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SupaVenezia From SupaStore: Between Art, Commerce, and Spatial Dynamics

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Abstract

This exhibition review reflects on the spatial and curatorial concepts, interior spatial qualities, and precedent design processes of SupaVenezia, which was held at the A plus A Gallery in Venice from 31 August to 25 September 2022. It examines the design of the display system at the exhibition while addressing issues pertaining to domestic, participatory, and white-cube settings. The review explores the intersection of art, commerce, spatial, and displays design dynamics in relation to the manifestation of the SupaStore's initial curatorial philosophy. Additionally, it reflects on the variety of spatial experiences provided and the manner in which a small-scale local gallery behaves and survives in the shadows of a monumental event—the 59th International Art Exhibition of Biennale Arte 2022, curated by Cecilia Alemani and produced by La Biennale di Venezia 2022—while drawing comparative reflections with similar scenarios such as Berlin Biennale and Documenta in Kassel.

Keywords: exhibition review, interior, domestic, white cube, biennalisation

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Introduction

The convergence of art and commerce takes centre stage in *SupaVenezia*, an intriguing exhibition held at the A plus A Gallery in Venice in September 2022. This exhibition review embarks on comprehensive reflections through the spatial and curatorial intricacies, delving into the precedent design processes and interior spatial qualities that defined this event. Curated by Sarah Staton in collaboration with students from the School for Curatorial Studies Venice, *SupaVenezia* redefines art exhibitions as event-based showcases. The show confronts the very essence of consumer culture, challenging the neo-capitalist mechanisms prevalent in today's art market landscape. Through the lens of consumer culture, this exhibition unravels the intricate links between commerce and marketing within Venice.

The second half of this article focuses on an analysis scrutinising the spatial construct of *SupaVenezia*, examining its transformation of the A plus A Gallery into a multifaceted landscape—a canvas where the lines between art and everyday objects blur. The spatial manipulation, akin to a domestic interior with intimate corners and clusters, mirrors the duality of aura and atmosphere as defined by Benjamin (1935/1969) and Böhme (1993), echoing the distinctive presence and immersive environment cultivated within the exhibition's space.

Moreover, *SupaVenezia* embarks on questioning the system underpinning the mainstream art market. The exhibition intentionally blurs the boundaries between art and commercial artefacts, sparking intentional confusion. As this exploration unfolds, the article navigates the nuances of the irregular fluid grid employed in *SupaVenezia*'s display strategy, drawing parallels to the flea market organizational grid. The seamless integration of architectural principles with exhibition design becomes apparent, inviting visitors into an organic structure that evolves and adapts, much like the transient nature of a street flea market.

In its last part, this article contextualises the exhibition against the grand backdrop of the 59th International Art Exhibition *Biennale Arte 2022*. It contrasts the colossal scale of the Biennale with the intimate, human-scale experience offered by *SupaVenezia*, shedding light on how small-scale galleries navigate and thrive within the shadows of monumental art events.

In conversations with the artist-curator Sarah Staton and Aurora Fonda (personal communication, April 24, 2022), the curator-founder of A plus A Gallery, the article unveils the strategies employed by local

galleries during the biennale, providing valuable insights into their survival and adaptation amidst larger-than-life art events. Through intimate insights, this article endeavours to uncover the intricate layers of *SupaVenezia*, unravelling the dialogue between art and spatial experiences within the eclectic streets of Venice.

SupaVenezia and SupaStore

SupaVenezia is an exhibition curated by Sarah Staton in collaboration with students of the School for Curatorial Studies Venice. The show is a recent edition of the SupaStore Project, which is an itinerant curatorial project and displays event-based artwork. The exhibition concept highlights and navigates the practice of shopping as a social, political, and economic activity, and aims to question the neocapitalist mechanisms of today's art market (School for Curatorial Studies Venice, n.d.).

Sarah Staton is a London-based artist and senior tutor at the Royal College of Art. *SupaStore* is one of her enduring projects that includes several editions. *SupaStore* invites audiences to rethink exclusivity and authenticity from the lens of consumer culture. Staton established the project in 1993, with its first edition, *SupaStore93*, located at Charing Cross Road in London. The most recent edition of Supastore is *SupaVenezia*, it aims at providing a new analytical tools to study an ancient city through the mechanisms of commerce and marketing. *SupaStore* is designed to perform as an itinerant and accessible shop-show-exhibition displaying works by contemporary artists (A plus A, 2022).

SupaVenezia was held from 31 August to 25 September 2022 at the A plus A Gallery run by Aurora Fonda and Sandro Pignotti. The exhibition was part of The Italian Glass Week of 2022, which was run in parallel with the Biennale Arte 2022. SupaVenezia was conceived by students in schools' international summer programs run by Fonda and Pignotti: Bates Assilbekova (Kazakhstan), Amelie Bès (Switzerland), Taylor Carruthers (Canada), Thais Domingues (Brazil), Lauren Fuller (United States), Lianna Gonzalez (United States), Ayman Kassem (Lebanon), JoJo Lee (South Korea), Laura Matterazzo (Italy), Sharon Jane Mee (Australia), Lucrezia Nardi (Italy), Valeriia Pliekhotko (Ukraine), Ghazala Raees (Pakistan), Natasha Roberts (United States), Patricio Tejedo (Mexico), and Jeffrey Wang (Taiwan).

Exhibition Statement: City Brand and a Point of Sale

This study argues that *SupaVenezia*'s concept emphasises the critique of cities as brands and the dynamics of commoditising experiences,

art, and identities through the works of a diverse range of established and emerging artists displayed in an everyday shop setting.

SupaVenezia was conceived using the lens of consumer culture to highlight new perspectives for analyzing a city. ... the show underlines the patterns of production and consumption that sustain this brand ... In the age of globalization and hyper-capitalism, each city can also be regarded as a brand ... Venice is the perfect example for illustrating how the "brand city" operates. The rich "idea" of Venice and its living spirit is used as a raw material for commodification and marketing for global consumption. (Raees, 2022, p. 6)

The curatorial theme questions the system of the mainstream art market, purchasability, and commercialisation, referring to Duchamp's booth at the 1935 annual inventors fair on the Concours Lepine in Paris, where his selling of art as entertainment was seen as one of the first performances to critique the art market (Mee, 2022). Marcel Duchamp had set up a booth displaying and offering for sale his disc set of six Rotoreliefs discs that offer optical entertainment when spun on a record player turntable at a booth that sells art as a playtoy, questioning not only what constitutes a work of art, but also what constitutes the art market. In resonance with Duchamp's booth's statement, *SupaVenezia* creates intentional confusion among audiences as to whether the objects displayed for sale are works of art or ordinary commercial artefacts.

A Domestic Everyday Interior

The spatial conception of SupaVenezia approached a blank white cube within the historical interior space. However, the white cube here does not act as a blank abstract metaphysical space that bleaches out the past (O'Doherty, 1999). The white cubisation that occurred at A plus A contrastingly emphasises the existing historical features and co-exists with them. The resulting semi-white cube hosting SupaVenezia performs as an everyday interior, an everyday local Venetian shop with a feeling of familiarity in an intimate domestic interior. The gallery during SupaVenezia acts as an everyday market space. The display setting recalls the practice of everyday self-shelving storage. In those regards, we reinterpret the reflections on everyday interiority by Atmodiwirjo and Yatmo (2018) and Filippides (2019), in which such everyday space becomes the manifestation of what inhabitants perceive, experience, and feel. Interiority is thus defined by occupation and becomes the reflection of the identity, subjective experience, and personal responses of the inhabitants (Atmodiwirjo

& Yatmo, 2018). Meanwhile, Filippides (2019) sees the contents of everyday self-storage reflect the negotiation between the inner life of the individual and the external demands surrounding them that reflect different motives: "excessive accumulation, intergenerational transference, and emotional deferral" (p. 7).

In the case of *SupaVenezia*, the inhabitants are temporary, including the absent artists, who are present through their exhibited artworks, and the visitors. At the same time, the display of the art objects on simple shelves and tables recalls the practice of personal everyday storage, where the exhibited objects already embody identities and narratives. Furthermore, in such a display setting, one intimately experiences the aura of each displayed artwork. However, microspatial qualities could also be experienced in each zone, such as corners or clusters of exhibits or display units (Figure 1). The term *aura* refers to object scale based on Walter Benjamin's definition as the unique presence, authenticity, and aura of authority that an original work of art possesses. The aura is connected to the artwork's singular existence, history, and place in time (Benjamin, 1935/1969).

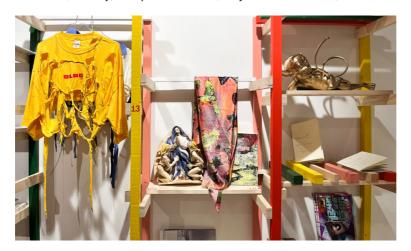


Figure 1 Micro spatial quality is created through the cluster of exhibits¹ (Photograph by A plus A, @AplusA 2022)

Atmosphere/ambience refers to the spatial scale based on Böhme's (1993) definition. Furthermore, the atmosphere is a holistic and immersive environment that encompasses physical, emotional, and aesthetic dimensions. The atmosphere is not merely a physical or measurable entity but involves an experiential and subjective aspect

¹ From left to right: *Top Universal* by Zuza Golinska (2019 and 2020), a blend of cotton and other materials from secondhand clothing; *Madonna* by Ioana Maria Sisea (2022), stoneware, glaze, and lustre; *Spekyng Rybawdy* by Melanie Jackson (2022), textile; *A Young Saint* by Laura O'Neill (2021), painted resin.

that influences human perception and experience within a space (Böhme, 1993). The atmosphere at *SupaVenezia* gave the space a store or flea market ambience, thus fulfilling and translating the philosophy of *SupaStore*, which comprises displaying art as consumer goods accessible to everyone. Furthermore, a series of atmospheres and auras were staged before each display, ranging from a 'chic' minimalist white cube to a warmer and more domestic space surrounded by welcoming everyday interiors with no pretentious intellectual narratives intended (Figure 2). The setting intentionally demystifies the concept of artwork and minimises its glorious aura, reflecting the *SupaStore* philosophy.

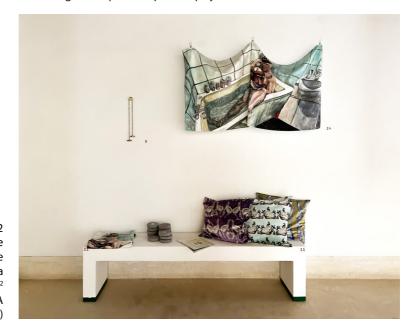


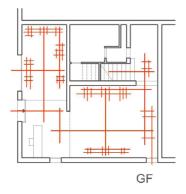
Figure 2 The accessible artworks are displayed in a shop-like setting² (Photograph by A plus A, @AplusA 2022)

Fluid Irregular Grid and the Market

Accessibility is a key characteristic of *SupaStore* exhibitions that apply and explore the idea of a market and store in the display strategy. A combination of openness and apparent randomness, as found in pop-up flea markets, was observed. It used a fluid irregular grid as an underlying spatial and event principle. The irregularity of the organising layout grid allows changes, subtractions, and additions, as in street flea markets. At *SupaVenezia*, the zoning and distribution of the works may have indicated a casual domestic approach, but

² Above right: *A Drowned World* by Phillipa Horan (2021), printed on a towel; Below middle: *Mini Bastards* by Mila Morelli (2022), wood and silicon; Below right: *Kazakh Funny Games Series* by Saule Dyussenbina (2017), printed on velour pillowcases.

closer observation revealed the presence of an implicit organisational system comprising a virtual grid of lines and axes structuring the dialogue among the exhibits and space (Figure 3).



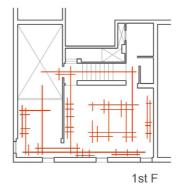


Figure 3
The clustering
and the irregular
alignments axis
and organisational
grid for the cluster
of exhibits in
SupaVenezia at A plus
A Gallery (Image
by author)



Figure 4
The cluster of exhibits manifests itself as a micro shop-display spatial setting with accessible goods³ (Photograph by A plus A, @AplusA 2022)

The vertical and horizontal circulation of visitors also protected the experience from the historical alleys outside with the inclusion of a large window. The grid could be investigated both vertically and horizontally within the gallery space. It reflected a similar grid in Mies Van der Rohe's Barcelona pavilion, where a grid shaped the interior landscape—a fluid openness, loose zoning, and circulation blurred the boundaries between the exterior and interior (Figure

³ Right: *Troia* by Julia Frank (2022), wood, textile, and metal; Front wall: *Champagne Violence* by Ioana Maria Sisea (2021), water colour on acid-free paper; Left: *Righe turchese e lattimo, rubino con orecchiette Verdi, giallo a quadretti ambra* [Turquoise stripes and the moment, ruby with green ears, yellow with amber checks] by Francesca Anfossi (2022), blown glass using traditional Murano techniques; Right corner: *Stocktaking Hands* by Klaus Weber (2022), bronze.

4). However, in *SupaVenezia* at A plus A, the organising grid was an organic structure that could change the direction, scale, and dimensions of its modules and units. This organising grid was also evidenced in the design of the display system in a more explicit and literal manner (Figure 5).





Furthermore, the large window opening to the exterior provided a view of the circulation route for pedestrians and was semi-enclosed by the building hosting the A plus A gallery. It blurred the perceptual boundaries between the interior and exterior, especially during an event or opening where the flow of visitors rapidly expanded between the street and the interior of the exhibition.

From Aura to Atmosphere, From Goods to Experience

The market experience is understood as holistic and atmospherically conceived in the *SupaVenezia*. This results from dialogue among exhibits, displays, and spaces. The aura of each displayed object disappears within the larger spatial event in the gallery. Art here is de-glorified and demystified. However, one can still individualise and establish a dialogue with their chosen object. While detecting and appreciating its current aura, the viewer knows that, in the case of a purchase, the object will be displayed in a different setting with fewer auratic competitors (Figure 5 and Figure 6). Thus, within this market experience of the space, visitors can still encounter various

⁴ Left wall: Shaking the Heavens, Useless Wealth, Statue Obsession, Statue Obsession, Wolf in Deer Skin by Chinglish Wang and Liang Su (2008), fine art print; Left table: Il sentimento dell'acqua [The Feeling of Water] by Hetty Laycock (2021), clay; Right wall: Archive of Personal Desires Ill: Teresa by Giorgia Agnese Cereda (2019, ongoing), rapidograph on 90 gsm paper; Right table: Venice Trash Project by Cosima Montavoci (2022), trash collected from the streets of Venice; Front table: Swatch (diptych) by Nina Ćeranić (2020), oil on paper.

unique auras. The spatial experience is diversified through various dimensions, genres, and scales of the curated exhibited artworks and is the only experience in which the main spatial landmarks are display installations.



Figure 6
Different works
by various artists
exhibited on a display
conceived and built
by the students at the
School for Curatorial
Studies Venice and
Sarah Staton in
the SupaVenezia
(Photograph by A
plus A, @AplusA 2022)

Carlo Scarpa's Display Design, Venetian Colour Palette, and Rietveld's Interlocks

SupaVenezia's display employs an interlocking system within the wood-display shelving while adopting a Venetian colour palette from green (lagoon), old bricks, rosé glasses, and washed-out coral walls. The colour palette echoes the display works of Carlo Scarpa, the Italian architect and exhibition designer, and recalls his intervention at Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo and Museo di Civico Castelvecchio in Verona (1958–1974), where paintings and sculptures were removed from their historic frames and set against polished, coloured plaster panels and horizontal timber strips (Figure 5 and Figure 6).

Structurally, Carlo Scarpa's display comprises a simple rational system of vertical and horizontal elements that somehow contains elements drawn from two distant movements: Arte Povera and Italian rationalism. The creative act is born from humble materials and resources, resulting in a rational spatial conception and practical,

innovative display solution. The *SupaVenezia* display seemed to reinterpret those traditions but with a De Stijl aesthetic. The system of vertical and horizontal lines also recalled the *Red and Blue Chair* and its interlocking system created by Gerrit Rietveld.

A Monumental Biennale vs a Local Gallery

SupaVenezia exhibition occurred in parallel with Biennale Arte 2022, a monumental event with all its collateral events and pavilions spread across the city of Venice. It is explained below how SupaVenezia countered but also benefited from the events of the biennale.

The *Biennale Arte 2022* in Venice registered a record of 22,498 visitors (La Biennale di Venezia, 2023). Those invited included 213 artists from 58 countries. In addition to meetings and collateral events, there were over 1,500 artworks, 80 national participants, 27 nations in the historical pavilions located in the so-called Giardini area of the *Biennale Arte 2022*, 26 nations in the Arsenale, and 27 nations spread around the city of Venice as off-site pavilions. The event was held from 23 April to 27 November 2022. These numbers and figures indicate the large scale of this event.

By contrast, *SupaVenezia*, a locally made, human-scale event, was collectively conceived by the international students of the local summer school who reflected on the local context—the Italian reality and Venice, in particular—and contacted local artists or artists residing in Venice to participate. The display installations were designed, built, and painted by the students, which gives a participatory and human dimension to the creation of the *SupaVenezia*. This scenario offers a perspective for observing and analysing the micro- and macro-ecologies of art exhibitions and markets that exist around the growing phenomenon of the biennales. This provides a valuable opportunity to study how these small-scale galleries behave and survive in the shadows of monumental art biennales.

Architecturally, it is interesting to note the spatial and scale differences between these galleries and biennales. A plus A occupies a formerly residential house within the historical urban fabric of Venice, whereas the biennales occupy massive ex-industrial, large-scale spaces. Conversations were held with the artist Sarah Staton and Aurora Fonda, the curator-founder of A plus A Gallery, to discuss their thoughts and reflections on this topic (personal communication, April 24, 2022). They generally agreed that small-scale local galleries benefit from the presence of a big event such as the biennale in terms of exposure and number of visitors.

This is mostly valid in the case of Venice, where the art scenes and the number of galleries are small. However, that might not be the case elsewhere, for example, in Berlin during its biennale. The art scene in Berlin is highly active and the number of local galleries is so large that the existing local art scene is somehow stronger than the Berlin Biennale. Additionally, there are several interesting art events and art weeks all year in Berlin, which are equally important to the biennale. Fonda pointed out that on a single street in Berlin, you may find a number of galleries equal to all the galleries in Venice and that some organisations in Berlin coordinate with the galleries, and activate some non-profit spaces. In this regard, Fonda pointed out the case of Documenta in Kassel as a completely different scenario from the cases of Berlin and Venice, where the art scene of the local galleries is almost nonexistent, thus the discussion of examining the behaviour and the survival of local art galleries in the shadow of the monumental event is not applicable. A similar scenario exists in the United Arab Emirates during the Sharjah Art Biennial. In fact, in the Emirate of Sharjah, the local art scene is almost non-existent beyond the activities of the Sharjah Art Foundation space. However, in the nearby Emirate of Dubai, during the biennial period, local galleries take advantage of timing their openings and activities with the opening events of the Sharjah Art Biennial.

In Venice, during the *Biennale Arte*, the local galleries schedule their events, openings, and shows during the opening season of the biennale. The SupaVenezia is one such example. Another example in Venice is Rob Pruitt's Flea Market, an event curated by Tommaso Speretta and the School for Curatorial Studies Venice directed by Aurora Fonda and Sandro Pignotti. The show occurred during the press preview days of the Biennale Arte 2022, where the American artist Rob Pruitt showed his project Flea Market to Venice for the first time at A plus A Gallery (A plus A, 2015). It was organised in cooperation with the students of the 22nd Course in Curatorial Practices and Contemporary Arts. Pruitt invited the international and local art communities to engage in the lively space of the flea market, a vibrant open-air market, and a place where art and commerce mingle. The show's offerings ranged from artwork, design, books, performances, and even to food and drinks. It was an unusual bazaar for artists. The interesting aspect or aesthetic quality of Rob Pruitt's Flea Market is the dependency on the participation of audiences, buyers, and sellers alike, and the similarity to an unfolding event free of constraints.

Scheduling the events at the same time as the first opening period of the biennale is a crucial strategy used by the local galleries, as noted by Fonda, especially during the first five days that witness an incoming big flow of journalists, curators, artists, and the general public of art enthusiasts coming to Venice. Some local galleries time the opening of their exhibitions slightly before the opening of the biennale so that people already know that an event is coming. Therefore, it becomes useful for the galleries to stage an unusual event and spread rumours about it—the process, the atmosphere, and the energy. Attracting well-known curators' or artists' presences in Venice for the Biennale Arte is definitely a very crucial element.



Figure 7 The artworks echo the reflections on the relation between Biennale and the city of Venice beyond and post-biennale⁵ (Photograph by A plus A, @AplusA 2022)

The local gallery often offers contextually embedded events and performative and interactive experiences. Such events attract audiences seeking a different human-scale experience rather than a monumental mass-oriented biennale, which offers experiences that tend to be more passive. One can say that these are two separate worlds. Fonda noted that the entire Arsenale area seems like an independent island within Venice, far from the centre, which adds to its disconnection from the local context (personal communication, April 24, 2022). The last concluding works at *SupaVenezia* exhibited on the upper floor of the gallery, Filippo Rizzonelli's *Polittico—Pezzi di Biennale* [Pieces of Biennials] and Patricio Tejedo's *Sedimentos de Venecia* [Venice Sediments] (Figure 7) act as relevant reflection points on the matter of materiality, biennalisation, and context. Further, the biennale organisation has rarely tried to coordinate or organise

⁵ Left: *Polittico—Pezzi di Biennale* (Pieces of Biennials] by Filippo Rizzonelli (2011–2015), mixed media on Biennale's scrap; Right: *Sedimentos de Venecia* [Venice Sediments] by Patricio Tejedo (2022), mixed medium on paper.

an event with local galleries. Both Staton and Fonda noted that the *Biennale Arte 1999* curated by Harald Szeemann was an exception because, as the curator, he aimed to relate to the local context and investigate the Italian scene. He travelled throughout Italy and Venice to engage local artists and develop context-related conversations.

It was also noted that spatial experience matters for a selective audience. For some people, the experience of the Biennale Arte, especially within the Arsenale, is tiring and monotonous. Despite the variety of pavilions installed inside, the visitor experiences a monumental non-human-scale ex-industrial space, where the spatial quality is throughout homogeneous and the quantity of exhibits is overwhelming. However, the Giardini of the Biennale Arte offers a more interesting spatial experience owing to spatial-architectural diversity and the indoor-outdoor breaks, where each pavilion is an independent building with a different architectural style. The same can be said of the national pavilions and off-site pavilions which are spread across the city, for example, in school courtyards, churches, and ex-hospitals. In particular, these pavilions offer a special experience in which exhibitions act as site-specific installations. By contrast, the local galleries spread across the historical urban fabric of Venice offer a completely different experience, as they occupy mostly exdomestic or ex-retail spaces, human in scale, partially white-cubed, within a domestic architectural language nested in the city.

Conclusion: Redefining Art and Local Galleries in the Shadow of Monumental Events

SupaVenezia offered a profound reflection on the intersection of art, commerce, and spatial experiences within the alluring cityscape of Venice. This retrospective exploration unveils the intricate layers of this event, encapsulating the essence of SupaStore's philosophy that challenges the conventional paradigms of the art market. SupaVenezia's compelling narrative goes beyond mere display; it becomes a commentary on cities as brands, urging us to contemplate the commodification of experiences, art, and identities.

Spatially, *SupaVenezia* cleverly manipulated the A plus A Gallery into an intimate domestic setting, blurring the boundaries between art and everyday objects. This deliberate demystification of artworks subverted the conventional aura of art, fostering an environment that transcended the pristine white cube, and embraced the warmth of a welcoming and accessible interactive market-like atmosphere. The fluid, irregular organisational grid that structured the exhibition's layout and display mirrored the dynamism of an open, inviting, and interactive space.

The existence of *SupaVenezia* at A plus A alongside the *Biennale Arte 2022* illuminates the dichotomy between the grandiose scale of global events and the intimate, human-scale experiences offered by local galleries. It unveils the survival strategies of small-scale galleries in the shadows of such colossal spectacles, highlighting their role as purveyors of contextually embedded events and interactive experiences, underscoring the symbiotic relationship between local galleries and major art events. While benefiting from the exposure generated by these monumental events, local galleries like A plus A thrive by offering audiences a distinct and participatory experience—counterbalancing the passive engagement often found in grand-scale biennales.

According to Patel (2020), biennalisation is often associated with standardisation and homogenisation, where every event, is just one of many, and more of the same. Patel et al. (2018) ask how biennial-making and practices which require great organisation, finance, and partnerships resist the growing standardisation and homogenisation in the field. *SupaVenezia* serves as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of local galleries, painting a portrait of a parallel art world—an intimate, human-centric landscape nestled within the grandeur of global homogenizing art events. This exploration offers a compelling insight into the nuanced dynamics between art and spatial experiences, urging us to reimagine the role and significance of local galleries in the ever-evolving art ecosystem.

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