

The Gazette

montrealgazette.com

Visual Arts: A sneak peak at the Montreal Biennial 2014 event has attracted art world stars like Thomas Hirschhorn and Lawrence Weiner



The Montreal Biennial doesn't begin at its main venue until Oct. 22, but an exhibition at one of its collaborating galleries about the Earth as a commodity is already running and another show that opens Sept. 27 will reflect the performance of a real-world investment.

BNL MTL 2014 has been a long time coming — three years since the last one. It has an artistic director and four curators: Gregory Burke and Peggy Gale, who were hired for the biennial that was aborted in 2013, and Mark Lanctôt and Lesley Johnstone, who joined them when their employer, the Musée d'art contemporain, became a partner in the event.

The biennial presents 150 works by 50 artists and collectives at the MAC and its 12 collaborating galleries and artist-run centres. Half of the artists are Canadians, with 16 from Quebec; the other 25 represent 22 countries.

Looking Forward is the theme, with interpretations ranging from geopolitics to economics and what, if anything, art can do to influence the future, said Sylvie Fortin, artistic director of the biennial.

Organizers hope that BNL MTL 2014 will make Montreal a major art world attraction, Fortin said in an interview.

“Once you have a good idea, people want to be part of it,” she said, pointing to the participation of art world stars like Thomas Hirschhorn and Lawrence Weiner, and that major events will occur almost daily until the biennial closes Jan. 4.

Swiss-born Hirschhorn is known for dense installations about contemporary life that he makes from found imagery and texts and wrapped in cardboard, tape and plastic. He will give workshops at Concordia and UQAM.

Weiner, a New Yorker and regular visitor to Quebec, is a conceptual artist whose text-based work will be seen at the MAC, the Darling Foundry and at the René-Lévesque Blvd. entrance to Place Ville Marie.

The biennial has already begun at VOX, where Richard Ibgby and Marilou Lemmens extrapolate a future world that’s advertising its resources to the galaxy on The Golden USB.

The device, which would accompany a mission to outer space, contains The Trade Catalogue of Everything. VOX is showing the contents of the video catalogue that is advertising our goods, including air and water.

In one video, a woman pulls a plant from the ground and holds it up to the camera before tossing it aside and repeating the action with another plant. Earth is open for interstellar business.

Goldin+Senneby, a collective based in Stockholm, was given \$8,000 to finance M&A, an exhibition that opens Sept. 27 at SBC Gallery as a play rehearsal.

The Swedish art collective gave the money to investment banker Paul Leong, who invested it in a hedge fund using a trading algorithm Leong developed with a computer scientist.

The artists also hired a scriptwriter, a set designer and Gerard Harris, an actor who will interact with gallery visitors. The duration of his performance depends on the performance of the investment, Fortin said.

Also starting early (Oct. 8) is Krzysztof Wodiczko's projection of the images and voices of Montreal's homeless people onto the façade of Théâtre Maisonneuve.

At the Musée d'art contemporain, a video-and-sound exhibition will turn a staircase into a diving experience. It's the work of Klara Hobza, who began a 35-year project in 2010 to scuba dive along Europe's waterways, inch by inch.

The German artist had to learn how to dive, even to eat and sleep under water, Fortin said. Her art is "determination, passion, skills acquisition and putting her life on the line."

Another exhibition at the MAC concerns the Alberta oilsands. It is the work of Susan Turcot, a Montreal-born artist living in England who returned to the city this month to supervise construction of *Automobility*, a dead tree with limbs made of rubber tires.

Where Edward Burtynsky photographed the oilsands from far above to show the scars and open wounds inflicted on the landscape, Turcot gets up close and personal. Portraits she made during a 10-day stay in a work camp will accompany the dead tree.

The quandary for artists trying to highlight industrial damage to the environment is that the ugliness can be aesthetically stunning. Burtynsky's images of the grandeur of ruined landscapes are toned down when he includes humans, and Turcot takes the process further. She makes drawings that probe the workers' psyches, accompanied by texts that tell their stories (some can be seen at turning-down-the-noise.info).

"The focus became the workers," she said. "They are emotionally vulnerable, with an intense working life that is devoid of connections to place and family."

Sitting down with an individual worker for two hours to draw their portrait produced a quiet interval that "gave them space to be listened to," she said. A digging machine operator told her that he constantly fears he will break into an aquifer, adding to the number of wells that are poisoned.

In Canada, artists get more support from government grants, which reward research-driven art, than the art market, which puts a premium on craft. Turcot's drawings meet Fortin's standards for inclusion in the biennial: a rigour both of research and craft.

"Conceptual and material is a false dichotomy," Fortin said. "Research is thinking with the mind, craft is thinking with the body. It's not one or the other."

When the MAC became a partner in the Montreal Biennial, it dropped the Quebec Triennial, which had been a showcase for Quebec and Canadian art.

In an interview last summer, MAC director John Zeppetelli acknowledged the loss, but saw a positive result for Quebec artists participating in an international biennial.

"It might be better to have 16 Quebec artists seen in context with the rest of the world," he said.

The Montreal Biennial opens Oct. 22 and continues to Jan. 4 at the Musée d'art contemporain, 185 Ste-Catherine St. W. Information: www.bnlnl.org and macm.org.