

CANADIANART

FEATURES

Near Future: An Interview with Sylvie Fortin

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Isabelle Hayeur, *Murs aveugles*, 2014. Site-specific architectural video projection, silent, 15-20 minutes (courtesy of the artist and Galerie Division, Montréal and Toronto).

The title of this year's Biennale de Montréal, which opens October 22, is "L'avenir (looking forward)," and the Canadian art world's collective response to this apt theme is undoubtedly a resounding "indeed."

After all, it was only last summer, just over a year ago, when Sylvie Fortin was appointed executive and artistic director of the event, which, at the time, was going through significant restructuring—essentially joining forces with the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal and absorbing that institution's Quebec Triennial. Fortin, a Montrealer returning home after several years in Atlanta as executive director and editor of the journal *Art Papers*, had her work cut out for her. The event had a new incarnation, with its curators already in place. There was limited time to plan.

Nonetheless, Fortin stepped in with confidence, producing, with her curators, an impressive list of artists that promises to speak both to Montreal's recent ascendance as Canada's contemporary-art capital, and to its conspicuously renewed interest in being an international city. David Balzer spoke with Fortin over the phone about this and other things as she and her team put the finishing touches on the Biennale.

David Balzer: You're a director working with a number of curators, who were appointed to the Biennale before you were hired. How did that working relationship play out? How is a director of a biennial different than a curator?

Sylvie Fortin: There were a number of contingencies; there always are. There's the fact that we only had one year to put all of this together—half the time. Basically the curators started working together after I came on board. Our first meeting was last August I believe, although I only started officially in September. So really, super-fast.

DB: To clarify, you had no role at all in selecting curators.

SF: No, I came on afterwards. In 2011 there was a call and Gregory [Burke] and Peggy [Gale] had been selected by the CIAC [Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal], which ran the former Biennale, to be the curators. And then there was the co-production agreement between the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal and the Biennale; all of this preceded me. Along with that co-production agreement came the fact that Mark [Lanctôt] and Lesley [Johnstone] from the Musée would be working as part of the curatorial team. But by August [of last year] they had not started to work together.

So that's where we were, with a skeletal list of artists that had to be rethought, because everything had changed. The first thing I asked everyone was to go back to that list and see if it was still relevant—and to know they had the honesty of saying yes or no. And then, from there, quickly build out and select works that would lead us to where we're going. So, my role in that context, given the fast-forward and the fact that the curators were working together without necessarily having chosen each other, was to act as a critic-in-residence. Given that I'd been working as an editor-in-chief for a long time, and had been editing [writers] and seeing all the biennials and travelling, I thought the best way I could insert myself was as the person in the background saying, "Have you seen this?" "Have you

thought of that?” “Have you read this?” It was more of a consultant role, teasing things out, asking questions and raising issues: positioning myself as the critic who would walk into the show on October 21. And, given the way things were being shaped, asking questions. A critic-in-residence.

DB: Can you give me an idea of the sensibilities of the various curators and how they’re shaping the finished product?

SF: With all of them, of course, one of the meeting places is an interest in moving-image work. I think that shows tremendously. Secondly I think everyone is interested in work that is very committed, which can take a number of forms, from John Massey’s fabulous new prints to Klara Hobza’s project, which is to scuba-dive through Europe. I think this notion of commitment is central to all of them. Then I would say that perhaps Gregory is interested more in political work. Mark is more interested in work that tackles or plays with legacies of modernism. And some work actually does all of this. If I had to qualify it, that’s where I’d draw some lines.

DB: Many biennials aim to be both local and global. Working out of Quebec makes this particular, as there is such a strong commitment to distinct provincial culture in comparison to the rest of Canada. As someone who’s Quebecois but who’s been away for some time, how did you negotiate this apparent need for a biennial to be global, but for the local to, perhaps, be specifically Quebecois?

SF: I think we’re way beyond a divide between local and global. In my own work that’s always been the case. It’s just not something that as a Quebecois I can believe in. Perhaps it’s because I’m a Quebecois that I’m skeptical of any form of nationalism. I think that the only thing that I can understand is trans-cosmopolitan relations, flows that happen between cities around the world. I never think of myself as being a Quebecker or Canadian. I think of myself as being a Montrealer. That’s the only thing I can really claim that makes sense to me. I think many artists operate this way, in between cities, and the whole national position doesn’t really work.

And also if you’re looking at Montreal now, it’s shifted drastically since the moment I left. It is a very cosmopolitan city. The world is here. So when we’re looking at something that’s global or international—that’s our neighbours we’re talking about. For me what was interesting was looking with precision. From Montreal, from 2014, what do these networks look like? What comes in and goes out quickly and easily and what experiences

resistance? That's what we need to look at now, and three editions from now: how do these connections and relations shift? That's how we understand where we are, both here and in the bigger global picture. So for me it's about this network, and that's what you'll see in the show.

DB: Building on this idea, was there a strategy in terms of programming the works not at the MAC but in the city—how they'd be imagined curatorially? Were you interested in activating the site-specificity of Montreal?

SF: I think it's about connecting to different audiences. There are a few things. First, respect for the work and its needs, to find the proper home for it. Some work just cannot operate in the white cube; that's where it goes to die. For example, Goldin+Senneby, currently at SBC galerie d'art contemporain, could not work in a museum. We decided to produce three of the works Lawrence Weiner developed here in 1963 but never realized. We had to think about how we would present that work today, years later, and it made sense, the trajectory we drew.

Second is the desire to connect with diverse audiences, understanding that access is not something that is passive. You can't just say, "Come and see us." You have to reach out and build bridges. We have a work at the train station, for instance, where hundreds of thousands of people come through every week. That might be a lever or a way in to the Biennale. And then we also have a piece by Lawrence Weiner at Place Ville Marie. People will encounter this fantastic work in their daily life as they go to the office. Then also working with the Quartier de l'innovation, a new neighbourhood in Montreal in which you have a high concentration of engineers and scientists. So, very close to where we are, but often there is no dialogue, no connection. In siting a work there, and then presenting public programs there, we are trying again to build that bridge that may lead to something else with the next edition. It's more a desire to respect the work and a desire to reach out and be truly every Montrealer's Biennale.

DB: What, then, is a biennial to you? I guess we could summarize or define the contemporary biennial as "more than just an exhibition"—but what is that "more" for you? It sounds like it might be a commitment to opening up discussion. What are your purpose-drivers?

SF: A number of things. In Toronto and many places in Canada contemporary art is often deemed to be somewhat inaccessible, which I just simply cannot understand. If there's anything that is accessible, because it is dealing with contemporary reality, which we all understand and live, it's contemporary art. I think part of it is, this being year one of this Montreal Biennale, this desire to clearly inscribe contemporary art as something that is at the very centre of what matters in this city, at the centre of the kinds of discussions that happen. Currently they're political and economic discussions. But art can also greatly contribute to that. So there's this shift to make it more central.

Canada is such a small country with so very few people and we don't have very large institutions, so there's a whole range of work that never gets shown here. I think our institutions are fantastic at showing great monographic exhibitions; they can give us someone's work in depth, but that's not enough to really give our students and the people that live in the city a sense of what contemporary practice is. I think a biennial can do that every two years: setting a shared language with diversity of practices from which, then, everything that comes in the next two years can be discussed, debated, understood, contested.

Some people have the privilege of being able to travel, but not every artist does, and many students don't necessarily have the opportunity to go to Venice or Documenta. If we want to have a lively community, people have to have mobility but they also have to have enough at home that they are informed and aware, and we can then judge everything else that our institutions are doing. So, these are all really important things a biennial can do, but you can't ever set it into a formula or recipe; everything moves so quickly that each edition of the biennial starts from scratch. Structurally as well: we pick a person and a set of questions or concerns that then defines where the show happens, what happens discursively around it, and even what kind of staffing structure we need. So the staff will kind of shrink and expand with each project so we maintain agility.

DB: The theme of the Biennale is "L'avenir." Biennials are known for their utopianism and obviously this is a kick-off to a new vision for this event. Are you balancing this hopefulness with skepticism? Biennials are so geared towards the present moment and present articulations, towards invitations, that they tend to be very elaborate

in their promises. Essentially I'm wondering if you're willing to explore limitations as well as possibilities.

SF: First and foremost I'd say limitations are one's own limitations—limitations in the capacity to imagine. That's where it starts most of the time. Yes of course there are external limitations, but what I've encountered in other projects and, as a critic, when I look at things that happen around me, the thing that's most surprising is people's ability to imagine. Being in Montreal at this particular moment, in Canada at this particular moment, there is a whole set of things we are told is not possible: economic parameters that are shifting, the private-to-public-sector balance being reconfigured...I could go on and on. This often circumscribes what we as cultural workers imagine as possible. That's something I refuse one hundred per cent. Yes, there is definitely a skepticism, but it's more about reaching out and asking for help, believing and trusting in the strength of the community. We have been developing these institutions here for a long time, and they're a lot stronger and richer than they think they are.

This is happening in Montreal but I really do see this as Canada's biennial. As we have more time to develop the next one, there will be a lot more work done around the country to mobilize the strengths and collaborations in a number of ways. For me the skepticism would also be about how easy it is to predetermine limitations. That, I don't want to fall into. I'd rather ask for help and define what the limitations are from the reality on the ground, rather than start from a position of skepticism, which I think forecloses a lot of things that we might discover.

I'm really curious about what might happen next. And what's been great with this one was how willing people were to collaborate. I'd been gone so long I didn't know what I'd find on the ground. Often, I think with dwindling resources there are two ways. Either people retreat and try to salvage whatever crumbs they have, or people open up. I was hoping that the opening up would happen rather than the retreat and that's mostly what did happen. Biennials are not going to do everything. I have no illusions about that. But I think they can be moments, every two years, where things open up, moments of experimentation and trying out things without any real liability. And then learning from that, and reshuffling afterwards.

This interview has been edited and condensed.