

ArtReview

The Biennial Questionnaire: Gregory Burke

The co-curator of this year's Biennale de Montréal talks to us about futurity, the Quebec art scene and co-curating

By Louise Darblay



tReview: *In line with the idea of repositioning the Biennale on the international art map, the title of this Biennale is L'avenir (looking forward), presenting artists that react to current conditions and crisis by looking to possible futures. Can you tell us a bit more about this theme and how it will be articulated?*

Gregory Burke: The project was born out of an assessment of recent practice and discourse, which, in the previous decade, focused on a past often defined in ideological terms, a past reclaimed through the rediscovery of moments of utopian striving. This work often entailed research into the modernist archive accompanied by restaging practices that played around the performative. Much of this work sought to mobilise these prior moments in order to provide a lens on the present.

By 2011, when Peggy Gale, the Biennale co-curator, and I started to develop this project, we felt that the potential of this approach had either been exhausted or foreclosed, that it had settled into a form. For the archive to be artistically or discursively relevant, it would have to be approached differently, with an eye to the future. Looking around, I kept asking myself, 'Why aren't people talking about the future now, given that the future was such a focus of modernism?' In our early discussions, Peggy and I noted that the future often seemed to be defined by some kind of passage beyond a point of no return, that it could only be looked at in terms of crisis, if indeed, it could even be considered at all. That's what inspired the idea of exploring futurity and the role that art can play in influencing what is to come.

AR: *There is also a clear intention to give more visibility to artists from Quebec and Canada in general. How do you feel the work of the Quebec and Canadian art scene relate to this overarching theme of the future? Do you think it is particularly relevant in their practices?*

GB: In my introductory text, I allude to the 1960s, the future-focused episode of Montréal's history, which was both locally specific and very much connected to other global movements. Like a lot of cities in the West at that time, Montréal was trying to invent itself as a future-focused city. The central project of that socio-cultural enterprise was Expo 67, whose symbol quickly became Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome. A monorail led you into the dome where the exhibition *American Spirit Now*, featuring works by James Rosenquist, Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Jim Dine, Ellsworth Kelly, Barnett Newman, Robert Rauschenberg and Roy Lichtenstein, was on view at the lower level. From the upper reaches of the dome, the Gemini and Apollo spacecrafts were going to take people to the moon.

While Expo 67 was optimistically focused on progress, painting a bright, bold future for humankind, the separatist movement had been steadily gaining momentum in Quebec throughout the 1960s, proposing a different kind of future in line with the internationalisms defined by decolonisation struggles and the Civil Rights movement. In 1969, the Montreal Stock Exchange was bombed and by 1970 the October Crisis led to tanks rolling into Montreal. Many companies relocated their headquarters to Toronto, forever changing the face of Montreal.

In our concept, Montréal and Québec play important roles: as site, as figures of a certain now-past future, and as battlegrounds where conflicting futures have variously articulated the relationship of the local to the global, and continue to do so. This local-global shuffle is the context in which Montréal artists are working, and it variously impacts their work.

This leads to a second question, 'How can you move forward to the future?' or, more specifically, 'Is the future entirely influenced by a large global power or can it be influenced locally?' Of course, it can be influenced locally, but it's rather impossible to think of the local and the global separately. It's probably more accurate to conceptualise their relationship as an interaction. That's reflected in the exhibition. The works we selected are all recent, with the exception of Lawrence Weiner. His date from 1969, the very moment I just discussed, and they were actually made in Canada. They refer to the Arctic Circle. And so, moving out from Montréal, the show zooms out to the Canadian North or even the global North. The Arctic, as a nexus of environmental, geopolitical and economic concerns, is a touch point explored by number of artists in the show, including artists from Montréal, Vancouver, New York, Ljubljana and Zurich.

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Finally, the Quebec artists included in the Biennale paint a very different picture of contemporary local practice from what was expected, much like the selection of international artists includes a number of surprising choices. A number of these Québec artists, like Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens, Hajra Waheed, and Arctic Perspective Initiative, live and work in Montréal, have gained an international profile, but haven't been seen that much, if at all, in Montréal.

As the Biennale reinvented itself, it also sought to reinvent what we define as local and what we choose to put in the international category.

AR: What about artists from Asia, or South America? Canadian artists represent half of the artists shown at the Biennale, and it is surprising to see that, with the exception of China and Brazil, the rest of the artists mostly come from Western countries.

GB: This is always a difficult question. Many artists are based in Western countries because they've been forced into, have elected or were born in exile. Many operate fluidly between countries and communities. Today, residence, citizenship, identification and geography can't be simply equated. The negotiation is much more complex. Many of the Canadian artists in the Biennale operate across various Canadian locales and in India, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE as well as Sweden, France, the UK and Germany, for example.

Nevertheless, yes, I'm very conscious of the fact that the selected artists only live and work between 22 countries and that Europe, North America and the Middle East are well represented. This was not by design, by any means, but rather a result of the particular time and budget-constraints of this transitional edition of the biennial. The former organisers could not provide a travel budget. With only a year to the event when the new direction got underway, there was

insufficient time to travel.

It's very important, as a curator, to actually go to a place and try to ferret out what's happening under the surface. We weren't able to do that. Back in the 1990s and into the 2000s I was working a lot with Asia. Much has changed there since then, pointing to the necessity of curatorial travel and research. For Asian artists, the situation has got very interesting. We all know that story quite well. As they have become associated with large galleries in the west, many Chinese artists no longer live in China. But what about work that is counter to that, work that negotiates what happens after the globalised phenomenon of Chinese art? Little of that work is getting any international attention. Fortunately, we have two recent works by the [Beijing artist Li Ran](#) in the show.

The public programmes will include other artists – through screenings, talks, conferences, and so on – allowing us to present a greater range of practices and ideas, from both local artists and artists from other continents.

AR: For its 2014 edition, La Biennale de Montréal is also looking forward by partnering with [The Museum of Contemporary Art of Montreal](#), which has been hosting the first two editions of the Quebec Triennial (2008 and 2011). For the Museum, this new collaborative venture is a flagship event of its 50th anniversary celebration. What does this new partnership mean for the Biennale? Will the two events be merged in one?

GB: Structurally, the 2014 edition of the Biennale de Montréal incorporates these two previous exhibitions into one major event, mobilising the complementary skills and resources of the two prominent Montréal institutions, in addition to those of its other contributors. This is the first edition of a multi-year partnership.

Curatorially, the Biennale is still the Biennale: it's still working on the basis of the original proposal for *L'avenir* (looking forward) that Peggy and I put forth back in 2011. The Biennale's partnership with the Musée d'art contemporain has meant that the Museum has become the Biennale's main venue. It's also meant that the Biennale has inherited the time slot and resources formerly allocated to the Triennial.

By coming together and sharing resources, these two institutions have created the conditions of possibility for the development of a significant international biennial in Canada. That's important for Canadian artists and for the community in so many ways.

AR: You are four curators working on this edition, yourself and Peggy Gale, who have been invited by the Biennale, Lesley Johnstone and Mark Lanctôt, curators from the Contemporary art museum of Montreal where the core of the Biennale is

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presented, and then Sylvie Fortin as an artistic director, overseeing the project.

How did you manage this collaboration between independent and museum curating when designing the show?

GB: Peggy and I conceptualised the project in 2011. The Biennale de Montréal then underwent major transformation. It wasn't until, effectively, two years later, that the financial and logistical parameters of the project were formalised, after the Biennale de Montréal hired Sylvie Fortin to set it on a new course, to work out the new partnership with the Musée d'art contemporain and to invite other collaborations. It became a very different, citywide project. Back in 2011, we had already done a lot of the research and selected artists and works. It was to be a smaller Biennale, with limited resources and fewer artists. At that time, we could not invite a number of artists we would have liked to include.

Fast forward to fall 2013: with just a little over a year to the opening and a completely different set of conditions, Lesley Johnstone and Mark Lanctôt joined the curatorial team. For the project to succeed, evidently, it was very important for the museum to have a sense of shared ownership. They are the Biennale's main site. This is by far their biggest collaboration to date.

A new set of conditions also evidently required a thorough rethink: we first revisited the 2011 version of the project, which included 20 artists. What was still relevant? This led to a re-edit, followed by an important expansion. Mark and Lesley brought fresh eyes, new questions and solid knowledge of Quebec production. The expanded team means that we benefit from the networks and experiences of four curators to develop *L'avenir* (looking forward).

We had to consider the fact that the 'new' Biennale de Montréal meant that the Quebec Triennale would no longer be. We knew that, for some, this would be seen as a loss. It meant that we had to ask ourselves serious questions about the inclusion of Quebec artists. We opted for meaningful inclusion. Mark and Lesley have also been very involved in the layout and design of the exhibition, with Krzysztof Wodiczko's major outdoor commission, and with the public programs.

AR: With all recent controversies questioning the parallel activities of corporate sponsors for biennales such as [Sydney with Transfield](#) or [Istanbul with Koç Holdings](#), it is interesting to see that you are mostly financed by public partners. What does it imply in terms of advantages and limitations, especially regarding commissions?

GB: Recent provincial cuts in funding have impacted the Museum. The Biennale has had to react and has increased its fundraising and partnership efforts. Besides this, I haven't experienced any sense of pressure because of public funding. Funding is a very complex issue: money is rarely, if ever, free from exploitation, whether it comes from the public purse or not. The [recent controversy around Manifesta 10](#) gives new urgency to our need to define the terms: 'Do you withdraw and boycott or do you engage and say no?'

The frame of the Biennale de Montréal actually has the positive potential to bring relevant issues to the fore. Funding is never an easy issue but, happily, we're not in a situation where we feel that we're involved with any particularly obvious controversial money.

AR: Judging from the selection of artists you will be presenting, could you give us a taste or some examples of what the future might hold?

GB: It's impossible to provide any single statement or to represent that future in simple black and white terms. Obviously, artists are trying to address a number of issues. One is the future of art itself, particularly given the disproportionate growth in commodification of art that's happened in the last ten years. Art has always been seen as a commodity or acquired as an investment. What's new is that, in some areas, art's commodity-value is overshadowing the actual role and power of art, which is to say, its engagement in the actual moment of creation. The growing commodification of art is bypassing, negating its moment of discursive force within the culture. This is a focus for many of the artists. It's not all doom and gloom. Some artists strive to assert art's agency by attending to the forms used.

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Much of the work in the show is actually temporal, exploring non-objective or situational possibilities. For example, Matthew Buckingham's project provides an open-ended platform that mobilises the United States' history of nearly ceaseless warfare in order to engage people in discussion throughout the course of the entire exhibition. While the piece sets the stage with a film and objects, it is activated through participation, including the lack thereof. That's quite interesting. The crucial question is whether art can have agency, in terms of influencing the future. Or rather, how do we define its agency? That's an issue addressed in quite a few works.

[The Biennale de Montréal \(BNL MTL\) will be running from 22 October 2014 – 4 January 2015, in the Contemporary Art Museum of Montréal and additional venues around the city.](#)

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