

A mosaic background featuring a large, stylized hand in shades of grey and blue, set against a field of yellow and orange mosaic tiles. The hand is positioned centrally, with fingers spread, and the mosaic tiles are irregular in shape and color.

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Editors

Aesthetics of Universal Knowledge

AESTHETICS *of* UNIVERSAL KNOWLEDGE

Edited by
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palgrave
macmillan

A small, stylized logo consisting of a central point with several lines radiating outwards, resembling a star or a compass rose, located at the bottom right of the cover.

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Text and Context: *Genius Loci* (A Preface)

Pasquale Gagliardi



Fig. 1.1 Isola di San Giorgio Maggiore, Venezia. Photo by ORCH, Courtesy of Fondazione Giorgio Cini

P. Gagliardi
Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice, Italy

Visitors to Venice who look out from the Doge's Palace over the Bay of San Marco immediately recognize the white forms designed by architect Andrea Palladio. The splendid façade of one of the most beautiful churches the 'divine' Palladio built in Venice shines out from the monumental complex of the former Benedictine monastery on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore. This is now the headquarters of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, a major centre for humanistic studies. For some time now, every year towards mid-September, when the summer has grown mild, the Fondazione Cini hosts the *Dialoghi di San Giorgio*. Their goal is to encourage dialogue and multidisciplinary debate on key issues facing contemporary society.

The current book faithfully illustrates the talks and discussions in the 'Dialogue' that was held in San Giorgio from 10 to 13 September 2012. A small group of experts and scholars from different cultural and professional backgrounds (philosophers, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, experts on new technologies of information and representation, and artists) addressed the theme *Re-visioning the World: Myths of Universal Knowledge and Aesthetics of Global Imaging*. The aim of this preface is to help the reader grasp the logic and spirit of this book by setting it in the temporal, spatial, and institutional context that generated it.

From their first instalment in 2004, the San Giorgio Dialogues have eschewed the traditional format of academic conferences. They emphasize spontaneous conversation over erudite prepared papers, crossovers of language and epistemology over specialized disciplines, and equal importance is given to sensory knowledge and aesthetic communication ("knowledge by acquaintance") and to intellectual and discursive knowledge ("knowledge by description").^{*} On these grounds, the participants at previous meetings have included artists such as Adam Zagajewski and Olafur Eliasson, while the 2012 *Dialogo* was attended by novelist Richard Powers and eclectic artist Adam Lowe. Of course, this conversational format entails more risks than a traditional academic format in which each participant presents a paper, answers questions, and, often, simply takes his or her leave. When you are forced to sit at a round table, with the basic aim of conversing, you accept the risk of not knowing what the outcome will be. But experience has shown that the advantages of this formula are much greater than the disadvantages. Indeed, five of the seven *Dialoghi* have been translated into publications and thus made accessible to a much wider public.¹

^{*} (Langer, 1967, 1969; Gagliardi, 2006).

Many participants of the *Dialoghi* have immediately realized that the conversational formula is particularly well suited to the island of San Giorgio, which—like all places rich in history and traditions—has its own *genius loci*. The specificity of the place, its suitability for exchanges of views, can easily be explained, if we bear in mind that for around 1000 years, the island was a kind of enclave or 'free territory', despite being so close to the palaces of power in the Serenissima. After obtaining the island from Doge Tribuno Memmo in 983, the abbot Giovanni Morosini founded a Benedictine monastery on it. Over time, the monastery gradually developed into a great cultural centre and later a place that welcomed exiles, hosted political meetings, and encouraged dialogue between different cultures.

FROM THE EXHIBITION TO THE 'DIALOGO'

Each *Dialogo* has a much longer history than the three days in which the contributors meet. The initial idea—it is often difficult to identify its exact moment of conception—has a long incubation period. The initial task is to assess if the theme proposed is topical—if it is 'an idea whose time has come'—and if it can be usefully analysed from different disciplinary points of view. The next step is to assemble a small team of experts, who set out to draft a 'manifesto' that will form the intellectual framework for the *Dialogo* and will clearly describe the theoretical reach and practical implications of the issues raised. Once this framework is in place, we begin to sound out various experts on the issues raised to see whether they are interested in taking part. And so we gradually build up the group of 10–12 contributors, trying to achieve the right balance of genres, disciplines, cultural backgrounds, and nationalities. The story of the *Dialogo* of 2012, on which this book is based, is somewhat different from the story of the other 'dialogues' and has some original features that deserve to be mentioned.

In reality, we originally had in mind an exhibition and not a dialogue. The idea of the exhibition came from Adam Lowe, a British artist and Director of the Factum Arte studio. Based in Madrid and Bologna, Factum Arte consists of a team of artists, technicians, and conservators dedicated to digital mediation—both in the production of works for contemporary artists and in the production of facsimiles—as part of a coherent approach to preservation and dissemination. In 2007, for the Palladian refectory in the monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore,

Lowe and his studio made the facsimile of the *Wedding at Cana*, Paolo Veronese's masterpiece, which had been looted by Napoleon's commissars in 1797 and taken to the Louvre. Lowe subsequently set up a close collaboration with the Fondazione Cini and made a crucial contribution to the large exhibition on Piranesi's etchings (*The Arts of Piranesi*) staged on San Giorgio in 2010. Then in 2011, with Renaissance scholar and historian of maps, Jerry Brotton, he curated an exhibition on antique and contemporary tapestries (*Penelope's Labour: Weaving Words and Images*).

Lowe's new project, also drafted in collaboration with Jerry Brotton, was for an exhibition that illustrated human attempts to represent the world in its entirety. At the centre of the project, they planned to construct a large relief map of the visible and submerged surfaces of the globe—'the lithosphere'. This three-dimensional map was to have been gradually filled with water from the lagoon until it was completely submerged, then gradually emptied. (See Chap. 3 in this book, in which they discuss the project.) This planned exhibition was discussed at length, ranging between two very different although not contrasting viewpoints: the first placed the emphasis on the ecological question, with the aim of making exhibition visitors more aware of the consequences of global warming and the problems of the planet's survival, while the second focused on the relationship between 'representation' and 'creation' of the real. The way the project developed is clearly reflected in the series of titles it was given during the work in progress: 'Meltdown. Avoiding Apocalypse'; 'Meltdown. Re-visioning the World'; 'Theatre of the World. Revisioning the Earth—Building Worlds'; 'Terra Firma. Revisioning the Earth—Building Worlds'; 'Terra! Terra! Drawing Maps, Building Worlds'; and 'Terra-Forming. Engineering the Sublime'.

Initially, we thought of timing the exhibition to coincide with the 2013 Venice Art Biennale and to use the 2012 *Dialogo* to finalize the project. Simon Schaffer joined Adam Lowe and myself in drafting the 'manifesto' for the dialogue, and the focus gradually shifted from the history and roles of cartography to more general epistemological issues, such as the relation between knowledge and power, global forms of knowledge, and a comparison of representations of the world—individual and universal, tangible and abstract, theoretical and aesthetic. The manifesto (or 'Introductory Note') for the *Dialogo*, which was sent to all the guest experts who contributed to this book, ran as follows.

THE 'MANIFESTO'

"This Dialogue is prompted by considerations of an urgent problem of knowledge and power. New technologies of information might seem to offer renewed opportunities for global connexion and global forms of knowledge. These technologies are commonly accompanied by new master narratives of universal knowledge and complete transparency. Such stories carry with them a kind of moral lesson: all our problems would be solved if only everything was, or could be, known about everything everywhere. This lesson moralizes the world of global data banks by urging the virtues of accountability, access, and audit. But of course this knowledge order is also accompanied by major risks. Among such risks, there is a threat to the virtues of tacit, embodied, secluded, and private forms of knowledge and skill, which run the hazard of expropriation or suppression by the universal knowledge order. There is also the challenge that corporate agents, increasingly the masters of global knowledge systems, exploit them for their own purposes under the cover of stories of universal knowledge and transparent accountability.

The critical relation between knowledge and power is certainly not new, but this predicament gives it urgency. One is told to think globally and act locally, yet it is often hard to see how local actions matter and hard, too, to think simultaneously of all the globe. This Dialogue asks about the aesthetics of global knowledge in a time of crisis. In particular, it addresses the vices and virtues of different world views, by contrasting singular and universal, tangible and abstract, intellectual and aesthetic representations of the world.

There are many long histories of projects that have tried to bring the globe to a scale where its contents and connexions become evident: cartographies of cities, landscapes, globes; collections, museums, encyclopaedias; the theme of the Ark as both universal cabinet and survival mechanism; and modernist plans for universal languages, exhibitions, and data systems that would encapsulate the entire world. Often crucial for all such schemes is the claim that they would revision the world so that by making a better global representation, the globe would become better. Like a corrective mirror, the world would simultaneously be reflected and improved. Thus these projects belong to the histories of utopia. There, a secluded island lets a community build an ideal world in miniature. Good links between island and mainland help the ideal become a resource elsewhere. This dialogue brings together on an island some of those who care about the puzzles and prospects of these political arts.

The dialogue therefore asks the question of the scale at which the political arts of representation should work. Its participants will explore how combinations of macro- and micro-cosmic world images can be made to function and how shifts of scale around the immediate, local, and miniature can be resources for the global or the worldly. These revisions would be realist, respectful of modesty

rather than insistent on an exhaustive account. Thus, as an alternative to forms of reductive abstraction, which work by removing features of the world, might it be possible to engage in the work of condensation, which achieves its ends by composing, by adding, and by giving, a condensation which makes atmospheres into waterways and currents?

San Giorgio, a secluded island, is an ideal venue for the Dialogue, in that it differs from some other utopias. Instead of dogmatically assuming the answer has already been reached, the Cini Foundation offers the chance for a collaborative search for better questions."

THE RULES OF THE GAME AND THE INAUGURAL EVENT

Another document which will help readers understand the context that fostered the ideas in this book is the letter of invitation sent to all the contributors. It clearly set out the 'rules of the game' and the format:

"... As we believe that dialogues are more important than formal paper presentations, we are not asking participants to write a new formal paper in advance: rather, they should bring to Venice their opinions on these burning questions, their wish to confront their own assumptions, and their willingness to accept the risk of not knowing what the outcome will be: in short, they are expected to be engaged in a conversation. That is why from the outset we have called this project a 'Dialogue'. We ask, however, each scholar to choose a theme or topic—within the framework proposed in the attached note—that s/he could introduce in a single session, thus setting the tone of conversation and the agenda for the session.

All participants will sit at a round table for the duration of the meeting. In each of the three days there will be three sessions, two in the morning and only one in the afternoon, thus leaving enough time and space for informal exchanges, rest, exploring Venice and generally enjoying the stay on the island.

According to the tradition of previous Dialogues, a formal opening event, aimed at exposing the Dialogue to the public and the press, will take place before the event, preparing our intellectual experience with an aesthetic experience conveying emotions as well as thoughts."

The inaugural event featured two ambitious attempts to represent the world by means of two different forms of expression: music and literature. The first was the composer Mauricio Kagel's illustration of musically possible 'trajectories in the world', guided by the compass, a universal instrument; three of his eight pieces of *The Wind Rose* (South, East, and

South-West) were performed. These were interspersed with readings from the works of Italo Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges, which compared the splendour and decline of great maps—either so detailed as to be pointless or so all-embracing as to contain only nothingness—to the simultaneous, instant vision of the whole universe which the poet, Borges, managed to convey with his electrifying intuition.

TWO FINAL REMARKS

The art project at the origin of the Dialogue, and this book—Lowe and Brotton's relief map of the lithosphere—was not realized in time for the 2013 Venice Art Biennale, for various reasons.² But, perhaps as compensation, the 2013 Biennale itself underscored the extraordinarily topical theme of our *Dialogo*: its main exhibition was *The Encyclopedic Palace*. This exhibition drew inspiration from a utopian dream by Marino Auriti, who filed a design with the US Patent office in 1955, depicting his 'Palazzo Enciclopedico', an imaginary museum meant to house all worldly knowledge. Auriti planned the model of a 136-storey building to be built in Washington, standing 700 metres tall and taking up over 16 blocks. "Auriti's plan was never carried out, of course", the curator Massimiliano Gioni wrote on the Biennale website, "but the dream of universal, all-embracing knowledge crops up throughout the history of art and humanity, as one that eccentrics like Auriti share with many other artists, writers, scientists, and self-proclaimed prophets who have tried—often in vain—to fashion an image of the world that will capture its infinite variety and richness. Today, as we grapple with a constant flood of information, such attempts to structure knowledge into all-inclusive systems seem even more necessary and even more desperate." Clearly, our plan for the *Dialogo* was drawing from some inevitable historical and contemporary spring.

The order of the chapters in this book reflects the sequence of the Dialogo sessions, with the exception of the introduction by Simon Schaffer and the essay by Lowe and Brotton. In fact, Lowe described the project of the lithosphere map in an informal evening meeting of the *Dialogo* with other participants. We thus thought it was only logical to begin the book with the essay by Lowe and Brotton to highlight the role that their planned but still unrealized—and thus, perfectly utopian—map played in originating and shaping the entire *Dialogo*.

NOTES

1. The 'Dialoghi' of 2004 (*Atmospheres of freedom. For an ecology of good government*), 2005 (*The architectures of Babel. Creations, extinctions and intercessions in the languages of the global world*), 2007 (*Inheriting the past. Tradition, translation, betrayal, innovation*), 2010 (*Protecting nature or saving creation? Ecological conflicts and religious passions*) led to the publication of the following books, respectively: Latour, B. and P. Gagliardi (sous la direction de), *Les atmosphères de la politique. Dialogue pour un monde commun*, Paris, Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond/Le Seuil, 2006; Fabbri, P. and T. Migliore (eds) *The Architectures of Babel. Creation, Extinctions and Intercessions in the Language of the Global World*, Florence, Leo S. Olschki, 2011; Gagliardi, P., B. Latour and P. Memelsdorff (eds), *Coping with the Past. Creative Perspectives on Conservation and Restoration*, Florence, Leo S. Olschki, 2010; Gagliardi, P., A.M. Reijnen and Philippe Valentini (eds), *Protecting Nature, Saving Creation. Ecological Conflicts, Religious Passions, and Political Quandaries*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Moreover, excerpts of the Dialogue held in 2005 (*Martyrdoms. Witnesses to faith, cultures of death, and new forms of political action*) have been published in «Studi Veneziani»: *Martiri. Testimonianze di fede, culture della morte, nuove forme di azione politica*, n.s. LIX (2010), pp. 17–69.
2. Curiously enough, a commentator took it for granted that Lowe and Brotton's planned relief map would be realized for the Art Biennale 2015. Matilda Bathurst, reviewing in the Oxonian Review the book *Mapping it Out: An Alternative Atlas of Contemporary Cartographies*, edited by Hans Ulrich Obrist, writes: "One of the most interesting contemporary manifestations of mapping and materiality, notably missing from the book, is the work of the Madrid-based practice Factum Arte, the art world's leading innovators of 3D printing technology. Renowned for their astonishing facsimiles of iconic art works, in 2013 the studio produced a high resolution three-dimensional record of the 13th century Hereford Mappa Mundi, recalling the folds and undulations of the bull hide on which it was originally etched. Positioned according to the East rather than the North, the map famously looks towards the Second Coming, imagining the annihilation of the very world it meticulously depicts. A similar

principle informs the studio's proposal for the 2015 Venice Biennale, a sculptural relief map of an oceanless earth, to be installed in a former football pitch. Over the course of the Biennale, the lunar-like projections would be gradually flooded with water from the lagoon, eventually submerging the map and rendering it invisible." Sadly, the project was never realized and remains, like many of the objects discussed in this book, a lost utopia.

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