

## REVERSING PEDAGOGIES with a LITTLE SOCIAL SCHOOLING

by Tatiana Mellema

Daniel Birnbaum,  
"Biennale Art, 53rd  
International Art  
Exhibition" (2009),  
[http://www.labien  
nale.org/en/news/art/  
en/80730.html](http://www.labien<br/>nale.org/en/news/art/<br/>en/80730.html)

This summer, thousands of travel-weary art watchers will meet in Italy for the 53rd Venice Biennale. Curated by Daniel Birnbaum, the exhibition will loosely consider collectives, exploring new spaces for art to unfold outside of institutional contexts and the art market.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not Birnbaum is successful with his theme "Making Worlds," there remains a global interest in collective activities and their challenge to social, economic, political and philosophical phenomena. It has been within this climate that the project *Reverse Pedagogy* (2008–) has gained an increasing amount of attention in Canada, its rotating cast of artists challenging art contexts by collectively directing their own experimental residencies. With members of the project communally living, playing, working and eating in a 16th-century Venetian palazzo, *Reverse Pedagogy* will be enacted during the first 10 days of the Venice Biennale. The artists will use the space as their own self-directed art school, collectively determining their day-to-day activities, while swapping methods and ideas that explore democratic exchange as an opportunity for breeding artistic growth and agency. Playing the role of informal facilitator, artist Dean Baldwin will be joined in Venice by Katie Bethune-Leamen, Nicholas Brown, Sarah Cale, Catharine Dean, Kristan Horton, Kelly Jazvac, Karen Kraven, Kelly Mark, Gareth Moore, Douglas Paulson/Parfyme, Mitzi Pederson, Joe Pingue, Paulette Phillips, Clint Roenisch, Jon Sasaki, Ruti Sela & Maayan Amir, Swintak, Çhen Tamir, Kara Uzelman and the project's initiator, Paul Butler.

Butler first enacted *Reverse Pedagogy* at The

Banff Centre in November 2008. Known for his work hosting "Collage Parties," he has travelled the world for years facilitating performative art events in galleries where invited guests and passersby are asked to take part in constructing collages from various magazines, newspapers, posters and other found materials. While some of the collages are selected and displayed, the overall emphasis of the Collage Party is to test approaches to art-making while fostering social exchange. Butler has also explored alternative gallery models through his work directing The Other Gallery, a nomadic commercial gallery that focuses on overlooked Canadian artists, and TheUpperTradingPost.com, a non-profit invitational forum for artists to trade their work. Interested in continuing to build communities and foster artist-directed activities, Butler approached Kitty Scott, Director of Visual Arts at The Banff Centre, with the idea of facilitating an experimental art school through the Centre's residency program. With Scott's support, the artists Zarah Ackerman, Dean Baldwin, Melissa Brown, Sarah Cale, Chris Dupuis, Gerald Edwards III, Amelie Guerin-Simard, Kristan Horton, Sara Kundelius, Stephen Lavigne, Jennifer San Martin, Ashley Neese, Kristin Nelson, Mitzi Pederson, Gordon Peterson, Scott Rogers, Swintak and Justin Waddell arrived in Banff in the middle of winter to enroll in *Reverse Pedagogy* 1.

Unlike most visual arts residencies at The Banff Centre, *Reverse Pedagogy* worked against traditional school models, with Butler asking residents upon their arrival to put aside all expectations of production and exhibition and to commit to the collective experience. Over the course of four weeks, the 20 artists organized

Dean Baldwin, Yesterday's  
Jägermeister, 2008  
PHOTO: DEAN BALDWIN



activities, field trips and projects based on the particular goals and expectations of the group. There existed no pressure to produce work or even attend activities and events. The residency's aim was to allow participants the space and time to experiment and exchange ideas away from the pressures of daily life, while exploring the possibilities of their practice through interactions with one another. The residency provided artists with access to their own studios, assistants, art-making facilities, a common space, a radio station and a gallery, while their day-to-day food and accommodations were also taken care of. Situated in a location far removed from the buzz of the art world and isolated just enough to allow for social havoc to reign, Banff was in fact the perfect site for the first location of this nomadic experimental school.

Throughout the seven weeks in Banff, a variety of activities and projects were initiated that were entirely unique to the space, time and personalities that constituted them. One of the highlights included the *24-Hour Shit Show* where every day two randomly selected artists from the residency were given 24 hours to prepare an exhibition, resulting in (among others) a live phone-sex show orchestrated through tin cans, a PowerPoint presentation revealing residents' secret identities and a live talk show where guests were subjected to the directions of two unruly hosts, played by Horton and Levigne. A Nautical Waste themed party also took place, which was outfitted with all the equipment necessary for sailing through garbage, including cans and streamers of exploding trash, eye patches, nautical stripes, sailors and tacky tourists. Karaoke nights, radio shows, a trip to Radium Hot Springs, a knitting circle and a collaborative print were among some of the other projects and activities organized, each of which was artist-initiated and directed. In an ad hoc closing ceremony on their last night in Banff, the group buried a time capsule in a secret location containing documents, artworks and trinkets that recorded the history of *Reverse Pedagogy* 1.

Although object-based works were produced during the residency, the social experience was the crux of *Reverse Pedagogy*, which is near impossible to thoroughly record. While a shattered bottle of Jägermeister beautifully glued back together by Baldwin, and a clay Raku board by Butler are fascinating works in themselves, it is the context of the production of these objects that is central to their significance. Like relics of "Happenings," Fluxus and 70s performance works, these pieces must be considered in light of the residency's larger

performative enterprise. *Reverse Pedagogy's* salience as a performance work lies in its connection to collaborative art practices, which have had a consistent presence in the past 20 years and are marked by an interest in alternative ways of producing knowledge.<sup>2</sup> While critics such as Nicholas Bourriaud, Claire Bishop and Grant Kester vie to detail the exact definitions of these artworks, it can be agreed that social encounters have become the primary content of numerous practices, artists providing a space for collaborators to investigate cultural and institutional contexts.

According to Bishop, art as a political trigger for participation is nothing new, since much of the art produced in the late 60s aspired to democratic outreach and was accompanied with rhetoric of democracy and emancipation.<sup>3</sup> Consider, for example, the Fluxus movement, which was most active between 1962 and 1978, emerging as a loose international association of artists working in a wide range of media.<sup>4</sup> Consciously incorporating audience participation and everyday life into their works, Fluxus artists sought to undermine the traditional role of art by demonstrating that everyone is in fact an artist. Many contemporary projects combine artistic production, curation and activism as ways to nourish self-determination and investigate cultural preconditions.<sup>5</sup> *Reverse Pedagogy* is no exception to this tendency. Envisioned as an extension of Butler's Collage Parties, which provide a frame for collaboration, *Reverse Pedagogy* is a radical departure from an art-school model whose structure facilitates a series of performative acts. To borrow from Bourriaud, the school provides the opportunity for a series of intersubjective encounters that are elaborated on collectively—the residency becoming an artwork unto itself.<sup>6</sup> What is therefore occurring within this nomadic school is an artistic examination of pedagogical process using a living model.

The guiding principle of art school is to serve as a training institution for artists so that they can acquire the skills recognized within the existing aesthetic canon. Historical shifts in this academic tradition have placed a greater emphasis on the creative freedom of the individual. Despite this change in approach a larger, question still remains: what is art if one is supposed to be able to teach or learn it in the first place? Schools are fundamental in reinforcing cultural rules and standards, acting as gatekeepers by deciding which students receive secure acceptance into the art world.<sup>7</sup> In place of the increasingly corporatized structure of the university, a growing number of free projects have developed that emphasize differ-

2 Maria Lind, "The Collaborative Turn," in *Taking The Matter Into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*, eds. Johanna Billing, Maria Lind and Lars Nilsson (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), 16.

3 Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall 2004), 61.

4 Rudolf Frieling, ed., *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now* (San Francisco: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 94.

5 Lind, 17.

6 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods and Mathieu Copeland (Paris: Presses du réel, 2002), 22.

7 Ibid.





Reverse Pedagogy, Nautical Waste Theme Party, 2008

8 Stephan Dilemuth, "Schools of Thought," *Frieze* 101 (September 2006), [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/schools\\_of\\_thought](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/schools_of_thought).

9 Waldo Bien, "Free International University: World Art Collection," (1999), [http://www.fiuwac.com/html/fiuwac\\_statement.html](http://www.fiuwac.com/html/fiuwac_statement.html).

10 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1991), 15–16.

11 Rancière, 715.

12 Paul Butler, "Reverse Pedagogy," *Canadian Art* 25 (Winter 2008), 62.

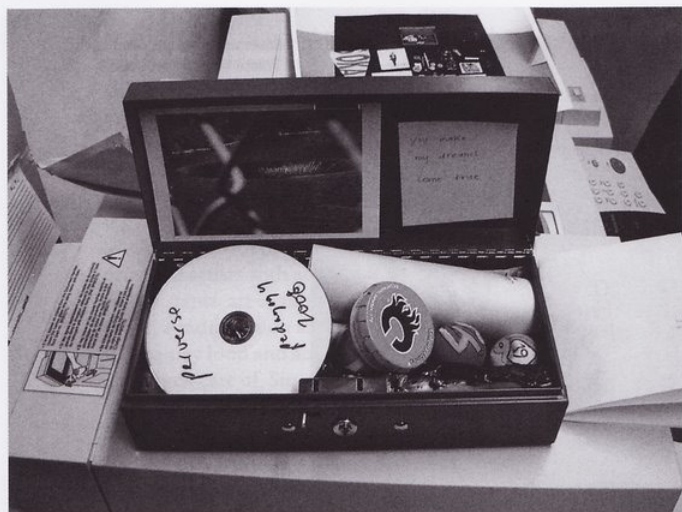
ence and collaboration by carrying out project-oriented research *in life and on life*.<sup>8</sup> Consider, for example, Los Angeles artist Fritz Haeg's eclectic home/studio known as the Sundown Schoolhouse, where workshops, classes and seminars encourage participants of all ages to study through an actively creative practice that engages the everyday world. This challenge to pedagogy has had a strong historical precedence through models such as Black Mountain College (1933–1957), which encouraged experimentation and the quest for experience, and Joseph Beuys' Free International University of Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research (FIU) founded in 1974, which admitted all students, seeking to help every person realize their full creative capacity.<sup>9</sup>

The traditional school system is based on the patriarchal model of the master schoolteacher who imparts knowledge onto his students. However, according to Jacques Rancière's book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (1991), one does not need a master teacher, since learning is propelled by desire and the constraint of a situation. Recounting the story of 17th-century professor Joseph Jacotot, who showed illiterate parents how they could teach their children how to read themselves, Rancière argues that in order to be emancipated one must be conscious of his or her own intelligence, which enables one to learn without explication.<sup>10</sup> Pedagogy is, in fact,

founded on the myth of the necessary dissemination of knowledge, which divides inferior and superior intelligences, and therefore sustains the power and the workings of the social world.<sup>11</sup> When considering the implications of Rancière's thesis, Butler's call for intellectual emancipation elicits self-directed learning in place of school that maintains the status quo. He has cited Rancière's writings as an influence in his formulation of *Reverse Pedagogy*, the residency serving as a space of intellectual freedom where artists can develop their practice by interacting with one another away from the pressures of the art world.<sup>12</sup>

*Reverse Pedagogy* unpacks the dominant pedagogical model that art school is beholden to by emphasizing art-making as a process of building social agency that opens new sites of artistic inquiry. By creating a social experiment where art school has no master teacher and is free from external social and economic pressures, participants exposed the repression of artistic agency in the art world at large. By shifting the residency emphasis from the training of artists to self-directed learning, *Reverse Pedagogy* provided access to creative exploration and a mode of potentiality. While evoking an institutional model where the social characteristics of art school are adopted without the trappings of classrooms and rules, experimental interactions that destabilized traditional working methods reignited. Collaborations between





**ABOVE**  
Reverse Pedagogy, Time  
Capsule Interior, 2008  
PHOTO: SCOTT ROGERS

**RIGHT**  
Reverse Pedagogy,  
Sealing the Time  
Capsule, 2008  
PHOTO: SCOTT ROGERS



**LEFT**  
Reverse Pedagogy, Burying  
the Time Capsule, 2008  
PHOTO: DEAN BALDWIN

members of the group created situations where artists could explore their own working conditions and the impact of these exchanges on their practice. This is Rancière's self-directed learning ad infinitum, an open space where every person can take full measure of their capacities with others and decide how to use them.<sup>13</sup> Unlike a number of relational works that emphasize the experience of the audience, *Reverse Pedagogy* is an exercise in artistic emancipation in the name of artist-directed activity.

While appealing to the potential qualities of art school, *Reverse Pedagogy* will never become a plausible institution itself. The Banff residency was not a totally harmonious micro-utopia that could provide a working model for a happier tomorrow: havoc sometimes reigned and

social divisions and physical injuries took place, making it unlikely to be taken on by any school as a sustainable endeavor. However, the impact of the residency lies in its function as a laboratory for creating constant flux, and opening questions and possibilities of artistic agency that challenge hierarchical pedagogical models. The tensions that occurred in Banff are just as telling as the successful collaborations, since each experience emphasizes the role of constant dialogue and negotiation necessary for rethinking our social world.<sup>14</sup> Complete artistic freedom is something that would not otherwise take place, and gives rise to moments and situations that reveal some of the fruitful possibilities of learning through artist-directed activity. Borrowing from Beuys' theory of art as social

13 Rancière, 17.

14 Bishop, 79.



19. Bieri.

20. Mark Clintberg, "Reverse Pedagogy: Roundtable with Paul Butler, Ashley Neese, Dean Baldwin, Harrell Fletcher, Justin Waddell, Kristian Horton, Scott Rogers, and Kitty Scott," *Akimblog* (January 2009), <http://www.akimblog.biz/akimblog/tid=552>.

sculpture, constant change and permanent dialogue have the potential to release binding patterns of history and bring forward the energies of creativity in any realm.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it is *Reverse Pedagogy's* constantly shifting structure of collaboration, and the successes and pitfalls of this process, that allow for the work to be politically salient.

It is without a doubt that the second installment of *Reverse Pedagogy* in Venice will take on a totally different structure and outcome than the first. This is in fact the strength of *Reverse Pedagogy's* model: a nomadic art school whose students are constantly rotating and therefore eliciting new creative potentials. For this upcoming edition, Butler has handed off the role of "non-facilitator" to Baldwin, who is known for his social art projects *Exit Poll Cocktail Toll* (2008) and *Minibar* (2007), which "both encourage intoxication and a certain abandonment of decorum, even etiquette."<sup>16</sup> A self-proclaimed social instigator, Baldwin is well suited to lead the group to Europe for a collaborative experiment in leisure and learning. Activities that *Reverse Pedagogy 2* have in the works include a portage and canal trip with 20 canoes from Venice's shipping port to their palazzo home base; a linguini dinner where the ink sacs from cuttlefish will stain the pasta and lips of the group; and the installation of Baldwin's northern woods log cabin, *The Algonquin Tiki Tiki Hut*, in the city's fish market, where the group will serve southern beach culture cocktails in pineapples and coconuts for the Canadian Pavilion's opening party. Plans for other public performances, discussions, presentations, publications and exhibitions during and after the residency have also been discussed, and it has been agreed that a blogger will be on site 24 hours a day to keep everyone at home up to speed on the group's activities.

The most significant change between the first and second residency is the location and timing of activities: *Reverse Pedagogy 2* is deliberately situating itself in the midst of the Venice Biennale opening. The Venice Biennale is the oldest, largest and most revered international contemporary art exhibition. The parties and events that come with the biennale's opening attract thousands of international artists, curators, critics, celebrities, media, tourists and hangers-on from the furthest corners of the globe for a frenzy of activity that has little to do with looking at art (in 2007, the Venice Biennale had 1.5 million visitors over the course of seven months). Embedding the residency within the hyper-social structure of the biennale's opening will provide *Reverse Pedagogy* with the opportunity to raise questions around international

exhibition practices, and the contexts that determine their structure. While Butler's group created a node of activity within what is almost an art school itself, *Reverse Pedagogy 2* will be far removed from such sustained institutional support. Instead, the new group will meld their social laboratory with the international art circuit, expanding the project into new artistic and pedagogical possibilities of the everyday.

*Reverse Pedagogy* has developed into a nomadic experimental school that undermines dominant pedagogies responsible for determining our cultural norms. By introducing a residency to The Banff Centre that appropriated the framework of an art school while removing the master teacher and rules of the classroom, Butler opened new possibilities for artistic agency and creativity. The spirit of exchange that evolved in Banff resulted in a flurry of collaborative activities that constituted *Reverse Pedagogy* as an artwork unto itself, and served as a living model for the possibilities of self-directed learning. In this context, collaborative art-making was pitted against hierarchical modes of schooling, and provided access to creative potentials that were nourished by self-determination. Excited by what occurred in Banff and the potential of moving the collective into new contexts, Butler has worked with Baldwin to prepare the second installment of *Reverse Pedagogy* in Venice, and is already working out plans for a third *Reverse Pedagogy* in Sligo, Ireland. While the outcome of the Venice residency will ultimately be determined by its participants, it will be exciting to observe the collaborations that unfold as this dynamic group engages the world's largest contemporary art gathering. ♦

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