

# THE MIAMI RAIL

## Between Two Tomorrows: The 2014 Montreal Biennale

WINTER 2014

### BETWEEN TWO TOMORROWS: THE 2014 MONTREAL BIENNALE

Hunter Braithwaite



L'avenir (looking forward), the 2014 Montreal Biennale, arises from two perspectives that meet somewhere in the middle. L'avenir is French for what is to come. While that appears to be quite poetic, it could refer to anything between death and the pizza that you just ordered. Looking forward—well, you speak English. We have two conditions of the biennale: the expected object and state, and the expectation itself. Spread out over 14 venues, the biennale comprised 50 artists from 22 countries. Half the artists were from Canada; 16 were from Québec. Although it would be incorrect to reduce the art to a thematic checklist, it seemed that the majority of the pieces held a Janus-faced relationship to both the future and history. This relationship appeared structurally in many of the ongoing research-based projects on display. It also appeared in the content of many pieces explicitly dealing with history.

---

In his essay “Between Two Colmars,” John Berger brackets the frustrated dreams of 1968 with two equidistant viewings of the Grünewald Altarpiece, in 1963 and in 1973. During the first viewing, his eyes were aided by hope, that “marvelous focusing lens,” so he had the fortitude to focus on the negative aspects of the painting, namely disease. Only when he returned, several years after those hopes were squashed one by one, was he able to see the painting in a new, more nuanced light colored by centerless and ubiquitous doubt.

Similarly, *L’avenir* (*looking forward*), the 2014 Montreal Biennale, arises from two perspectives that meet somewhere in the middle. *L’avenir* is French for *what is to come*. While that appears to be quite poetic, it could refer to anything between death and the pizza that you just ordered. Looking forward—well, you speak English. We have two conditions of the biennale: the expected object and state, and the expectation itself. Spread out over 14 venues, the biennale comprised 50 artists from 22 countries. Half the artists were from Canada; 16 were from Québec. Although it would be incorrect to reduce the art to a thematic checklist, it seemed that the majority of the pieces held a Janus-faced relationship to both the future and history. This relationship appeared structurally in many of the ongoing research-based projects on display. It also appeared in the content of many pieces explicitly dealing with history.

That history often was localized around the social movements of Canada in the late 1960s. Not only was 1967 the centennial anniversary of the country, the World Expo was also held in Montreal that year, for which the city was branded the city of the future. Eyes were looking toward the past and toward the future. The entire atmosphere was one of promise—a truly bilingual city in the New World. Buckminster Fuller brought a dome. At the same time, however, the separatist group Front de libération du Québec was bombing shops and kidnapping politicians. If the past can be viewed through rose-colored glasses, they are the wrong prescription.

Sylvie Fortin led the biennale with a team of four curators: Peggy Gale, Lesley Johnstone, Gregory Burke, and Mark Lanctôt. While each of the four curators surely had a distinct plan for the biennale, it was impressive to see how it all came together. Unlike the last Whitney, they weren’t given separate floors. Still, some of the tastes influenced the whole. Gale freely admitted that she loved the moving image, a predisposition that explained the glut of film and video works on display. To be fair, from a phenomenological perspective, few modes of art approach the future (that is, the passage of time from

---

now...to now) better than the moving image.

Work revolved around several themes: the Anthropocene, the digital, and, as mentioned above, the past. Due to Montreal's history as a port city and Canada's proximity to the Arctic, it is no surprise that much of the ecologically oriented works examined water and ice. Artists and groups like Klara Hobza, Lawrence Weiner, Arctic Perspective Initiative, and Hito Steyerl took on liquid in one way or another. The digital world and all of its ramifications shook through powerful displays by Andrea Bowers, Jillian Mayer, and Simon Denny. And research-based projects look back to history in order to envision the future. What follows is a recollection of the opening days of the biennale and some of the pieces that this writer, now wedged inescapably in the future, remembers from that press trip long ago.

The biennale began in the rotunda of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. The space was filled with a disorientating archive flume by Montreal artist Étienne Tremblay-Tardif. For the past five years, the young Quebecois has researched the Turcot interchange, a crumbling symbol of 20th-century idealism and urbanist hubris. Built in record time to facilitate access to the World Expo in 1967, the interchange was made out of subpar materials and has been in decline ever since. It is supposed to be torn down, but even that requires a degree of transparency and competency that evades the local politicians. For this installation, Tremblay-Tardif hung many prints in caution colors on several layers of metal cord crisscrossing the room's overhead space. His archive seemed to mimic political protest posters, as well as the architecture of the interchange itself.

Also in the first room was a shipping palette filled with nude postcards by Jillian Mayer. For the project, "400 Nudes" (2014), the Miami-based artist trawled Reddit, 4chan, and revenge-porn sites gathering nude selfies. She photographed herself in a similar pose, and then photoshopped her face onto the bodies. From there, the life of the image split. She uploaded the new selfies onto the Internet, branded with scarlet-letter SEO terms that will link them back to porn sites and also to the artist's web presence. She also printed off hundred of small, pocket-size photographs that would be distributed around the city.

The bulk of the work is upstairs, except if one follows Klara Hobza's whimsical "Diving Across Europe" (2010) downstairs. The Berlin-based artist taught herself to scuba dive in order to plunge into each body of water that she comes to as she bisects the continent north to south. The piece was installed on a series of monitors mounted on each side of the staircase. It begins comically (her flopping about in fins on the shoreline) before following the viewer down—glug, glug, glug—to a submarine depth where borders disappear and all you can hear is the sound of your ears popping.

In the basement is Amanda Beech's nail-biting "Total Machine" (2013). Displayed on an immersive three-channel theater, the piece combines sniper-scope vignettted footage of high deserts, Miami highways, and other noir landscapes (basically, a more scenic Zapruder film) with an unerring, unshaking voiceover blending the CIA, Michael Mann, and Louis Althusser. The monologue is purposefully opaque—one might say redacted—but the (e)visceral power brought me back again and again.

Upstairs there is a dark room with a sign outside it barring children from entering. Inside, one finds Thomas Hirschhorn's "Touching Reality" (2012), four minutes and 45 seconds of a woman's manicured finger pinching and swiping (such violent words) through a touch-screen sideshow of mutilated dead bodies. While we don't know the exact cause of death, the amount of headshots and the demographics of the dead (young, male, olive skin) place the bloodshed to the Middle East. It only speaks to the

---

detachment of the image that I felt the piece's main ethical concern was whether it was OK *to look* at these dead bodies. Never mind the fact that they didn't have to be blown to bits in the first place.

Hito Steyerl's "Liquidity, Inc." (2013), like cement around the ankles, engages the viewer all the way to the bottom. As layers of meaning and Adobe After Effects move from below to above, the viewer plunges in a controlled free fall. The piece follows the burgeoning career of an MMA fighter. It takes a martial arts trope ("Be water my friend") and applies it our current economy, suggesting the potential of a proletariat liquidity, a state of flexibility defined not by the accumulation of capital, but by something else that I didn't really grasp because I had fallen asleep. The video was installed on the flatbottom end of a quarter pipe that was topped with a blue dojo mat so that it both resembled a wave and the MMA ring. (I shouldn't be shamed for sleeping in Steyerl's installation. During one of the riveting early morning artists' panels, she said that the only thing she expects from video art installation is that the room provides the viewer with a place "to sleep, or to make out, to do anything except be surveilled.")

Andrea Bowers takes over the end of a main hall with a series of meticulously rendered drawings text messages from the Steubenville High School rape case. The event and its aftermath (plus the false event and real aftermath, since rumors and backtracking are cemented in courtroom testimony) plays out in drawing after drawing. Against a cloudy blue background, the words levitate. Until you begin to read. Then they ossify and drop to the floor. I tried to walk away from the piece but couldn't. It's not just the sexual assault that horrifies, it's the loss of the moment, the fact that this won't disappear into the ether, not for the perpetrators, not for the community, and not for Jane Doe.

When viewers finally pull themselves away from Bowers's piece, their exhaustion is cunningly embodied by a taxidermied owl that Abbas Akhavan placed against the wall of the gallery. Walking away, you look back to see the text disappear into clouds, giving the whole installation the feel of a celestial screensaver. If you walk just far enough away your eyes also catch half of Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's video in the adjacent gallery, which features children playing until fatigue pulls them into sleep. That's one of the uncanny pairings of the exhibition.

One of the most divisive works in the show was Simon Denny's "All You Need is Data" (2012). The New Zealand artist gathered images and quotes from different presentations about the brave new tech scene and presented an astonishingly banal 90 inkjet prints on canvas installed waist-level on a serpent of metal railings. The effect was to bottleneck the entire second floor of the museum, causing visitors to slow down as if they were at a TSA checkpoint or were lab rats in an experimental trial for a really shitty version of Adderall. TED talks, Powerpoints, Lanyards, everything that is bad in the world made it into Denny's installation, which was one of the most exciting pieces in the museum.

\*\*\*

The biennale spilled out into Montreal, taking place in 13 other locations, both suited for showing art or press-ganged into doing so. At the Parisian Laundry, Edgar Arceneaux presented his film "A Time to Break Silence" (2013). Set in a ruin-porn church in Detroit, the film combines the Dr. Martin Luther King speech of the same name with Stanley Kubrick's *A Space Odyssey* and sets it all to a techno soundtrack. There was also a smoke machine, which I feel makes a point for me.

---

The Darling Foundry, an artist residency set in a beautiful industrial building, included a Li Ran video and a nice Lawrence Weiner. At the Arsenal there was a suite of strong videos, including Basim Magdy's "The Dent" (2014), which matched evocative footage with equally evocative story, although I don't think they evoked the same thing. The result was an exciting mix of Chris Marker and Gabriel García-Márquez.

Then there was work that wasn't work at all. As part of their ongoing *Heteropolis* project, Adaptive Actions (Jean-Maxime Dufresne and Jean-François Prost) examined the out of sight reaches of the Underground City, a 30-km underground ring of shops and passageways designed to shield the city's people from their sun-death winter climate. Having yet to discover the Keurig hidden in my hotel wardrobe, I had unknowingly staggered into this subterranean world in an early morning search for coffee. I found none, but did stumble across a section of the Berlin Wall in one of the skylit arcades. The muzak-drenched end of history was too much that early in the morning. It was like Kevin Smith doing Francis Fukuyama, or vice versa.

As I walked toward the wall, in an underground quarter of this historic city of the future, temporal binaries toppled as they would on East German television. In the end, the biennale creates a field of contemplation between the subject looking forward and the approaching object, a field not bound by physical limitations, but only by our imagination. In that same early morning panel, Hito Steyerl put it nicely: "Any imagination of the future pales in comparison to the complexities of the present."

*Hunter Braithwaite contributes to Ocean Drive, The Paris Review, and The Virginian-Pilot.*