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**Venice as the Archetypal Waterscape of the 21st Century:
Aleksandra Mir's Postcards for the 53rd Biennale**

Abstract

As an ephemeral, portable and disposable object, the postcard is a powerful medium for the global circulation of images and the creation of enduring collective imaginaries. This essay considers a project by artist Aleksandra Mir for the 53. Venice Biennale (2009), titled *VENEZIA (all places contain all others)*, which entailed the design, printing and free distribution of one million postcards. A visitor could mail the postcards on the spot, ensuring the global circulation to the project. The participatory and ephemeral nature of this postcard project is discussed in relation to the curatorial concept of that year's Biennale, the ability of the postcard format to activate a problematic memory of place, and the various iterations of the project from 2005 to 2018. Mir's use of the postcard format in the Venetian context stresses the close link between the contemporary art world and the economy of tourism in late capitalism.

Keywords

Aleksandra Mir, Postcards, Overtourism, Climate change, Waterscapes, Reproducibility.

Venice as the Archetypal Waterscape of the 21st Century: Aleksandra Mir's Postcards for the 53rd Biennale

Camilla Pietrabissa

Water equals time and provides beauty with its double.
Joseph Brodsky¹

1. One Million Postcards for Free

Visitors to the 53. Venice Biennale, held between June 7 and November 22, 2009, could pick up free postcards from various rotating stands placed outside of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni at the Giardini or from boxes installed in the main nave of the Arsenale [Fig. 1]. They were part of Aleksandra Mir's project entitled *VENEZIA (all places contain all others)* that consisted of designing, printing and distributing (free of charge) one million postcards.² Although it was part of the official selection for that year's curated section, the project's display was not limited to the main exhibition areas because visitors dispersed the cards throughout the city or sent them to friends and family all over the world. Its ephemeral nature resided in its distribution: during the preview days, 300,000 postcards were already taken away, as VIPs bagged them by the dozens, so that by the end of the Biennale the stands and boxes were empty.³ Visitors could buy stamps in the exhibition area at the Giardini and mail the postcards on the spot, ensuring their wide circulation, from Venice to the rest of the world. As a 22-year-old student, I also picked up several postcards; some I mailed, others I kept at home in a box where I collect brochures and other miscellaneous printed matter.

Since the early 2000s, many artists have produced ephemeral artworks in the form of posters and postcards for international exhibitions.⁴ On

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Joseph Brodsky, *Watermarks, an Essay on Venice* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992), 134.

2

The work was sponsored by and printed at the Ringier Pressehaus, Zurich.

3

On the postcards' dispersal, see the artist's statement in the Appendix.

4

For a history of the postcard in the field of contemporary art, and particularly its appeal for young artists in the 1990s and early 2000s, see Jeremy Cooper, *Artists' Postcards. A Compendium* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), esp. 9-12.

fig. 1

VENEZIA (all places contain all others), Installation view, 53rd International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, Giardini, Venice, 2009. Photo courtesy: aleksandramir.info



one hand this is due to the increasing accessibility of designing and printing technologies; on the other, the appropriation of branding and marketing strategies in museums, and the mass media promotion of contemporary art collecting, have contributed to the creation of an ‘aura’ for artists’ ephemera. In an article for *Interview Magazine*, for example, Alex Gartenfeld noted that visitors “pocketed” Mir’s postcards because “they’re editions, after all”, and further added that artists’ postcards could be found at the Athens Biennial that year, thereby making it possible for North American visitors to send back home postal souvenirs from various European art events.⁵ Like other similar paper works, therefore, *VENEZIA (all places contain all others)* invited different uses from participants, including mailing and collecting. Mir’s idea to install a mailbox in the exhibition space—which ended up being the most difficult part of the production process—was meant as a provocation to the visitors, who had to choose whether they wished to capitalise on artistic value by collecting the free postcards, or to circulate them around the globe.⁶ In so doing, Mir solicited questions about the value of art and the cultural role of the Biennale as a global exhibition and event.

The postcards’ design was an ironic adaptation of the touristic image of Venice. Overlaid with a graphic that spelled out “Venezia”, the front side depicted a variety of waterways around the world sourced from a commercial stock agency, but Venice was not among them [Fig. 2]. Those images include flamingos and rock cliffs, large beaches and the ocean, as well as mountain lakes, all of which clash with the image of Venice as the quintessential Renaissance city built on an artificial island, in the middle of a protected lagoon. Still other postcards feature landmark monuments of other cities built on a coast, such as Sydney [Fig. 3]. The only element that all these photos have in common is the prominent presence of water, paired with the printed word “Venezia”. A short piece in the fashion section of *The New York Times* remarked that “Venice is the supermodel of cities, more prodigiously photographed than Kate and Gisele combined”, but in Mir’s postcards there was not “a Grand Canal in the bunch”.⁷ This comment captures well Mir’s

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Alex Gartenfeld, “Postcards from Europe”, *Interview Magazine*, June 2009. Mir’s project received wide press coverage, since it fit well with the overall curatorial concept of the Biennale, as discussed below. A list of the articles on the work can be found on the artist’s website: <https://aleksandramir.info/bibliography/>, accessed May 2021. See also an article about Mir’s work as a metaproject, Whybrow, Nicolas, “Venezia, Italia, fare mondi: doing and undoing (the myth of) Venice”, in Johanna Ruohonen and Asta Kihlman, eds., *Machineries of Public Art. From Durable to Transient, from Site-bound to Mobile* (Turku: University of Turku Publications, 2013), 29-49.

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On the part of the Biennale, Biennale’s production assistant Paolo Cimarosti was instrumental in securing the Poste Italiane mailbox and collection on site, and also paid out of pocket to have stamps for sale in the bar. I wish to thank Aleksandra Mir for giving me this information.

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Alix Browne, “Wish you were...here?”, *The New York Times*, June 19, 2009.

fig. 2
Aleksandra Mir, *VENEZIA* (all
places contain all others),
illustrated postcard, 2009.
Photo courtesy: aleksandramir.
info



fig. 3
Aleksandra Mir, *VENEZIA* (all
places contain all others),
illustrated postcard, 2009.
Photo courtesy: aleksandramir.
info



sensibility regarding communication strategies, particularly in the form of printed matter, as well as her interest in popular imagery, partly a result of her education in media and communication and visual arts, as well as cultural anthropology. The postcard, in this sense, is a perfect medium to activate the imagery and practices of contemporary tourism. Made in series, illustrated with generic photographs, and produced cheaply, the touristic postcard encapsulates the notion of a perfect reproducibility of place—in the same way as early photographs encapsulated the reproducibility of the work of art.⁸ The postcards' relational and ephemeral nature ultimately accords with Mir's interest in collective practices of communication through images.

In this article, the original meaning of Mir's postcards in the context of the 2009 Biennale will be considered in light of ongoing preoccupations with the future of a Venice tainted by the danger of heritage devastation and environmental catastrophe. Although the project fits very well within utopian and universalising claims for art as a global field of experimentation made by the curator of the 2009 Venice Biennale, it also addresses the urgency towards protecting waterway cities in the face of ecological hazards. Recounting the story of the project from 2009 to today shows the manifold implications of the use of the postcard format in the context of international art exhibitions, while reflecting on the possible afterlife of such ephemeral projects. Mir's postcards of Venice constitute a playful and participatory project whose cheerful design leaves behind a sour aftertaste.

2. Making Worlds: Play, Globalism, Accessibility

The curatorial claim of the 2009 Biennale was utopian in its ambition and contradictory in execution; many commentators regarded the concept as too vague and the event as insipid.⁹ Daniel Birnbaum, the Swedish curator who was then Rector at the Städelschule arts academy in Frankfurt, chose a seemingly innocuous title, *Making Worlds*, whose meaning varies when translated into different languages. With this title, he wished to call attention to art as a way to devise a platform for cultural exchange across geographic distances, to create historical links with figures from the past, and to participate in processes of experimentation.¹⁰ The notions of multiplicity and openness were important underlying principles for this utopian approach:

Perhaps art can be one way out of a world ruled by leveling impulses and dull sameness. Can each artwork be a principle of hope and an intriguing plan for escape? Behind the immediate surface we are

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On the history of the postcard see: Frank Staff, *The Picture Postcard and its Origins* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1966); Claude Frère and Aline Ripert, *La carte postale, son histoire, sa fonction sociale* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, (1983) 2001); the special issue of *Resources: an International Journal on Images and their Uses* 17, no. 4 (2001); *From Albums to the Academy: Postcards and Art History*, ed. Jordana Mendelson; David Prochaska and Jordana Mendelson, eds., *Postcards. Ephemeral Histories of Modernity* (University Park PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010). On postcards reproducing works of art, see Bertrand Tillier, "La carte postale, multiple documentaire du chef-d'œuvre", *Perspective* 2 (2019): 239-248.

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Take, for example the following review: "Though Birnbaum escapes the traps of overcrowding and infinite corridors of video, his tendency towards restraint results in an exhibition that at times feels insipid. [...] If the measure of a biennial's success is that it's not loved, but rather is widely discussed and debated, then Birnbaum's 2009 iteration—like its recent predecessors—could be considered an achievement. The problem with that premise though, is that much like the concept of "making worlds through art", it's all too vague, even meaningless. Ultimately, the translation exercise doesn't quite translate", Gillian Sneed, "Lost in translation. On the Venice Biennale 2009", *Texte zur Kunst*, June 25, 2009: <https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/lost-translation-venice-biennale-2009/>, accessed May 2021.

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The title was inspired by and departing from Nelson Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978).

many—together and individually, through the multiplicity of imaginative worlds we hold within.¹¹

As in the case of previous biennials such as Harald Szeemann's *Plateau of Humankind* (2001), critical reviews of the 2009 show disapproved of such definitive statements on art and the human condition. On the pages of *Frieze*, Jennifer Higgie answered Birnbaum's somewhat naïve question about art's power to "plan an escape" by noting that "at the heart of this unwieldy and often—despite the chaos and exhaustion—joyful beast that is the Biennale lurks a curious contradiction", that of praising "creativity that seems resistant to change and, despite its apparent celebration of difference, is often mired in the worst kind of politics".¹²

This tension between the political structure of the Venice Biennale and the curatorial concept seems to parallel Mir's *VENEZIA (all places contain all others)* which, in principle, accords well with the show's celebration of creativity and experimentation, but which also questions the overall framework in which the event is taking place. In particular, three elements at the heart of the main show—playfulness, accessibility, and the global outlook of art—can be found at work in Mir's project. Playfulness can be detected in Birnbaum's definition of the works in his show as "things in the making", thus highlighting the ephemeral nature of art and emphasising process over product.¹³ Several installations offered free items, such as Anawana Haloba's market stall, where visitors could take packaged, mass-produced candies from a small, artisanal kiosk. The design of the catalogue itself, made of recycled paper, presented the essays against a background depicting a working table of notes and cards. Playfulness and entertainment also characterised the three interior design interventions in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni: a new café designed by Tobias Rehberger (who won the Golden Lion), an educational space by Massimo Bartolini, and a bookstore by Rirkrit Tiravanija.¹⁴ In this context, Mir's work, located at the show's perimeter at the Giardini, functioned as a threshold project which introduced the playful tone of the show.

The second element, accessibility, is tightly connected to the procedural conception of art, but it also calls attention to relational and participatory processes. Although Tiravanija's presence could be seen as a sign of the continuous appeal of the Relational Aesthetics of the 1990s, the curator tried to integrate his work (like that of other artists formerly associated with that approach) into a more generic participatory character.¹⁵ Mir's work was only loosely connected to the tendencies of Relational Aesthetics, since the provocation and political implications of her work resided not in an interaction between artist and visitor, but in the materiality of the work itself, the accessibility of which was predicated upon the decision to give postcards away for free. As the artist has pointed out in our correspondence, the project's relational and ephemeral nature was more in line with the "generosity projects" of the 1990s and early 2000s. According to the late American curator and educator Ted Purves, at the time artists were beginning to undo "assumptions and

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Daniel Birnbaum, "We are many", in *La Biennale di Venezia. 53a Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte. Fare Mondi/Making Worlds* (June 7 - November 22, 2009), exh. cat. (Venice: La Biennale/Marsilio, 2009), 187.

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Jennifer Higgie, "Written on Water. The Highs and Lows of the 53rd Venice Biennale, *Fare Mondi Making Worlds*", *Frieze* no. 125 (2009): <https://www.frieze.com/article/written-water1>, accessed May 2021.

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Daniel Birnbaum, "We are many", 187.

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See the interview by Angela Vettese, Tobias Rehberger, "Was du liebst, bringt dich auch zum Weinen (Cafeteria)", in Paolo Fabbri and Tiziana Migliore, eds., *Quaderni della Biennale. Sulla 53esima Biennale di Venezia* (Milano: et/al edizioni, 2011), 42-53. On playfulness in the show's display, see also Pamuk Orhan, "Se la Biennale sembra un gioco come un bambino a spasso tra i padiglioni", *La Repubblica*, August 1, 2009.

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On the critical debate around Relational Aesthetics, see Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics", *October*, no. 110 (Fall 2004): 51-79.

ideas surrounding the ‘gift’ in the work of art and the innate ‘generosity’ of the artistic act”, so as to involve the audience more clearly in the process and contribute to a critique of the capitalist system.¹⁶ In an interview about *Making Worlds*, Birnbaum seems aware that the notion of generosity is a recurring motif of his show.

TG: But how much work in the show actually employs that model of generosity?

DB: Well, Thomas Bayrle, who has always been interested in mass production, contributes a very large pattern on the wall: it’s wallpaper that is free and infinitely reproducible. Then there’s Aleksandra Mir, who is making a million picture postcards of Venice; anyone can pick one up and send it back home. But here again, one can look back to history in order to find a way forward. There’s also a room devoted to Gutai, the Japanese avant-garde movement that was interested in multiples and activities and Happenings—things that are not about the original object at all but rather about a given activity in itself. And after all, if one is to take “making worlds” seriously, one must think of how a world is normally something shared, no? The world is inhabited by more than one person, and so “making” revolves around building something common.¹⁷

This passage is interesting as it tries to generalise the “generosity model” within the long history of contemporary art and globalisation.¹⁸ Yet various commentators have noted the avoidance of crisis-laden rhetoric in favour of a hopeful approach, evident not just in the selection of works but also in the overall installation, marked by a playful aesthetic, as seen above. After all, the 53. Biennale was put together in 2008, the year of the subprime crisis which hit the global economic system and made evident its inherent fragility.

The third element, the show’s global outlook, was therefore problematic from the start. Besides the historical link with Gutai, Birnbaum’s ideal of global interconnectedness felt somehow too idealistic and outdated—but the gesture was deliberate. In the catalogue essay, for example, the curator clearly stated that although “nobody believes in such simple remedies from society’s pathology [as playful, idealistic artworks]”, in the face of the time’s “increasingly fetishistic visual industry and its demand for commodities [...] little is more relevant than insisting that the experience of art cannot be fully grasped in terms of possession”.¹⁹ The cartographic approach of the show’s display, where a rigorous itinerary had been avoided, disoriented the public in order to create unexpected resonances and interrelations between the works on view in a labyrinth of galleries. By addressing globalisation from the angle of a touristic imaginary, Mir’s postcards similarly

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Ted Purves, ed., *What We Want is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), X. A revised version of the book was published in 2015, with a slightly different title, which includes examples from Aleksandra Mir’s work as exemplary of the ongoing interest in the generosity model and productive collaborations with audiences.

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Tim Griffin, “New beginnings”, *Artforum* 47, no. 9 (May 2009), online at: <https://www.artforum.com/print/200905/tim-griffin-talks-with-curator-daniel-birnbaum-about-the-53rd-venice-biennale-22616>, accessed May 2021.

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The misleadingly idealistic tone of this argument resonates with Caroline Jones’ account on the historicity of the global model of art exhibitions: “If one focuses on the emergence of a contemporary biennial, one quickly realises that the key structures of the current exhibitionary complex, the undisputed foundations of contemporary display, were put in place more than a century ago”, Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World’s Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), XI. See also Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel, eds., *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (Karlsruhe, Germany, September 17, 2011 - February 19, 2012), exh. cat. (Cambridge [MA]: MIT Press, 2012).

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Daniel Birnbaum, “We are many”, 187.

question the meaning of global interconnection from the viewpoint of estrangement and disorientation. The catalogue entry written for the project, however, stressed its fittingness within the optimistic narrative of the curatorial vision: “In the same way that the water of the city’s lagoon is part of a continuous global cycle of exchange, the postcards will be circulated by the public to every part of the world as mementoes and evocations of a non-standardised experience” so as to “amplify the meaning of the artwork across time and space”.²⁰ But isn’t this wide circulation, as Mir’s disorienting images seem to suggest, marked by cultural misinterpretation and possibly delusion? And aren’t the accessibility and playfulness of the postcards the mark of a superficial, infantile attitude to travel—an uncaring commodification of place?

3. Waterscape Souvenirs

Mir’s understanding of place matches a contemporary sensibility for composite notions of cultural identity. Partly a result of a peripatetic life, her anthropological approach draws attention to the kaleidoscopic nature of identity formation as a result of travel—of objects, people and imaginaries.²¹ In her statement on *VENEZIA (all places contain all others)* she writes that

The idea of waterways as a supranational entity mirrors patterns of globalisation: travel as a matter of course rather than exception, the erosion of the nation-state, and, conversely, its re-emergence as a brand to be marketed. Cultural identity as an effect of global movement rather than static nationality. Politics as pollution rather than border control.²²

Flipping the catalogue’s argument that the flow of water may connect the whole of humanity, the artist’s words point to the analogy between waterways and the flow of tourists travelling to favourite destinations, along with the flow of capital and its undercurrent, the process of commodification in the form of city branding. Venice, one of the world’s primary touristic destinations, becomes paradigmatic of the contradictions of late capitalism in that it reinforces international relations while strengthening urban identity in the name of branding.²³ In this context, as Joseph Brodsky’s famous essay suggests, Venetian identity and history reside in its relation with water: “By rubbing water, this city improves time’s looks, beautifies the future. That’s what the role of this city in the universe is”.²⁴ From today’s perspective, then, Mir’s focus on “supranational identity” may refer more clearly than in 2009 to urban ecology and the future survival of the city itself—Venice being a paradigm of all cities in danger, but particularly those built on water. Mir’s postcards, in this sense, become a token of memory—a *souvenir*—not of the city’s eternal history, but of a period of fragility. The selection of pictures from a stock of generic photos serves to

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Claudia Battistella, “Aleksandra Mir”, in *La Biennale di Venezia. 53a Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte*, 112.

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On the impact of contemporary global mobility on artistic work, see Anne Ring Petersen, *Migration Into Art. Transcultural Identities and Art-making in a Globalised World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017). More generally, on the philosophical and political opposition between local and global, see Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climate Regime* [2017], trans. Catherine Porter (Medford [MA]: polity, 2018).

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See the artist’s statement in the Appendix.

23

Among the vast number of volumes on the role of Venice in the global economy, see the collective project, published in 2009, Wolfgang Scheppe, ed., *Migropolis. Venice/Atlas of a Global Situation*, 2 voll. (Berlin and Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2009).

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Brodsky, *Watermarks*, 135.

disrupt the meaning of the postcard genre and call attention not to obvious monuments or points of interest but to the possibility of irreparable damage and loss. The imaginary of Venice within Mir's postcard ruptures when "Venezia" is transplanted to a foreign city: the act of collage cleaves the signifier from the signified and in so doing hints at its potential demise. While the postcard is usually intended to celebrate place, these postcards hint to the fact that the place may one day disappear. In other words, these postcards activate a problematic memory.

To prove this point, we may note that *VENEZIA (all places contain all others)* was the second iteration of a project conceived in 2005 for an exhibition at the Gesellschaft für Aktuelle Kunst in Bremen which reflected on urban identity at a time of fundamental structural change.²⁵ The eight postcards produced on that occasion play on the effect of estrangement between place and its touristic stereotypes [Fig. 4]. The option of mailing the postcards on the spot—which would become so important at the Biennale—was not available since the project was conceived for a local audience rather than for masses of international tourists. In any case, the idea to reflect on collective imaginaries, and the way in which objects of everyday consumption may strengthen their creation and reproduction, had initially been formulated in Bremen.²⁶ By looking at the artist's longer career, one realises that an

fig. 4
Aleksandra Mir, *Bremen*,
illustrated postcard, 2005.
Photo courtesy: aleksandramir.
info



interest in touristic imagery which deployed disruptive juxtapositions was already at work in *The Concorde Collages*, a series started in 2004 (the year in which the Concorde was retired) and made of cut-out photos of the airliner glued onto posters depicting popular icons, masterpieces of European art or tourist destinations.²⁷ In a 2004 interview for *The Believer*, Mir explained her use of mass-reproduced photos,

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A Lucky Strike. Kunst findet Stadt (September 9 - October 30, 2005), exh. cat. (Bremen: Gesellschaft für Aktuelle Kunst, 2005). See also Cooper, *Artists' postcards*, 9-10.

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On the political use of the postcard in creating collective imaginaries, and the intermedia relation between the postcard and other images in the interior space, see Matteo Bertelé, "La cartolina illustrate come modello dello spazio quotidiano sovietico", in Matteo Bertelé, Angela Bianco, Alessia Cavallaro, eds., *Le Muse fanno il girotondo. Jurij Lotman e le arti. Studi in onore di Giuseppe Barbieri* (Crocetta del Montello: Terra Ferma, 2015), 90-102.

27

See the publication which collects all the different iterations of the project, Aleksandra Mir, *The Concorde Collages* (Paris: Onestar Press, Galerie Laurent Godin, 2006).

such as the image of the Concorde or the portrait of Che Guevara, as an attempt to reply to the question: “How can two once so powerful ideas relate back to us in a productive way now?”.²⁸ While in *The Concorde Collages* the cut-up and reproduced photos are simultaneously visible, in the postcards projects (in Bremen and Venice) the juxtaposition between photographs and script requires the viewer to activate their imaginary, calling to mind mental pictures of the real city (for those who have only seen photos of the place) or personal memories (for those who have visited it in the past).

Mir seems aware of a philosophical tradition which regards the memory of place, like memory itself, as a fragmented, blurred and deceptive faculty. In his musing on the postcard as a form of writing, Jacques Derrida argued that the immediacy and the public accessibility of the message in the postcard makes the text ultimately less important than the image, which is what remains when the card is resold in the antique shop.²⁹ Thus, the image is what ensures the postcard’s after-life, what carries it into the future. In contemporary art, the ability of the postcard to reactivate memories of place has been put to use by many other artists, including Tacita Dean, whose art commemorates the obsolescence of media and the relation between photography and time.³⁰ A work by Dean commissioned by dOCUMENTA (13) and exhibited in Kabul in 2012, for example, consists in a series of hand-coloured postcards of pre-war Kassel which produce a nostalgic reflection upon urban heritage [Fig. 5].³¹ By contrast, Mir’s postcards are not connected to a philatelic mania—although they may become collectibles or objects found in antique stalls in the future. *VENEZIA (all places contain all others)* refuses the nostalgic patina of

fig. 5
Tacita Dean, *c/o Jolyon*, 2012,
Gouache on found postcards.
Courtesy Marian Goodman
Gallery / Tacita Dean Studio



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Christopher Bollen, “An interview with Aleksandra Mir”, *The Believer*, January 1, 2004, <https://believermag.com/an-interview-with-aleksandra-mir/>, accessed April 2021.

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A fragmented, literary work in itself, the postcard is a metacritical reflection on the impossibility of describing the self in anything but a discontinuous manner. Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* [1980], trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

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On the importance of what Jeremy Cooper calls “manipulated postcards”, see *Artists’ Postcards*, 141-168.

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The related publication was commissioned by dOCUMENTA (13) and the Goethe-Institut, Kabul and produced on the occasion of the exhibition at Queen’s Palace, Bagh-eBabur in Kabul, Afghanistan. See Tacita Dean, *c/o Jolyon* (Kabul, June 20 - July 19, 2012), exh. cat. (Cologne: Walther Koenig, 2012).

old postcards and instead embraces the kitsch appearance of the cheerful tourist postcard to carry it into the future, and possibly question the very promise of that future. In this sense, Mir's work joins the history of the international exhibitions, which offered postcard souvenirs of the pavilions which visitors could collect in albums.³² Instead of the memory of place, postcards of global shows carry the memory of locations which are "both specifically located and simultaneously diasporic", what Irit Rogoff calls "relational geographies".³³

In this sense, Mir's work joined other meta-projects from the 53. Biennale. Escaping the naïve curatorial approach to globalisation, various works from national pavilions challenged the proposed model in subtle, clever ways. At the Giardini, Fiona Tan's film on Marco Polo in the Dutch pavilion, *Disorient*, and Steve McQueen's film for the British pavilion, *Giardini*, are exemplary of a strain of works which considered the spatial identity of Venice and the Biennale respectively.³⁴ More relevant in iconographic terms is the correspondence between Mir's work and John Baldessari's intervention for the main show, titled *Ocean and Sky (with Two Palm Trees)*, which played on the genre of the *veduta*. Baldessari had the façade of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni painted with an open view of an expanse of water, flanked by two palm trees, a reminder of California in Venice [Fig. 6].³⁵

fig. 6
John Baldessari, *Ocean and sky (with Two Palm Trees)*, Installation view, 53. International Art Exhibition, Giardini, La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, 2009. Photo: Giorgio Zucchiatti © Courtesy Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia – ASAC.



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See the example of the 1937 Paris world's fair discussed in Caroline Jones, *The Global Work of Art*, 76 (plate 21).

33

Irit Rogoff, "Geo-Cultures. Circuits of Art and Globalization", *Open*, no. 16 (2009): 114-115. For a critical history of the international exhibitions, see Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials and Documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art* (London: Wiley and Blackwell, 2016); and Elena Filipovic, Marieke Van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø, eds., *The Biennial Reader* (Ostfildern: Hatje Kantz, 2010).

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That year was marked by projects about the Biennale: other similar works included Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's *De novo* and Haegue Yang's *Condensation*, as well as the work of Roman Ondak for the Czech/Slovak pavilion (*Loop*) and Doris Margreiter for the Austrian one (*Pavilion*), see Tiziana Migliore, "Steve McQueen, Giardini", in *Quaderni della Biennale. Sulla 53esima Biennale di Venezia* (Milano: et/al edizioni, 2011), 154.

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From the catalogue entry: "Do we cherish the exuberance and sublime grandiosity of this misplaced vista in a city of vistas? Or are we astounded at the irreverence with which he has turned the façade of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni of the arts into a cheap, generic postcard?", Kim West, "John Baldessari", *La Biennale di Venezia. 53a Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte*, 6.

An unusually positive review described Birnbaum's "genial Biennale" as a show which "meanders around positions whose coordinates lie somewhere between the melancholy fog of Venice off-season and the photogenic glow of Venice Beach's shoreline", the latter being an allusion to Baldessari's work.³⁶ The mural painting's effect of displacement is well paired with Mir's work's effect of disruption, as both use water to reference Venice and create a collage of visual elements belonging to different locations. But while Baldessari's mural was quite minimalistic and inconspicuous, and was removed at the end of November, the postcards have a longer material afterlife, a fact which projects Mir's work into the future, eliciting anticipatory imaginings about the future for cities on water. From today's perspective, once the relational aspect of Mir's work has worn out, the theme of environmental risk is more easily readable than that of overtourism. Today, the ironic aesthetics of the souvenir which made the work so cheerful hand over to gloomier reflections about the future of coastal towns and the marine ecosystem on which these towns have depended for centuries. Ultimately, Mir's exploitation of the cheerful aspect of the postcard serves to posit Venice as the archetype of cities built on water, revealing that all sites depicted on the cards are equally at risk due to the global dimension of the economic and ecological crises.

4. Iterations and Afterlife

The story of Mir's work over fifteen years shows that postcard projects are less ephemeral than what the medium may have implied at first. While *VENEZIA (all places contain all others)* was an iteration of the original idea from 2005, a further iteration of the project reveals the fake waterscape postcard as a powerful device in contemporary art. Despite refusing all proposals to reproduce the project after 2009, in 2018 the artist accepted an invitation to make a third iteration of the project, using the same images she had used at the 53. Biennale, for an exhibition in Shanghai on the role of original and copy in contemporary art. Curated by Alessandro Michele and Maurizio Cattelan at the YUZ Museum, *The Artist is Present*, whose title replicates that of Marina Abramovic's performance at MoMA in New York in 2010, featured thirty-seven artists who either copied other artists, appropriated other works, or presented a new version of their own work from the past, as in the case of Mir.³⁷ For the Shanghai postcards, Mir recycled the same stock of images and the same design seen in the postcards for the Venice Biennale, but replaced the inscription [Fig. 7]. In Shanghai, the audience tended to take photos of the cards neatly displayed on narrow shelves and post them on social media rather than take away the cards themselves.³⁸ The digital postcard "posted" from another city built on water thus ensures, once more, the widest possible circulation of the problematic imagery of waterscapes. The ephemeral nature of the postcard as a disposable and insubstantial work on paper is contradicted once again by the endurance of the image in other forms.

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Lynne Cooke, "Play Grounds", *Artforum* (September 2009): 237.

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The format of the exhibition catalogue was referential in itself, being a "newspaper" called *The New York Times* with some articles on the ideas of the show.

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"It has been ten years and I was curious to see how both time and geographical distance would change the work and the difference was radical. In Venice the VIP crowd jumped on the piece and 300,000 cards disappeared in the first 48 hours, while in Shanghai we had to explain to the more measured audience that it was OK to take one. A lot of people here photographed the work instead and spread it via social media, while that didn't even exist ten years ago", Jessica Xu, "Interview with Alexandra Mir", *Bazaar Men Style China*, December 2018, online here: <https://aleksandramir.info/bibliography/xu-jessica-the-artist-is-present-q-a-with-aleksandra-mir-bazaar-men-style-china-shanghai-de>, accessed May 2021.

fig. 7
Aleksandra Mir, *Shanghai*,
Installation view, YUZ Museum,
Shanghai, 2018. Photo
courtesy: aleksandramir.info



More than any other medium, print is associated, since its origin in the late 15th century, with mobility and transience.³⁹ In this history, the postcard remains successful in conveying the power of print to travel. Its ability to reproduce popular imagery is predicated upon ephemerality. Even if today's internet environment has incorporated all previous media (as Marshall McLuhan had predicted), the particular format of the postcard may still convey the original illusion of straightforward communication through a photograph of place.⁴⁰ In an interview made on the occasion of the show in Shanghai, Mir discussed her prolonged interest in the traditions and technologies of printing, publishing and distribution: "I don't see those projects as less valuable than anything I have made in steel. In Venice I printed 1 million cards, which is the equivalent of 16 tonnes of paper, so it is actually a monumental piece of work".⁴¹ Commenting on the nature of the postcard as a medium, she added: "Part of the trick is to make you believe that a postcard is something ephemeral, fragile and disposable, when in fact their combined volume and distribution might guarantee their longevity forever". The postcard format then raises questions about the visibility of contemporary art—often deemed as elitist and obscure—against more popular forms of collective "image-sharing". By virtue of its potential for reproduction and dissemination, in fact, the postcard has endured throughout the history of photography as a powerful vehicle for the discourse on memory and place. Mir's ephemeral work, thanks to its clever exploitation of practices of mobility and travel, turns out to have adapted well to the digital revolution which has occurred over the last fifteen years. Reinstating the power of the generic view of landmark sites to reactivate collective memories of place, Mir's postcard project in the context of the Venice Biennale joined a number of projects which have questioned the geographic situatedness of international art events and their contribution to the phenomenon of overtourism. At the same time, the large number of postcards printed in 2009 and the possibility of re-prints for other exhibitions questions the ephemeral nature of the postcard as an art form. The postcard is ephemeral—temporary and easily destroyed—only inasmuch as it is printed on a fragile support and it is cheap to produce, but turns into a truly monumental work of art when it exploits generic imagery and is diffused globally.

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The literature on the origin of print as a medium to ease the circulation of images is vast. Among recent works on the topic, see at least Suzanne Karr Schmidt and Ed Wouk, eds., *Prints in Translation 1450-1750. Image, Materiality, Space* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017); Ruth E. Iskin and Britany Salisbury, eds., *Collecting Prints, Posters, and Ephemera. Perspectives in a Global World* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

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Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964). For a recent take that considers the viral image in the internet era, see Valentina Tanni, *Memestetica* (Roma: NERO editions, 2020).

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Jessica Xu, "Interview with Alexandra Mir".

Appendix

Aleksandra Mir, Artist's statement — received December 1, 2020

The project entailed the design, printing and free distribution of one million postcards, to be given away to the general public during the 2009 Venice Biennale.

100 Originals x print run of 10.000 each = 1.000.000 total.

Full color front / B/W back

The 100 motifs depicted a variety of waterways from around the world, overlaid with a graphic that spells out 'Venezia' in a variety of typical cheerful postcard styles. The generic photographs were sourced from a commercial stock agency and paid licensing for, and a graphic designer collaborated on the typeface. The work was sponsored by and printed at the Ringier Pressehaus, Zurich. This meant that two trucks had to deliver 6 tonnes of postcards to the exhibition venue in Venice, offloaded box by box and only accessible via boat, a logistical feat by the Biennale organisation.

The work also entailed the installation of a real Poste Italiane mailbox and the selling of stamps in the exhibition area, to provide an immediate tool for the physical diffusion of the work by the public to their relations around the world. (This was in fact the hardest thing to arrange as the postal service never had a fully serviced mailbox on the premises before).

Thus the canals of Venice extended out into the world's oceans, rivers, lakes, ponds. Venice in every molecule of the rain. The idea of waterways as a supranational entity mirrors patterns of globalisation: travel as a matter of course rather than exception, the erosion of the nation-state, and, conversely, its re-emergence as a brand to be marketed. Cultural identity as an effect of global movement rather than static nationality. Politics as pollution rather than border control.

The final objective of the work is as far reaching as where the public will eventually carry the cards. Venice is the world's most popular tourist destination and each visitor thus became a distributor, 'working' on behalf of the work. In time, 100 years from now, my hope is that a random flaneur will find a card in a shoebox labelled 'Venezia' at a bookseller on the Seine, and find themselves bewildered.

Because of the work's purely romantic ethos, I was also already well aware of the savvy and cynicism of a certain segment of the public. During the preview days 300,000 cards were already dispersed via the VIP audience, many of whom bagged them by the dozens. By September when the school trips started, the Biennale organisation was already portioning them out, and by October 1st was receiving hate mail from visitors who had read about the piece and couldn't find it any longer. Truth is, I could have printed 2-5-10 million, and they would have been gone as well. I don't mind the greedy accumulation, as sooner or later even these cards will disperse, as people get bored, clean house or die. But what happened next is more predictable. The cards became collector items and those who deemed themselves 'collectors' of the work started to hunt to complete their set to reach a full 100. I have received plenty of emails over the years, asking to complete their sets, or seen partial sets available on ebay. This is fine too, as I was ready so had made the decision on the outset of never having all 100 motifs available on any single day, strategically staggering the card distribution so nobody could ever have a full set. Instead, I held back a series of complete sets for myself, as a separate artist's edition, which after the original show cannot be repeated, has been collected with my sanction and exhibited as 'archive material' in showcases and behind glass at a number of museums, including MoMA, NY.

Over the years, I have also received numerous invitations by curators all over the world to remake the work for their location, France, Israel, LA, you name it... I always declined these offers as they didn't offer the work anything new and I effectively could be doing nothing for the rest of my career. In 2018 however, ten years had passed and I took up the offer by Maurizio Cattelan to remake a version for his show 'The Artist is Present' at the YUX Museum in Shanghai, a show that dealt specifically with the idea of the copy. I was curious as to how the work would operate in China, after the advent of Social Media and within a new generation. For this edition of the work, 300,000 cards were printed, 50 of the same 100 originals were used, the same graphic templates employed and the word just changed from Venezia to Shanghai: <https://aleksandramir.info/projects/shanghai/>

Note that one more much earlier version of the work exists, created with the BAWAG Foundation in Bremen, which holds one of the main artists' publishing collections in the world. I originally created 8 cards for an exhibition there in 2005: <https://aleksandramir.info/projects/bremen/>

END.

This statement has been updated.

Author's Biography

Camilla Pietrabissa is a postdoctoral fellow in the History of Art at Università Iuav di Venezia. She teaches the History of Early Modern Art at Bocconi University in Milan. She studies the representation of landscape in Western art, the visual culture of the 18th century, and the history and theory of drawing from nature. Her recent publications include an essay on landscapes in the

catalogue *Quayola* (2021) and 'The eternal event. Urban void and image temporality from the Renaissance to 2020' (*Visual Culture Studies*, 2021), and she is a regular contributor of *The Burlington Magazine* and *Antinomie.it*. She is currently researching the visual culture of the *veduta* in Venice in relation to geographic knowledge and media technologies.