001 and 2024 has documented a loss of 1,300 inhabitants, from about 12,545 in 2001 to about 11,200 in 2023, which corresponds to an average decrease of about 6-7 inhabitants per month. In particular, the population of Colle Santa Lucia decreased from 404 inhabitants in 2001 to about 346 in 2024, confirming a constant trend of depopulation (ISTAT data). There are also considerable socio-economic inequalities in the Dolomites. Some established tourist resorts enjoy a high level of economic development and prosperity, fuelled by world-class mass tourism. In contrast, small and remote settlements where tourism is still in its infancy suffer from social, demographic, and economic marginalisation, while

traditional primary activities (forestry, agriculture, livestock) are in decline (Murphy, 1985).

6.3.2 Methodology

In social science research, the epistemological assumptions that determine the validity of an investigation are traditionally situated within two main paradigms: Qualitative and quantitative. The former favours an in-depth, often intimate exploration of phenomena through approaches based on textual or verbal narratives, while the latter relies on systematic procedures using large-scale surveys or population questionnaires (Goopy and Kassan, 2019). In this study, the research team instead adopted an arts-based approach (Leavy, 2018) to explore innovative ways of engaging participants and analysing knowledge construction processes. Specifically, researchers observed that knowledge development doesn't only follow a rational, linear, and hierarchical approach, but also follows a rhizomatic one (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980) which values the spontaneous emergence of connections and insights. Within this framework, artist Elena Mazzi participated as an integral part of the project. Her works, rooted in the examination of specific territories, reinterpret the cultural and natural heritage of places by intertwining stories, facts, and memories passed down by local communities to suggest possible solutions to the conflict between humanity, nature, and culture. Her method, in close dialogue with anthropological approaches and methodologies, favours a holistic perspective aimed at healing social fractures and tensions. This approach, based on close observation and understanding the needs of local groups, was implemented through the experimental use of CLLs in the two tourist locations of Venice and the Dolomites in the Veneto region. The arts-based methodology was divided into three interconnected phases, Initiation, Work and Result, and Debriefing, each designed to centralise marginalised voices, ascribe value to

cultural practices, and reconfigure waste as a resource, both materially and symbolically.

In this project, in line with several scholars who have identified culture as a lever for change (Lockwood and Soublière, 2022; Lounsbury et al., 2001, 2019), culture was understood as an artistic process in dialogue with the principles of the circular economy within the context of CLLs. Here, artistic practices not only used recycled or reused materials, but also served as critical and creative theoretical tools to rethink cycles of production, consumption, and waste, both materially and symbolically.

The research was structured as follows:

Setup Phase – Narrative Collection

The research began by collecting “waste stories” - narratives about everyday practices of waste management and reuse, from community stakeholders, including restaurateurs, food industry workers, and associations. Narratives were collected through semi-structured interviews and situated practices, such as cooking together, to generate embodied and relational forms of knowledge. The artist, together with researchers, interviewed operators from the food and hospitality sector during November and December 2024 and March 2025. A total of 15 interviews were conducted.

Creative Living Labs

The CLLs were designed as spaces of experimentation where communities, the artist, and researchers could reframe and discuss the contradictions of tourism monocultures and hospitality waste. In Venice, two workshops of 3 hours each were held. In the Dolomites, one longer workshop of 4 hours took place, conducted in part in a restaurant kitchen. Each session included two components:

1. Knowledge-Sharing – researchers presented interdisciplinary insights on waste materials, particularly waste

cooking oil (WCO), highlighting both its technical reuse potential (e.g. biodiesel, plastics, cement; see Baldan, chapter 5) and its metaphorical role as residual waste from tourism-driven consumption.

2. Memory Bridge and Collective Imagination – participants connected personal food-related memories with contemporary socio-environmental challenges, thereby constructing a “*memory bridge*” between past and present. Participants were invited to bring personal items and receipts connected to food memories, which served as prompts for storytelling and as symbolic artefacts linking material culture to lived experience. This approach reflects the principles of arts-based research (Leavy, 2018), whereby creative processes support data collection while mitigating extractivist tendencies. To ensure reciprocity, all participants received reimbursement fees, to recognise their contributions, and to avoid reproducing asymmetrical relationships as part of the research. Through storytelling, drawings, and collaborative reflection, participants collectively re-imagined alternative futures.

The CLLs functioned as situated, participatory environments that fostered the development of alternative imaginaries, bottom-up futures, and forms of socio-ecological resilience co-created with local communities. The theoretical perspective of waste enabled a critical rethinking of the category of discarded material and immaterial things, and highlighted the processes through which dominant systems ascribe value while creating marginalisation. Discussions with participants revealed emic interpretations of the mechanisms that maintain these asymmetries, and showed how waste can become a space for knowledge, resistance, creativity, and symbolic renegotiation. In this process of co-constructing knowledge, waste has been considered

as an important epistemological and cognitive tool (Bourriaud, 1998), capable of giving voice to marginalised and invisible interpretations, often absent from dominant narratives, and translated into the artist's drawings. As Pussetti (2019) points out, the creative and artistic process represents an increasingly significant research tool that can open up spaces for reflection and co-creation that are difficult to achieve through prescriptive or hierarchical methods. From a methodological perspective, the drawings made during or after the CLLs not only preserved the memory of specific situations but also expanded the possibilities for analysis and interpretation. In line with Kashanipour (2021), they represented a stepwise approach to the understanding and production of knowledge, involving both the unlearning of consolidated categories and the learning of new, potentially related categories.

Participant selections

In the two locations analysed, (Venice and the municipalities in the Dolomites), particular attention was paid to restaurateurs, key actors in local tourism.

Characteristics of participants varied according to age, culinary offer, type of venue, and target audience. In the Venetian case study, independent individuals without a fixed workplace, with a more nomadic and performative approach were also involved, as were associations and cooking schools. In the Dolomites, individuals, associations, and personalities specifically linked to the Ladin community were also involved.

While restaurateurs are often identified as producers of food waste (material waste), in this project they were also recognised as actors involved in the dynamics of symbolic and immaterial waste, which are usually marginalised in the discourse around tourism and tourism management. The simplification and commercialisation of traditional recipes for tourism purposes is a form of cultural impoverishment, reducing community

knowledge and practices to commercial stereotypes. This process contributes to the reproduction of a tourism system that is unsustainable - not only on an economic and structural level, but also on a cultural level. Thanks to their everyday familiarity with the production and management of waste, restaurateurs were conceptualised as strategic figures capable of conceptually redefining waste and transforming it into a cultural and material resource. They were also viewed as nodes for the complex connections within their communities and beyond. Their position in CLLs enabled the activation of new pathways of meaning - for example through the recovery of recipes in all their complexity, and through enhancing the value of local knowledge, thus renewing participatory cultural narratives. The use of drawings as part of the laboratories documented interactions and practices, but also critically reinterpreted the connections between restaurateurs, communities, and gastronomic memories, highlighting symbolic and emotional dimensions that are difficult to access through discursive analysis alone. This visual production acted as a catalyst for new perspectives and enriched the collective discussions by offering further insights into and understanding of the value of waste as a cultural and material resource.

6.3.3 Findings

The nature of tourism is paradoxical – it represents both a lifeline and a threat. On one hand, participants recognised tourism as a necessary driver of economic sustainability for their territories, seeing it as a means to combat depopulation. On the other hand, they also saw it as a force of erosion, endangering community cohesion, traditional knowledge, and local identities. This ambivalence situates tourism within broader contradictions, where systems of growth simultaneously sustain and exhaust the very resources—cultural, social, and ecological—on which they depend.

Across all narratives, cooking emerged as a recurring motif and was described by many participants as an “act of resistance.” Cooking became a performative and affective language through which memories and traditions are transmitted, re-embodied, and reclaimed. In this everyday practice, participants articulated the possibility of political and transformative agency—a means to “bridge memories and territories” and to reassert the continuity of marginal and peripheral communities otherwise silenced by dominant tourism narratives. A case in point is the history of the *tiracle* in the Belluno Dolomites. *Tiracle*, traditional flour-and-egg fritters, were historically prepared for celebrations or community gatherings (es, Carnival, festa delle Donaze). Today, however, they have almost completely disappeared from the menus of restaurants and mountain huts, replaced by more easily marketable dishes such as French fries or polenta—the latter often mistakenly regarded as “authentically mountain” food, despite not being part of the region’s original culinary tradition. This marginalisation of the *tiracle* reflects the broader dynamics of homogenisation driven by tourism, in which local culinary identities are reduced to simplified and easily consumable representations. However, it is important to consider that the *tiracle*, like any other aspect of traditional culture, cannot be understood as a static element, but rather as a porous cultural device capable of absorbing external influences while reworking and renewing elements within the community. The transformations it has undergone to respond to tourism should therefore not be interpreted solely as signs of loss, but also as forms of cultural adaptation and reworking, through which tradition is renewed and acquires new symbolic and social functions. *Tiracle* are now being reimagined in a contemporary form. They are smaller, lightly fried, and now served not as a main course but as an appetiser or aperitif, accompanied by other small local delicacies. During a collaborative learning experience in the kitchen of a Ladin restaurant in Arabba, under the guidance of the artist,

the research team analysed the preparation of *tìrcle* as a minor form of cultural resistance. For the occasion, they were made using natural food colourings that recalled the colours of the Ladin flag: green for the meadows, white for the snow, and blue for the sky. This experience showed that culinary practice functioned as a performative and affective device through which traditional recipes, gestures, and knowledge were revitalised and given new meaning. The act of cooking *tìrcle* emerged as a process of cultural re-signification, an ongoing dialogue between past and present, tradition and innovation. In this context, the material itself, comprising ingredients, shapes, and colours, became a vehicle for belonging and memory, as well as a space for symbolic negotiation, where tradition was reintroduced into new contexts of meaning. From this perspective, the reworking of *tìrcle* assumed the value of a symbolic and relational practice, capable of connecting memories and territories and reaffirming the historical and cultural continuity of marginal and peripheral communities, often silenced by dominant tourist narratives, while remaining in constant dialogue with the needs and transformations of the present.

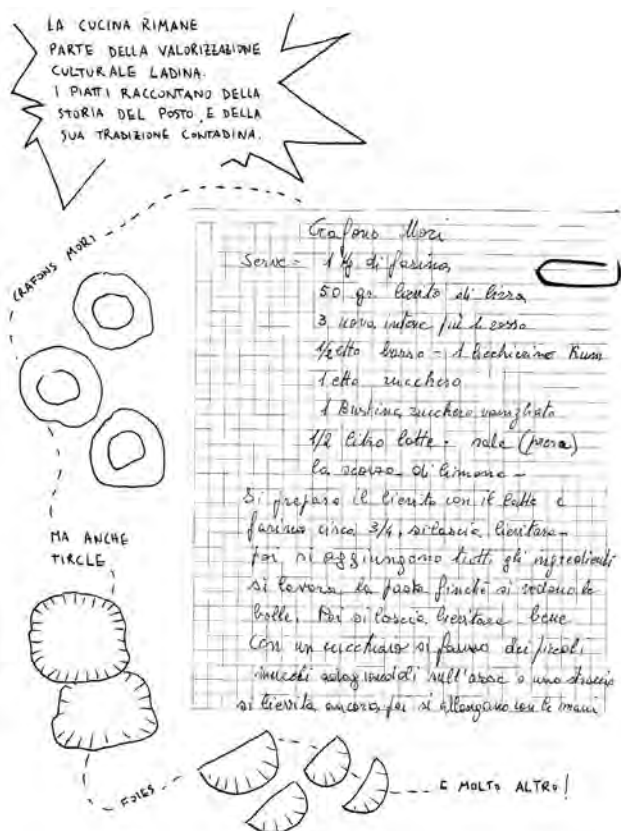


Figure 1 – Tircle Recipe¹

During the CLL in Venice, participants' speeches and drawings revealed cooking as both a practice of sustenance and also as a political act of memory and resistance, capable of opposing the processes of standardisation imposed by tourist economies

¹ Cooking remains a key element of the appreciation and enhancement of Ladin culture. Various dishes narrate both the history of the local area, and its farming and folk traditions. Crafons...small fried dough cakes with blackberry jam...and also Tircle, flour and egg fritters...and much more!

and restoring dignity to everyday gestures of care and sharing. One of the recipes presented by participants was boiled meat, a dish widely enjoyed in the past and now experiencing a revival due to its ability to evoke a sense of home and bring people together around a warm meal. To prepare this dish, the chef selects cuts of meat that are now difficult to find but were once common, such as veal breast, veal tongue, or veal head. The chefs also experiment with the recipe, creating new types of sauces and ragù, and adding boiled beef.

In Venice, preparing the recipe and reworking the remaining leftovers also became a means of reactivating local knowledge, transforming this into tools for critical reflection and collective imagination. In this case, waste was treated as symbolic, establishing a parallel with the remnants of everyday life and industrialised hospitality, and highlighting the inherent tensions between consumption and renewal, exploitation and care. Through processes of artistic and participatory reworking, this waste became a tool for critique and a catalyst for imagining, allowing participants to envisage alternative futures grounded in situated and contextual knowledge, rather than the commodification of cultural heritage. In this case, working with waste also proved to be both a creative exercise and a political and cognitive act, capable of questioning dominant economic logic and restoring value to ordinary practices of care, transformation, and sharing.

Within the Creative Living Labs, the rediscovery of objects related to the preparation of tìrcle became a symbolic act of reappropriation: a way of reclaiming marginalised culinary practices and reaffirming a sense of belonging.

Below are some of the drawings the artist produced in response to interviews, observation, and the CCL. The drawings sum up the processes of experimentation, reflection, and revision that occurred during the activities.



Figure 2 – The Methodology²

² Interviews and workshops. Used cooking oil was the central theme of the interviews and workshops. Starting from the idea of re-using waste, together we tried to imagine a collective vision for transforming this waste into a resource - and also to connect memory to the present-day community. Together we identified new concepts, which we'll call relational objects. These narrate the past, present, future, tradition, and inclusion, ecology, and rural living. The actors were: local politicians, Nevodi, a mutual aid society, Tucia!, Covino, the Hotelier's Association, Pietra Rossa, Gislone, Barena Bianca, the Hotel Alpenrose, Riva del Vin

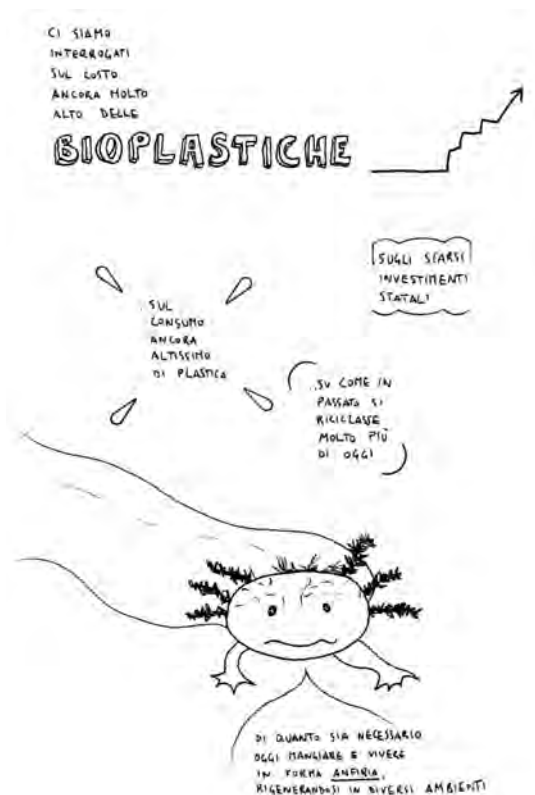


Figure 3 – The methodology of inquiry³

³ We discussed:

The (still very high) cost of bioplastics

The (still extremely high) level of consumption of plastics

The lack of government investment

How we recycled more in the past

How it is now necessary to eat and live in a kind of ‘amphibious’ way, regenerating according to our environments

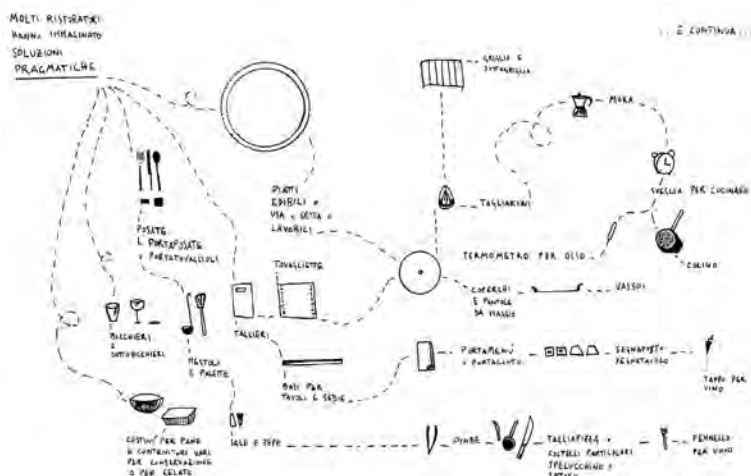


Figure 4 – The outcome of the living lab: pragmatic solutions⁴

⁴ Many restaurateurs thought of pragmatic solutions for:

- Edible, single use or washable plates
- Cutlery, cutlery rests and napkin rings
- Glasses and coasters
- Ladles and spatulas
- Salt and pepper pots
- Tongs
- Pizza cutters, special knives, peelers
- Cutting boards
- Napkins
- Base structures for tables and chairs
- Menu holders or receipt holders
- Place names or table numbers
- Wine stoppers
- Pastry brushes
- 'Travel' saucepans and lids
- Oil thermometer
- Trays
- Kiwi slicers
- Griddles and grills
- Coffee pots
- Kitchen times
- Sieves
- ...and the list continues

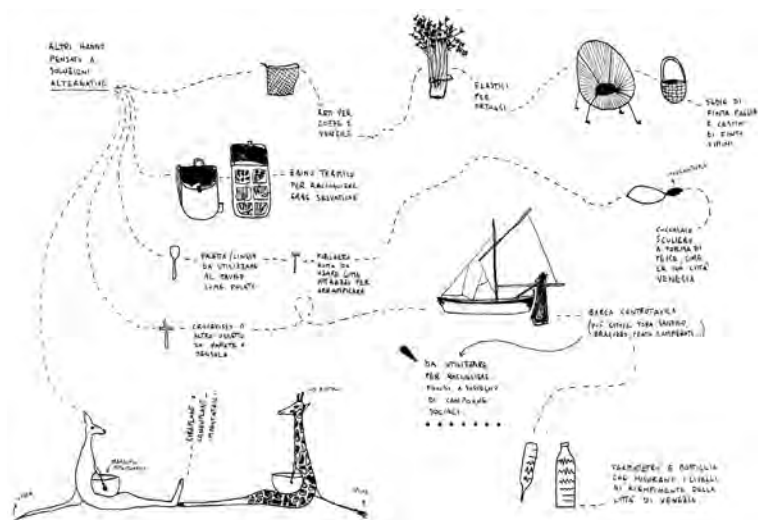


Figure 5 – The outcome of the living lab: image-led solutions⁵

⁵ Others thought of alternative solutions:

- Nets for mussels and clams
- Elastic bands for vegetable garden produce
- Chairs made from imitation straw or baskets made from imitation wicker
- Insulated backpacks for gathering wild herbs
- Spoon/utensil to use as cutlery
- Broken fork to use for climbing
- Sculいた spoon in the form of a fish, recalling the city of Venesia
- Crucifix, or other wall or shelf ornament
- Boat as a table decoration (which could be in the form of Topa, Sandolo, Bragozzo, Peata, Sanpiero - used for fundraising to support local initiatives)
- Thermometer and bottle that measures how full Venice is.
- “Marsupial” dough mixed with buttons and power lead (in the form of a giraffe - giraplant - or a kangaroo - canguplant)

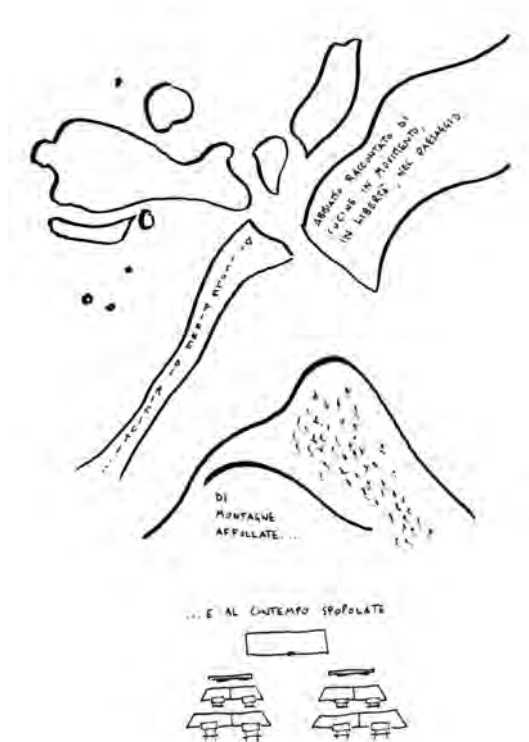


Figure 6 – The outcome of the living lab: reflections on the tourism and territory⁶

⁶ We spoke about cooking and kitchens as free, on the move, as part of the landscape. About islands full of rubbish. About the mountains being crowded and depopulated at the same time.

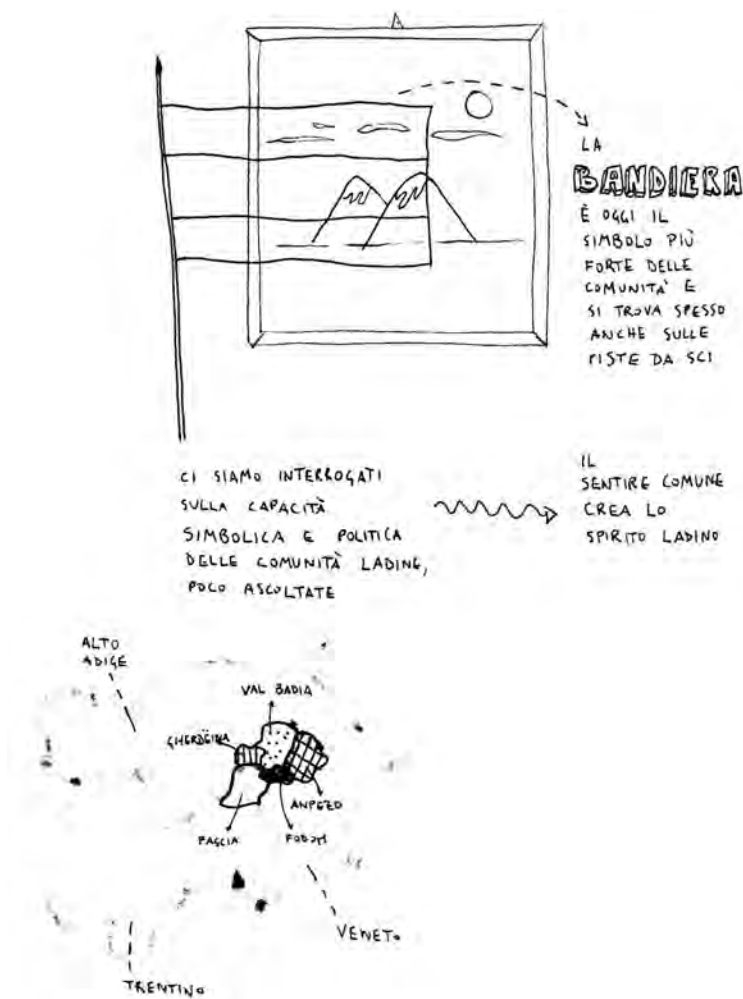


Figure 7 – The outcome of the living lab: reflections on marginalized communities, Ladin community⁷

⁷ Today the FLAG is the strongest symbol of the community, often seen on the ski slopes. We discussed the symbolic and political influence of the Ladin community, who are not listened to enough.

Following feedback from the research team, these reflections were then re-elaborated by the artist to create a book published by Magonza Edition.

The artist's choice of the name ESAUSTE emphasises the collective nature of the process. The term (which means "exhausted" in English) is intentionally gendered and plural, expressing both a condition and a methodology. It reflects the exhaustion we encountered on two fronts. Firstly our own exhaustion in confronting academic logics, disciplinary fragmentation, and institutional expectations; and secondly the exhaustion within the communities we worked with, strained by tourism models that consume rather than nourish, simplify rather than listen, and extract rather than sustain. At the same time, "Esauste" alludes to a concrete starting point: ("Olio Esausto" in Italian) - used cooking oil. An everyday waste product that we initially approached through a technical concept of circularity—how to repurpose used cooking oil, what substances it can generate, and how its transformation might contribute to sustainable innovation. Yet, in this initial enthusiasm for a "virtuous transformation of waste," we recognised an underlying risk: replicating the same logic of economic accumulation that dominates tourism economies, where every residue must be converted into value without questioning the system that relentlessly produces waste, materially and symbolically. Our inquiry shifted from *how to recycle* to *what* and *who* is discarded.

The book is based on origami, and can be read both as a small book and as a map. The book can be downloaded for free from the Publisher's website (<https://magonzaeditore.it/it/product/esauste/>) or by using this code:



The book collates and interprets the participants' inputs, visions, and suggestions, not as a neutral archive of possible re-uses for waste cooking oil, but as a curated assemblage of collective voices, a device of memory-work that resists erasure and commodification (Halbwachs, 2020). Indeed, the artist decided to deviate from the familiar process of creating new tools, objects, and souvenirs from waste, which would have risked perpetuating the same inherent practice of producing and creating waste. The artist's book works as an 'opening' device—a medium for dialogue that does not close off meaning, but rather multiplies channels for interpretation, prompting reflection on the paradox of the tourism monoculture in these territories.

The art-based research carried out was not limited to a communication or educational tool, but became a method of collective enquiry and resistance to prevailing models, perceived as far removed from local value systems.

6.4 Discussion

The final artworks show the contradictions inherent in prevailing narratives about sustainable tourism strategies, while challenging the techno-managerial optimism that underpins

many models of the circular economy. Indeed, these artefacts did not aim to become consumable products, but rather functioned as performative mediators of shared meaning, enabling participants to recognise their experiences refracted through new cultural forms. Beyond their aesthetic value, the drawings served as tools for generating situated knowledge that challenges dominant narratives about waste. In this sense, they align with the perspective of waste as critique (Corvellec and Bevan, 2025), which interprets waste not simply as a material by-product but as a relational and political category that reveals exclusions, hierarchies, and asymmetries of power (Liboiron and Lepawsky, 2022; Gille, 2007). Embodying a form of waste-based critical epistemology, waste offered counter-narratives that challenged the linear logic of “take-make-waste” and opened new possibilities for thinking and acting differently in environments subject to overtourism.

The findings can be organised into three main categories, each reflecting different ways that culture and artistic production can be mobilised to engage with waste:

1. Refunctionalization/resourcification of waste. In this category, waste is intended as a resource to be transformed and recycled. In line with dominant circular economy narratives, waste was reimagined as a resource, converted into new commodities (promoted as green or sustainable), or a new form of energy production. Creativity as such is not mobilised in the process, or is only addressed in a marginal way to make said object aesthetically compelling. However, this risks reproducing extractive logic and “wasting relations” (Liboiron and Lepawsky, 2022). This process does not challenge the idea of who (and which system) produces waste and who is then responsible for it, nor does it address or challenge the core issue of the tourism industry.

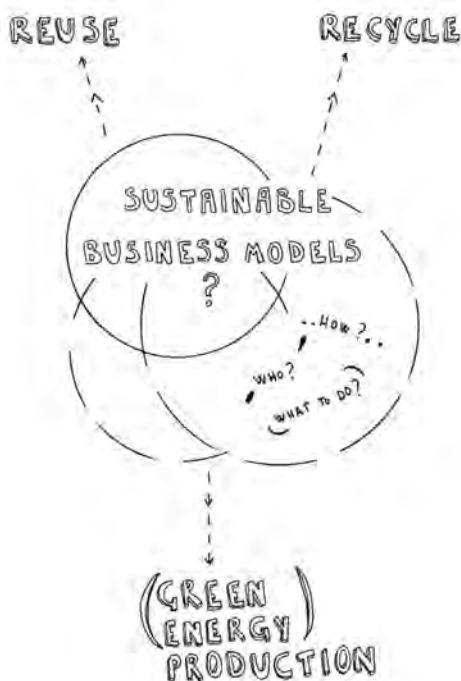


Figure 8 – Refunctionalization/resourcification of waste.

2. Reimagination of waste: Rather than generating new items for consumption, the process produced an imaginative tool that challenges the very notion of production. Creativity was mobilised to re-signify waste by transforming it into artefacts that mobilised memories and emotions. These may take the form of relational objects - for example, items created from waste cooking oil - that are not just materially “new” but are deeply embedded in personal and collective memory, dealing with issues relating to the carrying capacity of the city perceived as “under threat” from tourism. For example, these ‘relational objects’ created from waste cooking oil could be thermometers (for ‘measuring’ the maximum

tourist capacity of the city), or creating new versions of objects used in the past to create traditional recipes such as tircle.

While more generative and thoughtful, this approach still risks commodifying or stereotyping cultural practices and traditions.

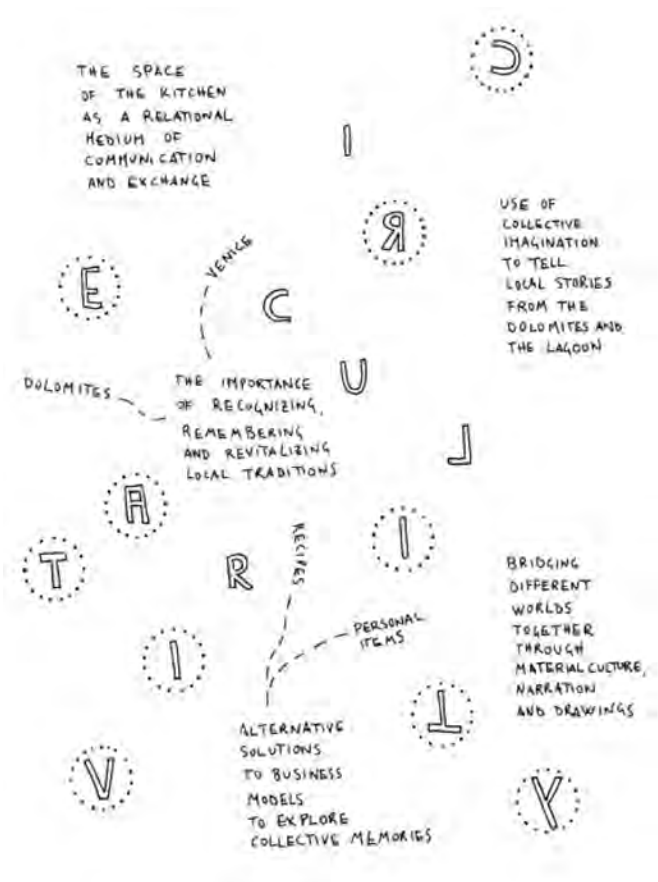


Figure 9 – Reimagination of waste

3. Caring for waste: The artistic process stimulated a profound reflection on the concept of waste that goes beyond the idea of material residue, interpreting it as a socially and politically constructed category which highlights practices of value attribution and processes of marginalisation. Care is understood here through a Haraway perspective. As Donna Haraway notes, “caring means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning” (Haraway, 2008: 36). This approach contrasts with the optimistic narratives of waste as a resource, often presented as a positive rhetoric that extols humanity’s heroic ability to solve even the most complex problems. Beyond the production of new objects, this approach privileged artefacts as non-products—performative mediators of ‘caring’ that escape market logic. Here, creativity foregrounded relationships and amplified voices which are otherwise marginalised in tourism narratives, aligning with critical waste-based epistemologies (Corvellec and Bevan, 2025). Starting from waste cooking oil (WCO), a by-product of the tourism and hospitality industry, the artistic process pulled the threads of memory, affect, and embodied practice. Within the CLLs, WCO was not only treated as waste but also as a symbolic material that embodies the contradictions of overtourism: it is simultaneously a result of intensive consumption and a potential resource to activate creative processes that disrupt the linearity of the production–consumption–waste paradigm (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980; Armiero, 2021). Waste thus means stories, memories, and the vulnerability of the area and its people.



Figure 10 – Caring for waste

Thus, how do we care for waste besides artistic practice? Even though they were not asked direct questions about tourism, participants communicated via people, objects, memories, and emotions to share vivid memories of how the tourism industry has gradually transformed their everyday habits and their sense of place. They recalled, for instance, how traditional dish-

es such as *pastin* have almost disappeared from mountain huts, replaced by homogenised offers like French fries, and how the spread of large hotel chains has eroded local autonomy, reshaping relationships between hosts and visitors into transactional ones. These reflections also revealed a growing awareness of the risks of tourism monocultures driven by large economic powers, which threaten to silence local voices and practices.

Amid these transformations, participants identified the kitchen as a generative space for new forms of local economy and sustainability.

6.5 Conclusions

In this research, artistic practices catalysed new forms of collective imagination. Starting from waste cooking oil, a by-product of the tourism and hospitality industry, the artistic process pulled the threads of memory, affect, and embodied practice. In the CLLs, used cooking oil was not only treated as waste but also as a symbolic entity that embodies the contradictions of overtourism – being simultaneously a (waste) product of intensive consumption and also a potential resource to activate creative processes that disrupt the linearity of the production–consumption–waste paradigm (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980; Armiero, 2021). The art-based approach revealed the contradictions inherent in prevailing narratives about sustainable tourism strategies, while challenging the techno-managerial optimism that underpins many models of the circular economy. Indeed, drawings enabled participants to recognise their experiences refracted through new cultural forms. By doing so, they resisted the commodification of culture and foregrounded alternatives for community, memory, and sustainability (Bartlett, 2015a; 2015b; Tarr, Gonzalez-Polledo, and Cornish, 2018). While thinking and making together, the participants implemented practices

based on comparison, dialogue and creative thinking that are not usually applied in their sector - or at least not through creative experimentation based on drawing, memory and sharing personal experiences.

From these processes, several important lines of interpretation emerged:

- Critical reflection on the concept of waste, understood not only as material waste but also as a social and political category that reveals practices of attributing value and processes of marginalisation.

- Highlighting the contradictions of sustainable tourism, which in some cases perpetuates unsustainable dynamics rather than transforming them. The artistic practice here does not aestheticize waste and wasted stories, but rather presents controversies.

- Proposing alternative, bottom-up approaches capable of stimulating new perspectives for development within territories and tourism management - in particular how personal experience becomes collective when shared. As Mouffe said "art's great power lies in its capacity to make us see things in a different way, to make us perceive new possibilities." (Mouffe, 2013). Indeed, the Living Lab experiments also embodied the affective and political dimension of caring for waste: by acknowledging exhaustion—of the communities—we created spaces where discarded elements could become mediators of dialogue, shared imagination, and situated knowledge.

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GRAPHIC INSERT: LIVING LABS

Venice



1 - Bioplastic derived from waste cooking oil.



2 - Waste cooking oil and purified oil



3 - Testing bioplastic materials



4 - Presentation of the Mutual Aid Society of Carpenters and Caulkers in Venice



5 - Andrea from "Pietra Rossa", Olga Tzatzadaki, iNEST Research Fellow and the artist and coordinator of the Living Labs, Elena Mazzi.



6 - Francesca Pangallo, iNEST Research Fellow, narrating the YR Project to the guests of the Living Lab in Venice.



7 - Andrea, restaurateur at "Pietra Rossa," Antonio, chef at "Nevodi," and Fabio from the cultural association "Barena Bianca" share recipes from their childhood.



8 - Ahmed, co-owner of "Orient Experience," presenting the object he imagined, made of bioplastic.



9 - Gianluigi, co-manager of the bar “Ai Do Leoni” and Lorenzo, cook and founder of “Tocia!”, talking about a knife used in the construction of the A1 highway and the recipe for tortellini broth



10 - Lorenzo, cook and founder of “Tocia!”, Marco, co-founder of “Tocia!”, and Ahmed, co-owner of “Orient Experience”.



11 - Chiara Carolina Donelli, lead of the Young Researcher's Project and Linda Armano, iNEST Research Fellow.



12 - Olga Tzatzadaki designing a fish-shaped spoon made of bioplastic, symbolizing the fragility of the lagoon.

Belluno Dolomites: Arabba and Colle Santa Lucia



13 - Elena Mazzi presenting the YR Project at Hotel Alpenrose, Arabba.



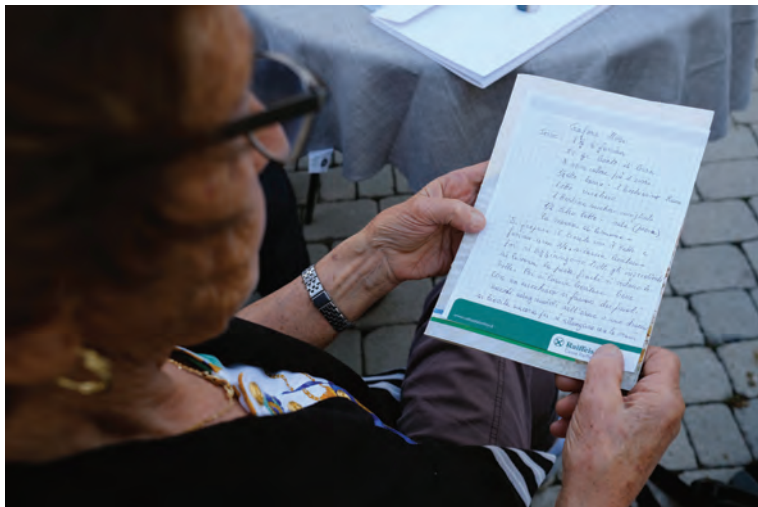
14 - Restaurateurs and hoteliers of Arabba and Colle Santa Lucia.



15 - Sharing stories of childhood recipes.



16 - Participants from different generations engaging together in the Living Lab activities.



17 - Teresa sharing traditional local recipes passed down through generations.



18 - Chiara Carolina Donelli, Francesca Pangallo and Elena Mazzi listening and taking field notes.



19 - Gabriele fully engaged in the Living Lab.



20 - Elena Mazzi together with Teresa and Chef Corrado!



21 - Chef Corrado in action!



22 - Pasta in the three colours of the Ladin flag: green for the meadows and forests, white for the snow-covered Dolomite peaks, and blue for the spring sky.



23 - Moments after frying—expert hands arranging the golden bites.

Event: “Esauste ripensare scarti e comunità nel turismo”



24 - From the ESAUSTE Event in Venice (27 October 2025, Groggia Theater), presenting the results of the YR Project - Margherita De Luca, Chiara Carolina Donelli, Elena Mazzi, Olga Tzatzadaki, Matteo Baldan, Francesca Pangallo and Linda Armano.



25 - Presenting and discussing with the audience the outcomes of the Young Researchers Project.

7. Creative and Artistic Interventions for Sustainable Tourism

Valeria Bruzzi

Abstract:

This chapter critically reviews experimental cultural and artistic interventions in Northeast Italy, highlighting their role in fostering new and sustainable forms of tourism promotion and local development. The focus is on site-specific and participatory practices that test alternative modes of interaction between art, territory, and community. The study is part of *Lab Village per Turismo, Cultura e Industrie Culturali e Creative*, a research and development hub funded by the PNRR within the iNEST Innovation Ecosystem. The project aims to design and scale “cultural prototypes” grounded in social innovation. Despite their potential synergies, the tourism, culture, and creativity sectors in the region often operate in a fragmented manner. Universities play a crucial role through their “third mission”: fostering collaboration among stakeholders, encouraging co-design, and supporting technology transfer to promote cognitive, social, and organizational proximity. The central thesis is that participatory and site-specific cultural practices provide regenerative approaches to territorial development. Understood as a transformative paradigm, Art Tourism moves beyond passive cultural consumption by engaging communities in creative processes that generate social, economic, and symbolic value. Pilot projects in Lavarone, Tonezza del Cimone, and Roana exemplify cultural prototypes that narrate intangible and relational heritage through artistic languages and community involvement, demonstrating their potential to transcend conventional tourism models. Challenges include the risk of reduc-

ing local participation to performativity, difficulties in measuring long-term impact, and the balance between artistic authorship and community agency. Through its action-research approach, Lab Village seeks to address these issues, integrating contemporary cultural production with community benefit. Its success depends on consolidating partnerships with businesses and public administrations, thereby promoting tourism as a vehicle for social balance, inclusion, and sustainable innovation.

Keywords: sustainable tourism development; action research; community co-creation; creative-cultural ecosystem; cultural prototypes; territorial regeneration; cultural and social innovation

7.1 Tourism, culture, and creativity: moving towards an integrated ecosystem for territorial innovation

Tourism, alongside the cultural and creative industries, acts as an axis point for highly interconnected sectors. Through effective collaboration, these industries can generate synergies of significant mutual benefit (Liu, 2018; Jelinčić, 2021). The growing interest in integrating creativity and tourism has been extensively explored in academic literature, outlining this continually evolving field (Richards, 2011). Cultural and creative industries enrich tourism offerings by proposing authentic and immersive experiences that range from traditional music and dance to local craftsmanship and typical gastronomic specialties. This not only encourages enjoyment but also fosters the preservation and enhancement of the intangible cultural heritage of territories. Simultaneously, tourist flows provide a dynamic market and a continuous source of inspiration for the creation and innovation of new cultural services and products, helping to support local creative and cultural activities on an economic level and promoting a 'virtuous circle' between supply and demand (Busacca & Paladini, 2019; Cacciatore & Panozzo, 2022).

In Northeast Italy, characterised by a strong presence of small and medium-sized cultural and creative enterprises often

operating in a fragmented manner, there's a clear need to promote forms of collaboration and integration. This would foster the development of an innovative and sustainable ecosystem, especially given the loss of attractiveness in some areas or, conversely, the unsustainability of massive tourist flows in culturally fragile or undervalued territories. The main challenge, therefore, lies in rethinking tourism, culture, and creativity as components of an integrated system capable of generating economic, social, and cultural value in a balanced and lasting way. In this scenario, the Lab Village project for tourism, cultural, and creative industries emerges as an experimental strategic policy instrument aimed at fostering social innovation in tourism through culture. Through the cooperation of cultural operators, institutions, academic research, businesses, and local communities, Lab Village seeks to create, test, and scale culturally based forms of social innovation, defined as 'cultural prototypes'. These prototypes are developed within experimental laboratories that encourage interdisciplinary dialogue and co-design, generating dynamic and fertile spaces for exchange and cross-fertilization between disciplines and sectors (Apicerni, Gravagnuolo & Panozzo, 2023).

Lab Village is integrated into the broader iNEST Innovation Ecosystem, a PNRR-funded project involving 24 partners, including nine Northeast Italian universities. Coordinated by the University of Padua, iNEST is structured into nine thematic Spokes. Spoke 6, led by Ca' Foscari University of Venice, specifically focuses on tourism, culture, and creativity. Over the past three years, Spoke 6 has pursued the objective of analysing and rethinking tourism systems and cultural production as deeply interrelated realities, highlighting the complex relationships between managing tourist flows, the attractiveness of places, and the generation of new collective cultural imagination capable of redefining territorial identities and local development. Within this framework, Lab Village acts as an advanced research and development hub where researchers, artists, public administra-

tions and private companies collaborate to co-develop innovative cultural ideas, experiences, and services, with a specific focus on the tourism sector (Busacca & Paladini, 2019; Cacciatore & Panozzo, 2022).

Despite the potential for synergy, the three sectors – tourism, culture, and creativity – often remain separate in Northeast Italy, with limited opportunities for collaboration and cross-pollination among businesses. This fragmentation is exacerbated by the prevalence of small, informal entities such as cultural associations, cooperatives, independent artist groups, and freelancers, who operate without structured coordination, hindering the construction of an integrated and cohesive ecosystem. In this context, the so-called ‘third mission’ of universities plays a crucial role. It acts as a strategic bridge capable of fostering encounters and collaboration among stakeholders from different sectors through co-design initiatives, applied research, and technology transfer (Busacca & Paladini, 2019; Cacciatore & Panozzo, 2022). Universities can activate and manage dedicated spaces – such as co-working facilities, innovation hubs, thematic workshops, and interdisciplinary projects – that promote physical proximity among the various actors (Mariotti & Akhavan, 2020). Such spaces are fertile and dynamic environments where the sharing of tacit knowledge—often difficult to codify—is facilitated, strengthening mutual trust among participants and creating ideal conditions for the development of lasting collaborations and innovative projects.

Numerous studies confirm that simple spatial proximity among individuals or organizations is not sufficient to generate innovation and solid collaboration. Instead, it is necessary to act on multiple levels of proximity: cognitive (sharing languages, skills, and visions), organisational (coordination and collaboration methods), and social (trust and mutual respect relationships) (Mariotti & Akhavan, 2020; Ansio et al., 2020; Merkel, 2019). Lab Village is specifically designed to activate and support these

complex collaborative dynamics, serving as a facilitator for dialogue among universities, businesses, administrations, and local communities. Its objective is to promote innovative processes capable of sustainably and inclusively enhancing the cultural and tourism resources of the territory, transforming them into tangible levers for local development and social cohesion (Apicerni, Gravagnuolo & Panozzo, 2023).

7.2 iNEST Cross-cutting activities 2: Lab Village for the Tourism, Culture, and Creative Industries

Lab Village for the Tourism, Culture, and Creative Industries is an applied research and collaborative innovation project. It aims to build a multidisciplinary space where academia, businesses, and local communities can co-design and develop solutions for promoting sustainable cultural tourism. The methodological approach adopted by Lab Village is inspired by the principles of participatory action research, which combines knowledge production with transformative intervention, actively involving local stakeholders as co-authors of the design process. This approach means actively involving local stakeholders not just as beneficiaries, but as co-authors of the project's development. The methodology unfolds in several phases: listening, observation, co-design, prototyping, and feedback. In each phase, the research team works closely with communities, local administrators, and cultural and tourism operators, activating discussion, workshops, creative labs, and public meetings. The project serves as an experimental platform for co-creating cultural prototypes – innovative tools designed to explore new ways of valuing local heritage. These prototypes activate synergy between tourism and culture, fostering sustainable and inclusive development.

The prototypes are cultural devices—installations, narrative experiences, sensory journeys—that connect artistic lan-

guages, local needs, and the potential of the area. Each prototype is conceived as a flexible, replicable, and scalable micro-structure that can evolve over time in response to community feedback and contextual changes. These are not intended as definitive answers or standardised models; rather, they are evolving operational hypotheses, alternatives models aimed at producing situated and transformative knowledge. Participation is the foundational element of the innovation process. The subject and the object of research become less distinct, with knowledge co-production - geared towards transforming the social systems in which we operate - given priority. This generative approach, inspired by John Dewey's thinking, does not apply preconceived theories. Instead, it constructs interpretations and intervention types based on direct interaction with the context in question. Lab Village sees tourism systems and cultural production as interconnected, valuing the relationship between managing tourist flows, the attractiveness of places, and the creation of new collective cultural imaginations. In this sense, it acts as a research and development hub where researchers, artists, administrations, and businesses collaborate to design innovative cultural services with direct benefits for the local area.

In Northeast Italy, where the tourism, culture, and creative sectors often remain disconnected, the project addresses the need to overcome the fragmentation that characterises many local entities - such as cultural associations, cooperatives, and freelancers - fostering an integrated and cohesive ecosystem. Within this system, the 'third mission' of universities plays a crucial role. It acts as a strategic bridge capable of facilitating encounters and collaboration among stakeholders from different sectors through co-design initiatives, applied research, and technology transfer (Busacca & Paladini, 2019; Cacciatore & Panozzo, 2022). Such creative collaborations and the building of effective networks are, in fact, considered key elements for innovation in cultural policy and the creative economy (Comunian, 2017). Universities can activate

and manage dedicated spaces – such as co-working areas, innovation hubs, thematic workshops, and interdisciplinary projects - that promote both physical proximity among stakeholders and also more articulated forms of cognitive, social, and organizational proximity (Mariotti & Akhavan, 2020). These spaces thus become dynamic and fertile environments where the sharing of tacit knowledge—often difficult to codify—is encouraged, and mutual trust among participants is strengthened. This creates ideal conditions for the emergence of lasting collaborations and long-term innovative projects. Lab Village arose from the need to foster these structured and collaborative dialogues among regional stakeholders. Numerous studies, in fact, highlight that mere spatial proximity between individuals or organizations is not enough to generate stable and lasting innovation and synergies. Instead, it's essential to encourage and enact multiple types of proximity: cognitive (sharing languages, skills, and visions), organisational (coordination and collaboration methods), and social (trust and mutual respect among participants) (Mariotti & Akhavan, 2020; Ansio et al., 2020; Merkel, 2019). In this way, Lab Village aims to facilitate networks and collaborative processes, with the goal of enhancing the value of cultural and tourism resources in a sustainable and inclusive way, transforming them into levers for local development and social cohesion.

Academic teams play a central role in scientific mediation, facilitating technology transfer and the design of these cultural prototypes, aimed at sustainably innovating the tourism market. Artists and cultural and creative operators are identified as key players, providing expertise to create new territorial narratives and inclusive tourism services - even though their initial involvement has been primarily in a consultancy role. Tourism operators are essential for integrating these innovations into the market, participating in the co-creation of new products and services. Local institutions, while so far being generally supportive of the approach, have been called upon to utilise these innova-

tions to build new forms of tourism governance, to prevent exploitation and to promote sustainability.

The project also leverages two intermediary entities with distinct functions, both crucial for initiating innovative ways of 'doing' culture and promoting conscious tourism. The first is *La Piccionaia*, a theatre production centre, which acts as a cultural intermediary and curator with specific tasks. The centre identifies the physical locations for the innovation laboratories and facilitates communication and flow of resources among participants. The other entity is dedicated to facilitating the market uptake of the innovative ideas. Finally, university administrative staff - though not initially identified as having this role - have taken the lead in management support and activity organisation, ensuring the project's feasibility despite bureaucratic challenges.

7.3 Art-based approaches and art tourism: emerging paradigms for alternative collective concepts for geographical areas

The growing interest in integrating artistic practices with traditionally non-artistic sectors, such as local development and tourism, reflects a conceptual evolution that views art as a catalyst for innovation and transformation processes. This phenomenon has been extensively studied in the field of 'arts-in-business' (Darsø, 2016). The artistic and cultural practices developed and analysed within the Lab Village project fall within the research field of Art Tourism. This is understood not merely as a market niche, but as an emerging paradigm. Art Tourism is capable of re-evaluating traditional modes of tourist consumption and enjoyment, and of proposing alternative approaches that are more sensitive to the experiential, relational, and transformative effects of engaging with places. The integrated perspective promoted by Lab Village through participatory and collaborative

methodologies finds a natural point of convergence within recent theory, constituting a specific way of applying site-specific, interdisciplinary, and transformative approaches. Indeed, Art Tourism embodies and puts into practice many of the operational assumptions which guide the Lab Village approach: the involvement of communities in the co-creation of territorial value, and experimentation with cultural prototypes rich in symbolic and relational content.

According to Apicerni, Gravagnuolo, and Panozzo (2023), Art Tourism can belong to three categories: 1) participatory artistic experiences – or Art-Based Enjoyment - as the direct and immersive involvement of visitors in artistic practices; 2) creative re-narration of heritage, as an innovative and dynamic reinterpretation of the stories and meanings of places; and 3) art-led urban and cultural regeneration, as the use of art as a tool for the transformation and revitalisation of urban spaces or territories. This classification, though flexible, offers a useful framework for analysing the multiple ways in which art can interact with tourism and territory, contributing to the construction of new images: visions rooted in local identity but open to innovative perspectives. These practices represent powerful tools for generating a new collective imagination relating to specific geographical areas.

In the context of the Lab Village, the collaboration between artists, communities, and institutions is not limited to simply enhancing tangible or intangible heritage. It also fosters forms of symbolic economy, generating cultural and social value that contribute to sustainable and lasting local development, where artistic languages act as genuine catalysts for collective learning and social transformation. This aligns with the principles of regenerative tourism (Dredge, 2022), which emphasize the need for an evolution of socio-ecological consciousness - moving from an “I” to a “we”, overcoming the reductionist thinking that has generated individualism, separation, and commodification. This

shift proposes a holistic, integrated, bottom-up approach centred on place and community, designed for sustainability and a net positive benefit, returning energy and resources to territories and local populations (Heras *et al.*, 2021).

Further studies indicate that tourism models based on participatory artistic practices help strengthen the socio-economic resilience of territories, enhancing social capital, and promoting the development of cultural competencies among residents (Richards, 2021). The main objectives pursued by the Lab Village's action-research project can thus be summarised within four priorities: 1) develop prototype cultural products – thus innovating the tourism offering and strengthening the link between creativity, culture, and local development; 2) set up territorial laboratories: transforming them from temporary experiences into a launchpad for replicable and marketable proposals in the area; 3) foster cross-sector initiatives: valuing collaboration among diverse stakeholders in tourism and the cultural-creative sector; and 4) the repositioning of territories through new narratives and consumption practices that overcome entrenched stereotypes.

7.3.1 Lab Village: pilot actions and ongoing experiments

Lab Village's action-research processes are brought to life through pilot actions. These are themed, experimental actions designed to respond to market dynamics and the needs of tourism businesses. They aim to redefine the attractiveness of places while simultaneously enhancing specific local characteristics and addressing the needs of resident communities.

Three main types of tourism have been identified as being appropriate for these interventions: mountain tourism, outdoor tourism, and urban cultural tourism. These categories encompass a wide range of geographical locations and themes within Northeast Italy, exploring the integration between art, culture,

and tourism in areas with diverse characteristics. The objective is to apply and test the potential of cultural and creative tourism and Art Tourism to develop less established destinations, fostering new opportunities for tourism offerings in smaller or marginal areas (Richards, 2019). The mountain tourism pilot actions, now completed, aimed to re-narrate territories and communities, overcoming stereotypes often associated with this sector. These stereotypes include linking mountainous areas exclusively to the snow economy, to the presence of second homes, or a narrow concept of the mountains.

The outdoor tourism pilot actions, currently underway, focuses on reinterpreting the hydrographic landscapes of Northeast Italy and the natural element of water as cultural and narrative heritage. It proposes more conscious modes of enjoyment, less oriented towards rapid consumption of the territory.

The urban cultural tourism pilot action, set to begin in September 2025, will focus on the issue of over-tourism in 'art cities', explored using various artistic and creative languages through (for example) music and the visual arts. The goal is set to provocatively and ironically explore how mass tourism transforms urban space, influencing daily life, the perception of places and social dynamics, highlighting contradictions and challenges in the coexistence between tourists and residents.

7.3.2 Focus: Pilot Action I – cultural prototypes for mountain tourism

From September 2024 to January 2025, Lab Village Spoke 6 conducted its first pilot action, on the development of cultural prototypes for mountain tourism. This initiative took place in the *Altopiani Cimbri* (Cimbrian Plateaus), spanning the upper Vicenza area and the province of Trento. The objective was to explore the collective memory, socio-cultural needs, and prospects of the local communities in Lavarone, Tonzetta del Cimone, and Roana.

The initial phase involved an in-depth exploration of the territory and its central themes, laying the groundwork for a shared understanding of local resources and potential. Direct interaction with the communities collected valuable information about their experiences, expectations, and challenges, highlighting the distinctive characteristics of each area. *La Piccionaia* Theatre Production Centre, under the supervision of the research team of Ca' Foscari University, identified artists with multidisciplinary expertise, capable of integrating art and culture into tourism promotion in innovative ways. Professionals were selected who could reinterpret specific local features, creating engaging artistic narratives aimed at stimulating reflection on the future of these places. The artistic actions developed in collective and distributed forms, generating cultural outputs designed as genuine prototypes. These were subsequently presented and discussed with stakeholders and industry experts.

7.3.2.1 Lavarone, Trento: imagining cultural tourism beyond the 'snow economy'

The prototype: a multimedia installation that re-narrates this specific area.

Photographer Marco Zorzanello developed the first cultural prototype in Lavarone, in close collaboration with the local community and tourism operators. The artist embarked on a research journey focused on the cultural economy of this Trentino municipality through a visual investigation that integrated audio, video, and photography. The result is a multimedia artistic installation that tells the story of the territory to visitors and residents in a non-stereotypical way, highlighting the area's rich cultural heritage. The starting point was the collective memory of cultural tourism. The work explores the idea of a future for this sector beyond the now deeply rooted (but no longer entirely relevant), imagery of snow. The installation questions whether

cultural tourism can effectively replace this established image through a visual investigation composed of interviews that capture a 'common feeling' about the place.

The prototype emerging from the work in Lavarone combines images printed on plastic material with a video projection of interviews collected during workshops. This fusion of media offers a representation of the past, hopes for the future, and local issues, creating a collective narrative that reflects the voices and expectations of the Lavarone community. This prototype aims to create a tourism experience that evokes emotions and deeply connects the visitor to the territory and its community. Everyday objects become narrators of personal stories, sparking curiosity and a desire to explore further. The potential market includes cultural tourists eager to discover authentic and continuously evolving local narratives. The innovation here lies in an approach that transcends the mere 'consumption' of places, merging with a tourist information service that encourages reflection, memory, and meaningful interaction with residents. It's a holistic approach that goes beyond the sum of services, creating a dramaturgical narration that engages both senses and intellect.

The laboratory: a co-creation and audio-visual investigation

The prototype was developed through a series of meetings with local stakeholders and an in-depth investigation into collective tourism memory and prospects within the sector. The approach was multimedia based, creating audio, video, and photographic recordings, fostering direct interaction with the community. The objective was to develop a qualitative audio-visual investigation aimed at representing the diverse socio-cultural, environmental, and economic needs of the Lavarone territory. This collective narrative gave voice to expectations, future desires, the connection to the past, and the shared memory of the community, configuring itself as a possible 'prototype of inquiry': a concrete model of interaction between the tourism market and the needs of those who live in the territory. The

use of a kind of ‘artistic residency’ for a group of local residents (restaurant owners, farmers, mountain guides) who already collaborate spontaneously is a positive example of co-creation. The artist acts as a catalyst, weaving a dramaturgical narrative from pre-existing experiences without imposing an external idea. The possibility of developing the project in various formats (itinerant performances, gastronomic-theatrical experiences, immersive routes or itineraries) and staging it as a seasonal or permanent event increases its flexibility and its potential to be integrated into existing tourism offers. This type of intervention is designed so that the tourist adopts the role of ‘temporary resident’, differing from that of the traditional ‘consumer’.

7.3.2.2. Tonezza del Cimone, Vicenza: community on stage through food, exploration, and stories

The prototype: “Residents in Residence” as a space for tourism co-creation

In Tonezza del Cimone, actor and playwright Diego Dalla Via was involved in the creation of the cultural prototype. His work resulted in an experience that fosters dialogue among people, traditional local food, and the life stories of residents, inviting them to work or interact together. The workshop idea involved a dramatic re-writing of the community and the territory. The experimental element was the application of the ‘artist’s residency’ model to the residents themselves, thus creating the ‘residents in residence’ approach—a genuine space for co-creation and ideation to re-tell the story of Tonezza del Cimone from within.

In the format of a dinner or convivial moment, this tourism experience sees residents engaging in dialogue around a table with the public, sharing the history, characteristics, and tourist, cultural, natural (and other) offerings of the area. Many of the participants are business managers or professionals in these sec-

tors. The cultural prototype developed in Tonezza del Cimone was configured as a dramaturgical narrative that integrates local experiences—such as gastronomy, theatre, and agroecology—into a structured, scalable, and modular tourism offering. It's based on a collective narrative of the community's activities and traditions, which are gathered and then presented in a theatrical performance. This prototype creates a potential type of experiential tourism that combines culture, gastronomy, and nature into a single integrated offering. It could attract tourists seeking an immersive experience that directly connects them to the daily life of the community.

The target market includes tourists interested in sustainable, gastronomic, nature-based, and cultural tourism. The project introduces innovation into the tourism sector of this territory by integrating it more with local life and its unique characteristics, represented through a multitude of professions, perspectives, and daily activities. This creates specific narratives that recount the area's features, challenges, concerns, and issues—elements that traditional tourism imagery tends to exclude in favour of a sweetened, sanitised, and appealing representation focused on the “beautiful” and on attractions with a unidirectional/universal appeal. This prototype lends itself to development in various formats, such as itinerant performances, gastronomic-theatrical experiences, or immersive routes that combine storytelling and landscape. It can be staged as a seasonal event, part of a cultural festival, or as a permanent experience integrated into the local tourism offering.

The laboratory: a community of residents as a nest of co-creators

This series of workshops applied the concept of an artist's residency to a group of local residents: two restaurateurs, two ecological farmers, and two mountain guides. They represent a significant and diverse section of the community, forming an informal network of individuals who have already collaborated

over the years on spontaneous initiatives blending theatre, exploration of the area, gastronomy, and agriculture/ecology. The artist's objective was to gather these experiences and integrate them into a community-driven dramaturgical narrative. The artistic intervention seeks to explore how theatrical language can serve as a tool to promote critical reflection on local dynamics and issues of public interest, integrating them into tourism services and experiences.

7.3.2.3 Roana, Vicenza: *memory in everyday objects*

The prototype: sound narrative and audio-visual performance

In Roana, the musician Fabio Bonelli was involved in the creation of the prototype. His work began with an initial phase of storytelling and listening, where Roana residents were invited to participate in open interviews, bringing a meaningful object from their daily lives with them. These objects, of personal emotional value, became the starting point for a collective narration of the place. Bonelli transformed the collected stories and experiences into a multimedia work. The artist created a performance called *TOTEM – il Suono della Memoria*, using sounds, images, and voices. In this performance, residents' personal objects were transformed into narrative and metaphysical symbols of the territory and its community. Bonelli's artistic intervention aimed to reveal the spirit of the place through individual experiences, drawing on the roots and identity of the territory. The audio-video performance shared the 'things' of residents' daily lives—objects that held stories, lived experiences, feelings, and memories of traditions and knowledge. The final workshop outcomes are not yet fully defined as a developed cultural prototype for the tourism market, and require further reflection. At present, the direct impact on the tourism sector is not yet clearly identified, likely because the production might have a more significant im-

pact in the artisan sector than in 'tourism' per se. However, it can be defined as an artistic production that narrates the life stories of inhabitants and their objects, and as an audio-visual performance that uses everyday, personal objects to recount stories and memories of the local community.

The laboratory: from individual fragments to a collective narrative of a territory

The first phase of the artistic lab, focused on storytelling and listening, involved Roana residents in open interviews, inviting them to bring a significant object from their daily lives. These objects, belonging to the personal or family emotional sphere, became the starting point for a collective narration of the inhabited places. The collected stories were transformed into a multimedia work. Through sounds, images, and voices, the artist created a performance titled *TOTEM – il Suono della Memoria*, (the sound of memory) where the objects became narrative and metaphysical symbols of the territory and its community. This intervention thus created a "collective totem," an artistic experience capable of restoring individual and community identities through the sensory dimension of memory and storytelling. Through the audio-video performance, the "things" of some residents' daily lives are shared: objects that hold stories, lived experiences, feelings, memories of traditions and know-how, and deep connections to the territory.

7.4 Conclusions

The cultural prototypes emerging from Lab Village's first pilot action offer a sophisticated framework for how art and culture can interact with territories to form emergent and sustainable models of tourism promotion and local development, fusing artistic and cultural content with the sustainable enhancement of the territory. Their strength lies in their replicability and

scalability, appealing to both private and public markets, and in their ability to reveal the spirit of a location through individual lived experience. The transformation of personal stories into multimedia works (sounds, images, and voices) generates an intense sensory experience, activating memory and storytelling, engaging visitors on an intimate, less mediated level.

All three prototypes focus on narrating the intangible and relational heritage of places. In Lavarone, Marco Zorzanella's installation intertwines community voices and expectations with local issues. In Tonezza del Cimone, Diego Dalla Via transforms residents' life stories and daily activities into an integrated dramaturgical narrative. In Roana, Fabio Bonelli's *TOTEM – il Suono della Memoria* elevates everyday objects to metaphysical symbols, narrating collective experiences and memories through an emotionally immersive experience. This emphasis on individual lived experience as a key to revealing the spirit of a place contributes to shared strength – it is clearly different from the phenomenon of mass tourism, promoting a more authentic and meaningful engagement with the heritage of these places.

This type of project, aiming for the sustainable development of territories, is closely linked to the artist's role as catalyst and mediator, and thus to artistic production as a driver of innovation and transformative value. The selected artists (Zorzanella, Dalla Via, Bonelli) act as facilitators and translators, capable of reinterpreting local characteristics and transforming experiences and memories through artistic languages that involve multiple actors. All prototypes seek to attract tourists who see beyond mere consumption – specifically, cultural tourists eager to discover authentic local narratives (Lavarone), tourists seeking an immersive experience that gives them a direct insight into the daily life of the community (Tonezza), and a closer, less mediated engagement with the territory (Roana), with the shared objective of transforming the 'consumer' into a 'temporary resident'. The participatory nature of these interventions is key to

their effectiveness in regenerating tourism. By actively involving local communities (residents, artisans, cultural operators) in the co-creation of works and experiences, the sense of belonging and social cohesion is strengthened. Local people are not just spectators or service providers; they become co-authors and custodians of a renewed, shared heritage. This activation of the community prevents the risk of proliferating stereotypes, ensuring that the experience is properly rooted. Regeneration is, therefore, primarily social and cultural, supporting a bottom-up development model, with economic regeneration having a lower priority.

The outcomes highlight the ability of these initiatives to transcend conventional models of cultural tourism. Traditional cultural tourism often tends to focus on tangible assets (museums, monuments, archaeological sites), proposing a unidirectional consumption model where the visitor is a passive consumer of a predefined offering. The practices examined, conversely, draw from contemporary and intangible expressive languages (performance, oral narratives, music, contemporary visual arts) that make heritage vibrant and dynamic, negotiable, in motion, and thus 'alive' – a prerogative that allows for a contemporary reading. Despite their intentions, the prototypes reveal some shared challenges and complex issues for their long-term sustainability. Among these is the risk of 'performativity of inhabitants' and, in some cases, the risk of achieving the opposite effect, where the personal narration of the residents, the community, and those sought out to represent 'authenticity' can produce artificial results. Artistic intervention thus requires a delicate balance between spontaneity and mediation. Furthermore, the measurability and sustainability of the impact of these prototypes on the tourism sector, precisely due to their nature as 'launchpads', is still unknown. Although designed to be replicable and scalable, there is a risk that they remain isolated events, given the complexity of implementation and the need for a long timeframe to become structured development models. The balance between

artistic authorship and co-creation is a further critical point, as the artist must find a compromise between their own vision and the full agency of the community, so that the work is perceived as a genuine 'collective totem' and not an idea imposed from above.

The diversity of art-based tourism projects (multimedia installations, gastronomic-theatrical performances, audio-visual productions) is a strength but also a challenge, making the process of setting them up more complex, along with the definition of uniform measures of success and the evaluation of their long-term impact. Lab Village, with its action-research approach, aims to address these critical issues, focusing on listening to the needs of the area, co-creating with local communities, and seeking lasting social and symbolic value rather than just economic benefit. The prototypes seek to test innovative forms that benefit the local community, integrating contemporary cultural languages and production as a structural element.

In conclusion, the cultural prototypes emerging from Lab Village's first pilot action offer a sophisticated framework for how art and culture can interact with territories to create emerging and sustainable models of tourism promotion and local development. They contribute to a broader reflection on the potential roles of art and culture in territorial transformation processes, laying the groundwork for a future where tourism is not only a lever for economic growth but also a vehicle for social balance, inclusion, and an authentic communicative representation of places and their narratives. However, the success of these models is strongly connected to the ability to consolidate relationships with the entrepreneurial sector and, crucially, with the public administrations of the areas in question.

A strong relationship with the public sector allows these prototypes to become active, integrating cultural and tourism policies. Collaboration among diverse actors is a crucial element for cultural policies and local planning strategies to be effective,

with the aim of developing an area in a sustainable way (Sacco, Tavano Blessi & Nuccio, 2009).

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8. Staging Craft: Doing Art-based Research on Stereotypes and Authenticity in Venice

Margherita De Luca, Camilla Ferri

Abstract:

Craft is widely associated with authenticity in tourism, symbolising tradition, local knowledge, and identity. Yet, in highly touristified contexts such as Venice, this association is mediated by stereotypes and staged performances that reproduce dominant imaginaries while marginalising alternative voices. This article explores how art-based research (ABR) can contribute to understanding the entanglement between stereotypes and authenticity in craft and tourism. Building on a collaboration between researchers and the Venetian theatre collective *H2O non potabile*, we co-created the satirical performance *Intelligenza Artigianale – Frullatorio Show*, which engaged artisans, researchers, and audiences in a reflexive exploration of craft as both labour and performance. Through this process, we identify three ways through which art-based research contributes to understanding the relationship between stereotypes and authenticity in relation to craft in tourism settings: (1) unveiling day-to-day practices of craft beyond stereotypes; (2) decontextualising dominant narratives by reframing them through performance; and (3) bringing forward unexpected voices and themes, such as questions of belonging and residential identity in Venice. The study highlights ABR as a situated and collaborative method that surfaces marginal stories, challenges reductive imaginaries, and generates politically engaged forms of knowledge in tourism and management research.

Keywords: Art-based Research; Stereotypes; Authenticity; Craft; Tourism; Venice.

8.1 Introduction

In contemporary tourism, craft is frequently framed as a symbol of authenticity: a material trace of tradition, identity, and local knowledge. Tourists are drawn to handmade products and artisanal workshops as expressions of the ‘real’ character of a destination. Yet, this apparent authenticity often conceals a more complex dynamic, where cultural representations are filtered through stereotypes and staged performances designed to meet the expectations of visitors. This is particularly evident in cities like Venice, where the craft sector is deeply entangled with the tourism economy. Here, artisans are not only makers of objects but also performers of traditions, operating at the intersection of heritage preservation and market pressures. In such contexts, what is perceived as authentic is often constructed through simplified and stereotyped narratives that reinforce dominant imaginaries, while marginalising other voices.

To interrogate these dynamics, this chapter adopts an unconventional perspective: rather than observing craft and tourism through traditional research methods, we engage with them through an art-based research (ABR) approach. By collaborating with a theatre collective, we sought to explore how stereotypes and authenticity in tourism and craft could be critically examined through performance, considering the potential of artistic practices to surface tensions, challenge representations, and generate new ways of seeing.

The chapter unfolds as follows. After providing a theoretical background on stereotypes, authenticity, and craft in tourism contexts, we introduce the methodological foundations of ABR and present our case study: *Intelligenza Artigianale – Frullatorio Show*, a satirical live performance co-created with artists that involved craft makers from Venice. We then outline three key findings that emerged from this collaboration, showing how

ABR enabled us to (1) unveil day-to-day practices of craft work beyond stereotypes, (2) decontextualize dominant narratives, and (3) bring forward unexpected voices and themes. We conclude by discussing the methodological implications of ABR and its potential to unveil 'cast-off stories' and to generate situated, collaborative, and politically engaged forms of knowledge in tourism and management research.

8.2 Theoretical background

8.2.1 Stereotypes in Tourism

Stereotypes are widely studied in social psychology, sociology, and related fields. They refer to cognitive schemas or mental constructs that individuals form about people, places, or objects (Fiske and Taylor, 2013). Lippmann (1922) introduced the concept of stereotypes into the social sciences, describing them as "pictures in our heads" that simplify complex social realities. These simplified, and often inaccurate, perceptions are formed when people rely on cultural, social, and political narratives rather than direct experience. While Lippmann acknowledged that stereotypes may lead to misinterpretation, he also saw them as a necessary function of the human mind to cope with the vast amount of information encountered daily.

In tourism literature, interest in stereotypes has been increasing, with numerous studies investigating their role (Tung *et al.*, 2020). Researchers have explored how stereotypes are reproduced in media representations (Caton and Santos, 2008), how they influence tourism education (Tung and King, 2016), and how they shape experiences in ethnic enclave tourism (Woosnam *et al.*, 2018). Other studies have focused on their impact on destination image (Chen *et al.*, 2013) and on how they affect tourists' perceptions of service providers (Luoh and Tsaur, 2014).

The emergence and diffusion of stereotypes in tourism contexts are the result of a socio-cultural construction of destinations. The global expansion of tourism in the 1980s and 1990s brought a growing focus on efficiency, product development, and destination branding (Morgan *et al.*, 2018; Calantone & Mazenec, 1991). This encouraged the portrayal of places through exaggerated or even invented features, in line with an increasing process of “commoditization” of cultures (Greenwood, 1977), where elements of local life are turned into tourist attractions and lose their inherent value, while acquiring an economic value – that of a commodity (Cohen, 1988). Examples include theme parks like Walt Disney World, casino districts such as those in Macau and Las Vegas, the transformation of cities like Barcelona and Venice into tourist-oriented destinations, and the conversion of post-industrial areas into real estate investments for affluent and mobile consumers (Young and Markham, 2020).

In these contexts, tourist destinations themselves become subject to stereotyping. Rather than being perceived as complex, evolving places, they are often reduced to fixed, marketable images that align with pre-existing cultural narratives. These narratives circulate and are reinforced through media, guidebooks, and branding campaigns, shaping tourists’ expectations. As a result, destinations are frequently framed not for what they are, but for what they are imagined to be, producing a narrow and often outdated representation that both reflects and reinforces cultural stereotypes.

Within these dynamics, questions around authenticity emerge, entangled with the very mechanisms that produce and sustain stereotyped imaginaries.

8.2.2 Authenticity in Tourism

The notion of authenticity is commonly associated with what is true, sincere, original, genuine, or traditional. However,

upon closer examination, the concept of authenticity reveals itself to be highly ambiguous (Wang, 1999), making it difficult to clearly define what counts as 'authentic' and what authenticity truly entails (Lehman *et al.*, 2019). Precisely because of this, the term is often constructed in oppositional terms, defined not by what it inherently *is*, but by what it is *not* (e.g., fake, artificial, contrived). This binary framing tends to reinforce objectivist understandings of the term, whereby authenticity is treated as a fixed, intrinsic quality, 'the real thing' tourists are looking for when travelling (Wang, 1999). Indeed, tourists are increasingly drawn to destinations that promise authentic experiences, seeking not only to observe but to immerse themselves in what they perceive as the 'real' life of a place. For example, this pursuit often takes the form of consuming traditional food in family-run restaurants rather than international chains, purchasing locally made crafts instead of mass-produced souvenirs, or staying in guesthouses and homestays rather than global hotel brands. In many cases, tourists engage in activities designed to simulate everyday life: visiting farmers' markets, attending community festivals, or taking part in traditional food cooking classes, with the aim of 'living like a local'. These practices reflect a desire for connection, differentiation, and emotional resonance during travel. However, in commodified and stereotyped contexts as described above, this search for authenticity often turns into a contrived imitation of the original, carefully shaped to meet tourists' expectations.

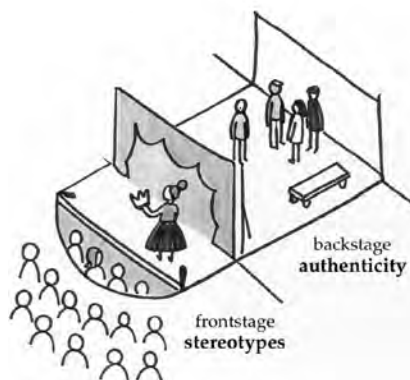


Figura 2.2.1 – Exemplification of stereotyped authenticity in over-tourism settings. *Source: authors' elaboration with AI*

In 1973, to describe this dynamic, sociologist Dean MacCannell introduced the concept of *staged authenticity* to pinpoint how, in tourism contexts, experiences of authenticity are often deliberately constructed to align with visitors' expectations. Tourists typically seek encounters they perceive as "genuine" or "untouched", "*backstage*" realities in Goffman's terms (1959, emphasis added). However, local communities, faced with commercial pressures or economic necessity, often respond by orchestrating performances that simulate authenticity. These representations may appear spontaneous or traditional, but are in fact carefully curated for tourist consumption. Consequently, tourists are led to believe they are accessing an unmediated, backstage reality, when in fact what they are witnessing is a strategically designed "*front stage*" (Goffman, 1959, emphasis added).

Therefore, in this context, what is perceived as "authentic" is thus often the result of a carefully managed performance, which puts selected elements of the destination "on stage" to satisfy the tourist gaze, aligning with expectations about local culture, tradition, and identity (for example, see Daugstad and Kirchengast, 2013 on agritourism settings).

Based on these premises, we argue that in extreme cases, where authenticity is performed within highly stereotypical settings, MacCannell's notion of *staged authenticity* may evolve into what we term *stereotyped authenticity*. This refers to a standardized and repetitive representation (often, a performance) of what tourists expect to be real, true, and genuine in a destination (Chen *et al.*, 2013). In this perspective, stereotypes and authenticity become conceptually linked, embodying the front and back stages of the tourist experience, respectively (see Figure 2.2.1). In contexts affected by over-tourism, the interplay between these stages becomes especially significant: a vicious cycle emerges in which originally authentic experiences are gradually 'touristified' and eventually reduced to stereotypes, thereby losing the authenticity that once defined them. This dynamic is clearly visible in Italian cities with high levels of tourist flows, such as Florence and Venice. In Florence, horse-drawn carriage rides are marketed as authentic experiences, evoking an idealized past, despite being detached from the city's contemporary social fabric. Similarly, in Venice, gondola rides—now a globally recognized symbol of the city—are consumed as quintessentially "authentic," yet are often based on romanticized and repetitive imagery that caters to tourist expectations rather than reflecting everyday Venetian life. In both cases, the commodification of heritage and identity transforms once-meaningful practices into staged and stereotyped performances of authenticity.

8.2.3 *Craft as a stage for authenticity*

In studying the relationship between authenticity and stereotypes in tourist settings, we chose to focus on craft as a relevant phenomenon where these dynamics are particularly complex and layered. Craft-making is widely associated with values such as tradition, sense of place, and resistance to mass production—qualities often perceived as markers of "authentic" culture

(Littrell, 1990; Kroezen *et al.*, 2021). As such, craft is frequently entrusted with the role of embodying cultural identity and offering tourists a tangible connection to the “real” essence of a place (Bell *et al.*, 2019). However, this very symbolic function may expose craft to processes of stereotypical representation and staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1973), especially in destinations subject to over-tourism. In these contexts, tourists increasingly expect crafts to serve as bastions of authenticity (Ferri and Lusiani, 2024), and craft makers often find themselves performing this expectation, adapting their practices, narratives, and even their workshops to meet the tourist gaze (Torabian and Arai, 2016). The case of Venice offers a particularly vivid illustration of these tensions: the city’s craft and commercial networks are deeply embedded in the tourist market, yet also strive to affirm a distinct sense of local identity. Craft can simultaneously reproduce and resist stereotyped narratives, revealing the complex dynamics of authenticity as something that is not just preserved, but actively staged, performed, and challenged.

Given the multifaceted and layered nature of the issue, we chose to approach it from an unconventional and reflexive angle, by involving those who, by profession, are experts in staging and performing: actors. Our scope is to explore how the dynamics of stereotyped, performed, and staged authenticity in craft and tourism could be interrogated through the embodied, critical, and creative lens of performance. This led us to establish a collaboration grounded in the principles of art-based research (Cacciatore and Panozzo, 2025), a research partnership between artists and academics (as explained in more depth further on in the chapter).

Therefore, we aim to delve into the methodological process of art-based research and explore how this process can inform our understanding of the dynamics of stereotypes and authenticity in the context of craft and tourism. Accordingly, we ask: *In what ways can art-based research contribute to understanding the rela-*

tionship between stereotypes and authenticity related to craft in tourist settings?

In the following sections, we first define the art-based research methodology and then present the case study through which we applied this approach and from which we derived the findings that address our research question.

8.3 ABR: not research *on* art, but *through* art

The term art-based research (ABR) is currently used to describe a broad set of practices that engage artistic processes as legitimate modes of inquiry, often emphasizing their hybrid methodological nature, drawing from both academic protocols and artistic practice. Cramer and Terpsma (2021) argue, for example, that ABR is grounded in the development of concepts, processes, and artefacts, with outcomes that emerge not solely through analytical reasoning but also through aesthetic experience and social engagement. Within this framework, forms of public presentation such as performances and exhibitions are recognized as valid and integral ways of disseminating knowledge.

While such definitions reflect the growing institutional recognition of ABR, they also reveal the conceptual heterogeneity the term encompasses. In its more mainstream articulation, ABR tends to denote research carried out *through* artistic practice, often situated within university contexts, and characterized by sensorial, performative, and experiential dimensions. Frequently, this version of ABR conforms to conventional academic expectations of methodological rigor and demonstrable results.

In contrast, the perspective we adopt aligns with a stream of ABR that resists integration into normative scientific or managerial paradigms. Instead of seeking legitimacy through established evaluation criteria, this approach affirms artistic expression as a mode of inquiry in its own right. It foregrounds the

collaborative relationship between artists and researchers as a site of epistemological experimentation (Cacciatore and Panozzo, 2025), where artistic and academic languages meet without subordinating one to the other.

From this standpoint, ABR is not simply about using art to illustrate research, nor about conducting research *on* art, but rather about engaging *with* and *through* artistic practices to co-produce knowledge. Artists and researchers share a research question and embark on a process of dialogue in which sensibilities, perspectives, and methods are negotiated along the way. This partnership enables disciplines such as management and art, often seen as distant, to encounter each other on common ground.

A distinctive feature of this approach lies in its co-creative logic: artists and researchers do not operate in parallel, but interact continuously, shaping the inquiry in response to the specific context and the relationships involved. This challenges conventional research hierarchies and reframes the role of the academic as not merely an interpreter or analyst, but as a participant in a collective and evolving process.

ABR can also involve forms of participatory engagement that include not only artists and scholars but also the practitioners and members of the public implicated in the field of study. These interactions create spaces for knowledge to be produced beyond the boundaries of academic authorship, embracing dialogue, negotiation, and affective resonance as part of the research process.

Moreover, ABR is characterised by a variety of possible outcomes. Rather than limiting itself to textual or numerical outputs, it often results in non-traditional forms (e.g., installations, songs, performances, visual works) which carry cognitive, emotional, and narrative weight. These artefacts may not always generate the same meanings for different observers and may even fail to communicate what the authors intended. Yet within ABR, failure, ambiguity, and subjectivity are not considered shortcomings, but rather constitutive dimensions of the research process. The personal perspective of the

artist is recognized as a valuable epistemic contribution, and unpredictability is embraced as part of a methodology that resists closure.

This openness invites a reconsideration of art-based research as a generative, collaborative, and evolving form of inquiry - one particularly suited to exploring the symbolic, affective, and performative dimensions that shape tourism and craft, which are at the core of our investigation.

8.4 The ABR case study: *Artisanal Intelligence - Frullatorio Show*

Building on the methodological principles outlined above, we adopted an art-based research approach in designing and developing *Artisanal Intelligence*, a live show about craft in Venice co-created by academics and performers.

The show was developed within the framework of the **Young Researchers - iNEST Spoke 6** project, *Sustainable Business Models for Tourism with a Culture-based Approach*, as an integrative research initiative aimed at exploring the relationship between stereotypes and authenticity in tourism and heritage contexts.

The project sought to investigate marginal or overlooked narratives—those often excluded from dominant representations—and to experiment with artistic methods capable of bringing such perspectives to light. Among these, we focused on craft voices, which hold strong symbolic relevance for local identity and are frequently instrumentalised in the construction of tourism imaginaries, yet paradoxically remain unheard or misrepresented in mainstream discourses.

8.4.1 *Introducing the artists: Frullatorio*

To explore the relationship between stereotypes and authenticity through an art-based research lens, we initiated a col-

laboration with the Venetian theatre collective *H2O non potabile*, specifically with their performative format *Frullatorio*. Active since 2015, the collective consists of two actors and two musicians, creating shows that blend interviews, live music, sketches, jingles, and audio-visual elements to address contemporary social and local themes in accessible and experimental ways.

This collaboration was particularly significant within our research process, as several members of the group have academic backgrounds, including doctoral-level training in fields related to the humanities and sciences. This dual positioning, between artistic and academic cultures, enabled a shared vocabulary and methodological sensitivity that made *Artisanal Intelligence - Frullatorio Show* an effective platform for co-producing knowledge.

8.4.2 Co-creating the Show

The collaboration with *H2O non potabile* began in autumn 2024 with a series of initial briefing sessions. During these meetings, the research team introduced the thematic focus of the overall project - tourism and craft - and framed this within broader questions about stereotypes and authenticity. These discussions laid the groundwork for artistic exploration, providing the performers with a conceptual framework to build on through their own creative practice.

As a first response, the collective developed a pilot performance, presented in October 2024 at Maker Faire Rome. This initial version focused on stereotypical imaginaries related to tourism in cities such as Rome and Venice. While it touched on relevant issues, the performance did not yet engage deeply with the topic of craft, which was central to the research. Following the performance, the research team provided feedback and encouraged the artists to further develop the piece by bringing the theme of craftsmanship into focus more explicitly.

A second phase of development followed, based on renewed dialogue and content sharing. The research team organized an additional working session and provided the artists with a set of interviews conducted with local craft makers, along with a table outlining key topics and research questions. These included themes such as the performative dimension of craft in touristic settings, the tension between tradition and innovation, the use of rhetorical histories in the self-presentation of workshops, the challenge of transmitting knowledge, and the sacralisation of craft as a form of aesthetic or heritage. Each theme was accompanied by literature references, explanations, fieldwork-based examples (e.g., Murano glass, Burano lace, statements from artisans) provided by researchers, and possible formats for sketch development provided by artists.

Rather than imposing a fixed script, the table functioned as an open framework for creative elaboration: a set of research stimuli that could be interpreted, subverted, or recontextualized by the performers. This phase marked a significant turning point in the collaboration: it enabled a deeper engagement with the research content while preserving the artistic autonomy of the collective. Following this, the development of sketches began to reflect the nuances of the field, not only bringing representations of craft into play but also the emotional, symbolic, and political tensions embedded in those representations.

The final performance took place on 16 April 2025 on the island of Giudecca (Venice), in a small theatre space typically used by local associations and community groups, and was promoted through the social media channels of the university and the artists (see Figure 4.2.1). The event drew a diverse audience, including researchers, craft makers, politically engaged people, and members of the general public. A key intention of the project was to present the show as a regular episode of *Frullatorio*, rather than framing it as an academic event. This choice was aimed at fostering immediacy between the audience and the topic: by

detaching the performance from institutional language and expectations, the show created space for shared reflection without the filter of academic formalism, bringing the research closer to lived experience and everyday discourse.



Figura 4.2.1 – Promotional poster of the event: image initially generated with ChatGPT and subsequently adapted by the artists

8.4.3 The Show

The show, titled *Intelligenza Artigianale* (*Artisanal Intelligence*), followed the established format of *Frullatorio*¹, blending live music, video segments, satire, and monologues while tailoring its content to the themes of the research project. It opened with the show’s signature musical theme and spoken introduction - a mix of irony, local humour, and cultural critique - immediately setting a familiar tone for returning audiences.

The first part of the performance focused on the concept of tradition, ironically interrogated through its etymology. Using playful linguistic reinterpretations, the artists questioned

¹ In Italian, “Frullatorio” recalls the word “frullatore” (blender) and symbolizes a show that mixes together different sketches and gags.

the notion of heritage as something to be uncritically preserved. Through a combination of storytelling, images, and newspaper headlines, they highlighted the commodification of tradition and the marketing of authenticity, particularly in Venice, where nostalgia often becomes a branding tool. Iconic references such as Burano lace and Murano glass were used to reflect on how certain forms of craft are elevated, mythologised, or reduced to cliché (and stereotypes) in tourism discourses.

This exploration was followed by a section on digital re-imaginings, using generative AI and manipulated portraits of local politicians to reflect on how identities, both personal and collective, are reshaped through new media.

The core of the show was dedicated to craft and its meanings in the city. First, it showed a humorous video, designed and shot previously by the performers in collaboration with a video maker, which satirized the pressure artisans face to perform their identity as craftspeople (almost as if placed on display) in a city marked by over-tourism like Venice. A musical interlude followed, composed and performed by the Maestro Alberto Bettin based on the melody of a well-known song, which served as a transition into this segment. Staying true to *Frullatorio's* style, the performers introduced the theme with a tongue-in-cheek etymological exploration of the word *artigiano*, playfully attributing its origin to the artesian wells of northern France, a humorous diversion that set the stage for a more performative, less didactic engagement with the topic.

Three artisans previously interviewed (or planned to be interviewed) by the research team - Valentina Stocco (ceramist), Paolo Brandolisio (oar maker), and Nicola Pavan (woodworker) - were featured as guests (refer to Figure 4.3.1). Their stories were not narrated directly, but rather reframed through funny comments, stylized introductions, and dramatised segments, creating theatrical distance.



Figura 4.3.1 – A scene from the live satirical show, in which craft makers were interviewed as part of the performance.

This approach allowed the performance to explore the symbolic roles assigned to craftspeople in the tourist imaginary, often suspended between admiration, nostalgia, and instrumentalisation. Another interpretative lens on the topic was offered by the original lyrics of the song *Intelligenza Artigianale*, created specifically for the performance. The song ironically reflects on mass production and the contemporary paradox whereby so-called “artisanal” items are often produced in series, like souvenirs.

Then, the interaction between research and performance was further emphasised when the artists invited some members of the academic team on stage. In place of a conventional presentation, the researchers were challenged to describe the project without using English words, a constraint that transformed explanation into playful performance. This moment encapsulated the collaborative spirit of the project, highlighting how knowledge production could unfold through shared improvisation rather than formal exposition.

The final part of the performance shifted the focus from craft to questions of belonging and residential identity in Venice. Original lyrics used over popular songs (*Volevo vivere a Dorsoduro* - *I wanted to live in Dorsoduro*²) and spoken monologues articulated the emotional and social tensions experienced by residents in a city increasingly devoted to tourist consumption. Feelings of exclusion, marginality, and being 'out of place' were expressed both personally and collectively by the performers, highlighting the fragility of urban life and inviting a reflection on who truly has a place in the city.

By introducing research themes into its dramaturgy as living tensions, the show *Intelligenza Artigianale* translated a complex investigation into an accessible and affective experience.

The result was not a staged representation of findings generated outside the theatre space (e.g., it was not a matter of translating an existing study into music or performance). Rather, the performance itself became a situated act of knowledge co-production, in which the artists did not merely interpret the research but actively contributed to generating insights through the collaborative process. Academic inquiry and artistic language met on equal ground, allowing findings to emerge from within the creative encounter itself. In the following section, we outline the main findings that emerged from this collaboration, showing how it helped us explore the relationship between stereotypes, authenticity, and craft in tourism settings.

8.5 Key insights

The case study *Artisanal Intelligence - Frullatorio Show*, grounded in art-based research, allowed us to explore various ways through which art-based research contributes to under-

² Dorsoduro is one of the six sestieri (districts) that compose Venice.

standing the relationship between stereotypes and authenticity in relation to craft in tourism settings. Below, we outline three key emerging insights: (1) unveiling day-to-day practices beyond the stereotypes; (2) decontextualizing craft narratives; and (3) bringing forward new instances and voices.

8.5.1 Unveiling day-to-day practices beyond the stereotypes

One of the video sketches created by the artists depicted artisans preparing for the arrival of tourists, rehearsing how to “perform” their manual work for an external gaze. Through satire, the scene highlighted a crucial point: craft is real labour, a day-to-day practice. The demand to constantly present it in a consumable, staged form is exhausting, and even when the outcome appears “authentic” to visitors, it often corresponds to what MacCannell (1973) defined as staged authenticity. In this case, the staged authenticity exaggerated the stereotypical expectations of what an artisan looks like in the tourist imaginary: a person (often male) in a dusty apron, using outdated tools, with rough hands, detached from technology, and immersed in a timeless atelier.

Therefore, what emerges is that the actual, “normal” work of artisans remains hidden, situated in a backstage area that tourists rarely access (or even wish to access), as it falls outside the stereotypical image they seek. As a result, those aspects of craftwork that do not conform to the expected narrative are not only neglected by visitors but also excluded from broader public discourses. By making visible these mundane, embodied, and often overlooked practices, the performance enabled a repositioning of craft as labour, not merely as a heritage or romantic act.

This finding also emerged from the words of the artisans themselves during the live performance. As they recounted, they often feel like “pandas in a zoo,” observed by tourists who watch them work, complimenting them with a “bravo, bravo”,

but without necessarily buying anything. This dynamic reflects a gaze marked by pity or romanticism rather than recognition. The public rarely sees artisans as economic actors embedded in a market, as professionals who adapt, navigate supply and demand, pay rent, bills, and produce goods for sale. Instead, they are often perceived as museum pieces, detached from contemporary economic reality. The performance thus helped surface this tension, challenging the stereotype of the artisan as a timeless figure and repositioning them as entrepreneurial agents within a complex and competitive system.

8.5.2 De-contextualizing craft narratives

A key insight that emerged from this art-based research process is how the show enabled a decontextualization and reframing of dominant narratives surrounding craft in tourism settings, both those generated by craft makers themselves and those produced externally by actors such as destination managers and policy makers.

Regarding self-produced narratives, a key finding emerged through the reconfiguration of the interview setting on stage. By relocating the dialogue with artisans onto the stage, the format moved away from the conventions of academic inquiry and created a space that was both playful and performative. In one segment of the show, the performers impersonated researchers conducting live “data collection,” staging interviews with three craft practitioners. This dramaturgical shift allowed for a different kind of interaction, fostering spontaneity, humour, and critical reflection.

The performative setting enabled the artisans to express themselves more freely, bypassing some of the constraints typically associated with formal research encounters. When interviewed by academics, artisans often relate to the University as an institutional channel, a vehicle to voice concerns or make requests to policymakers. This dynamic can lead to rehearsed

narratives shaped by expectations of advocacy or validation. On stage, however, the absence of such expectations created room for different insights to emerge. The ironic and playful tone of the show discouraged narratives of victimhood, instead fostering self-reflection and complexity. Notably, the theatrical setting was not perceived as a promotional space: none of the craft makers used the moment for self-advertisement, but rather spoke openly and thoughtfully about their work.

In terms of externally produced narratives, the show posed a critique of contemporary society and mass consumption through mocking the mainstream rhetoric of craft, especially through the song entitled *Intelligenza Artigianale*, which highlighted topics such as the unsustainability of luxury craft, the boundaries between quantity and quality of production, and the problematic nature of big cultural events.

In both cases, this shift in framing enabled a decontextualisation process: by removing the institutional setting and relocating the interview into a theatrical environment, the performance detached craft narratives from the expectations and power dynamics of conventional research. In doing so, it allowed new meanings to surface, less shaped by institutional projection, and more reflective of lived complexity.

8.5.3 *Bringing forward new instances and voices*

A further contribution of the art-based research process was its capacity to raise issues that were not originally included in the academic framing, nor in the round table session with the research themes. One striking example was the theme of residential belonging in Venice, a topic that emerged prominently in the final part of the show through songs and videos but had not been explicitly shared or explored by the research team.

Through this newly emerged theme, the artists drew a powerful connection between craft and residence, positioning it

in contrast to tourism, which had been our initial research focus. This shift highlighted how *being a craft maker* also means *being a resident* in a city overwhelmed by tourism, and that craft is not something produced only for visitors, but also deeply embedded in the life and needs of those who live in the city.

From a methodological standpoint, this illustrates the generative potential of artistic collaboration: by bringing their own perspective into the process, the artists expanded the scope of the investigation beyond its initial boundaries. Their performative gaze sheds light on overlooked tensions, offering new entry points into the relationship between authenticity and stereotypes in craft and tourism. In this sense, working with artists allowed us to access dimensions of meaning that our academic design had not anticipated, and our inquiries had not touched on.

8.6 Conclusions

In environments subject to over-tourism, as seen here in the case of Venice, “touristification”, commodification of culture, and the prioritisation of profit over community well-being often result in threats to cultural heritage, local identity, and residential life. When tourism becomes a monoculture, the lived reality of residents is increasingly shaped and constrained by the expectations of visitors. In this environment, stereotypes thrive and multiply, reinforcing reductive images of place, identity, and labour, while, paradoxically, tourists expect to find authentic experiences and genuine encounters.

This study aims to explore this paradoxical situation, which we refer to as “stereotyped authenticity”, focusing specifically on the case of craft in Venice. Given the complexity and multi-layered nature of the phenomenon, we approached it through an innovative and unconventional methodology: art-based research. Thanks to collaboration with artists, this approach provides new

epistemic tools with which to discard, critique, and question issues related to the performance, staging, and stereotyping of authenticity.

Specifically, this chapter aimed to outline the art-based research process that was carried out to set up *Artisanal Intelligence – Frullatorio Show*, and the ways in which it contributes to understanding the relationship between stereotypes and authenticity related to craft in tourism settings.

Through collaboration between researchers, artists, and craft makers, the project *Artisanal Intelligence – Frullatorio Show* did not aim to *represent* reality from the outside, but rather to *intervene* in it, creating space for different voices, exposing contradictions, and challenging dominant narratives around craft, tourism, and authenticity.

The outcomes of the project were not a set of fixed results, but rather a set of situated tensions and reframed questions, leaving an open space for reflections and multiple interpretations.

Through using an art-based methodology, three key insights emerged in relation to our research focus. First, it allowed us to uncover everyday practices that often remain hidden behind dominant stereotypes – in this case, the real, day-to-day work of the craft makers, consisting of real-world challenges and down-to-earth tasks (*unveiling day-to-day practices*). Second, it enabled a critical distancing from familiar craft narratives, challenging taken-for-granted representations, both those given by craft makers themselves and those presented by mainstream rhetorics (*de-contextualizing craft narratives*). Finally, it brought new perspectives and voices to the fore that are typically absent from mainstream accounts – namely, in our case, the residents' perspective (*bringing forward new instances and voices*).

Overall, the performance made visible what is usually left in the shadows: the everyday labour behind stereotyped authenticity, the institutional frames that shape craft narratives, and the perspectives that often go unspoken.

In doing so, it foregrounded what we call ‘cast-off stories’, which emerge from marginalised, messy, and politically charged voices; and yet are fundamental for understanding the complex entanglements between tourism and local life.

As tourism and management research continues to grapple with the challenges of sustainability, participation, and representation, we argue that methodologies like art-based research offer valuable ways of thinking *with* rather than *about* the field. By engaging with artistic practices not just as tools of communication but as forms of inquiry, researchers can create new spaces for reflection, encounter, and change.

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9. Between Proximity-Based Social Innovation and Tourism: Initiatives of Micro-Regeneration in the Po Delta and Polesine Region

Olga Tzatzadaki

Abstract:

Faced with pressing challenges including unemployment, depopulation, over-tourism, the erosion of social cohesion and the loss of collective identity, many local communities' tourism initiatives include proximity-based forms of social innovation. These are often initiated by small-scale, bottom-up stakeholders - small entrepreneurs, family firms, cooperatives, museums, and social enterprises – and aim to preserve and enhance local cultural heritage in its diverse forms. Social innovation in tourism has become an increasingly relevant field of research, shedding light on how communities mobilize tangible and intangible cultural heritage to foster processes of micro-regeneration and sustainable local development. The chapter examines various case studies in the Po Delta and Polesine region, looking at stakeholders who are involved in promoting local cultural heritage. A qualitative approach has been employed, based on interviews and life-stories of key stakeholders involved in cultural heritage enhancement and narration. The goal is to explore how these professionals act as key agents to preserve and enhance the historical memory of their territories, generating benefits both for themselves, their local communities, while also launching micro-regeneration processes in the area.

9.1 Social innovation in tourism

9.1.1 An introduction – Tourism Innovation

Innovation is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of economic and social development. Traditionally, it is defined as the introduction of novel products (or improvements on existing products), new production techniques, or the integration of alternative resources within supply chains (Schumpeter, 1934). Schumpeter identified five types of innovation: (a) product/service innovation; (b) process innovation; (c) market innovation; (d) input innovation; and (e) organizational innovation. These involve, respectively, the creation of new goods or services, novel production methods, entry into new markets, the use of new inputs, and transformations in organizational systems.

Product innovation supports growth and competitive advantage by enhancing or differentiating goods and services. Process innovation aims to improve production efficiency and reduce costs (Ottenbacher & Gnoth, 2005), while organizational innovation focuses on administrative practices to strengthen relationships and market position. Service innovation responds to shifting customer needs through improved quality and scope (Mahavarpour, Marvi, Foroudi, 2023). Management innovation targets internal decision-making processes, aligning managerial practices with strategic goals to support efficiency and change.

Despite wide academic interest, a universally agreed definition of innovation remains elusive. Many scholars view it broadly as the successful realization of novel ideas. Kanter (in Hall & Williams, 2008: 5) pragmatically defines innovation as “the process of bringing any new, problem-solving idea into use,” including workflow changes, cost reductions, and team-based structures. Importantly, innovation requires not just creativity but also acceptance and implementation.

Before narrowing the focus to tourism—and in particular social innovation in tourism—it is useful to consider historical innovations that have reshaped the sector. Hjalager (2010) identifies several key transformations: new products and services, enhanced tourist empowerment, increased productivity, development of new destinations, improved mobility, innovations in information flows, and shifts in institutional power. These underline tourism's capacity for continuous reinvention.

Recent research highlights emerging forms of innovation—shaped by stakeholder collaboration, technology, and evolving governance models. One example is 'experience co-creation', where tourists, communities, businesses, and institutions generate tourism experiences collaboratively. This process is supported by social capital—trust, openness, and networking—and digital technologies like e-tourism platforms and gamification (Buhalis & Law, 2008). These technologies enable dynamic, participatory models for destination development.

The concept of 'smart' destinations builds on 'smart city' frameworks, leveraging technologies such as ICT, the Internet of Things (IoT), cloud computing, AR, and VR. These interconnected systems enhance communication and knowledge exchange between stakeholders, allowing tourists to become active participants in shaping their experiences.

Destination governance has also shifted towards e-participative models, which blend top-down and bottom-up approaches. Digital platforms reduce barriers to interaction and support inclusive, collaborative decision-making among diverse actors (Wegner et al., 2024).

Central to these shifts is social innovation—the development of new ideas and initiatives that address unmet social needs, improve well-being, and generate systemic change. Social innovation often operates across sectors, drawing on partnerships among governments, businesses, non-profits, and communities.

In tourism, social innovation reconfigures social capital by reshaping relationships among stakeholders. It introduces new “social technologies” to address inequality and exclusion (van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016). Social innovation expands the stakeholder ecosystem to include underrepresented groups such as local communities and NGOs, who play key roles in unlocking and sustaining tourism innovation and development.

9.1.2 Social Innovation in Tourism

The emerging field of research in Social Innovation in Tourism (SIT) has developed in response to various grassroots experiments and initiatives worldwide, where local communities have sought to create new opportunities for their future and address pressing regional challenges such as unemployment and depopulation. As highlighted by scholars (Wirth et al., 2023), social innovation has the capacity to tackle context-specific issues (Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017; Moulaert et al., 2017) by fostering collective action and actively engaging society in the co-creation of novel solutions (Bock, 2016).

The various studies on SIT, starting from 2007 (Sorensen, 2007), explore the evolving landscape and aim to identify major research themes and emerging gaps - informing future academic inquiry and policy development. The primary objective of papers dealing with SIT has been to investigate how social innovation initiatives can redefine the relationship between the tourism sector and local communities, thereby addressing poverty and social inequalities by enhancing access to social, cultural, and economic resources for marginalized groups.

We should remind ourselves that social innovation, a relatively recent concept, is understood as a catalyst for social change (Swedberg, 2009) that introduces new solutions—ranging from products and services to models and processes (Caulier-Grice, Davies, Patrick, & Norman, 2012)—which significantly impact

social capital (Neumeier, 2017), local development trajectories, and knowledge capacities (Choi & Majumdar, 2015; Gallouj et al., 2018; van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016).

SIT encompasses a diverse range of initiatives. Despite the variety of approaches and contexts, these initiatives share several core principles that underpin their transformative potential. By examining key dimensions such as community empowerment, sustainability, collaborative governance, cultural preservation, technological innovation, education, and inclusive economic development, it is possible to identify the common threads that connect distinct SIT practices. The following synthesis (see Table 1) highlights these fundamental aspects, illustrating how different SIT models collectively contribute to reshaping tourism in ways that prioritize social well-being, environmental stewardship, and equitable growth:

Table 1 – Shared Key Aspects of SIT Initiatives and Examples

Shared Key Aspects	SIT Initiatives and Examples
<i>Community Empowerment and Participation</i> (Malek and Costa, 2015; Martini et al., 2017; Basile et al., 2021; Batista et al., 2021; Partanen et al., 2023; Sharma and Bhat, 2023)	All SIT initiatives emphasise the active engagement of local communities in decision-making, management, and equitable benefit-sharing. For instance, community-based tourism explicitly centres on empowering residents to govern tourism resources, shaping development according to their cultural values and needs. Similarly, rural and ecotourism foster local participation by involving indigenous and rural populations in tourism activities, enabling them to share their traditions and reap economic benefits. Social entrepreneurship initiatives also engage marginalized groups directly, providing training and employment opportunities that enhance local capacity and resilience.

Shared Key Aspects	SIT Initiatives and Examples
<p><i>Sustainability (Social, Environmental, Economic)</i> (Batle et al., 2018; Antošová et al., 2020; Lapointe et al., 2021; Phi & Clausen, 2021; Belliggiano et al., 2021)</p>	<p>Sustainability is a fundamental principle common to all SIT initiatives, aiming to balance environmental conservation, cultural integrity, and economic viability. Ecotourism in particular highlights environmental sustainability through practices that protect biodiversity and promote responsible interaction with natural habitats. Cultural and artistic heritage tourism preserves intangible and tangible cultural assets, supporting social sustainability by fostering identity and pride. Environmental sustainability initiatives focus on minimizing tourism's ecological footprint, adopting renewable energy, waste management, and climate change mitigation strategies. Economic sustainability is embedded within all initiatives, ensuring that tourism-generated wealth benefits local populations inclusively.</p>
<p><i>Collaborative Governance and Partnerships</i> (Amore & Hall, 2016; Elias & Barbero, 2021; Nurhasanah & Van den Broeck, 2022; Sarkki et al., 2022)</p>	<p>A defining feature of SIT is the formation of multi-stakeholder collaborations which unite communities, NGOs, governmental bodies, and private sector actors. For example, governance mechanisms in community-based tourism often involve formalised local institutions (for example NGOs established by islanders or fishing communities) which facilitate dialogue and conflict resolution. ICT innovations further support collaborative governance by providing digital platforms that enhance stakeholder communication and enable participatory decision-making processes. Social entrepreneurs frequently partner across sectors to leverage expertise and resources, amplifying their social and environmental impact.</p>
<p><i>Cultural Preservation and Promotion</i> (Le Bel et al., 2017; Karzen & Demonja, 2020; Corbisiero, 2021; Moleiro, 2021; Splendiani et al., 2022)</p>	<p>Preserving and promoting local cultural heritage is central to SIT efforts. Cultural and artistic heritage tourism initiatives actively celebrate local identity through festivals, crafts, music, and performing arts, which not only bolster community pride but also attract tourists seeking authentic cultural experiences. Rural tourism emphasizes safeguarding and transmitting traditional knowledge and practices, providing a platform for cultural continuity. Social entrepreneurship initiatives often integrate local customs into their offerings, fostering cultural exchange and supporting artisans and cultural practitioners.</p>

Shared Key Aspects	SIT Initiatives and Examples
<i>Leveraging Innovation and Technology</i> (Lim & Park, 2016; Polese et al., 2018; Van et al., 2020; Errichiello & Micera, 2021; Presenza et al.; 2021)	Innovation, particularly technological, is a cornerstone of SIT's transformative potential. ICT innovations—ranging from online booking platforms and digital marketing to virtual reality tours and smart destination management—have revolutionised how destinations interact with tourists and stakeholders. Smart destinations utilize interconnected digital infrastructures to facilitate knowledge sharing and collaborative innovation. Social entrepreneurs incorporate innovative business models and eco-technologies to promote sustainability and inclusivity, while environmental sustainability initiatives adopt green technologies such as renewable energy and efficient waste management systems.
<i>Education and Raising Awareness</i> (Lopez & Ramos, 2015; Van Der Yeught & Bon, 2016; Chiodo et al., 2019; Belliggiano et al., 2021)	SIT initiatives prioritize educating both tourists and local communities about sustainable practices, cultural significance, and social issues. Ecotourism and rural tourism programs often include interpretative activities that raise awareness of ecological and cultural heritage, encouraging responsible behaviour. Social entrepreneurship frequently involves educating tourists on local challenges and fostering appreciation for community-led solutions. Environmental sustainability efforts integrate educational campaigns which aim to promote conservation and sustainable consumption. Via ICT platforms and participatory governance, stakeholders are also better informed about and engaged in sustainable destination management.
<i>Inclusive Economic Development</i> (Quandt et al., 2016; Zebryte & Jorquera, 2017; Mahato, 2021; Tre-siana & Duadji, 2022; Suriyankiet-kaew et al., 2022)	Equitable economic benefits are a shared objective across SIT initiatives. Community-based tourism stimulates local economies by promoting small-scale enterprises such as homestays, handicrafts, and guide services, facilitating wealth distribution among residents. Rural and ecotourism create alternative livelihood opportunities that reduce dependence on extractive industries and urban migration. Social entrepreneurship advances economic inclusion by empowering marginalized populations through capacity building and employment, while environmental sustainability initiatives foster diversification of local economies by promoting sustainable tourism products. ICT-enabled digital marketing further broadens market access for smaller enterprises and destinations.

A significant knowledge gap in current debates on SIT lies in the under-exploration of how these initiatives evolve within specific areas—in particular the scale on which they operate and produce impact. While SIT is often seen from a social or thematic perspective, its geographically embedded nature and spatial outcomes remain less studied. Many SIT initiatives generate significant

socio-spatial and economic transformations on a micro scale, often catalysing processes of micro-regeneration in areas which may be simultaneously subject to excessive tourism and marginalised, or suffering from depopulation or neglect. In such contexts, proximity-based social innovation plays a central role: it leverages local networks, trust, and locally situated knowledge to co-produce adaptive responses that are both socially inclusive and transformative on a spatial level. These bottom-up interventions—such as reactivating disused public spaces, revitalizing cultural infrastructure, or creating small-scale tourism circuits—demonstrate how localized collaboration can be translated into tangible improvements in quality of life, identity, and resilience within a territory.

In conclusion, by working collaboratively “with” and “for” local cultural heritage, SIT initiatives activate diverse assets—environmental, artisanal, artistic, gastronomic, industrial, documentary, and rural—within an inclusive and sustainability-oriented framework. They typically emerge in a ‘bottom-up’ fashion, often mediated through public-private or cross-sector partnerships, and aim to address multifaceted social challenges such as unemployment, depopulation, social exclusion, and accessibility. A commitment to the priorities and agency of host communities is central to their success, ensuring that tourism serves as a platform for empowerment rather than displacement. By embedding proximity-based innovation within spatial practices, SIT not only supports more equitable and context-sensitive forms of tourism, but also acts as a powerful catalyst for regenerating territories from within, reinforcing the need for closer attention on a local scale in both research and policy agendas.

9.2 Methodology

The research methodology consisted of two main phases. The first phase involved a theoretical analysis to understand

the conceptual foundations of SIT, examining a variety of international case studies. This was complemented by a desk-based analysis focused on the Po Delta and Polesine area. This included a review of institutional documents, tourism marketing plans and policy reports, providing insights into recent trends and strategies within the region. These findings informed the design and structure of the empirical phase.

The second phase, carried out in the second half of 2024, involved 9 case studies within the research area, involving a diverse range of public and private local stakeholders engaged in cultural heritage management and promotion. These actors included museum professionals, small-scale entrepreneurs, non-profit organizations, consortia, eco-museums, farm stay (agritourism) operators, and local institutions. The interviews explored the implementation of SIT initiatives with a focus on interactions between actors, the presence and quality of institutional support, individual motivations driving engagement in these practices, and the key conditions which enable the success, sustainability, and potential scalability of such innovations. The interviews were transcribed with the support of the *TurboScribe* software. Subsequently, they were analysed using the *Atlas.ti* software (Smit, 2002). The author focused on these codes: “collaboration”, “administration”, “community”, “mission”, “tourism”.

To protect privacy, the names of the case study organizations are not disclosed. However, their institutional profiles are described, encompassing public, private, and non-profit entities. Each organisation has been attributed a numerical identifier, used for reference throughout the text:

1. A consortium of small enterprises
2. An eco museum located at a historic mill
3. An agritourism location
4. A cultural association focused on various artistic practices
5. An archaeological museum

6. Another agritourism location
7. A public entity supporting rural territories
8. A business-affiliated museum
9. A cultural cooperative

Each organisation is involved in tourism, culture, and social innovation—sectors that aim to enhance cultural heritage in its various forms while contributing to the resolution of local social challenges such as depopulation and unemployment.

9.3 Case study: the Po Delta and Polesine region

9.3.1 *The context – overview and tourism profile*

The Polesine—which covers the area of the Province of Rovigo—is a unique territory shaped by its close relationship with water, lying between the lower courses of the Adige and Po rivers. Its landscape is defined by the river and delta environments, culminating in the *Parco Regionale Veneto del Delta del Po*, one of Europe's most significant wetland areas and a site of international ecological importance. This ecosystem, composed of lagoons, reed beds, canals, and floodplains, reflects a long history of interaction between natural forces and human intervention.

In addition to its environmental value, Polesine also has a rich cultural heritage. The region is dotted with historic towns, villas, churches, and cultural institutions, while gastronomic and craft traditions contribute to a vibrant local identity. Together, these elements support opportunities for sustainable and experiential tourism, connecting visitors with both the landscape and the cultural memory of a territory that remains relatively under-explored.

The Veneto Po Delta is Italy's youngest geographical area, formed less than 400 years ago through sedimentation and hu-

man engineering, notably the 17th-century *Taglio di Porto Viro*. Covering around 786 km²—130 of which are officially protected parklands—the Delta includes nine municipalities and over 72,000 residents. The region's complex geomorphology, shaped by sediment, tides, and wind, continues to evolve. Today, its challenges lie in balancing biodiversity conservation with sustainable development, placing local communities at the centre as stewards of a living landscape.

Tourism development in the Po Delta is guided by a Destination Management Organization (*OGD Po e il suo Delta*) and structured through a strategic plan, an operational plan, and a participatory governance model. The strategy targets two main sub-areas: the inland Polesine stretch and the coastal Delta zone. It aims to create a cohesive destination identity by integrating environmental, cultural, and socio-economic assets. The OGD plays a key role in coordinating these efforts, ensuring sustainability, quality, and destination branding through collaboration with public and private stakeholders.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the region's vulnerability to disruptions in tourism, but also underlined its potential for proximity-based, nature-oriented, and flexible tourism. With its extensive cycling paths, river-based infrastructure, and low visitor density, the Delta is well-positioned for slow tourism—for example cycling, boat trips, and food-related experiences. These strengths align with emerging travel trends which favour authenticity, outdoor activities, and environmental consciousness.

Tourism products in the Delta reflect its strong integration with cultural and natural heritage. Historical and archaeological sites support cultural tourism, while gastronomic tourism benefits from rooted food systems tied to agriculture, fishing, and horticulture. These sectors reinforce the region's identity and contribute to territorial development, though challenges remain in consolidating scalable tourism networks and products that are both high-quality and market ready.

Governance is central to the Delta's tourism model. A hybrid framework—linking the Regional Park Authority with a tourism consortium—enables coordination across marketing, service delivery, and stakeholder engagement. While bureaucratic inertia persists, this public-private synergy is vital for building an eco-destination rooted in local values and environmental ethics. The aim is a tourism offer that respects rural areas, supports inclusive development, and nurtures the distinct character of the area while responding to modern sustainability demands.

The region's alignment with sustainable tourism and social innovation is evident. Its strategy emphasizes local heritage preservation, inclusive governance, and the transformation of structural vulnerabilities—like depopulation and unemployment—into engines of resilience. In this area, tourism is not just an economic sector, but a means for reinforcing cultural identity, supporting cohesion across the area, and renewing marginal rural landscapes.

Founded in 2013 under the Veneto Delta Regional Park, the *OGD Po e suo Delta* operates within the framework of sustainable tourism governance and benefits from the area's designation (since 2015) as a UNESCO MAB Biosphere Reserve. Its objectives include improving service quality, enhancing environmental sustainability, increasing accessibility, and promoting a unified image of the destination. A core part of the strategy is cross-sectoral collaboration among municipalities, public institutions, private operators and civil society, which aims to avoid fragmentation in tourism governance and ensure integrated communication and product development.

Covering 24 municipalities and one of Europe's largest wetlands, the Po Delta supports a diverse range of tourism offers—from nature and heritage tourism to gastronomic and coastal experiences. Its identity as a slow tourism destination is reinforced by unique features such as traditional boat bridges, brackish lagoons, and strong culinary traditions. Through strategic planning and marketing, the OGD positions the Delta as

a resilient, high-value tourism destination at both national and international levels.

In support of this vision, the Integrated Project for Enhancing the Tourism Attractiveness of the Po Delta—developed by Veneto and Emilia-Romagna Regions with their respective park authorities—represents a landmark intervention under Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP). With €55 million in funding, the project adopts a multifaceted strategy focused on sustainable tourism and enhancing cultural heritage.

The plan has three main priorities: (1) development of 'soft' mobility through cycling and walking infrastructure; (2) enhancement of cultural and museum offerings, including the reuse of abandoned heritage sites; and (3) promotion of nature-based tourism via improved access and visitor services. This approach aligns with slow tourism principles while preserving ecological integrity.

Governance is provided via a steering committee that facilitates participatory coordination across institutions. Importantly, the project also lays the foundation for a future Cultural Tourism District—an institutional platform for public-private collaboration and long-term destination management. Its goals include diversifying tourism flows, extending seasonal appeal, and activating lesser-known areas, especially those that are outside the conventional tourist circuits.

By framing tourism as a catalyst for territorial regeneration, the Po Delta project effectively connects environmental stewardship with cultural and socio-economic revitalization. It provides a compelling and replicable model for other protected areas seeking to reconcile conservation with inclusive and sustainable visitor engagement.

9.3.2 Results - Collaborations

One of the critical aspects of the research was the analysis of networks and collaborations. The interviews reveal a clear pat-

tern of institutional and cultural fragmentation in the Delta area. Associations and local actors often operate in ‘silos’, focused on their own projects, with limited interaction and shared planning.

Another aspect to consider is that to participate in calls for funding, associations are often required to collaborate with others. This may seem like a positive thing, but it also reflects an underlying issue: many associations tend to stay within their own “little garden.” The lack of regular planning meetings between associations to join forces and define common goals is a significant challenge. Collaboration is essential, but there appears to be a lack of a solid network for communication and cooperation among different organizations (interviewee n. 4).

This “little garden” mindset (“*campanilismo*” in Italian) is a critical barrier to building robust networks. While such local pride can be a strength, in this case it leads to isolation and missed opportunities for synergy, especially when funding calls require structured partnerships.

Dialogue between neighbours in these small-town situations isn’t easy. There’s a lot of campanilismo, as we call it—the tendency to protect one’s own turf, seeing one’s own lived experience or place as being better than those of the neighbours. Among us operators, there’s a bit more dialogue, but currently I don’t see much openness to collaboration between local administrations in the area. We struggle a lot to develop projects that go beyond the local level (interviewee n. 8).

While local administrations in the Delta area show openness to collaboration, they often lack the technical expertise and organizational capacity to engage effectively with complex funding procedures or innovative project formats. This isn’t a result of resistance, but rather of structural limitations—such as understaffing, lack of training, and uncertainty in managing unfamiliar processes.

Insisting on collaboration helps build it, and local communities appreciate it because it keeps the town alive. It doesn’t happen everywhere, of course,

but perhaps the most beautiful goal would be to eventually create a bond between neighbouring towns, so that these activities could be held in one place and then in another, encouraging people to participate in events across nearby towns (interviewee n. 9).

There seems to be a gap in capacity-building rather than a lack of will. Administrators need guidance and reassurance when exploring unfamiliar opportunities. As a result, promising initiatives may be abandoned due to their perceived complexity. Targeted support and mediation from experienced actors—such as cooperatives or cultural organizations—could help bridge this gap, translating willingness into effective participation. This reflection highlights a recurring issue in small-scale governance: collaboration relies on clarity and guidance. While local administrations are open to new initiatives, their engagement depends on how clearly the proposal is communicated and how well the process is supported.

In my opinion, there are opportunities in terms of funding, and the administration is willing to collaborate, but it's the kind of collaboration where, if you present them with something new like this, you also need to be able to help and support them. For example if you start saying that once this is uploaded you have to apply for the "City that Reads" call, then you need to explain what "City that Reads" actually is. After that, they'll ask, "But what do I need to do?" So if you propose something but don't know how to move forward, the administrator might hesitate or say, "No, look, this is too complex—we can't handle it right now," and then the project gets dropped. We believe that a kind of cooperative could be valuable if it also knows how to approach the administration—because once they see everything is well organized and for the greater good, they'll open all the doors for you (interviewee n. 9).

Without adequate explanation and operational follow-through, even promising projects risk being perceived as too burdensome or complex. This underscores the importance of intermediary actors—such as cooperatives or cultural facilitators—

who can mediate between creative initiatives and administrative structures, translating vision into actionable steps. This example demonstrates a successful model of cultural networking grounded in shared regional identity and professional collaboration. The cooperative “Tourism and Culture” demonstrates an early and effective effort to coordinate resources among local museums, improving accessibility and narrative coherence. The cooperative “Tourism and Culture” and the museum network in Polesine show that collaborative models can work in this territory.

We have a good relationship with our neighbours and with other museums. We come from a museum-related background, having founded early on the cooperative “Tourism and Culture,” which created a network among the museums of the Polesine area. The aim was to ensure they were open with bookable hours and staffed by people able to tell the story of those places, highlighting the importance of their existence (interviewee n. 4).

This illustrates how grassroots cultural initiatives can fill institutional gaps, foster cooperation, and enhance the visibility of local heritage through practical solutions such as shared staffing and unified scheduling. These are valuable local success stories that prove collaboration is possible and fruitful when supported by a shared goal and structure.

Table 2 – Main challenges regarding collaboration in the case study area.

Key Challenges	Opportunities & directions for policy- making
Siloed operations and ‘closed’ operation within territories	Foster informal networking, shared events, and cultural pride through collaboration
Administrative overload and inexperience	Provide technical assistance and act in a liaison role for funding and project management
Low youth involvement	Introduce youth-led initiatives and promote generational exchange within associations
Lack of strategic coordination	Encourage ‘soft’ regionalism through rotating events and cultural branding
Scarce communication platforms	Create a shared communication and information hub (even a simple newsletter)

9.3.3 Governance and local administration

Local governance in the Delta area appears to be highly contingent on individual leadership styles and shifting administrative priorities. As one interviewee remarked, *“In short, everything depends on the program and priorities of each mayor”* (Interviewee 6). This observation reflects a broader issue of inconsistency in institutional vision: the success or failure of initiatives often hinges on the interest of individual mayors, rather than on stable, long-term strategies embedded within the administrative structure.

Although certain mayors have shown genuine interest in supporting local development, this support rarely translates into sustained action. One interviewee provided a striking example:

I remember that twenty years ago, thanks to a mayor who was very supportive of tourism development in Porto Tolle, I invited her and the provincial tourism councillor of Rovigo to lunch to discuss and explore which doors we could open. She listed all the challenges I was facing as an organization, emphasizing that I couldn't manage certain difficulties and that we could have handled resources differently. The response was always the same: 'Yes, you're right, well said,' but then nothing ever changed (Interviewee 3).

This account demonstrates how verbal agreement and institutional inertia often coexist, leaving key issues unresolved despite apparent political will.

Another significant challenge concerns the lack of administrative preparedness and awareness regarding funding opportunities. Several interviewees emphasised that municipalities often lack the necessary information, skills, or dedicated personnel to identify and respond to relevant calls. One interviewee explained:

In my opinion, the administration needs to be either trained in, or at least informed about, the existence of certain calls for funding that the municipality itself could apply for. These funds could also cover other specific activities. That way, they'd have an additional resource available (Interviewee 9).

This gap is particularly critical in small towns, where municipal staff are limited and typically overloaded with routine administrative duties.

The absence of a specialized figure capable of monitoring and managing funding opportunities often forces public sector employees to take on multiple roles. As one respondent described:

Very often, in small towns like ours, there's no one who's properly informed about these things, so in the end you have to do all the work yourself. That means the hours you spend doing your job must also include time for other tasks. It all becomes one big job. So yes, there is funding, there are calls, but they need to be explored and studied—someone needs to be capable of following them and considering them properly. I'm trying to do some self-training, but because we don't have someone dedicated to this role - and we've realised this as we move forward with a clear mission and everything - it would be wise to carve out some time to focus on this aspect as well (Interviewee 9).

This situation highlights the uneven distribution of responsibilities and the need for targeted capacity-building to avoid burnout and inefficiency.

The interviews also underscore how bureaucracy, limited resources, and administrative delays can obstruct even the most dedicated local initiatives. One interviewee reflected: *"I'm still far from completing the project; I'd need three or four lifetimes to finish it. But unfortunately, time, money, and bureaucracy drain you—they kill your energy and wear you down"* (Interviewee 3). This testimony points to a deeper structural fatigue experienced by local actors, who often carry the weight of development work with little institutional support.

Even when awareness of funding opportunities exists, limited technical expertise remains a critical barrier—especially for accessing more complex sources such as European funding. As one interviewee noted: *"We also always have to stay alert for funding calls, because unfortunately, nothing comes from above. In the future, we could*

try to apply for some European funding, but that would really require expertise—something we're currently struggling to find support for" (Interviewee 4). This signals that while ambition and vision are present, the practical tools for implementation are often lacking.

Taken together, these accounts point to a need for more stable, informed, and proactive governance frameworks. Strategic investment in training, technical assistance, and cross-sector coordination would allow local administrations to move beyond reactive responses and instead support sustained, community-driven development. Without these structural improvements, governance in the Veneto Delta area risks remaining fragmented and overly dependent on individual commitment rather than institutional capacity.

Table 3 – Main challenges regarding governance and local administration support in the case study area.

Key Challenges	Opportunities & directions for policy-making
Governance highly dependent on individual mayors and shifting political agendas	Develop long-term, institutional strategies that transcend electoral cycles
Institutional inertia despite verbal political support	Promote mechanisms for accountability and follow-up to ensure implementation of agreed initiatives
Lack of awareness of and being prepared for funding opportunities within municipalities	Invest in training programs for local administrations to improve knowledge of and access to funding instruments
Absence of dedicated staff for funding and project development	Introduce specialized roles or shared technical support across municipalities to manage calls and proposals
Public sector employees overburdened, assuming multiple roles due to institutional gaps	Provide technical assistance and capacity-building support to reduce burnout and enable more strategic engagement
Bureaucracy, limited resources, and administrative delays slow down local initiatives	Simplify administrative procedures and streamline project support frameworks
Insufficient expertise for applying for complex funding calls, especially European funding	Create partnerships or cooperative platforms to pool expertise and improve access to external funding

9.3.4 Cultural missions: personal and collective

The cultural and touristic potential of the Po Delta region has long been recognised as underexploited and insufficiently understood, both within local tourism circles and the art world. One interviewee observed that in the past *“the Po Delta, despite being a region full of potential, was little known or understood—both in terms of tourism and in the world of art”* (Interviewee 4). This lack of recognition was compounded by structural gaps, such as the absence of art galleries, sector-specific services, and contemporary art events. The situation led to the migration of prominent local artists who *“couldn’t find space or opportunities here”* (Interviewee 4) highlighting a critical loss of cultural capital.

In response to these challenges, initiatives have emerged to harness and promote local resources in innovative ways. The creation of a festival aiming to integrate tourism with contemporary art illustrates this approach. As noted, *“tourism can benefit local communities, and that’s exactly why the festival was created: in addition to enjoying the natural beauty of the area, we invite people to visit this open-air contemporary art museum”* (Statement 4). The identification of over 120 murals forming a multi-modal route demonstrates a commitment to embedding cultural experiences within the natural landscape, while plans to develop a supporting app and secure funding emphasise the strategic vision to sustain and expand this effort.

The initiative is underpinned by a broader mission to foster knowledge and awareness, viewed as essential for meaningful engagement with the territory. One interviewee articulated this clearly: *“We strongly believe this initiative is important for promoting knowledge and awareness. In our view, the more a person knows and experiences things like this, the better they can interact with the world around them. This is all part of our project and our mission to enhance the value of the area and its resources.”* (Interviewee 2). This reflects an educational and experiential philosophy that situates cultural

heritage as a dynamic resource for social interaction and territorial identity.

The role of archaeological museums is similarly framed as central to cultivating an appreciation for diversity—both temporal and spatial—within the community. This mission is particularly personal, with practitioners emphasizing their dual identity as both archaeologists and cultural custodians: *“archaeological museums play a fundamental role in helping people become accustomed to diversity, both across time and across space—and that’s a mission we feel deeply committed to”* (Interviewee 5). This perspective situates heritage management within an affective and ethical commitment to fostering pluralistic understandings of place.

Long-term dedication to the cultural development of the region is further exemplified by the account of a couple whose shared work began with the creation of the first guidebook to Polesine. They described this project as *“almost a life purpose for us,”* simultaneously a *“blessing and a curse”* that brought them together and sustained their ongoing cultural activities (Interviewee 2). This personal narrative underscores how cultural initiatives are often intertwined with individual identities and social relationships, reinforcing the human dimension of heritage work.

The emotional and symbolic significance of these cultural projects is palpable. One participant described the festival as *“like a child... a deep bond, almost like an umbilical cord. My love for this work is undeniable, as is my connection to this land. Seeing schoolchildren or local people enjoying the festival, relaxed and happy, and appreciating what we’ve created—that’s a huge personal achievement for me”*, connecting her to both geographical and personal roots (Interviewee 4). The joy of witnessing community engagement, particularly from local schoolchildren, was described as *“a huge personal achievement”* that affirmed the meaningfulness of their work. This statement highlights how cultural initiatives can foster profound attachments that transcend professional duties.

Finally, the element of passion emerges as a defining feature of sustained cultural engagement in the region. The interviewee insisted that the work *“definitely becomes almost a mission... the will to keep this memory alive and to pass it on as much as possible, to make it widely known”* (Interviewee 8). Passion here is conceptualized not merely as enthusiasm but as a deep, existential commitment: it is not *“just a desk job where you clock in and out,”* but a holistic endeavour where professional activity and personal values are inseparable *“I really mean believing that it’s not just a desk job where you clock in and out, but one where you constantly try to connect what you do with the values you want to express as a person. In short, it becomes one and the same”* (Interviewee 8). Such testimonies reveal that effective cultural governance in peripheral regions depends heavily on the dedication and identity of local actors.

Table 4 – Main challenges regarding cultural tourism and missions in the case study area.

Key Challenges	Opportunities & directions for policy making
Lack of recognition of the region’s cultural and touristic value	Festivals and cultural routes enhance visibility and attract visitors
Absence of infrastructure (e.g. galleries, events, services)	Creative reuse of space and digital tools (e.g. mural routes, apps)
Outmigration of local artists due to lack of opportunities	Cultural platforms help retain talent and promote local expression
Limited public engagement with heritage	Educational initiatives foster awareness and territorial identity
Workload and emotional strain on cultural actors	Passion and personal commitment drive sustained initiatives
Peripheral locations and limited external networks	Strong local identity and storytelling as tools for regional positioning

9.4 Conclusions

In conclusion, SIT offers a transformative model that redefines tourism as a vehicle for equitable and sustainable devel-

opment. By placing local participation at its centre, SIT ensures that communities play a leading role in managing resources, preserving cultural heritage, and sharing economic benefits. Whether through community-based tourism, rural initiatives, or social entrepreneurship, SIT enhances local capacity while promoting social inclusion and environmental responsibility. A core strength lies in its emphasis on collaboration among diverse stakeholders, often supported by ICT tools that facilitate governance, education, and innovation. These innovations—from digital platforms to green technologies—support more efficient, inclusive, and sustainable tourism systems. Education is also key, raising awareness among tourists and residents about heritage, ecology, and social issues. SIT enables more resilient and self-determined communities by aligning tourism development with cultural integrity, environmental stewardship, and inclusive economic growth, especially in contexts facing marginalization or environmental pressures.

The challenges facing sustainable cultural and touristic development in peripheral regions such as the Po Delta reveal the complex interplay between institutional fragmentation, limited administrative capacity, and underutilized cultural potential. Siloed operations, narrowly conceived geographic initiatives and a lack of strategic coordination impede the formation of cohesive development frameworks, while municipal administrations frequently struggle with administrative overload, inexperience, and limited awareness of funding mechanisms. These institutional gaps often force public sector actors to assume multiple roles, leading to burnout and inefficiencies. Moreover, the absence of long-term planning structures and overreliance on individual political figures result in inconsistent governance, which undermines the continuity and scalability of local initiatives.

At the same time, a range of opportunities and pathways for transformation exist. ‘Soft’ regional initiatives (for example shared events, informal networks, and rotating cultural pro-

grams) are a promising way to overcome fragmentation while reinforcing local identity. The integration of youth, targeted training programs for municipal staff, and the establishment of shared communication platforms can address both generational disengagement and institutional inertia. Likewise, the introduction of specialised technical support roles or inter-municipal co-operation on project development may increase access to funding, especially European funding.

Importantly, local cultural actors demonstrate both strong commitment and innovation, despite systemic obstacles. Initiatives such as open-air festivals, mural routes, and digital applications creatively repurpose existing infrastructure, enhance visibility, and foster public engagement with heritage. Despite emotional and logistical strain, the passion and dedication of these actors serve as the foundation for continuous initiatives.

In conclusion, the region's peripheral position may pose structural challenges, yet its strong cultural identity, community resilience, and emerging collaborative practices provide fertile ground for inclusive and sustainable development. Releasing this potential requires an integrated governance approach that combines institutional support, capacity building, and participatory cultural strategies aimed at long-term transformation.

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