European Memory in Populism

Representations of Self and Other

Edited by Chiara De Cesari and Ayhan Kaya

Chapter 6

Textures of urban fears

The affective geopolitics of the 'oriental rug'

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Introduction: missing mosques

> During my preparation for the exhibition in Sicily, I noticed that, despite the large Muslim community, not a single classical mosque had been erected. . . . The objective of the work *Missing Architecture* is to throw light on this fact, and insert in the public space the elements which symbolically represent the missing place of worship for Muslims.
>
> (Igor Grubic, 2018, personal communication)

> THE MOSQUE will serve as a place of activity for the Venice Muslim Community and will offer an ongoing schedule of educational and cultural programs available to the general public [and will include] the physical attributes of Muslim worship – the qibla wall, the mihrab, the minbar, and the large prayer carpet oriented in direction of Mecca – juxtaposed with the existing Catholic architecture of the Church of Santa Maria della Misericordia *in a visual analog*.
>
> (Icelandic Arts Council [IAC] Press Release, 2015)

The two previous citations refer to two artistic exhibitions (or 'interventions', as both artists referred to them): in Modica, Sicily, in 2012 and in Venice in 2015, attempting to materially 'make space' for Muslim worship in the two Italian cities. Given the lack of existing formal sites of worship, the artists Christoph Büchel and Igor Grubic used select 'physical attributes of Muslim worship' (IAC, 2015), including oriental 'prayer' carpets, in order to create (virtual) sites of prayer and, especially, to draw public attention to their absence.

Grubic's installation was part of an arts festival organized by the city of Modica (in the province of Ragusa, Sicily) in August 2012, entitled *I Vespri. Civic Forum in Five Acts*. Drawing inspiration from Verdi's nineteenth-century drama *I Vespri Siciliani* (*The Sicilian Vespers*), based on the historical events of the Sicilians' revolt against French domination in 1282, the exhibition strove to 'create a public discussion . . . with people coming from across the Mediterranean with the aim of putting on stage an opera between past and present, local and global' (Blogazine, 2012).

Büchel's exhibition, on the other hand, was commissioned by the Icelandic Art Council as its contribution to the 56th Venice Biennale of Contemporary Art, taking place from May to November 2015. This biennale was hailed by the international media as 'the most political yet' even before it opened – both because of the particular mix of exhibitions featured in the national pavilions but also because its central exhibition, under the heading of *All the World's Futures*, made the iniquities of the contemporary global condition its central theme (Biennale di Venezia, 2015). Büchel's THE MOSQUE (the official name of the exhibition in capital letters with the subtitle 'The First Mosque in the Historic City of Venice'), proposed to offer just such a 'counter-historical' project: it lasted, however, only two weeks before being shut down by the local authorities for 'public health' reasons.

We will discuss in detail the two exhibitions and their vicissitudes in the paragraphs to come, focusing on the emotional public reactions they both evoked, albeit to different degrees. Needless to say (and as other chapters in this volume highlight), such reactions have become far from isolated incidents in contemporary Europe. Indeed, as Nilüfer Göle has argued in a number of her recent works (2013, 2015), they reflect many other similar self-styled 'citizens' revolts' against a purported 'Islamization' of European cities, even though *Missing Architecture* and THE MOSQUE were 'simply' art installations, material and visual analogues of (to be) Muslim spaces. Yet this is precisely why the popular reactions they provoked are perhaps even more revealing of the ways in which a diffused fear of anything indicating Muslim presence has become a political obsession in today's Europe, provoking what anthropologist Michael Fischer (writing about the Danish Muhammad cartoon controversy a few years back) termed 'emotional excess' (2009: 27; see also the discussion in Göle, 2009). In our case, that emotional excess engages an everyday, private object – the oriental carpet – deliberately brought out into the public realm by the two exhibitions, becoming something entirely different in the process. The carpet as common domestic object once 'aired' in the public spaces of the two cities is, literally, made other: it becomes the signifier of a Muslim prayer space and, as such, arguably 'out of place' in the contemporary urban landscape of the two Italian cities. It provokes precisely the sort of affective reactions described by the editors in the introduction to this volume, drawing on the work of Berlant (2011 and others: a nostalgic desire to reconstitute a culturally pure European space that never was.

Indeed, such attempts at material purification are particularly striking in the two locations chosen for the installations: Venice and Sicily, which both have long histories in the mediation of material and symbolic exchange between Europe and 'the Orient', both key sites for the arrival of 'oriental objects' to Europe from the fifteenth century onward. What is more, the urban fabric of both Venice and Modica is today still significantly marked by Islamic architectural styles and influences. It is this legacy that also renders the public reactions to the two exhibitions all the more telling of a wider politics of resentment against 'anything Muslim': even in places where that 'anything' is very much part of the urban built environment and historical memory.

As numerous authors have noted, the politics of resentment[1] in contemporary Europe frames its claims around struggles for limited resources: economic, political, but also identitary and mnemonic (see, among others, Wodak et al., 2013; Wodak, 2015; Muller, 2016). As Cramer (2016: 9) argues, 'A politics of resentment arises from the way social identities, the emotion of resentment, and economic insecurity interact'. Indeed, Cramer's analysis notes how struggles to define and delimit social identities provide an (albeit partial and temporary) attempt at reclaiming space – figurative, as well as material. The two instances discussed here are suggestive of that dynamic. In an Italian political context marked by growing economic precarity, if not impoverishment, of a significant proportion of the population,[2] exclusionary identity politics has taken centre stage (see Mauro, 2018, and also other chapters in this volume).

It is striking that the once separatist Northern League (Lega Nord) party dropped the 'North' from its name (and largely from its electoral programme) for the 2018 elections in order to also appeal to disaffected southern voters: a strategy that has proved highly successful, with Lega politicians ably combining economic as well as identitary (if not directly racist) arguments to invoke the imaginary of an Italy 'under siege' both from those determined to impoverish it (the EU and international capital) and those conspiring to destroy its national identity (migrant hordes and 'multicultural do-gooders') (for a longer genealogy of these political imaginations, see Antonsich, 2016. Such imaginaries allowed the Lega to capture votes even in regions such as Sicily, previously the uncontested bastion of first Christian Democratic and subsequently (Silvio Berlusconi's) Forza Italia parties. Although it was the Lega's subsequent coalition partner, the anti-establishment *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (Five Star Movement, M5S), that captured the majority of the vote of the Italian South (including every single electoral district in Sicily), the appeal of the Lega's virulent anti-immigrant rhetoric in the southern regions reflected a profound shift in Italian politics (see Turco, 2018). The vote in Venice itself also reflected this momentous shift: while the Veneto region had long been the pre-eminent space of Lega support (for a history of the Lega in the Veneto, see Bialasiewicz, 2006), the city had always been an outlier, voting consistently for centre-left parties. For the first time in 2018, Luigi Brugnaro, a formally 'independent' but Lega-affiliated candidate, was elected as mayor.

Resentment, made material

How can we relate these wider shifts in Italian politics to the localized reactions forming the focus of our discussion? We will argue that it is precisely by interrogating such 'excessive' emotional reactions (Fischer, 2009) that we can perhaps begin to interpret how wider geopolitical fears touch down in specific places, how they are made sense of, and how they are translated into objects and bodies 'to be feared' – and whose presence is resented as 'out of place'.

Specific material objects, just like specific bodies, are central to understanding the politics of resentment, as recent work in cultural and political geography

on 'affective geopolitics' has emphasized.[3] As Gillian Rose and Divya Tolia-Kelly note, the guiding aim of such work has been to better ground accounts of cultural and political transformations within situated analyses of both 'the bodies [as well as] the material infrastructures of societies' politics, inequalities and ideologies' (2012: 2). Especially pertinent to us is the stress placed by this literature on 'the (geo)politics of embodied, material encounter and engagement' (2012: 3): that is, the (geo)politics that emerges, that is (co)constituted by contact with things and bodies and everyday material landscapes.

As Anderson and Wylie (2009: 320) argue, 'things' matter because they 'act as a lure for feeling, for feeling that "something matters"'. Feelings 'stick' to things as they stick to bodies; or, better yet, they are 'made to stick', as Sara Ahmed (2000, 2004/2014) has argued in her work for almost two decades now. Describing the 'affective economies' that determine to what and to whom certain feelings 'stick' (to which things, to which bodies), Ahmed compellingly delineates how 'emotions accumulate over time, as a form of affective value' (2014: 11). What is particularly important, she argues (speaking directly to the concern of the present volume with memory politics), is that things and bodies acquire particular affective value precisely only

> by an erasure of these histories, as histories of production and labour. But whilst Marx suggests that emotions are erased by the value of things (the suffering of the worker's body is not visible in commodity form), I focus on how emotions are produced. [So] it is not so much emotions that are erased, as if they were already there, but the process of production or the 'making' of emotions. In other words, 'feelings' become 'fetishes', qualities that seem to reside in objects, only through an erasure of the history of their production and circulation.
>
> (Ahmed, 2014: 11)

A particular body, a particular object, a particular landscape thus becomes 'inherently' fearful or resented as being 'out of place' for the 'work of emotions involves the sticking of signs to bodies and objects' (Ahmed, 2014: 13) while masking both the longer histories and the 'labour' of making such emotions 'stick'. What is occluded, in other words, is *the process of dis-placement, the process of making the (object or body) 'other', 'foreign'* – but also *the process of its re-placement into a new, different set of imaginaries* (in our case, the carpet now signified as 'other' or 'Muslim').

Political geographers have extended Ahmed's work on 'affective economies' further by looking also at the 'generative powers' of objects themselves: whether they be bodies, things, or physical landscapes. As Vicky Squire (2015) argues, it is by looking at the mutual enactment or 'co-constitution' of subjects, objects, and environments that we can best discern the workings of such affective economies in shaping the contemporary (geo)politics of fear. Squire returns to the work of Karen Barad (2003, 2007) and in particular her notion of 'agential realism' that

rejects the assumption that bodies and things are already-existing entities, and instead looks at their production through processes of materialization and 'thingification'. [Barad introduces] the neologism of 'intra-action' in terms that reconfigure the concept of interaction, and can be understood as a play of forces that emerge through the relations between different elements. Barad discusses these elements in terms of both discursive processes and material phenomena, suggesting that the relationship between these various elements produce particular material-discursive configurations of the world.

(Squire, 2015: 150, citing Barad, 2003: 812–814)

It is with the Baradian notion of 'material-discursive intra-action' that we would like to approach the analysis of the two exhibitions described in this chapter, for it allows us to draw attention to the longer-standing 'affective economies' that have contributed to the contemporary re-signification of the oriental carpet, to the 'othering' of carpets as (necessarily) 'Islamic' – and thus 'alien' – objects in European urban spaces.

The (forgotten) histories of the oriental carpet

In many ways [oriental carpets] represent the epitome of Western concern with alien things.

(Spooner, 1986: 195)

As Leonard Helfgott writes in the opening lines of his social history of carpets, *The Ties That Bind* (1994: 1), oriental carpets have always 'functioned historically as both reality and metaphor' and, in particular, as both metaphor and embodiment of elsewhere(s). The oriental carpet or rug[4] has long occupied a prominent place in Europe's and Europeans' imaginations of the 'Orient' and oriental 'others' and otherness. Yet as Rosamond Mack (2001) and countless others have argued, carpets were not just imagined objects: they were key commodities in the trade of luxury goods and, from the 1500s on, an everyday presence in the palaces and stately homes of Europeans. During the reign of the Venetian Republic, large oriental carpets were prominently displayed in public for special occasions, including both (Catholic) religious celebrations but also to commemorate military successes, such as the victory over the Ottomans (Mack, 2001: 77–78).

From the fifteenth century onward, hand-knotted carpets from the Islamic world became much-coveted furnishings in aristocratic homes and palaces, as well as religious residences. They were markers of status, opulence, and power and, as Jardine and Brotton (2003) suggest, one of the first 'globalized' objects. During the Renaissance, carpet trade greatly increased with the growing Mediterranean commercial exchange, and oriental rugs became a common presence in Italian and subsequently Northern European Renaissance paintings,

especially after the formation of the Dutch East India Company in 1602 as the commerce of rugs passed almost completely to Northern Europe (Mills, 1983: 22). Recent scholarship in Renaissance studies on the social history of domestic objects notes how carpets were crucial signifiers of wealth, social status, and identity and were thus purposefully incorporated into the paintings that the Italian elite of the day commissioned, highlighting the culturally and historically specific connotations of this valuable commodity. Since the days when the German art historian, curator, and museum director Wilhelm von Bode first assigned to major design types of early carpets the names of certain European painters in whose works depictions of such carpets appeared (among others, Lotto, Holbein, Memling, and Crivelli) (Denny, 2009: 239), the oriental carpet became an integral part of European material culture.

The role played by carpets within European paintings of the period is somewhat marginal in the art historical literature because they play an odd role in these pictures. Iconography allows for the identification of depicted characters as Christian saints or pagan figures, while ornamental interiors or landscapes can be interpreted in much more straightforward, literal fashion. The depiction of carpets, however, falls between these two categories, and although they originally may have carried symbolic meanings, carpets become purely decorative when represented within such paintings. 'There is little evidence about how pre-modern Europeans understood Islamic carpets', as David Carrier writes (2005: 2). A telling example is the account given by Denny (2002: 24–25) of the 1478 visit of the Venetian envoy Gisafat Barbaro to Uzun Hasan, the ruler of Tabriz: Barbaro is reputed to have commented that the ground was covered with 'the most beautiful carpets', but fails to provide any description of them. To the fifteenth-century European eye, carpets were simply objects of beauty, to be coveted as material, but also representational, 'capital'. In her path-breaking work Rosamond Mack (2001: 75–76) describes, indeed, how a single Anatolian (Ushak) carpet design was reproduced in over a hundred Renaissance paintings between the early sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries (see also Nabavi Nejad, 2012).

The European re-signification of the oriental carpet through courtly painting speaks precisely to the sort of material–discursive intra-action described by Barad: a reclaiming and renaming through painting that turned the carpets into something else. Indeed, just as Ushak carpets hailing from Western Anatolia became popularly known as 'Lotto carpets', other carpets, also of Anatolian origin but with different motifs, came to be known with the name of another sixteenth-century European painter, Hans Holbein the Younger (although similar carpets also featured prominently in several famous works of the Italian school of the fifteenth century, including work by Domenico Ghirlandaio and Piero della Francesca; for a fuller discussion, see Boralevi, 1999).

From the end of the fifteenth and especially in the sixteenth century, carpets were represented often in portraits of important members of the Republic of Venice, highlighting the prominence of rugs as a luxury good in the trade of

which Venice specialized and a luxury object demarcating wealth, power, and trade connections among the most prominent governors of the city. The signoria of the city thus purchased carpets in significant numbers, with the largest examples used during important public events (as was already noted), including both religious processions and political gatherings of the governors of the city (Spallanzani, 2007: 92). Small Anatolian carpets called *sajjada* ('for prostration') or *ceyrek* ('a quarter of the measure' or 'prayer rug') were used to decorate windows and balconies on the occasion of official ceremonies in Piazza San Marco (Denny, 2007: 188). As David Young Kim notes, carpets allowed 'a façade [to] participate in the ritual life of the city', with 'hanging textiles transforming the architectonic cityscape into a flexible and malleable civic space' (Kim, 2016: 182).

In the process of making-carpets-also-European, the question of their 'Islamic' association was not considered relevant: or, better yet, was not seen as any impediment to their purchase, display, and enjoyment. Indeed, 'in addition to decorating the interior (and, occasionally, the exterior) of patrician homes, carpets also furnished religious and confraternal spaces [such] as the Scuola Grande di San Rocco' (Kim, 2016: 183). Mack (2001: 5) speculates that perhaps it was the absence of any religious icons in their decoration due to the Islamic prohibition of idolatry, along with a shared Byzantine artistic heritage, that could be one reason for the unproblematic popularity of these Oriental objects in Europe. So while carpets were certainly associated with the 'Orient', their association with religiosity/religious symbolism, and especially directly with Islam, was not at all evident (see also Nabavi Nejad, 2012). As Mills, among others, has argued (1983: 16), even 're-entrant' carpets, also known as 'keyhole' or 'Bellini' carpets, were not seen by their Venetian (or other) collectors as in any way 'religious'. We note this aspect in particular since the carpets used in both focused exhibitions provoked differing levels of controversy precisely as 'prayer carpets'. But as Mack (2001: 84) notes, 're-entrant' carpets became commonly referred to as 'prayer carpets' largely because

> the directional design of these and later related carpets and their standard portable size became associated with the Muslim ritual of praying five times a day facing Mecca. . . . The characteristic niche is believed to symbolize both a doorway to paradise and the mihrab, the mosque niche orienting prayer toward Mecca, and the lamp commonly suspended in the niche refers to a verse in the Quran likening Allah to a lamp in a niche. The keyhole at the bottom of the niche has been interpreted variously as the basin for ablutions before prayer, a niche-within-a-niche, or a mountain providing elevated ground for prayer.

'Nevertheless', Mack is careful to note, 'the pre-Islamic origins of most, if not all of the stylized forms that have been presumed [by Islamic art scholars] to symbolize the niche, mihrab and lamp in carpets raise questions about the validity of the term "prayer rug"' (Mack, 2001: 84). It is also interesting to

note that most contemporary collectors' guides to oriental carpets consider the 'prayer rug' as simply a distinct design and 'format', and also dispute their necessarily 'religious' intent and function. Perhaps the most authoritative and consulted work on Persian carpets, A. Cecil Edwards's 1953 volume is illustrative in this sense, cautioning against attributing any symbolism – religious or mystical – to carpet design and motives, taking them to be simply 'art for art's sake': 'the Persians are an artistic people who regard design as an end in itself. . . . The end which they had in view was delight through symmetry and beauty; but no more' (Edwards, 1953: 51). Edwards's considerations on Persian carpets are emblematic of his era, displaying a fascination with an uncorrupted relationship with beauty and the preservation of forms of ancient craftsmanship (before these were transformed by the market for 'Westernized' designs): forms of craftsmanship and 'meaning-making' that depend, nevertheless, on the persistence of a 'backward', tribal existence,[5] as also Helfgott (1994: 85) has argued.

Beyond the discursive meaning-making that has always accompanied the travels of the oriental carpet, their material use also disputes any direct or necessary association as 'Islamic' things. Murray Eiland (1981: 20) remarks that 'in the Middle East, prayer rugs are seldom seen in use for their intended purpose. [Indeed] despite their romanticizing in older rug books, it appears likely that most "prayer" rugs reaching the West were actually never used for prayer'. Indeed, it was most often the keyhole carpets (that became known as 'prayer rugs') that were most commonly found in European religious depictions and material settings (see Ruvoldt, 2006).

What happens to 'oriental' carpets, then, to make them what they are today? What set of 'material-discursive intra-actions' (to return to Barad) has transformed them from objects marking status and ideal beauty to Islamic 'prayer rugs' that mark the presence of undesirable others and draw fear and suspicion? David Sylvester, writing in his introduction to the catalogue accompanying the 1983 retrospective exhibition on 'The Eastern Carpet in the Western World', lamented how in the twentieth century Europeans' relationship to 'Eastern Carpets' had become 'unhealthy', with carpets 'withdrawn from life and lodged, away from wear and tear and ultra-violet, in museums, [ensuring] that those carpets will never again be seen as they ought to be – on the ground, or a table' (Sylvester, 1983: 9). Oriental carpets had become something out of the ordinary, Sylvester remarked, and especially removed from ordinary, quotidian spaces. The cover image of that exhibition's catalogue is illustrative: the much-reproduced painting of *The Somerset House Conference* from 1604 (artist unknown), the peace conference between England and Spain. As Sylvester (1983: 9) comments, here:

the carpet is depicted in an altogether healthy situation. This artefact imported from an alien culture is shown to be used, cherished, given a central place at great occasions. . . . While cherished, it is not neurotically

conserved but allowed to play a part in life, spread out as a no-man's land
between the opposing teams of great sly men of state.

As Mack (2001), Howard (2000, 2002), Carboni (2007), and countless other
scholars of Venice's relations with the Orient suggest, any absolute geopolitical
divides between Europe and an 'Islamic other' had always been complicated
by commercial but also power-political interests. As Donald King, former
Keeper of Textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum, has argued, projecting
contemporary understandings of 'an essential opposition between west and
east, between Christian and Islamic powers' gives 'a vertiginously foreshort-
ened view of history' and 'is wholly misleading', for 'the frontiers between the
two sides were never closed or watertight' and diplomacy and, especially, trade
bridged them constantly: 'To combat the Ottoman Turks, Venice sought an
alliance with the Turkomans in Tabriz; Francis I of France, on the other hand,
allied himself with the Turks to fight the German Emperor' (King, 1983: 25).
The continued presence, also in formal, diplomatic settings – as in the example
cited by Sylvester above – of oriental carpets was testament to such ongoing
exchange.

Airing the rugs I: Venice

There are approximately 20,000 Muslims who live or work in Venice and its
hinterland today, and who for fifteen years have been campaigning to have
a site for prayer within the city. The Swiss artist Christoph Büchel created
THE MOSQUE project in direct collaboration with the Islamic Community
of Venice and the Association of Muslims in Iceland. Büchel's stated aim was to
both answer the local Muslim community's need for a gathering space but also
to bring attention to Venice's connections to the East (for a fuller discussion
of the politics of the exhibition, see Bialasiewicz, 2017). Prior to the Venice
installation, Büchel was already well known for his projects that directly inter-
vened into urban spaces, such as his transformation of a London gallery into an
(apparently) fully functioning community center (Piccadilly Community Cen-
tre, 2011) or turning a museum into a shelter for refugees (S.M.A.K. Stedelijk
Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, 2017).

   Büchel decided to present THE MOSQUE outside of the main Biennale
exhibition spaces in the old Venice Arsenale and surrounding gardens, selecting
instead the deconsecrated church of the Santa Maria della Misericordia in the
Cannaregio district (Image 6.1).

   The baroque white façade of the Church during the exhibition (8–15 May
2015) displayed no indication whatsoever of that which lay within. Only
once inside the main entrance, the glass panels of the interior wooden door
announced 'Centro Culturale Islamico di Venezia' – 'La Moschea della Miseri-
cordia' [Venice Islamic Cultural Centre – the Misericordia Mosque], with an
Arabic inscription above. The main nave of the deconsecrated church had been

Image 6.1 View of Santa Maria della Misericordia in the Cannareggio district of Venice.
Source: Photo by Luiza Bialasiewicz

converted into a space resembling a mosque prayer hall, with carpet covering the entire floor, and other 'visual attributes' of a functioning mosque, including a mihrab niche indicating the qibla, created in between two former altars, and a minbar from which the imam could address the congregation (Images 6.2 and 6.3). Within the installation, a wooden barrier marked the boundary between the (to be) religious and non-religious space, with instructions to visitors to remove their shoes and observe Islamic custom (for women, veils were provided) should they wish to enter into what was supposed to be the area of prayer, delimited by the carpets.

It was these instructions and the delimitation of a 'religious space' that brought the wrath of a self-declared 'spontaneous citizens' committee' of local opponents who lodged a protest with the city authorities within a couple of days of the exhibition's opening (Mion and Mantegoli, 2015: 20). Some particularly incensed local residents made the 'shoe question' into a rallying point, forcibly attempting to enter the carpeted 'prayer space' in shoes, 'to see what these people can do to us', as one woman cited in an article in the Italian daily *La Repubblica* argued, 'these people . . . who consider women as inferior . . . just try to keep your shoes on and see what happens' (Berizzi, 2015: 25). Needless

Image 6.2 Christoph Büchel, THE MOSQUE, 2015, Installation view at the Icelandic Pavilion, Venice Biennale.

Source: Photo by Luiza Bialasiewicz

Image 6.3 Christoph Büchel, THE MOSQUE, 2015, Installation view at the Icelandic Pavil-
ion, Venice Biennale.

Source: Photo by Luiza Bialasiewicz

to say, nothing happened to visitors who wittingly or not violated the shoe
rule,[6] but the exhibition's demarcation (and perceived 'real' re-signification) of
a (formerly) Christian space by the laying down of an 'Islamic' carpet became
a crucial point of the contestation.

Although the protest focused on the 'carpeting' (and thus presumed claim-
ing) of a former church in this instance, the appeals of the protesters to physi-
cally violate the religious prescriptions of a to-be-Islamic space drew upon a
much longer history of contestations in Northern Italy of 'real' spaces of Mus-
lim religious practice, most famously the actions of the right-separatist Lega
Nord politician (and for a time vice-president of the Italian Senate) Roberto
Calderoli, who had called for 'A Pig Day' to 'infect' land granted by munici-
palities for the possible construction of new mosques (Calderoli brought his
own pig to stroll across the terrain of the land granted for the Lodi mosque in
2005) (*La Repubblica* 2007).

When the Venetian municipal authorities decided to shut down the installa-
tion on 22 May (just two weeks after the opening, and months before its offi-
cial closing date) it was not formally due to any violation of religious or cultural
sensibilities. The Venice Procura announced that THE MOSQUE would be

shut down for public health reasons, citing sanitary and fire safety regulations[7] (interestingly, applying regulations that usually govern 'real' places of worship and public gathering spaces). Following a flurry of commentary on the local and national media, and some outraged statements from various representatives of the art world, the question slowly fizzled out.

The Icelandic Art Center in Reykjavik, the organization that had commissioned the installation, issued a formal statement disputing the closure, noting that the very purpose of Büchel's mosque was to 'materially draw attention to the political institutionalisation of segregation and prejudice in society' and 'to provide a platform for dialogue about and communication between different cultural positions' (cited in Ruiz and Panzeri, 2015). The staged contact with a material Muslim space and its material objects including, most prominently, the contested 'prayer carpet' did not achieve this intended outcome, however. If anything, it served to further 'materialize' a series of broader fears regarding Muslim presence in the Italian North-East, furnishing a specific set of spaces and objects around which right-populist narratives of 'nostalgic deprivation' could be focalized.

Airing the rugs II: Modica

The Croatian artist Igor Grubic, like Büchel, has long used his artistic practice as a form of political activism, with many of his works created in and for public spaces, including site-specific intervention, photography, and film.[8] In 2012, Grubic travelled to the southern Sicilian city of Modica for his intervention entitled *Missing Architecture*. During his research, Grubic noticed that despite the presence of a large Muslim community, not a single formal mosque existed in the city. Instead, members of the Muslim community would rent houses or apartments that would turn into meeting places for prayer. In conversations with locals, Grubic learned that the construction of mosques was, in practice, forbidden.[9]

So what do you do when the construction of a communal space devoted to praying is not permitted? Can you simulate one? Can you create a virtual and simultaneously 'real' open-air mosque in its place? After a period of fieldwork, Grubic began to make contacts with the members of the Modica Muslim community, including the imam. There was one common thread in all the conversations, he noted: their desire for a mosque (Grubic, 2018, personal communication).

Given the institutional obstacles to the construction of a 'real' mosque, Grubic decided to symbolically create a mosque in the open spaces of the city through the use of three elements: carpets, posters, and the call to prayer; carpets to symbolize the ground to pray on, posters with oriental patterned tiles hung on the walls of the old city symbolizing the walls of the mosque, and the call to prayer by the muezzin to symbolize the minarets. For the first time in modern times on Sicilian soil, a muezzin recited the five times a day call to

prayer in different public spaces on the artist's invitation. Grubic set the carpets in five locations in Modica with a strong symbolic significance: the municipal building, the stadium, an abandoned factory, in front of a Catholic church, and in the city's main square (Images 6.4, 6.5, and 6.6).

The choice of physical sites was not incidental, for the artist saw them as enabling an interaction between Modica's citizens and institutions: 'I intended to suggest that some place of worship for Muslim people should also have an important role regarding citizens' equality in a democratic society. Perhaps, in some of these strategic sites, a mosque could also have been imagined' (Grubic, 2018, personal communication). By re-siting the chosen objects – carpets and wall-like posters – Grubic thus attempted to (at least temporarily) re-signify a non-religious public space, opening it to the possibility of prayer. 'The dream [of the local Muslim community] is to have the classical mosque with a minaret built one day. The objective of the work *Missing Architecture* is to throw light on this fact and insert in the public space the elements which symbolically represent the missing place of worship for Muslims' (Grubic, 2018, personal communication).

Just as in the case of the Venice exhibition that was supported by the local Islamic centre, the imam of the Modica Muslim community played a crucial role in Grubic's project also in very material fashion. As the artist notes, 'He actually allowed me to use their carpets from the [existing informal] "mosque".

Image 6.4 Igor Grubic, *Missing Architecture*, 2012, Installation view in Modica, Sicily.

Source: Courtesy of the artist

Image 6.5 Igor Grubic, *Missing Architecture*, 2012, Installation view in Modica, Sicily.
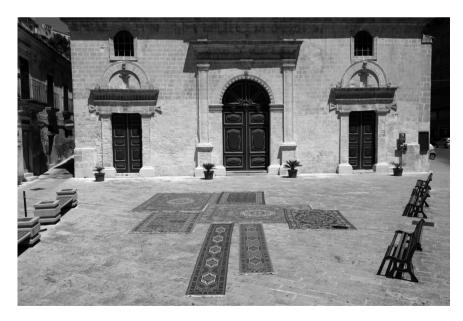*Source*: Courtesy of the artist

Image 6.6 Igor Grubic, *Missing Architecture*, 2012, Installation view in Modica, Sicily.
Source: Courtesy of the artist

This aspect is very important because it made the difference between fiction and reality'. The carpets used in the exhibition thus came from the functioning mosque, which can also be considered as a masjid and in the case of Modica was located inside an apartment rented by the Muslim community. In addition, the imam contributed to the project by 'acting' as the muezzin reciting the call to prayer in the public space in different locations, performing the audible part of the installation (Image 6.7). The interventions or 'simulations' (as the artist referred to them) took place one after the other, as Grubic was re-placing and transporting the same carpets from one location to the other. In each case, carpets were 'aired' for a few hours during the whole twenty-four hours *I Vespri* presentation. During this period, the public was provided with maps showing the location of the works and performance schedule, and the public programming included curator and artist talks.

How did the Modica public react to the work? When asked if the exhibition provoked tensions, Grubic commented, 'The gallerist was quite afraid for the possible reactions, but the [*Vespri*] curator told him that I, as an artist, would take all responsibility and likewise him as the curator'. Vocal and visible protests of the sort encountered by the Venice exhibition did not occur – and, according to Grubic, the representatives of the Muslim community were satisfied to be involved in the event. Several mentioned that this gesture was particularly politically important as perhaps for the first time in contemporary Sicily it

Image 6.7 Igor Grubic, *Missing Architecture*, 2012, Installation view in Modica, Sicily.
Source: Courtesy of the artist

created the possibility to publicly hear the Islamic call to prayer recited by the muezzin at prescribed times of the day. Since Modica is in a canyon, it was a 'really magnificent experience to hear the *adhan* as it is resonating and echoing early in the morning, before dawn, above and in the city while all city was still quiet and sleep' (Grubic, 2018, personal communication). Nevertheless, not everyone appreciated Grubic's re-invocation of the traces of Muslim presence in the Sicilian town: through the course of the exhibition various attempts were made to remove the posters during the night, but since they were strongly glued they were difficult to completely destroy.

Grubic has more recently attempted to realize a new version of the *Missing Architecture* presentation in Bucharest (Image 6.8), as part of the seventh edition of the public art programme *Expanded Space* titled *Cool Monuments – Hot Heads* (11 October–15 November 2017). The *Expanded Space* was organized around

> the conceptual tension between the strategic process of regularization of the public and the 'nomad' forces that dislocate it. In other words, the art–works are situated in between the authoritarian process of monumentaliza-tion of the past and fixation of collective identity in grandiose visual forms and stable conceptual frames, on the one hand, and the destabilizing action of disruptive interventions in the public sphere, which aim to challenge instituted structures of power and to spontaneously reinvent the relations between social agents that are shaped by these configurations.[10]

Image 6.8 Igor Grubic, *Missing Architecture* 2, 2017, Installation view in Bucharest, Romania.

Source: Courtesy of the artist

Grubic's *Missing Architecture 2* (2017) was originally planned as another mul-timedia intervention in public space. Just as in Modica, Grubic was surprised by the absence of a formal site for Muslim prayer in Bucharest, despite the city's sizeable Muslim population. *Missing Architecture 2*, framed around the scaffolding of an imaginary building under (re)construction, was to be in fact a direct response to the uncertain situation of the biggest mosque to be built in Bucharest (the Bucharest Mosque), following a government decision from 2015 which was met with a string of protests, marked by strong chauvinism and xenophobia against the local Muslim community. The temporary counter-monument designed by Grubic aimed to speak directly to such hostile reac-tions to the making of a Muslim space. Although the focus of the *Expanded Space* programme (under the aegis of which Grubic was invited to participate) was on the 'transformative' role of public art, ironically Grubic's work did not get the permission for public installation, and the artist had to present it in the courtyard of the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC) in Bucha-rest. His work was, moreover, excluded from public communication about the exhibition, as the organizers were concerned with possible reactions, given continuing large-scale protests against the building of the Bucharest Mosque.

Transgressing rugs

In many ways, the reactions provoked by Büchel's THE MOSQUE and Grubic's *Missing Architecture* reflect similar contests over the building of 'real' mosques, in Italy and elsewhere in Europe: both in the popular reactions they evoked (much more pronounced in the Venetian case) as well as the concerns expressed by the organizing institutions. Over the past decade, a considerable body of academic work has examined the geographical politics of what has been (somewhat problematically) termed 'the Islamization of space' in Euro-pean cities and, more broadly, the various ways in which Islamic presence in European cities has been subject to negotiation in different local contexts (see, among others, Allievi, 2009; Cesari, 2005; Gale, 2004, 2005; Göle, 2011, 2013, 2015; McLoughlin, 2005). Recent work by geographers and anthropologists on the racialization of spaces has extended this discussion in important ways by also considering the affective geographies generated by 'Islamic spaces' and 'Islamic bodies' (see especially the special issue edited by Tolia-Kelly and Crang, 2010; also Astor, 2014, Haldrup et al., 2006; Ruez, 2012; Swanton, 2010). Such studies have been particularly important in drawing out precisely the sort of 'emotional excesses' (Fischer, 2009) provoked by the appearance of Islamic sites and Islamic bodies but also, as we have tried to show, the making visible of 'Islamic things' like carpets in European urban spaces.

As Göle (2011: 383) has argued, the 'visibilization' of Islam in public 'can-not be thought independent of [its materialities], namely aesthetic forms, dress codes, or architectural genres'. The 'things' associated with Muslim presence

have thus become active agents in the 'material–discursive intra-action' that produces both the discourses but also real, physical practices of exclusion in urban spaces. As we have tried to highlight here, this has also been true of 'virtual' artistic attempts to bring into public view – to 'air' – objects that have now been 'made Muslim', rendered foreign and thus 'out of place'. By drawing attention to the longer traces of 'carpet memory' in Venice and Sicily – and thus to the longer histories of Muslim presence in those sites, both symbolic as well as material – the two exhibitions attempted to remind audiences of the other affective economies (to cite Ahmed, 2014) within which carpets were once located and made sense of; affective economies within which the oriental carpet was a known and coveted object. Grubic's 'airing' of the carpets in Modica (as Büchel's intervention in Venice) was aimed not only at creating new spaces, but also at 'airing' the Sicilian past: using past material objects like the carpet to re-materialize the memory of a different past of religious and ethnic coexistence, of the co-presence of 'Islamic' and 'European' memory-objects.

The use of oriental carpets in the two installations in order to tell 'other' stories of Europe's pasts, to attempt to re-weave the long-standing relations and exchanges between East and West, is particularly poignant also because of carpet's unique role as, precisely, 'storytelling' devices. In the first issue of the journal *Oriental Carpet and Textile Studies*, German scholar Werner Brueggemann remarks upon Walter Benjamin's discussion of the concept of 'aura' as 'a singular vision of the remote, however close it might be' (Benjamin, 1935, in Brueggemann, 1985: 283). As Brueggemann (1985: 283) notes, 'the central word "remote" is not to be understood as distant in space, but rather as its quality of being unapproachable'; unapproachable since Benjamin sees the origin of all art in ritual:

> 'The unique value of the true work of art', Benjamin writes – and here we may include that of a carpet – 'has its roots in ritual, in which it possessed its first and original function'. By this he means that even when the art object becomes divorced from its function, something belonging to the ritual is still apparent. The experience of 'aura' in this sense is therefore always 'a celebration of the numinous'.
>
> (Brueggeman, 1985: 283)

Brueggemann (1985: 283) suggests that 'it was no accident that Benjamin discovered the "aura" for aesthetic theory', citing Benjamin's biographer Werner Fuld's (1979: 19) description of the former's childhood as marked by the experience of being surrounded by antique and exotic objects. Benjamin's father 'worked at Lepke's, the well-known auction house in Berlin', Brueggemann remarks, and as a child, Benjamin 'spent his life close to collectors' items', 'breathing in their "aura"' and, especially, developing an appreciation of the relationship between objects and their collectors and observers. In Benjamin's aesthetics the relationship between the object and its observer is crucial:

a relationship that, as Benjamin argues, is fundamentally transformed in the modern age.

Nevertheless – and this is relevant to our analysis – even in the process of the modern disenchantment and 'estrangement' of art objects, they are never entirely stripped of their 'aura'. Theodor Adorno, commenting on Benjamin, emphasizes the persistent, 'indissoluble', nature of the 'aura' as 'a residue' that 'opposes the world's disenchantment' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1969: 8). Brueggemann recalls, indeed, Adorno's notion of 'investment' as that 'element of human work that adheres to objects' and thus invests them with layers of meaning; he cites Adorno's letter to Benjamin where the former 'asks "is not the aura the mark left by the unremembered human attributes of the object?", by which he means that it carries the past relationships between men and objects into the present' (1985: 285). The 'aura' that is 'literally woven into the carpet', Brueggemann suggests, allows the collector (as too the observer) 'to follow in them the traces of past humanity' (1985: 285). Nevertheless, he importantly cautions (following Benjamin himself) that 'our aesthetic attitude should not be merely that of one who persists in contemplation, nor should the experience of the 'aura' be lost in nostalgia. It requires . . . that we submit the historical material stored by the carpet to the "touchstone of the critical intellect"' (1985: 285).

How can we relate this to the reception of the carpets brought into public view in Venice and Modica? In many ways, the intent of the two exhibitions was to use the carpets' 'aura' to remind audiences of Adorno's 'unremembered human attributes'; to make use of the carpet-as-memory-object that 'carries past relationships between people and objects into the present'. Yet the 'airing' of the carpets appears to have evoked not the sort of 'critical intellectual' reaction called for by Benjamin but rather its opposite – a nostalgic, indeed 'ritualistic' (in Benjamin's terms) attempt to remove the offending object, and thus with it its offending aura. In both cases, the exhibits seem to have evoked reactions marked by precisely the sort of 'nostalgic deprivation' highlighted by the editors in the introduction to this volume as characteristic of contemporary right-populism.

As Göle (2009: 278) has argued in her analysis of another installation that provoked similarly resentful protests, 'The realm of art has emerged at a privileged interface in relating as well as confronting different publics and cultures', most visibly those of 'Europe' and 'Islam'. In disrupting accepted notions of proximity and distance, art installations that materialize 'Muslim' things in the public spaces of European cities 'cross symbolic and spatial boundaries, provoking anxiety' (2009: 283). Such exaggerated anxiety – the 'emotional excess' noted by Fischer (2009) that we cite at the outset of this chapter – must be understood, Göle suggests, in the political context of contemporary Europe where 'the representation of the "other" has shifted from the distant unknown "Orient" to that of Muslims living in proximity with Europeans, and perceived as threatening intruders' (2009: 285).

The 'othering' of carpets that form the crux of both exhibitions thus needs to be read in their multiple 'material-discursive intra-actions'. The carpets 'claiming space' in Venice and Modica become objects of anxiety and transgression precisely in their role as carriers of (hi)stories and 'auras' of past interactions of Europe and the 'Orient'. By rejecting their materialization and entanglement in the spaces of the two Italian cities, the protesters staged or 'wove' their own threads of storytelling: a nostalgically idealistic 'reminicense' of an 'uncorrupted' European (aesthetic) tradition, free of an 'other'ly presence – past and present. It is, needless to say, an impossible nostalgia, as Valenta (2011) reminds us: a 'yearning for a Europe that never existed: a Europe disentangled and distinct from the rest of the world'.

Notes

1 We choose to use the 'politics of resentment' (following Cramer, 2016) rather than the more common term 'populist politics' as we believe it better captures the popular reactions we wish to discuss here (for a review of the usage of 'populist politics', see Gusterson, 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

2 Not just in the Italian South, but also the once booming North-East region where Venice lies.

3 Drawing on the wider 'material turn' in anthropology and cultural studies, in particular the work of Barad (2007) and Bennett (2010); for a broader overview, see Buchli (2002, 2004), Coole and Frost (2010), and Hicks and Beaudry (2010); in geography, see Cook and Tolia-Kelly (2010).

4 The choice of terminology ('carpet' or 'rug') is itself marked by the histories of contact and trade and is itself a colonial legacy (see Edwards, 1953, for an overview – itself highly colonial).

5 Edwards closes the section on 'Symbolism in Persian Design' thus: 'I suggest, therefore, that caution is indicated in our approach to these matters. A tribal weaver, as she crouched over her horizontal loom, is more likely, I think, to seek inspiration from what she sees than from what she thinks – if, indeed, she thinks at all' (1983: 51).

6 The Icelandic Art Center (IAC) responded directly to the 'shoe controversy': 'Visitors to THE MOSQUE project are NOT required to remove their shoes nor cover their heads with veils. Inside the exhibition in the Pavilion there is a sign SUGGESTING that visitors remove shoes as a part of the exhibition and the installation, and as a way to respect the cleanliness of the site. Veils are provided for OPTIONAL use by anyone wishing to use them. It is entirely left up to visitors to choose whether to remove or wear their shoes, and whether to try wearing a veil' (Icelandic Art Center 2015, emphasis in original).

7 A strategy that has been deployed in initiatives to block the construction of mosques in other European cities (see, among others, Cesari, 2005, and the edited collection by Göle, 2015).

8 It is worthwhile to note that, as we write, it was announced that Grubic was selected to represent Croatia at the 2019 Venice Biennale.

9 While the building of mosques is not formally forbidden in Italy, a variety of legal obstacles have been invoked to block their construction, including architectural and 'landscape preservation' norms (see Saint-Blancat and Schmidt di Friedberg, 2005).

10 The VolumArt Association, *Cool Monuments – Hot Heads* (October 11–November 15), http://volumart.org/?amp&lang=en (accessed on 15 July 2019).

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