

# Act V: The Commedia dell Arte in Venice

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## VENICE

### A Collective History

Venice as a city remains in a state of contradiction, it is constantly maintained to appear as a living vibrant city; yet, it endures as a relic. This city is a product of a collective unconscious; the inhabitants collectively ignore the conditions of time in order to preserve its decay and historical significance. The modern advancements of the city are concealed within the layers of its history.

This stratification of layers consists of an amalgam of formal artifacts, collected or produced by many individuals. Each layer of history is supplanted atop one another, revealing the fragmentary nature of the city's construction. Therefore, I regard the city as spolia, where the trace object expresses or represents the difference between the city as a collective and as an individual.

## PHOTOGRAPHS

### Fragments

In an effort to convey the ephemeral nature of Venice, the use of photography allowed for a type of distillation, to capture the condition of transformation over time. A photograph is a whole, and within it there is a whole fragment, which represents a non-existent, non-finite, an artificial ruin. Here the photographs, thus reveal themselves as "perfect and precise," a document of a given moment in time. The fragment as a remnant or scrap of pure past always appears as half of itself and so denotes an absence.

This design project began as a study of how fragmentary elements are not incomplete works. Rather, the fragment allows for another mode of completion not unlike how our memory is incomplete, distorting time and place. Both the photograph and memory are transpositional in nature, altering orientation and specificity. Venice is a preserved monument that contains many details that go unnoticed. By framing fragments or residual spaces of the city, in such a way, that the whole or the body of the building is apparent, the mask like qualities of the facades are discovered.

The facades appear as masks, they are tacit in nature, implying a presence, yet they are not animate. They are not unlike theatrical masks, which reveal and conceal at the same moment, a presence with an absence. The building facades, seen as masks are a referent to their function, the state of the building, or to the inhabitant.

## MASKS

### Facades

The Venetian Theater masks that are on display and for sale throughout Venice, became the topic of research. The traditional

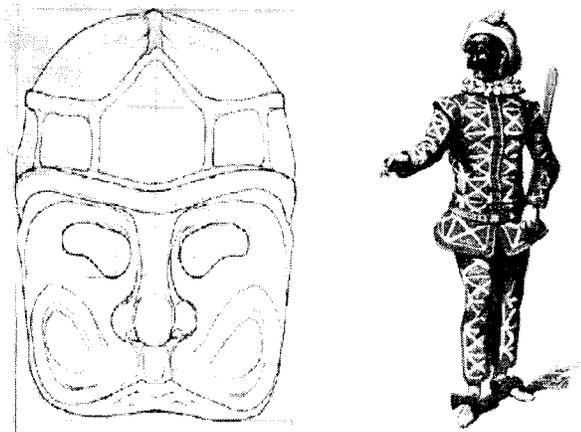


Fig. 1. (left) The mask of Arlecchino. Fig. 2. (right) The costume of Arlecchino.

theater mask belonged to the Commedia dell Arte, a roving troop of comic theater characters that originate from the thirteenth century. This particular set of masks served as a departure to explore a way to build in Venice. The Commedia dell Arte is comprised loosely of eighteen characters. Each actor donned a particular mask, which demonstrates the countenance or the particular facial features of the comic character. These masks defined the characters actions and personas. With the actor's face hidden, the actor is forced to project his character's emotions with his body.

Masks were selected due to their inherent fragmentary quality; the mask is incomplete unless it is veiling another's body. The mask is employed to code all attributes of society. Therefore the mask ostensibly tends to fix, or codify a persona. The mask makes it difficult to convey emotions; the mask is always prejudicial to the actions of the performer, either in joy or sorrow. Latent within the mask, there are limitations, which constitutes a powerful effect, for the actor's gestures must speak. Though the characters face never changes, his body speaks differently every moment, in every act.

## CHARACTERS

### Constructed Individuals

The city streets and building facades were employed directly as a backdrop for the commedia's performances. The characters played directly to the audience, moving through the city. The episodes or acts usually involved three interactive sets of stock characters. Each stereotyped character had a defined set of attributes, their stature,

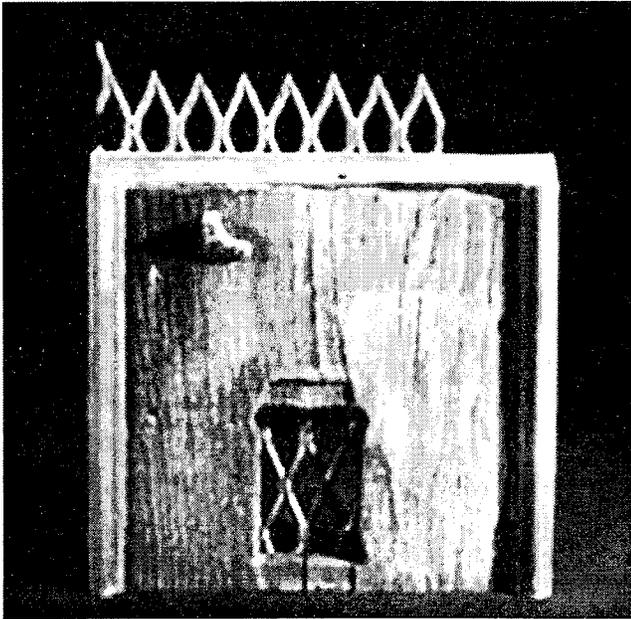


Fig. 3. Texture Map - Arlecchino.

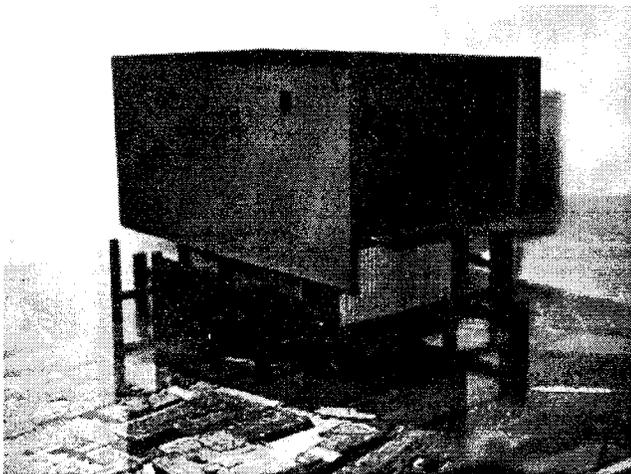


Fig. 4. Arlecchino at Ca d'Oro, Venezia..

dress, and accoutrements were collected from many different cultures. The characters represented various levels of social and economic stratification within society.

The figures are a culmination of values, morals, and experiences, combined to formulate a new entity. The construction of the characters was a way of recording historically significant individuals, taken out of a specific context made to fit into a more general or aspecific group. They are a symbol of the never changing cycle of time, yet they are similarly a never-ending regeneration of known types or styles.

The *Commedia dell'Arte* derives its origin from the open markets and narrow streets of Venice and the Veneto region. Being a construction of the Venetian collective memory, it is my desire that these characters be reconfigured or re-deposited into the city. Since, there was no specific pattern or procession that guided the *Commedia*'s performance, I began to investigate how and where to realize the characters location. The Vaporetto stations along the Grande Canale are experienced in the day to day life of Venetians and tourist alike. The re-appropriated stations assume the formal characteristic of a *Commedia dell'Arte* character. Therefore, the selection of the ACT V, (water taxi system) provides a place for each character to reside, while addressing a procession through the city.

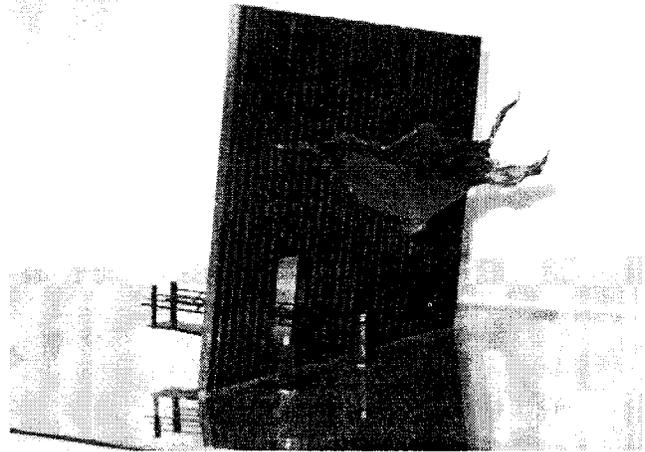


Fig. 5. Pantalone at Rialto, Venezia.

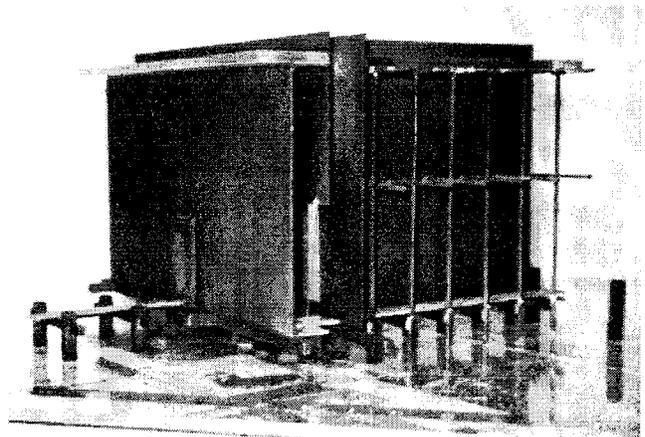


Fig. 6. Brighella at Ferrovia, Venezia.

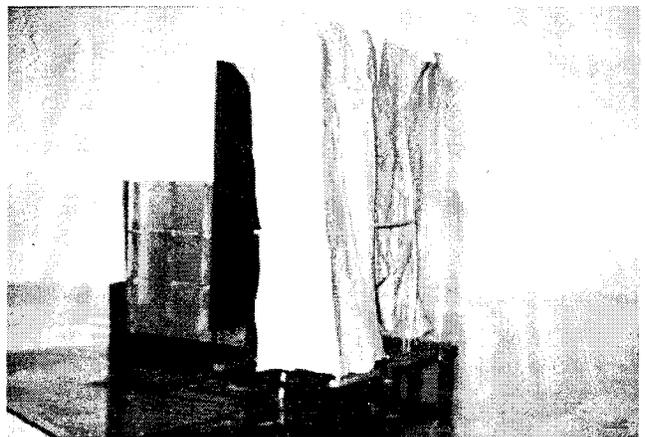


Fig. 7. Il Dottore at Sant' Angelo, Venezia.

## VAPORETTO STATIONS

### Thresholds in Procession

The *Commedia dell'Arte* is created like the city of Venice, it is not about the original, but the fact that the character resides over time, the time of each man is limited; the future therefore must be the present.<sup>1</sup> The ACT V has been employed as a register for the realization of the characters. By addressing the procession through

the city, each character can be visited separately or experienced in sequence while floating on the canal. Fixed, but not finite, always recognizable, it is not the function of the Vaporetto station that is being altered; it is the experience or the expression of form that is being manipulated.

A threshold, is a liminal moment of activation. The Vaporetto station provides this threshold; for temporary occupancy and constant connection, they provide a network of interstitial spaces. Each station is individually addressed to accommodate the stature and qualities of the given character. While materiality is limited to a set palette, in order to maintain a cohesive or homogeneous

grouping. The reprogramming of the stations has transformed the stations from a non-place (the stations presently exist as an anonymous backdrop) to an activated event. It is my intention that the construction of the characters will become a part of the city's infrastructure, regardless of who built them. For they exist separate from their creators.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press 1997).