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Biennale de Montréal hopes for a rebirth

After years of troubles with funding and organisation, the Canadian art event is looking forward to its next edition this autumn

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The 2014 edition of the Biennale de Montréal, is in the words of the recently-appointed executive and artistic director Sylvie Fortin, "a new incarnation of an event [that was] sometimes glorious, sometimes less glorious".

The biennial, founded in 1998 by the Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal, became an independent organisation in 2013 and joined forces with the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (MACM) that spring. It has—not without controversy, though this was not addressed at a recent press conference for the event—replaced the museum's Québec Triennial, an event dedicated to contemporary Québécois art that held its second edition in 2011. Fortin, a curator and editor, took the helm of the Biennale de Montréal in September 2013 and has since been working closely with the event's four co-curators: Gregory Burke, a former director of the Power Plant in Toronto (2006-11), Peggy Gale, an independent curator and writer, and Lesley Johnstone and Mark Lanctôt, curators at the Montreal museum.

The biennial was originally scheduled for autumn 2013 but was postponed. Its director of several years, Claude Gosselin, resigned in 2012, and his replacement, Nicole Gingras, left in February 2013, only six months before the event was due to open. The exhibition has faced difficulties finding funding and venues from edition to edition.

BNLMTL 14, due to open on 22 October and run through 4 January 2015, will be held at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal and other sites in the city, with tours, talks, performances, film screenings and conferences complementing the exhibitions of art in a variety of media. The 50 artists and collectives from 22 countries include Lawrence Weiner, Simon Denny, Andrea Bowers, Ryan Gander and Shirin Neshat, whose latest video will make its North American debut at the biennial.

The fitting theme for the first edition of the reborn event is "L'avenir (looking forward)". The future that the biennial considers is both the future of art as well as that of the world and humanity, whether sobering or hopeful. The works are often socially engaged and tackle ethical questions, with many exploring environmental, geopolitical and humanitarian issues. For instance, a new series of projections on two buildings by Krzysztof Wodiczko, co-produced with the Quartier des Spectacles Partnership, involves a local homeless mission, making a marginalised community visible on a monumental scale.

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The organisers are themselves looking forward, with a strategy of multiplying and strengthening partnerships with local and international institutions, re-focusing on risk and experimentation and contemplating the event's relationship with its locality. While the future depicted in some of the works to be shown is anything but rosy, the direction of the Biennale de Montréal is optimistic about a successful future for the re-worked event.