



MAY 13, 2014, 11:31 AM

## Montreal Biennial Curators Explain the Show's 50 Participating Artists



The Montreal art world has finally hatched its darling, the Montreal Biennial. Absorbing the critically-acclaimed Quebec Triennial, last year, and following the previous biennial's sudden reform, a sense of anticipatory calm has set in as the event positions itself nationally ("finally, a Canadian biennial!") and readies itself for international regard. ARTINFO Canada spoke to the biennial's four curators — Gregory Burk, Peggy Gale, Lesley Johnstone, and Mark Lancôt — and biennial director Sylvie Fortin during Frieze week and just before their international press announcement of the biennial's artists. Nerves were audible, and passion clear.

### **How did you undertake the process of folding the Quebec Triennial into the already-underway Montreal Biennial?**

Mark Lancôt: The process was one of starting from work previously done, in that Peggy and Greg had a project for the biennial previous to this, and we worked from that. It wasn't like starting from scratch. We contributed to that project, and made it what it's become now. So it's been about folding the institutional merits of the biennial and the triennial into one another — making it about much more than the specific biennial that Greg and Peggy were working on, and the specific triennial that Lesley and I were working on.

Lesley Johnstone: The triennial was conceived as — and intended to be — a Quebecois project, whereas the biennial has invariably been international, and also both Canadian and Quebec. Originally, Greg and I responded to was an open call back in 2011 that was for an exhibition called "L'Avenir" ("Looking Forward"), which had to be international and had to involve Quebec. Through many changes, and now four curators and a new director, I think we're able to say that we're now working together really well.

But we did have a complete project ready before, but with only twenty artists, and now we're fifty. Conceptually it's the same, it's just that much larger and more ambitious. And much more spread across countries and ways of working.

Regarding the theme, Greg, you've been quoted as saying "Looking Forward" is about futurity and its speculation. Can you discuss how you're regarding this theme's relevance to contemporary art, and the appeal it has for you?

Gregory Burke: When Peggy and I proposed this idea, it was at the time of the Occupy movement, the street protests in Montreal. We were thinking about this idea of looking forward while looking back.

---

### **How did you initially approach the theme, given your various points of expertise and research?**

Johnstone: I think we're interested in new ways of thinking about what a core practice is. A number of our artists are working in long-term or infinite projects that involve all kinds of communities, and the way that the artist is locating their practice within a whole spectrum of concerns apart from gallery-based environments. There's a lot of video work, for instance, and research-based work.

One of the challenges for Mark and I, when we came on, was to keep our mandate and propose Quebec artists. The triennial was always sort of ground-up, and the biennial is very different. It informed Mark and I to look at some of the practices in Quebec, and initially there weren't many off the top of our heads who were approaching concerns in the way that Peggy and Greg had developed them. But we thought, and talked to artists, and found a group in Quebec who were really interesting and different from what we would have probably proposed for the triennial.

### **How are you perceiving your particular strengths? Have you articulated among yourselves your individual research strengths, or your curatorial proclivities?**

Johnstone: What's interesting about the project is that we all had very different backgrounds, very different practices, and became introduced to work that we may not have been otherwise.

Peggy and Greg were traveling internationally for a few years, where a year before the triennial Mark and I were working with Quebec artists. It switched the way we thought. But it's been great – in the way that there are all these different practices, and the show reflects how the four of us got together and said, "here we go." We had to figure out how to work together. I think the show will reflect that in its broad spectrum.

Sylvie Fortin: Both Greg and Peggy have been working on projects for years and years, but we did not sit down and articulate that. It was more about which artists, and what worked, and that dialogue.

Lancôt: It was organic –

Gale: We took a skeletal show of twenty people, and some of the artists who are in the show now were in the original list that Greg and I assembled in 2011, but we did have to go back to our list and also extend to a bigger field. Because the world is different now than it was three years ago. So it's been complicated, but I think it's worked well. But it didn't start out as "this is what I want, what do you want?"

### **What are you hoping to add to the international slate of biennials, and contribute to the larger conversation?**

Fortin: We're most concerned with now is making a really good biennial that will be the Canadian biennial, one that will be grounded in the politics of the local in Montreal, and inscribing that in an international context. That's the beginning point.

When I travel to biennials, I get a sense of the city that they're in and also the international dialogue. I think that's what we're trying to do now.

Also, I think it's a relief for people who aren't necessarily on the biennial circuit: this will compete with a very tightly-curated thematic exhibition, as opposed to "these are the hot artists around the world" type of exhibition.

### **How are you navigating the politics of Quebec-versus-Canada when it comes to giving priority to artists, and regarding the context in which this biennial is situated?**

Lancôt: It's an issue of realms. There's the municipal, the provincial, the national, the North American, and the international; how we negotiate that is dictated by the background research that went into the thematic development. It's kind of an organic relationship. Regarding Quebec and Canada, it's realms within others. We're focused on a different locality.

Fortin: Ultimately they're just physical parameters. You have to have a group of people who have a number of points of view; of course you want a variety of geographies, but you can't do it by culture. It's important to have a presence from Quebec, just like an important presence from Canada. But this is a substantial work being done now, and how we're talking to each other and how artists are speaking to one another through their work. I don't think it should be Canada versus Quebec, at all, but rather local versus other.

### **Which project or artist would each of you say was your baby?**

Lancôt: The blue one was my favorite one. [*laughs*] No, it's impossible. It's been so organic. If it had been performative, as a curatorial methodology, it would have been more about that – but it came out of back-and-forth between each other so much that there are projects I can't even remember where it came from.

Here's the complete list of Biennale de Montréal artists and collectives:

Abbas Akhavan – born 1977 in Tehran, Iran, lives and works in Toronto  
Adaptive Actions (Jean-Maxime Dufresne and Jean-Francois Prost) – based in Montréal  
Edgar Arceneaux – born 1972 in Los Angeles, lives and works in Los Angeles  
Arctic Perspective Initiative (Matthew Biederman and Marko Peljhan) – based in Canada and Slovenia  
Nicolas Baier – born 1967 in Montréal, lives and works in Montréal  
Taysir Batniji – born 1966 in Gaza, Palestine, lives and works in Paris  
Amanda Beech – born 1972 in Cheshire, England, lives and works in Los Angeles  
Ursula Biemann – born 1955 in Zurich, lives and works in Zurich  
Raymond Boisjoly – born 1981 in Langley, BC, lives and works in Vancouver  
Andrea Bowers – born 1965 in Wilmington, OH, lives and works in Los Angeles

---

Matthew Buckingham – born 1963 in Iowa, NV, lives and works in New York  
Mikko Canini – born 1975 in Guelph, ON, lives and works in Toronto  
Simon Denny – born 1982 in Auckland, New Zealand, lives and works in Berlin  
Dave Dvment – born 1970 in Toronto, lives and works in Toronto  
Charles Gaines – born 1944 in Charleston, SC, lives and works in Los Angeles  
Ryan Gander – born 1976 in Chester, England, lives and works in London  
Goldin+Senneby (Simon Goldin and Jakob Senneby) – based in Stockholm  
Babak Golkar, born 1977 in Berkeley, CA, lives and works in Vancouver  
Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, born 1965 in Strasbourg, France, lives and works in Paris and Rio de Janeiro  
Nicolas Grenier – born 1982 in Montréal, lives and works in Montréal and Los Angeles  
Isabelle Haveur – born 1969 in Montréal, lives and works in Rawdon, QC  
Thomas Hirschhorn – born 1957 in Bern, Switzerland, lives and works in Paris  
Klara Hobza – born 1975 in Czech Republic, lives and works in Berlin  
Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens – live and work in Montréal and Durham-Sud, QC  
Simone Jones and Lance Winn, live and works in Wilmington, DE  
Emmanuelle Léonard – born 1971 in Montréal, lives and works in Montréal  
Ann Lislegaard – born 1962 in Tønsberg, Norway lives and works in Copenhagen and New York  
Basim Magdy – born 1977 in Assiut, Egypt, lives and works in Cairo and Basel, Switzerland  
Lynne Marsh – born 1969 in Vancouver, lives and works in Berlin, London and Montréal  
John Massey – born 1950 in Toronto, lives and works in Toronto  
Jillian Mayer – born 1984 in Miami, lives and works in South Florida  
Shirin Neshat – born 1957 in Qazvin, Iran, lives and works in New York  
Jacqueline Hoang Nguven – born 1979 in Montréal, lives and works in Stockholm and Montréal  
Susan Norrie – born 1953 in Sydney, Australia, lives and works in Sydney  
Melik Ohanian – born 1969 in Lyon, France, lives and works in Paris and New York  
Li Ran – born 1986 in Hubei, China, lives and works in Beijing  
Kelly Richardson – born 1972 in Burlington, ON, lives and works in Whitley Bay, England  
Kevin Schmidt – born 1972 in Ottawa, lives and works in Berlin and Vancouver  
Skawennati – born 1969 in Kahnawake, QC, lives and works in Montréal  
Steele and Tomczak – live and work in Toronto  
Hito Steyerl – born 1966 in Munich, lives and works in Berlin  
Oleg Tcherny – born 1973 in Minsk, Belarus, lives and works in Paris and Venice  
Althea Thauberger – born 1970 in Saskatoon, SK, lives and works in Vancouver  
David Tomas – born 1950 in Montréal, lives and works in Montréal  
Suzanne Treister – born 1958 in London, lives and works in London  
Étienne Tremblay-Tardif – born 1984 in Isle-aux-Coudres, QC, lives and works in Montréal  
Susan Turcot – born 1966 in Montréal, lives and works in Whitstable, England and Kamouraska, QC  
Anton Vidokle and Pelin Tan – live and work in New York, Berlin, Istanbul and Mardin, Turkey  
Hajra Waheed – born 1980 in Calgary, lives and works in Montréal  
Lawrence Weiner – born 1942 in the Bronx, NY, lives and works in New York and Amsterdam  
Krzysztof Wodiczko – born 1943 in Warsaw, Poland, lives and works in New York and Cambridge, MA

– *Sky Goodden (ARTINFOCanada)*

(Photo: Sylvie Fortin)