

Remodeling the Montreal Biennial: A Q&A With Director Sylvie Fortin

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15/08/14 9:26 AM EDT



Sylvie Fortin
(Courtesy of the BNLMTL)

For its 2014 edition, [La Biennale de Montréal](#) (BNLMTL) is undergoing what its leadership is terming a "radical shift." Bringing on Sylvie Fortin as the executive and artistic director, absorbing the Quebec Triennial, and joining into partnerships with the Musée d'art contemporain and other local institutions are all big changes for the Canadian exhibition, which opens this fall. This year's theme, "L'avenir (looking forward)," is fitting when considering all the changes afoot — it will encompass works by Ursula Biemann, Thomas Hirschhorn, Shirin Neshat, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Andrea Bowers, and 45 other artists and collectives. ARTINFO recently sat down with Fortin to discuss the particularities of Montreal's art scene, Wodiczko's commissioned artwork, and the biennial's major themes.

There's a big push this year to make the biennial "a landmark event on the international cultural calendar," to use language from a press release. How do you transform a regional exhibition into one that gets international exposure?

I think for me it's not so much to make it an international event, but to really bear witness to the fact that the local and the global are so connected. Montreal is a very cosmopolitan city. It's not unusual for people in Montreal to speak four or five languages. I think that's really specific to Montreal. So we are trying to undo that dichotomy and to impress upon local audiences that their very lives are much more global than we might think. I think that's where it started. It wasn't about a desire to be global, but rather a desire to be super specific about the local global engagements that do happen. Working with the Musée d'art contemporain was one way and then the other way is that we have a number of other partners. The museum was kind of the lever to start this show. You need to have some kind of base to make major change. It was the first step towards something that's now become much broader. We're working with three of the four universities, and more than likely all four, and we are also partnering with the Canadian Center for Architecture, the Museum of Fine Art, and with a number of artist-run spaces. Montreal is a place where knowledge and the academic industry is very close to the art scene in a way that is

super specific. So how do we present that? We present that by multiplying the base from which the biennial emerges.

The biennial will give a special focus to Montréal's art communities and half of the participating artists are Canadian. What is the Montreal scene like?

Like most of Canada, because the system is basically relying on state funding, the work that comes out is very often research-based. It's not market-driven because there is very little market. There is one, but it's not the dominant force. The dominant force is state funding, which is allocated through arts councils and those are peer reviewed. So it's artists allocating funding to artists. So that changes the whole reality. You have to make work that other artists find very interesting, find to be cutting edge. You have a lot more socially-integrated work, long-term research-based practice, performative time-based work. You also have two intellectual traditions: French and English. It's more than just language. It's worldviews, a whole set of theories. So these get negotiated in real time in Montreal and that's the only place on the planet where that is like that. For example, if you're in Paris you encounter American theory in translation. There's a time lag. And vice versa. In Montreal, these two things happen absolutely simultaneously. It's kind of this translation machine. With the lecture series we're doing, we are playing with language. Some will be in French; some will be in English. Thomas Hirschhorn is so generous and is doing two — one in French and one in English.

Was partnering with the institutions you mentioned earlier part of helping the biennial to grow and bring in bigger names?

I think it's probably the other way around. When I came, I proposed a vision, which was that the biennial had to play a more complex role in Montreal and that would be done in two ways. One is not denying the fact that we are inheriting this biennial that local artists felt entitled to major representation in every three years. That's a reality and the objective of that was to give them visibility and open some markets for them. However, to ghettoize it within Quebec doesn't really lead to those results. We have a responsibility and we want to engage the local arts communities so we are going to do that by also welcoming a broad range of international artists. This is the first year that we are doing that so we want to invite international artists who are perhaps better known because that pulls the attention. But on the other hand the whole biennial hopes to be surprising. There's a lot of research that has been done by the curators. In our international representation, yes we have a few big names, but we also have people whose work is amazing but has never been shown in Canada or North America. There are so many biennials and it is so easy to curate by the yellow pages, but we didn't want to do that. But, at the same time, it is important to bring in people whose work is better known but give them new opportunities. Many of these better known artists don't need the biennial so it's also their belief that this is an important project that they want to be a part of. The last thing Montreal wants is a cookie cutter biennial.

One of those better-known artists is Krzysztof Wodiczko, who has been commissioned to do a project. Did the site of Montreal draw him?

Both him and Lawrence Weiner have a long time relationship with Montreal. It's a city that they know well, that they've come back to. Krzysztof has Canadian citizenship. The context in which he is working is very different from anything he has done before.

So what form will the piece take?

The museum is in the entertainment district, which was an urban planning decision that was made — that Montreal was going to be a festival city. So an area of the city had to be redesigned and reconfigured to be able to welcome large numbers of people. In the immediate periphery of that neighborhood there is a very large homeless population with a number of missions and friendship centers. That is what struck him. They are just pushed to the margin of this grand social project. We hired someone who builds relationships with the St. Michael's Mission, a local friendship center, shelters for women. We told them all about Krzysztof's work and identified individuals who could be part of the project. Last week we were able to do the shooting in a studio

in Montreal. Ultimately what will happen is that this large projection will be on the whole façade of a large theater. You can see it from blocks away and as you get closer you'll also start to hear the sound part of it, which is these homeless people speaking in French, English, Cree, and Innu about their experience and what it's like to be homeless in Montreal.

What are some major themes in the exhibition?

The major themes are the economy, the environment, and agency. Agency is like, what can art actually do? We make so many claims for art all the time. 'It's socially engaged and it's going to do all these things.' But we never stop and say, 'What *can* it actually do?' The environment of course is completely linked with issues of ethics and economics and, being in Canada, it is a very important question for many reasons. One is, of course, questions of water. We have the most water on the planet and it is something that we are very conscious about. The other is resource extraction and fracking going on. The level of that practice in northern Canada is something that is very present. Also, if you're Canadian, the Arctic is very important, the melting of the ice. The Northwest Passage you can pass now. It's just water; it's no longer ice. The environment as a theme is locally grounded but allows us to talk about much bigger global concerns.