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— A RETURN TO ART CRITICISM —

FEATURES

REVIEWS

ART NEWS

ABOUT

EVENTS

FUTURE FORECAST: THE MONTREAL BIENNALE 2014

BY SAELAN TWERTY • REVIEWS • NOVEMBER 10, 2014



Emmanuelle Leonard, "Postcard From Bexhill-on-Sea," 2014.

The Montreal Biennale is at once a new institution and an old one. Last year, the previous iteration of the Biennale (independently operated since 1998) merged with the Musée d'art contemporain's own Quebec Triennial (held twice since 2008), becoming a new, jointly administered event. Gregory Burke and Peggy Gale had been contracted since 2011 to curate what would have been the Biennale's 2013 installment. Once under the wing of the MAC, the event was pushed to 2014. Two of the museum's own curators, Marc Lanctôt and Lesley Johnstone, joined the team and Sylvie Fortin was hired as the Biennale's new director. Now assembled, this new team had barely more than a year to realize the exhibition that opened on October 22nd. With the intellectual and financial resources of two organizations, the potential for a substantially larger and more ambitious international event was clear, but concerns remained: would this biennial be able to rise above its administrative disarray, or would it succumb to the proverbial dilemma of too many cooks?

It is a pleasure to report, then, that no sign of behind-the-scenes wrangling is noticeable at the 2014 Biennale de Montréal. The curatorial vision is cohesive, the work is generally very strong, and the ideas on offer are urgent and compelling. This is an especially pleasant surprise given that the theme – "L'avenir (looking forward)" – is very broad, as is often the case with large expositions like this one. Futurity is both a challenging idea and a timely one, since we live in a moment particularly short on long-term vision. Virtually every future scenario on offer in popular entertainment is post-apocalyptic, anticipating political or economic crisis, natural disaster, or both. It seems that no one expects our current mode of life to continue indefinitely, but the energy to imagine an alternative is little in evidence.

Within twentieth-century modernism, however, utopian ideas flourished. In an interview, Biennale co-curator Gregory Burke discussed how the theme of "Looking Forward" is partially a response to a particular trend within contemporary art of the last decade: artworks that take an archaeological approach to modernism, re-discovering and sometimes re-enacting key instances of utopian idealism (a high-water mark of this tendency

was dOCUMENTA 12 in 2007, for which one of the curatorial “leitmotifs” was the question, “Is Modernity Our Antiquity?”). From the vantage point of the present, modernist attempts at rupture look like a form of innocence we can no longer access.

This evident obsession with the past-as-archive prompted Burke and Peggy Gale to ask why more artists weren’t talking about the future. The result of their research (aided by the MAC’s curators) is a survey of artworks that relate to “what is to come,” sometimes by envisioning possible futures or sci-fi scenarios, but more often by responding to developments in the present that seem most likely to influence the future course of events. Also, despite Burke’s contention that the archaeology of modernism has become a predictable or worn-out trope, a number of works in the Biennale do revisit historical instances of futurism.

In fact, the first work one encounters on entering the MAC is of this type. Etienne Tremblay-Tardif’s *Signage Matrix for the Refection of the Turcot Interchange*, an ongoing work begun in 2009 and slated to continue until 2020, consists of over 300 prints, projections, and sculptural elements based on architectural plans, documentation, and signage related to the monumental highway interchange in southwest Montreal that opened to traffic on the eve of Expo 1967. Tardif’s array of materials are installed on steel wires crisscrossing the Musée rotunda, creating a disorienting visual maze of layered, neon graphics that echoes the current state of the interchange, which, like most of the highways in and out of Montreal, is a crumbling nightmare of traffic congestion and disrepair. In many ways, the city already feels post-apocalyptic, having never recaptured the mood of optimistic futurism that peaked with Expo ’67 and evaporated amidst the violent separatist struggles and mass Anglophone exodus of the 1970s.

At the end of the rotunda, Emmanuelle Léonard’s video *Postcard from Bexhill-on-Sea* (2014) also ruminates on lost optimism. In it, we see shots of the empty beaches and shoreline of the titular British resort town as voice-over from elderly residents and visitors recounts their nostalgia for a more civil past (sometimes tinged with casual racism and xenophobia) and their bleak assessment of contemporary life. Léonard’s video is one of many works in the show that adopt a documentary or ethnographic mode. While Léonard focuses on particular communities and personal experience – in her other work in the Biennale, *La Providence* (2014), she interviews retired members of Montreal’s sisterhood of Grey Nuns – other documentary works in the exhibition consider the related nexus of resource extraction, climate change, and natural disaster.

Ursula Biemann’s eight-minute video *Deep Weather* (2013) links bitumen extraction in Alberta’s oil sands with rising sea levels in Bangladesh. Aerial footage of the oil fields’ scarred, quasi-alien landscape is juxtaposed with ground-level scenes of Bangladeshi villagers packing mud into sandbags by hand and carrying them on foot in order to build enormous embankments against the waters claiming their homes. The surreal heroism of their effort is all the more moving for being futile, a wholly temporary solution. The whispered, conspiratorial voice-over reminds the viewer of the planetary impact of human action in the face of invisible links between far-flung locales.

Isabelle Hayeur’s photos and video of post-Katrina New Orleans ply similar territory, displaying the still-visible traces of disaster (the works were produced in 2013) and suggesting a future in which extreme weather events are likely to grow even more frequent. While Hayeur’s video, *Aftermaths*, is a meditative, unpopulated series of stationary shots of buildings and landscapes, Susan Norrie’s *Rules of Play* (2009-2014) is even closer to a true documentary film than Biemann’s *Deep Weather*. Norrie is known for her activist video works, such as *Dissent* (2012), which addressed the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan and the subsequent protests against nuclear power. In *Rules of Play*, she looks at oil and gas development in the subarctic sea between Russia and Japan, a territory claimed by both powers, but also prone to earthquakes and volcanic activity that menace extraction efforts. Over hauntingly beautiful shots of rigs at night and tankers gliding across frigid black water, a narrator from the region’s indigenous population relates the traditional environmental knowledge of his community.

A number of other contributors to the Biennale also take arctic regions as their subject matter, proposing the frozen north as a potential site of future struggles. The Arctic Perspective Initiative, co-founded by Montrealer Matthew Biederman and Slovenian Marko Peljhan, is among the most interesting. Part art project and part activist non-profit, API conducts exchanges with Northern communities in order to imagine, design, and build new technologies that empower indigenous peoples against the exploitative corporations encroaching on their lands. Their sci-fi(ish) installation featured an aerial drone, a “modular habitat” called *KALLITAQ* (it looks like a giant wooden sled-skeleton), and a data console that displays real-time information from devices all over the arctic. The API’s problem-solving, design-oriented techno-optimism was something of an anomaly in a show otherwise dominated by darker visions, such as Kevin Schmidt’s *A Sign in the Northwest Passage* (2010-present), for which the artist installed a large wooden sign on drifting ice in the Northwest Territories, hand-routed with an apocalyptic verse from The Book of Revelation.

As visitors to the Biennale are likely to notice, this exhibition is dominated by installation and video-projection works to an even greater extent than is already typical in major international art events. Of the fifty artists and collectives contributing to the Biennale, twenty-three employ video or film in some form. The sheer combined running time of these moving images is staggering – watching all of it would be practically impossible, even

for a committed viewer on multiple visits. Burke's curatorial statement argues that "situational, performative and temporal" works have an intrinsic relation to the theme of "looking forward," which may be true, but it would be more instructive to admit that, especially in the context of a sprawling biennial, visitors aren't really expected to sit down and watch contemporary video works front-to-back. Rather, what makes both video and installation the dominant artistic forms of the present is the fact that they allow an artist to develop the work as a project or platform that brings together diverse resources, objects, bodies of knowledge, and often the skillsets of other people (fabricators, actors, technicians, etc.). Artistic labor in this mode is brought in line with the highest-status form of value creation in our society: information management. Artists both manage information and make their work manageable. Accordingly, the principal value of such work for curators is its degree of curatability: it can contain a high density of ideas, techniques, and references, which makes it ideal for forming connections with other work in order to advance a curatorial argument. It's often said that curators are meta-artists, but artists themselves have become more and more curatorial in the way they work. For example, the most interesting things about Oleg Tcherny's video *The General Line* (2014) are that its narrator is philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who reads a text by Galileo, while the title is a reference to Sergei Eisenstein's film of the same name. Likewise, Edgar Arceneaux's sci-fi video *A Time to Break Silence* (2013) tries to forge an associative connection between Martin Luther King Jr.'s last public speech and Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which was released only two days before King's death in 1968. The piece is set in a crumbling Detroit church where an ape-man witnesses King's speech delivered by an apparition. Despite its high production values and booming score by legendary Detroit techno producers Underground Resistance, the piece is unfortunately boring and aimless, failing to rise above its references. However, if the goal is actually for the viewer to browse, staying only long enough to get a sense of the work's aesthetic before glancing at the wall text and moving on, then it succeeds in advancing the curatorial agenda.

Relying so heavily on video and installation, then, is a function of the priority that the curators give to art as discourse and information. Artworks function like a collection of key concepts or tags that exist to stimulate thought and discussion. In the worst case, this could come at the expense of art as experience, but what really elevates this biennial is the way that it takes its own operating method as a specific theme: if art has become more networked and idea-driven, it's because everything has. Accordingly, a number of works in the exhibition – in fact, many of the most compelling ones – address the supremacy of the information economy and its associated forms of commerce (technology, finance, "creative" industries), calling attention to their likely influence on the shape of the future.

Simon Denny's installation *All You Need Is Data: The DLD 2012 Conference REDUX Rerun* (2012) walks the viewer through the 2011 Digital Life Design conference, a tech-industry gathering that brought together speakers from major companies like Google, Tumblr, Soundcloud, eBay, and Dropbox, as well as publishers, universities, and government agencies (including the White House press secretary and former Clinton administration advisors). Denny literalized the conference's various panels by digitally printing canvases with graphic representations of each session's content and participants and mounting them on a structure of metal stanchions that physically guides the viewer through the proceedings. Amidst the information overload and the stream of occasionally zany, I-drunk-the-Kool-Aid pronouncements, it becomes increasingly clear how much power is in the hands of private companies who, despite their laidback presentation, are not only shaping the future through technological development, but also actively seeking to influence the political climate (in part through private, invite-only meet-ups like *DLD*).

The business of speculating on the future is also the subject of Richard Ighby and Marilou Lemmens's *The Prophets* (2014), an installation of over 400 tiny sculptures based on graphs and charts taken from journals of economics, measuring things like "Jobless and Wageless Recoveries" and "Credit Requirements for Interest-Rate Swap Portfolios." Made from fragile, humble materials like bamboo skewers, fishing line, and cellophane, Ighby and Lemmens's jewel-like miniatures parody the authority of what Thomas Carlyle called "the dismal science," while suggesting an unforeseen relation between artistic and economic abstractions.

For me, one of the highlights of the exhibition was Hito Steyerl's video installation *Liquidity Inc.* (2014), which managed to unite all of the Biennale's sub-themes (climate, information technology, speculative finance) in one place. Projected in front of a wavelike ramp clad in the kind of padded blue mats used to floor martial-arts gymnasiums, the video loosely coheres around the story of Jacob Wood, a war orphan born in Vietnam who emigrated to the U.S. as a child and eventually became a financial advisor. After losing his job in the 2008 financial crisis, he embarked on a career in mixed martial arts. Taking off from a famous remark Bruce Lee made in an interview (which, in the video, plays off of an iPhone screen) that the martial artist must "be water," Steyerl uses water as a flexible metaphor for adaptation to unpredictable circumstances, whether in financial markets, cage fighting, or extreme weather. Through a warped visual logic immersed in internet culture, Steyerl implies that the future will be stormy, and survival may depend on adept mimicry of the very forces that imperil us.

What makes Steyerl's piece so enjoyable is the way she presents a constellation of urgent issues without succumbing to didacticism (which has not always been the case with her work). In *Liquidity Inc.*, the visual language takes on a life of its own, flowing in, out, and around the content that it conveys with protean, irreducible energy. This is true of the Biennale in general. Despite being highly curated and idea-driven, the frame doesn't overpower the art. On the contrary, the different works speak to each other so extensively that even the weaker

ones seem enriched by the juxtaposition.

Further, the strongest works aren't necessarily the ones by the most high-profile artists – the focus on Canadian and Quebec-based contributions, especially by emerging artists, pays off with plenty of pleasant surprises. That two teams of curators were able to achieve such a level of thematic consistency across such a large exhibition with such a limited amount of time is a remarkable achievement, no doubt attributable in large part to the organizational acumen of Sylvie Fortin. Indeed, for the revamped Biennale de Montréal, the future looks bright.

The 2014 Biennale de Montréal runs until January 4, 2015 at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal as well as various satellite spaces. Given the enormous breadth of the 2014 Biennale de Montréal, this survey only scratches the surface of the works on offer. Visitors can also look forward to other impressive works by Suzanne Treister, Althea Thauberger, Goldin+Senneby, Thomas Hirschhorn, Andrea Bowers, Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen, Raymond Boisjoly, Abbas Akhavan, Jillian Mayer, and many others.