



Most Serene Republics **Curatorial Statement**

Edgar Heap of Birds is the creator of some of the earliest and most memorable conceptual Native American art in the United States. Drawing on language and history, Heap of Birds's installations, prints, paintings, and drawings explore the often contested relationships between non-Indian historical accounts and Native memory, and the negotiated alterity of the contemporary Native experience. The Cheyenne/Arapaho artist (b. 1954) is perhaps best known for his public art installations, which—employing the framework of official signage—engender a dialogue between place, history, and a sometimes unsuspecting audience.

The exhibition *Most Serene Republics* refers to Heap of Birds's interest in the creation of republics or nation-states through acts of aggression, displacement, or replacement of populations and cultures. As he states, "The nature of their creation is to eclipse or absorb previous societies and governmental groups." Two temporary public installations of signage seek to engage Venetians, passing tourists, and members of the international art community who temporarily occupy this unique place, steeped in its multifaceted history.

The first installation is in the Giardini Reali near Piazza San Marco, the site of Napoleon Bonaparte's obliteration of local architecture to create a pastoral view of the Grand Canal from the Imperial Palace. Heap of Birds's installation of eight signs examines and deconstructs elements of Venetian history, including the Fourth Crusade at the beginning of the thirteenth century, plunder, and Venetian artistic and nautical achievements. Yellow borders on the signs underscore parallels between the first "ghetto" established in Venice to contain and control the Jewish population and Indian reservations created to contain and control Native people. This work is both an examination of the past and a critical dialogue about present-day global conflict and "crusades."

The second installation is between the Giardini Napoleonici and Via Garibaldi, along the Viale Garibaldi, a site where homes were destroyed by Napoleon in order to create a grand, processional avenue. Here Heap of Birds pays homage to the Native actors/warriors who traveled to Venice and other European cities as part of Wild West shows in the 1880s and 1890s while simultaneously commenting on their displacement both from and within their own country. The artist's choice of this location—a space with both symbolic and literal reference to the end of Venetian independence and existence as a sovereign entity—adds further depth and resonance to the memory of these events. The words "HONOR" and "RAMMENTARE" repeat in a fugue of sixteen signs that recite the names of Native "Show Indians" and members of their families who perished during nineteenth-century European tours. "It is a human right to have a voice and be heard," the artist observes. "So often our Native American heritage is represented by silent faces, stoic in their repression. My work in Venice begins with a belated honoring of those Native spirits who died in Europe as part of the Wild West spectacles."

In both installations, multilingual signs in Italian, English, and Cheyenne repeat in multiples of four—a symbolic, ceremonial number among the Cheyenne that Heap of Birds employs to mend the imbalance created by the exploitation of indigenous people. Other details are also symbolic: the green borders of the Viale Garibaldi signs incorporate the repeating ceremonial symbols of an eagle and a shield with a Christian cross, alluding to sacrifice and spirituality, as well as the medieval crusades; the borders of the Giardini Reali signs feature a fitched cross associated with war and religious zeal.

Heap of Birds has also created a series of text interventions scattered throughout Venice during the 52nd International Art Exhibition. At Marco Polo International Airport, a billboard designed by the artist greets international visitors at the Customs checkpoint for arrivals from outside the European Union. His thought-provoking words appear on posters and on notices in the vaporettos (water buses) that travel the canals.

Most Serene Republics, a transitory installation, reminds us to “Rammentare: Remember” the past as we question our complicity in events of the present.

-Truman Lowe and Kathleen Ash-Milby, Curators