

Gondolas make way for Canuck canoes

**Piloted by artists, 11 canoes
paddled to start of art world's
Olympics**

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On a mercifully mild afternoon this week in the less scenic portion of Venice – think freight barges and loading docks, not gondoliers and piazzas – Dean Baldwin led a flotilla of 11 canoes into the open sea.

Their destination, the old city's gentler internal waterways, lay five kilometres away, across a choppy expanse of salt water; his crew of 23 artists was a reluctant bunch, to say the least.

"They kept saying 'Can't we get them towed across?'" Baldwin recalled yesterday, safely within *La Dominante's* quiet canals. "I had to really get them to believe it was possible."

Baldwin, a Toronto artist, is leading the second installation of Reverse Pedagogy, an artists' residency program-cum-social experiment. Winnipeg artist Paul Butler hatched the idea at the Banff Centre last summer; he handed it to Baldwin this year, who brought it here on the eve of the Venice Biennale, the art-world equivalent of the Olympics.

This week, official entrants from dozens of countries readied for tomorrow's opening, splayed across a giant giardino, an open area with permanent national pavilions (Canada's official entrant this year is Mark Lewis). "For the Banff, the idea was to put the whole thing in a bubble, away from the art world," Baldwin says. "Paul wanted to do it in seclusion; I wanted to do the opposite: take it to the den of the lions, to see how the dynamic shifts."



SUPPLIED PHOTO

Artists from several countries, including Canada, paddled 11 canoes through Venice's canals earlier this week to participate in the Biennale.

For a Venice project so staunchly unofficial, this is not as easy as it sounds. For Baldwin, there were months of anxiety co-ordinating a crew stocked with artists from Toronto, New York, Los Angeles and Tel Aviv, and an unintended crash course in Italian importation regulations. It was neither as gruelling as feared, nor particularly easy.

But it ended relatively incident-free (Toronto art dealer and curator Clint Roenisch, manning a canoe sponsored by *Border Crossings* magazine, relayed via email the nearest thing to disasters: his canoe cracked and took on water, while another, sponsored by *Canadian Art* magazine, swamped. "No one drowned.")

Safely within their short-term home, a frescoed piazza along a canal, Baldwin and crew, which includes Toronto artists John Sasaki, Bruno Billio, Katie Bethune-Leamen, Kelly Mark and Fastwurms, can get down to business.

In Reverse Pedagogy terms, that means a group of artists, writers and curators convene for a brief, intense bout of communality; sleeping, eating, working – and whatever else – as a single unit. But collectives have a funny way of practising natural selection, and if it sounds a little touchy-feely, think again.

In Banff, "we didn't all sit around singing 'Kumbaya,'" Baldwin says. "There was manipulation, coercion, power struggle – all the things that happen when people try to assert their own endeavours into the collective outcome."

This is not to say the all-for-one mentality is abandoned. Paddles through the city at night, a sort of colonial exploration, help galvanize, as do unrevealed plans for canoe-related gentle public mayhem (the website offers a helpful map, with "mystery nighttime activity" pegged for three separate venues).

Today, Reverse Pedagogy's 11 canoes will drift lazily through the old city en route to the giardini. Arriving alongside the Canadian pavilion, the crew will moor their vessels and climb up from the canals, en route to the Canadian pavilion's official opening.

Then tonight, the crew will engage in the collective Canadianizing of the Venice experience, erecting Baldwin's "Algonquin Tiki Tiki Hut," an installation that doubles conveniently as a bar ("It's an Ontario park ranger cabin meets a tropical island exclusive hotel vacation beach bar," Baldwin says. "Instead of bamboo and palm fronds, it has raw spruce and pine boughs.")

Baldwin plans at least one canoe to be hauled out of the water, filled with ice as a makeshift beer cooler – poetic justice for a job well done.

"It was a huge task that just seemed physically impossible," Baldwin says. "But the magic of doing this, all together, was unbelievable. Paddling in, when we saw this majestic heap of a city, rotting across the bay, we knew it was worth it."