

Twittering Venice

By [Tous](#) 06-16-2009 [COMMENTS\(0\)](#) [Impressions](#)

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REUTERS/Denis Balibouse

Tourists on the Piazza San Marco in Venice

I don't use a Blackberry or an iPhone, but if I had taken one on a recent trip to Italy, where I went to see the 53rd Venice Biennale, I might have sent these tweets, which admittedly exceed the 140 character limit of the real thing.

I am sitting in a cafe at Pearson International Airport in Toronto with art collector Ydessa Hendeles, the most brilliant curator in Canada, and art critic John Bentley Mays, who is writing for architecture magazines these days, as well as Canadian Art (see the latest issue). We are all going to Venice for the biennale.

I am looking down at Venice from the plane, amazed to be able to see the entire city of islands laid out below like a floating tabletop model.

On a crowded vaporetto, I am passing the islands of Murano and San Michele and encountering a regatta that is messing up the water traffic at the entrance to the Grand Canal. Somewhere among the boats: the canoe paddled by Canadian artists in the collective Reverse Pedagogy, which has entered the regatta to get permission to launch the venerable craft in Venetian waters.

My friends and I are staying in an apartment on a quiet alley off a high-rent street, literally five minutes from Piazza San Marco, and have three days to look at old art before the three-day preview of the biennale begins. I am starting with Tiepolo and Tintoretto, who is wonderful and weird .

I am not shopping, I say to myself, but fall prey to gorgeous silk scarves a la Fortuny and a Borsolino straw with black grosgrain trim on the edge of the brim.

I am mistaken for an Italian by a young Romanian woman who is soliciting donations and signatures on a petition to help young drug addicts. It must be the hat.

I am hanging over the railing of Rialto Bridge watching a vaporetto carrying a tall, semi-reclining palm tree to an unknown location, the third such sighting in three days.

I am at Mark Lewis's film, Backstory, a frequently hilarious documentary portrait of the Hansards, father and son, whose family did most of the rear projection work in Hollywood during the 1950s to '70s. Lewis is representing Canada at Venice and showing four films in the Canada Pavilion.

I am in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, 40 minutes from Venice, looking at Giotto's 14th-century frescoes of the lives of Mary and Jesus Christ, feeling uplifted and immensely satisfied by one of the most sublime works of art I have seen in my life.

We are walking to a restaurant and follow the sound of choral music to find a group of middle-aged choristers in street clothes singing in the street at the edge of Piazzò San Marco.

I am thinking Venetians know how to live, with art, architecture, food, and artful pursuits that make them happy.

I am sitting outside in a campo at Aqua Pazza restaurant a few tables away from Yoko Ono, the only big, big-name biennale celebrity I spot during a six-day stay, although the rich and famous and royal are everywhere.

I am agog at Jake and Dinos Chapman's nine-vitrine vision of hell at the new Punto della Dogana, and the unspeakable things going on in their medieval nazi nightmare, which are acted out by thousands of little figures, and then I see the title, F***** Hell (2008), and want to laugh.

We are walking back from dinner through narrow alleys and have come into a large campo filled with Venetians of all ages who are dancing intricate ballroom steps to American pop music at a neighbourhood street party. It's nearly 1 a.m.

I am standing shin-deep in water in Piazza San Marco and watching the lights shimmering on its surface as bandaids float by in the nighttime flooding that has us taking off our shoes, hiking our skirts and rolling our pants legs as we go in search of a midnight drink.

I am leaving the Giardini, the biennale grounds where the national pavilions are, thinking the Canada Pavilion with Mark Lewis's films, is one of the best.