

*There will be fire.*

Lydia Ourahmane in conversation with Polly Staple  
12pm Saturday 11 April 2026.

POLLY STAPLE: The exhibition is conceived as a series of encounters. Shall we get straight to it and walk the audience around the show?

LYDIA OURAHMANE: \*opens the door\*

PS: At the end of the entrance hallway is the first work, the light machine, *Offerta Luce: €1*, 2026. What is this object Lydia and how did it find its way here?

LO: The machine comes from the church San Giovanni Crisostomo in Venice. In its previous life this machine was used to illuminate a painting installed in the church by Giovanni Bellini *Saints Christopher, Jerome and Louis of Toulouse*, 1513. Saint Christopher is the patron saint of travellers. Apparently, he was very tall and is often depicted carrying a child on his shoulder ensuring safe passage across water. When I started working in Venice 'passage' became a focus for how matter moves between the spiritual and material world. Where does a form get caught in the net of perception? How does it become visible? Much like the light turning on, it is through an offering. And what we offer becomes the means for illumination.

On our first research trip to Venice, Giorgio Mastinu took us to see the church and the Bellini painting. He put a coin into the machine and the painting suddenly lit up by way of a very rudimentary circuit strapped into this box. The machine is a conduit to light the work of art which is otherwise obscured by the darkness of the church. If an offering is made, the painting is revealed, so the light is a conditional vehicle tied to a prayer.

PS: This machine enables you to see.

LO: It's positioned directly in front of you as you come into the Foundation facing the window into the garden. Light lights light.

PS: The machine is also connected to LED lights installed throughout the building. Just for three minutes, then the lights switch off until someone puts in another euro.

LO: Yes exactly. If you don't have a euro, you can't see the show.

PS: One of Bellini's many skills as an artist was denoting perspective. For me what is interesting about your attraction to that painting and the light machine is also to do with a shift in perspective you employ in your work. In this exhibition you take readymade or found objects and put them to new use. You're also continuing in a long line of artists, including Bellini, commissioned to make site specific artworks in Venice.

All the works in the exhibition are new, made within the last few months here in Venice. When you were invited by Nicoletta Fiorucci to come to Venice to be in residence and commissioned to make an exhibition at the Foundation the invitation was very open.

LO: I remember you taking me to Nicoletta's house in London to meet her early one morning in 2018 when we were working on the Chisenhale show and Nicoletta and I have been in sync ever since. The invitation was generously open, so I was able to respond intuitively. I knew I wanted to make everything in Venice; I didn't want to produce work elsewhere to be shipped in. Many of the works are produced in Giudecca which is where I chose to live during the residency.

PS: This leads us into the space next door and another confrontation with an everyday object made strange. In Venice we see piers everywhere, but we don't usually see them inside a building. What is this object and what is it doing here?

LO: The title of this work is (45.3820696, 12.3294242) which are the GPS coordinates to a location on the island of Poveglia where this pier will eventually end up. It is a fully functioning 10-metre pier built to scale. The pier has been implanted through the gallery floor and into the ground below exactly how a pier would usually be installed.

PS: Would you like to explain how you arrived at making the pier?

LO: Poveglia is an uninhabited and largely inaccessible island located on the outskirts of the Venice lagoon close to the Lido. Northern Poveglia has recently been granted as a concession to Poveglia per tutti (Poveglia for all) a cooperative of Venetians from Giudecca. After campaigning for over ten years, the group successfully managed to save the island from private development and are turning it into a public park; a first for Venice where

real estate is at a premium which makes the work of Poveglia per tutti quite remarkable.

Poveglia was an historical fort; a quarantine island for ships entering Venice, and, during the plague years, between 1347 and 1630, it is said that many people died there. The island's now dilapidated buildings formerly housed a geriatric hospital, sanatorium and church. The island was abandoned in the 1960s but you can find plenty of claims online to both supernatural inhabitants and contested real estate ventures.

I discovered Poveglia while researching another Venetian property that is notoriously cursed, Ca' Dario on the Grand Canal. That building has been uninhabited for over 30 years. Many of its former owners and residents died violent and tragic deaths so the building is haunted by its reputation for misfortune. I was impressed that the ghosts had been doing the work of disrupting prime real estate, but I also started wondering how a building becomes haunted. If, for example, the spirit world can move wherever it pleases, why would it obey an architectural definition? Why then does a spirit remain in a place? I assume locations are vessels for communication, but I was more interested in spiritual obedience to architecture, an unavoidable thread to have followed with the number of churches and in Venice.

PS: On that first research trip we also went out to Poveglia with Giorgio and Nicoletta. It was a pilgrimage of sorts, and we were not sure what we'd find but we knew we had to go there.

LO: I was initially drawn to Poveglia because of its speculative history. But the real fulcrum is all the issues Venetians are facing living in a territory with incredible heritage but grappling with mass tourism, transactional geo-politics, corruption and environmental catastrophe. The cooperative Poveglia per tutti has 4,500 members, who are all committed to creating a different vision for Venice and a sustainable space for the community to enjoy on the island. The informal headquarters of Poveglia per tutti is at La Palanca, a restaurant in Giudecca run by Andrea Barina.

PS: We had visited this island on the borderlands of Venice full of incredibly rich material, but we were tourists.

LO: On that first trip I had planned to gather physical material from Poveglia. I saw all these potent objects: giant metal cupboards thrown down the stairs, graffitied walls, piles of metal beds and

stoves from the 1930s... and I imagined taking these objects, melting them down or reinstating them.

I guess I was thinking in extractive terms because that's something we often do unfortunately as artists when we're living and working in a place for a very short period. We arrive with the unavoidable lens: 'what am I going to do here?'. That question can turn into a violent, extractive practice which is ultimately quite boring. I sort of had to check my responsibility as a visitor and ask: 'how do I work for this place?'.  
So much of the work in the show consists of forming relationships and creating exchanges with organisations in Venice, and I wanted to work into the context. The whole exhibition moves within a local social economy.

Poveglia per tutti had a real question to address: public access to the island. The site had been abandoned so there was no real pier, no way to safely land with a boat. The cooperative was already in the process of applying for permission to install a pier and so I approached them to collaborate on producing the pier. When Poveglia per tutti's planning application is approved by the municipality, the pier will be transferred to the island. If the approval takes place during the exhibition's run, we have agreed that the pier will be removed and transferred with immediate effect leaving only the 8 holes in the floor behind.

The pier was made by one of the main pier makers in Venice: Cantiere Daniele Manin based in Giudecca, 200m behind where I'm living. As you can see it's a very simple wooden structure.

PS: You see these piers all over Venice and don't really think about them but they are essential to how we all move around the city. In the exhibition space you are positioned in relation to the pier as if you are underwater. It's powerful as an object because it holds the tension of being a real functioning object but also an art object with no practical function or use value. It resonates with a long tradition of commemorative monuments and minimal sculpture. There is also a simple visual pleasure encountering its sheer scale within the gallery – it feels at once too big and contained.

LO: When you enter the space, you encounter the pier at eye level which is usually where your feet would be, so we encounter the point of contact between the body and the pier in its eventual use on the island.

PS: I like to think of the pier as the twin to the sculpture of laundry upstairs.

LO: *1.3 tons of decommissioned bed linen from 200 Venetian hotels.*

When you come up the stairs you are encircled by 13 cages of clean bed linen. You can smell that the sheets have recently been washed. The linen comes from Lavanderia LSG in Mirano on the mainland. LSG is one of the industrial laundries that serve all the hotels and restaurants in Venice. Every used bed sheet, towel, tablecloth and napkin is washed elsewhere: collected in large cages, processed and returned clean.

Since the main economy of Venice is tourism. Most of the hotel bed linen is used by people who are passing through for a very short period, sometimes for just one night.

The laundry process starts with people hand-sorting the linens by colour, thread count, weight, towel, face cloth, sheet, napkin - one by one before the items move into an automated conveyor system of washing, drying and ironing. I was struck that this industrial process still starts with the laundry team methodically touching every soiled sheet.

The linen must be ironed at 180 degree Celsius to kill any possible germs rendering the threads much weaker than domestic washing and after 80 washes the sheets are more prone to decay. In the final stage of LSG's laundry process each sheet is read by a machine that tracks any defects in the sheet. If the machine registers a rip or an irreparable stain, it flings the bed sheet off the production line onto the floor. These sheets are collected, again by hand, put into cages and decommissioned.

PS: The cages you see in the show are accumulated over two months, between February and April when we installed the work.

LO: It's an equation. Two months of visitors equals 1.3 tons. Not a perfect equation but a bracket of time.

PS: You also once described them to me as 'straight up sculpture'. For me there is a physical confrontation that takes place with these objects as abstract monolithic forms which is at once totemic, fetishistic and harks back to both modernist sculpture *and* conceptual gesture. The latter is indicated by the language you use for the title.

But you also bring in a politically and emotionally charged Venetian context. These objects make me think about the bed sheets in my apartment; they come from an intimate, private place. Each sheet represents waste, but it also represents a person and all

the fragile lives that move through Venice. All those hopes and dreams. As Giorgio said when we were installing, 'all those pillows full of tears'.

LO: I mean, what else is a pillow for?

PS: That's also why I see the bedsheets as the partner to the pier. However, they are the inverse. The pier is an artwork which will then enter reality as a fully functioning object. The bed sheets were fully functioning objects in the real world that have now come into this space and become artworks.

LO: They can't be anything else anymore. They have no use value.

PS: They have become valuable as artworks. It's a straight up transaction. An alchemical transformation perhaps. Matter is always negotiating its terms in this exhibition.

LO: But isn't that what art is?

PS: Yes, but you are using *these* materials in *this* context. Is art for you a process of transformation?

LO: No, I wouldn't call it transformation. I'm interested in how matter can still be meaningful even if it has been discarded. Or if materials have no economic or political use, how can they be imbued and reincarnated?

PS: Let's move to the bead curtain. It's positioned in the threshold between two spaces. How was this piece made?

LO: The back windows of the apartment where I am living in Giudecca look onto the women's prison, Casa di reclusione femminile. It's the first thing I see when I wake up. I started going there on Thursdays to buy vegetables as there's a project, Rio Tera' dei Pensieri, working with the women growing vegetables in the Orto delle Meraviglie (garden of marvels) within the grounds of the prison and selling the produce each week. Nicoletta Barbata from TOCIA! Cucina e Comunità told me about another cooperative Banco Lotto No. 10: Il Cerchio which is a tailoring project working with the women prisoners.

A beaded curtain is familiar for anyone like me who grew up in the Mediterranean. Maybe at your grandmother's house there would be a beaded

curtain placed at the threshold of the house to the balcony or garden to keep the flies out.

PS: I remember you saying you wanted to make a piece for the show which contained warmth, light, colour and human touch.

LO: I have a bead bracelet making tradition with my niece Julia. When I travel, I'll always look for beads to post back to her. And then when I go and visit, we'll sit on her bed and make bead bracelets together for our friends. It's very sweet. We both derive so much joy stringing colourful beads together.

I was thinking about manual labour in relation to industrial processes. Beading takes real time. And I thought a lot about time in relation to incarceration, waking up with that grey building in view each morning. So, I asked Il Cerchio to collaborate on the beaded curtain, which is named after Manuela, Margherita, Mariana, Monia and Patrizia, the women who beaded each string.

PS: There is a beautiful moment at a certain time of the day when the sunlight hits the curtain, and it throws light and colour into the interior gallery. The work is a threshold which brings us to our next encounter in the front room. *Angel* is set into the wall.

LO: A puzzle mould from the 1950s.

PS: *Angel* is the one object in the exhibition that isn't from Venice.

LO: The mould comes from Fonderia Nolana in Naples, a foundry that I've worked with several times before. These are moulds for casting bronze sculptures from the foundry archive. I've been working through my photographic archive recently and thinking about the integrity of the image and analogue film which deals with the dichotomy between a positive and a negative. Similarly cast bronze sculptures are made using the mould's negative representation. Like a photographic negative, the mould is a tool for reproduction. It is the master of the image. Maybe *Angel* has mothered hundreds of angels.

PS: So, what we see embedded in the wall is a mould for casting the figure of a 'putto' or an angel; it evokes an object that is not there. The object is *of* sculpture, but it is not sculpture.

LO: But it is the essence of sculpture because it carries the potential for form elsewhere. These

puzzle molds are fascinating objects, representing an old technique and a complex system used to piece together an image.

PS: Why did you put an angel in the wall?

LO: It's hard to articulate exactly what the experience is when you come into the room and look *into* negative space. You're both within the architecture and without the image.

PS: Do you remember at the beginning of making the exhibition, when you wanted to make a piece that was a void? A whole room which was void of sound. In the end the concept of the void – we could call it an absent present or a negative/positive dialectic – is here in all the works, and in the empty rooms, the breathing spaces between the works.

LO: A voided ring of sound hovering within a room is technically impossible. It's a project I seem to return to every few years with the hope that technology has managed to defy the laws of physics. Void transforms the slightest momentum into pure potential which is why I use it as a conceptual place holder, it's more figurative for me to think through it about what *could* be.

PS: We also researched the history of the Foundation's building – which was once a Priory and orphanage for girls – hauntology and the spirit world in Venice. I can't help but see *Angel* as a spirit. Within the Christian tradition, which is everywhere in Venice, when you welcome pilgrims into your house, you welcome angels.

LO: An angel always appears at the right time.

PS: Let's talk about *Rock Soup*.

LO: *Rock Soup* comes from the folklore of travellers carrying nothing more than an empty pot. In the story the soup making becomes a communal exercise and a parable of working together when curious villagers join the travellers by bringing vegetables to add to the broth to make a shared meal.

*Rock Soup* is a sculpture comprising a gas bottle, gas ring, a pot, a broth, the sound of the boiling and the aroma. It's a sculptural soup. The smell is the first element you encounter when entering a home where someone is cooking, you immediately imagine the meal.

PS: You're not giving visitors to the exhibition bowls of soup though; you're not performing participatory relational aesthetics. Instead, what is most important to you is the smell and the image of the cooking pot with the gas canister.

LO: The aroma is an invitation. When you come into the building, you smell something cooking upstairs and you're transported into a domestic, intimate moment of sharing a meal within a home.

PS: For a long time developing the exhibition there was going to be a sound piece in the room that *Rock Soup* occupies.

LO: But now we have a sound piece, you can hear the broth bubbling, the sound of the gas being used. We used to cook in this way when I was growing up; our kitchen in Algeria was literally a gas bottle, a gas ring with a pot on the floor and my mum sitting on a stool. For me that is a very familiar, domestic image. Here in Venice this might look more rudimentary, whereas I think of home.

PS: The price of that gas bottle is fluctuating wildly right now with the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. This piece touches on your biography, folklore, the history of the building we find ourselves in and the blunt reality of how power operates in our world right now. The world is divided into those who share and those who do not.

Let's go back downstairs. Photography is integral to your practice, a constant thread. What are these images and why are they displayed like this? And what more broadly is your interest in photography?

LO: This display is drawn from 10 rolls of film shot while living here in Venice. I've consistently taken photos on the same camera that my dad gave me when I was 16. Including images in the show was a way of being generous to the audience; they can see the various locations related to each work: the pier yard, the laundry, the church and Poveglia. My work can be very distilled but there is so much that happens in the background, the many relationships and narratives involved. Showing all the images in this format with the contact sheet and the negative is about allowing the viewer to decide how to narrativise the series of images, it's not about showing or making a good image.

PS: In contrast when you came to titling the show

you chose *5 Works* which is a simple, factual description. It's also totally absurd because, if I may get technical on you, in the end, the show comprises 7 entirely new works – including the photographs as one body of work – made for this exhibition.

LO: I like how *5 Works* sounds. Five is a spiritual number. 7 is also a lucky number.

PS: You always describe yourself as a conceptual artist. What does 'conceptual' mean to you?

LO: It means nothing and everything at the same time. Each idea has to find its own material, method, location, requirements. I'm not joking when I say that I sit and stare at a wall if I have to work through something.

PS: But it also references, obviously, a long art history of conceptual art, which – consciously or not – is there in many of the gestures and moves that you make in the work.

LO: We reference art history because the motivations for conceptual art are quotidian, they often circulate within and are produced by lived experience.

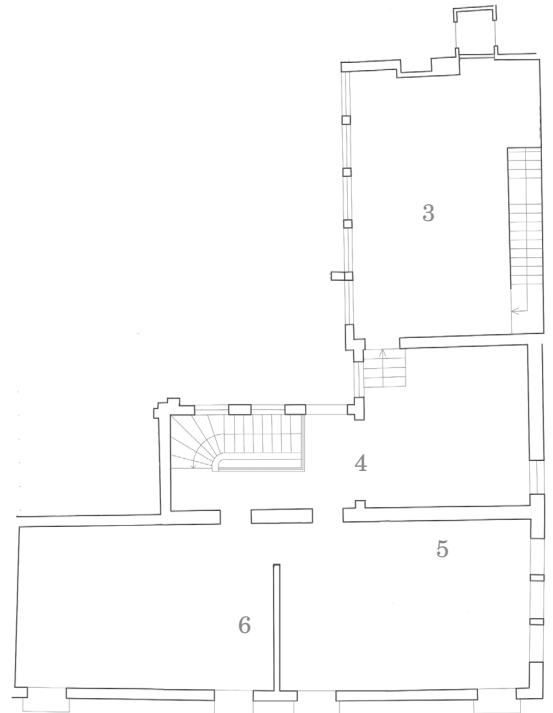
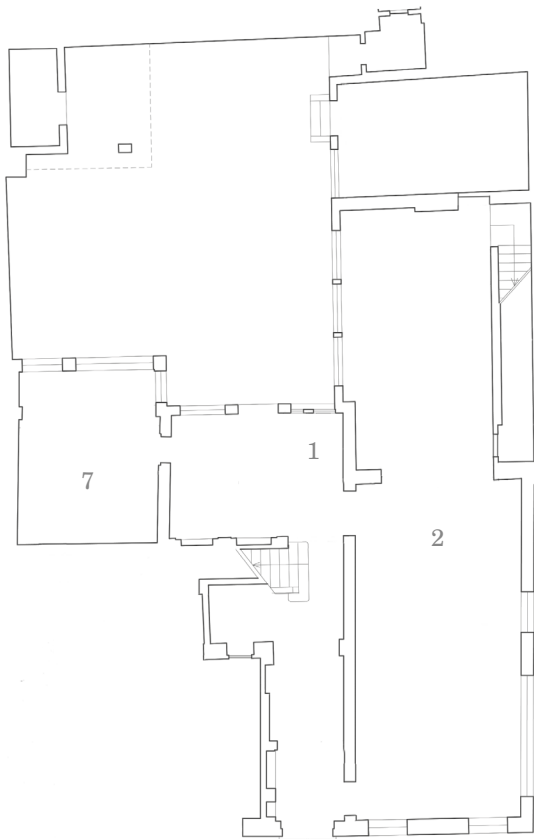
PS: Could you say that the show is a portrait of Venice or rather a portrait of your time here in Venice?

LO: No. What I was looking for was something that I didn't know how to look for. Do you remember our first conversations when I was asking 'what's the underbelly of Venice?' An alternative to this place that is so avidly consumed, and which also takes so much energy to maintain.

Perfection is what you imagine other people want to see. So much of the idea of Venice is about the maintenance of this state of perfection which is really about a perfect point of decay. Venice is a little bit dishevelled which lets you in and makes you think that you're part of its history. I was not at all interested in that. I wanted to know what people were doing who live here, now. What was parallel to its image.

PS: We kept on talking about what people – including us – were looking for coming to Venice. Everyone is looking for something. A combination of expectation and desire.

LO: Well, what are we doing here?



1. *Offerta Luce €1, 2026*  
Votive light box, LED lights  
Dimensions variable
2. *(45.3820696, 12.3294242), 2026*  
Larch wood, chestnut wood, galvanised iron  
160 x 150 x 975 cm
3. *1.3 tons of decommissioned bed linen from 200 Venetian hotels, 2026*  
13 metal cages, bed linen  
[7] 182 x 80 x 70 cm; [6] 175 x 77 x 60 cm
4. *Manuela, Margherita, Mariana, Monia, Patrizia, 2026*  
Glass beads, plastic beads, steel  
265 x 245cm
5. *Angel, 2026*  
Plaster  
56 x 36 x 23 cm  
  
Casts from the archive of Fonderia Nolana
6. *Rock Soup, 2026*  
Aluminium pot, gas ring, 15kg gas bottle, water, stock  
Dimensions variable
7. *324 Photos (Giudecca, Dorsoduro, Poveglia, Cannaregio, Napoli, Mirano, Murano), 2026*  
Negative, positive contact sheet, glass, lead  
31.4 x 27cm; 31.4 x 27cm