

Biennialism in Montréal

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Biennales are the signature events of the twenty-first-century art world, appearing and disappearing in a sequence of far-flung places. Montréal is now one of many such cities to host an exhibition of contemporary art under the rubric of a 'Biennale.' The *Biennale de Montréal* which opened to the public for the first time in 1998 actually grew out of a locally renowned contemporary art event, *Les cent jours d'art contemporain* (100 Days of Contemporary Art), which ran from 1985 to 1996. It could be argued that the name change was merely cosmetic, and that the 1998 and 2000 biennales staged so far were not substantively different from the preceding exhibitions, but this objection doesn't account for the new strain of biennial fever that has spread throughout the art world, around the world. Art publications these days regularly offer up reports on the latest biennial exhibition in Havana, Shanghai, Johannesburg, Gwangju, Istanbul... The 'biennale' appellation itself seems to magnify an event's contemporary relevance and cachet, while the prestige of the hosting city is also at stake. Montréal's first Biennale programme summoned up this litany of place-names, and proposed a symbolic shift in the city's self-image when it announced, "Like Lyon, Shanghai, Venice and other great cities, Montréal now has an international contemporary art biennial" (Gosselin 1998, 3).¹ Joining this planet-wide constellation of cities, it appears as if Montréal's art scene has been geo-culturally realigned.

About half of the artists participating in the two biennales to date have been Montréalers, Québécois and Canadians, and the remainder originate from a range of other countries. Some kind of productive and mutual exchange is presumably the pay-off when such high-profile international events are hosted. The local art scene is ostensibly enhanced through its encounter with non-local artists, curators, and writers; hometown artists get greater exposure, and opportunities to exhibit abroad; the larger art world, meanwhile, is at least momentarily made aware of the innovative art production going on at a local level. It must be admitted, however, that what has just been described is a kind of ideal picture of how cultural negotiations get played out in the new world of globalized markets and circuits. Is this really what occurs in Montréal, or in other cities that stage similar events? Is the local scene now *branché* in a whole new way? Is Montréal now more than ever before part of a genuinely cosmopolitan art world?



It is possible to view these recent exhibitions as simply the latest episode in Montréal's modern art scene, which has evolved over the past fifty-odd years by repeatedly forging new connections with a more remote art world. And initially at least, the strategy of biennialization seemed to work. It was certainly unprecedented in 1998, when writers for *Art in America*, *Frieze*, *Artpress* and other international art magazines descended on the city to report on this singular art event. If most of the published responses to Montréal's Biennale seem rather uninformed or unenthusiastic about the local art scene, though, perhaps this points to a range of unresolved questions about what is generally expected from this genre of exhibition, and what is delivered.

Many internationally acclaimed art careers of recent years have been right in sync with this world-spanning exhibitionary circuit. There is the possibility that successful artists today don't necessarily have to live and exhibit exclusively in traditional centres like New York or Paris. (The artist Janet Cardiff, for instance, has had a very successful international career, culminating in a major prize at the Venice Biennale of 2001 — while being based until quite recently in Lethbridge, Alberta.) If it is now difficult to locate the geographic centre of the art world, perhaps this is because the city-to-city biennial exhibitions have come to provide a more up-to-date, flexible, and virtual system of display and exchange. But the implications of this shift are very much open to debate. Many of the curators and artists involved in these exhibition/events clearly hope to challenge the orthodox structure of the art world through an assertion of local scenes and histories, especially when the exhibitions are held in Third World and developing countries. We are informed that "at the heart of every Istanbul Biennial is the city itself," for instance, and that the "Gwangju Biennale is rooted in the spirit of the people of Gwangju."² Johannesburg's 1997 Biennial was described in glowing terms as "the first global exhibition to transform the promise of postcolonial theory into a tangible reality" (Dan Cameron 1997, 22). There are on-going discussions, in other words, about this apparent dispersal and de-centralization of the art world, and some doubts about whether the new crop of biennales will subvert, or simply repackage, Eurocentric concentrations of power and cultural capital. Some critics seem unable to accept the changes wrought by the de-centering and de-colonizing process. An American visitor to the Havana Biennial, for instance, is aggrieved to discover that "hovering through the exhibition, there was a sense that visitors were being manipulated towards ends other than aesthetic" (Bloemink 1994, 18).

By far the most famous of international art exhibitions is the Venice Biennale, which has been an on-going concern since the late nineteenth century. Within garden-like grounds, participating countries (such as Canada) have been granted their own pavilions in perpetuity, and it is

within these distinct architectural frames that artworks are presented, through official government sponsorship. There are specific material conditions, therefore, for the periodic re-creation of an international art scene. In many ways the Venice Biennale is an offshoot of the nineteenth-century world's fairs and great exhibitions, in that it showcases cultural artifacts within an overdetermined national (and colonial) context.³

The Venice Biennale has not, however, provided the blueprint for subsequent exhibitions of international contemporary art. The Italianized name has quite often been adopted, but the newer *biennales* or biennials don't share the permanence, the confirmed cash flow, nor the old-world status of the Venetian event. It is important to note that the Venice Biennale doesn't set out to make the local art scene more visible and accessible to its international visitors; that has never been the point. In a history of the Venice Biennale published in 1968, Lawrence Alloway included a section entitled "The Biennale as a Party," because the opening days of the Venice event are renowned as an extravagant and very European party-scene, played out in rented palazzos (1968, 23). It is in marked contrast to this model, then, that the upstart biennales often make a point of foregrounding the local art scene. By claiming that local artistic developments are worthy of serious consideration, these exhibitions suggest new kinds of global or cosmopolitan exchange, which serves to challenge the usual comparative national models.

The contemporary art events held in Havana and Johannesburg are exemplary of this revisionist biennale approach, whereby the hosting cities and countries inflect the character of the entire event. Havana's Biennial was inaugurated in 1984, when Cuba's identity seemed to be inescapably defined by Cold War geo-politics. What this regularly staged exhibition managed to assert, however, was the importance of the island's culture and history within a Third World and Latin American context. In the intervening years, despite a growing international attendance, the regional and local emphasis has remained, and auxiliary events have extended to a range of Havana neighbourhoods. The Johannesburg Biennial, inaugurated in 1997, was in its turn determined to become a southern-hemisphere, Third World and African event. There was tremendous excitement that the new post-apartheid South Africa would in effect function as the framing device for a world-wide convergence of artists.

The biennales that emerged in the 1990s have emphasized the relationship between art and questions of place, borders, and other forms of geographic specificity. If the site of the exhibitions is key, there is often, as well, an expectation that the exhibiting artists will themselves embody a sense of place or local identification. Cumulatively, an exhibition can provide a kind of mapping device or world picture (see Ferguson, Greenberg, and Nairne 1997). There is a utopian dimension to such gatherings, there-



fore, for they imply that artists (and works of art) can overcome a range of economic or ethnic or linguistic frontiers, that it is possible for them to achieve a common understanding, and occupy a common cultural terrain. Critiques of this tendency—of this supposed aesthetic commonality that can ‘magically’ transcend all manner of cultural and historical differences—emerged in response to the now-infamous exhibition, *Magiciens de la terre*, held in Paris in 1989.⁴ Virtually every biennial exhibition nonetheless advertises itself with greater or lesser measures of this utopian, multi-cultural, and cosmopolitan rhetoric. It is something of a paradox, therefore, that while biennialism implies some brand of global ‘togetherness’ and understanding, the artworks included in such exhibitions are often hailed for articulating much more dystopic scenarios: dislocation, disenfranchisement, exile, fractured identities. Many artists deliberately refrain from inventing fictions that reconcile place and memory, that promise a homeland, that imply a sense of rootedness. This tendency is perhaps akin to what Paul Virilio has termed the “de-localization of aesthetics,” whereby contemporary cultural production is characterized by a diminished sense of place or presence (1996, 55).⁵ A telling example of this was a work by Chen Zhen included in the Montréal Biennale of 1998. This Shanghai-born, Paris-based artist, who participated in several such international exhibitions, presented *Pied-à-terre* (1998), a kind of floating shack made with pieces of a small fishing boat and various found materials. The authors Simon and McSherry commented at the time that the work was effectively site-specific, speaking to Montréal’s “recycling of a maritime industry as tourist-site” (1998-1999, 16). Beyond its local resonance, however, this striking work could also be interpreted as a kind of ironic or inverted monument to global homelessness. The phrase ‘pied-à-terre’ suggests an abode that is temporary, but in the elitist sense of a globetrotting traveller who can choose from amongst multiple chic residences. Chen Zhen’s pieced-together home, on the other hand, suggests the inventiveness and vulnerability of another type of global subject on the move. This work points to something contradictory at the core of such events, when specific artworks can evoke the constraints of geography, while at the same time the exhibitions themselves promote a cosmopolitan, border-defying realm of cultural exchange. These exhibitions often conjure up distorted kinds of world-pictures, therefore, even when they generously set out to include artwork from ‘all over the world.’

If biennales are sending out mixed messages, this is symptomatic of the complex relations between a global art world and local art scenes. While these exhibitions promise new ways to conceive of centres and peripheries, it is nonetheless difficult to judge to what extent previously marginalized artists and art-scenes are truly being integrated into a greater, globalized art world. For Rasheed Araeen, founding editor of *Third Text*

magazine, the terms of this new 'inclusiveness' continue to be as suspect as ever. In contrast to the many people who have mourned the recent demise of the Johannesburg Biennial after only two outings, Araeen argues that this event was essentially a failure: even if more local artists were given an opportunity to show their work, the exhibition still failed in its mandate to represent the local constituency in a profound, historical sense. Araeen writes:

"The purpose of a biennale anywhere in the world is first to address the needs of its own local or national constituency, its own art community, and if this constituency is not taken into consideration whatever one does will fail. This was particularly essential in the case of South Africa. But most of the work presented in both the Biennales, given the deprivation the black population suffered during apartheid, could not and did not address its own needs" (2000).

Araeen took very seriously the possibility that this art event could make the injustices and international complicities of apartheid evident and intelligible. Nor is this extra-artistic expectation for biennales uncommon. The organizers of the Gwangju Biennale came right out and described the exhibition's proto-political goal: the "celebration of diverse cultures" is intended to show that "Gwangju can become a city of light that uses art to brighten the dark reality of Korean separation."⁶

It is interesting to note that writers for major American and European art publications invariably comment on social and political issues when attending exhibitions beyond their borders. Reports on exhibitions in Cuba, South Africa, China, or South Korea include observations about perceived social injustices, political flashpoints, and human-rights issues; this material is integrated with more or less finesse into discussions about particular installations, video productions, and so forth. There seems to be a widely held assumption at the present time that this larger 'context' is part of the show being put on for an international audience, and it is also taken for granted that it is the proper role of contemporary curators, artists, artworks, and exhibitions to re-interpret and aestheticize geo-political realities.

As mentioned, biennale coverage is now *de rigueur* for art magazines appearing on North American news-stands. Eleanor Heartney has been a kind of foreign correspondent on the biennale circuit for *Art in America*, and she came to Montréal in 1998. A general commentary suggested that, "on the whole, the Montréal Biennale represented an admirable attempt to bring Canadian artists into an international context." While such a statement is vaguely patronizing, the report's concluding paragraph points to some of the expectations outlined above, about the kind of ago-

nistic political framework sought by many biennale visitors. The exhibition is criticized for “implicitly leaving out artists of a more political, theoretical and critical bent. One sensed that this decision had been made, at least in part, with a view to smoothing over the separatist tensions, ethnic conflicts and economic difficulties that confront Canada” (Heartney 1999, 51). It is difficult to know whether the author had any particular slighted artists in mind, whose artworks would have added that separatist frisson to the exhibition. But in any case, from Heartney’s point of view the exhibition as a whole failed in some fundamental way because it was not sufficiently suffused with local conflict and historical rupture. The author left the city with an unsatisfied desire to have the inner workings of the Montréal art scene laid bare. In different ways, then, authors such as Araeen and Heartney judge biennial exhibitions harshly for failing to connect contemporary art with the history and politics of a local scene.

It is no doubt frustrating for residents of a city when visitors don’t ‘get’ what is going on locally, but it is after all not easy to identify the constant flux of players, events, relationships, and sites that contribute to a specific scene. In the case of Montréal, moreover, the art scene is distinctive not simply because of what is showing in downtown galleries at a given moment in time, but because of the idiosyncratic history of modern and contemporary art in the city and province. A sense of history and art history was strikingly missing from most non-local commentaries about the first Biennale de Montréal and its ‘context’ in 1998. And yet, the city was awash that summer and fall with the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the *Refus Global*, the astonishing manifesto instigated by Paul-Émile Borduas and co-signed by a group of Montréal painters, dancers, and poets.⁷ What this manifesto ‘refused’ in a vivid exclamatory style were pious provincialism, narrow-mindedness, and a stifling cultural climate. What was at stake was the very modern possibility of opening up to a wider world, and the manifesto did implicitly speak to a troubled relationship between art and place. Borduas evidently struggled throughout his life with the problem of balancing local affections, localities, and identifications with a cosmopolitan aesthetic ideal. Alongside the 1998 Biennale, a major exhibition was held at the *Musée d’art contemporain*, and many local art critics, art historians, artists, and cultural theorists took this opportunity to re-think the Borduas/*Refus Global* legacy in Québec, whether in contributions to a special issue of *Le Devoir* newspaper or to numerous other publications. Lise Bissonnette, for instance, wrote that each anniversary of the *Refus Global* confirms the status of this text as “the most powerful point of reference in the cultural history of Québec” (1998).⁸ In order to achieve an understanding of the contemporary art scene in Montréal, therefore, it could be argued that the on-going questions raised by this 1948 document are key. To what extent did this small



group of ardent modernists remain committed to their local roots? How can we understand the prolonged exile of certain artists, whether obligatory or self-imposed? What has been the relationship between Montréal, New York, and Paris at various times? If there is a cosmopolitan ideal at the heart of the *Refus Global*, can it still be regarded as a proto-nationalist document, announcing the future affirmation of a *Québécois* identity? If there continues to be disagreement about many of these questions, this sophisticated local discourse does nonetheless echo many of the issues that currently preoccupy the participants in biennales world-wide, concerning the local modalities of modernism and abstraction, or post-modernism and video art.⁹

The 2000 version of the *Biennale de Montréal* took over the half-abandoned “Palais du Commerce” on Berri Street, a building which once housed trade-fairs and had recently been used for raves, while the floor above the exhibition areas was still noisily occupied by the *Tazmahal* skating-rink. The Biennale 2000 continued what its predecessor the “100 Days” had accomplished so effectively throughout the 1980s and 90s. It was a temporary exhibition; it was an event occurring outside of the usual gallery and museum system; it showed local and international artists together; and it was held within one of the city’s decaying modern buildings. We are accustomed by now to seeing contemporary art installed in the crumbling grandeur of historic buildings, or in cavernous closed-down factories. There was something far less sublime, but pleasingly absurd, about the nether regions of the decrepit ‘Palais,’ as there had been about the basement of the La Cité building complex where the “100 Days” was held for many years. These were not the ruins of impressively historicized architecture. Rather, as once suggested by Robert Smithson, this was “the opposite of the ‘romantic ruin’ because the buildings don’t fall *into* ruin *after* they are built but rather *rise* into ruin before they are built” (Smithson 1996, 73). At the 2000 Biennale, visitors also learned they were standing on the site of what will soon become a spectacular monument to the language, literature, and cultural worth of Québec. The building housing the exhibition is slated to be knocked down in 2001, making way for a \$90 million library, the *Grande Bibliothèque du Québec*. The main exhibition was positioned, therefore, amidst this clash of architectures and temporalities, and was in fact entitled *Tout le temps / Every Time*.¹⁰ Installations, sculptural works, video, and works in various media eloquently addressed metaphoric concepts of time, or the material decline of urban spaces and everyday things. And while this entropic aesthetic was appropriately millennial, it also has a local resonance within the urban environment of Montréal.

Montréal’s Biennale is a comparatively modest event, and it is evident that the organizers don’t yet have the kind of money and resources to



match the world-dazzling events staged in other cities. But just how big, expensive, and permanent do biennales have to be, in order to be of interest to a greater art world, and beneficial to the local art scene? The name itself is misleading, of course, with its promise of endless recurrence. The Melbourne Biennial of 1999 turned out to be a one-off performance, for instance, while as already mentioned, Johannesburg's much-lauded biennial has abruptly ceased to exist. The relative success of these 'here today gone tomorrow' biennales is difficult to judge according to a model of art which culminates in museumification, institutionalization, and canonization. But perhaps the ephemeral and ad hoc quality of these exhibitions is in itself a valuable contribution, and the very struggle to bring disparate art, people and places together is the sign of their collective success.

It could be argued that events like the *Biennale de Montréal* allow the local art scene to inhabit a cosmopolitan realm while circumventing more troubled forms of intra- and inter-national exchange. Montréal has long had a reputation as Canada's most 'cosmopolitan' city. Within a national and North American context this is largely due to the *Québécois* language and culture being read as foreign, and the habits of Montréalers as relatively exotic. Within the city and province, as mentioned above, there is a different understanding of what it means when local languages, customs, and institutions intersect with 'international' standards for art-making and exhibition practices. It is interesting that towards the end of his life Paul-Émile Borduas reflected on his trajectory through life, and his shifting identity as an artist in relation to place: "I belonged first to my village, then to my province; next I considered myself French-Canadian, and after my first trip to Europe, more Canadian than French; Canadian... in New York, and lately North American. From now on, I hope to 'possess' the whole world" (qtd. in Gagnon 1988, 20). The cosmopolitan ideal has indeed been central to the discourse of twentieth-century modernism and avant-gardism, but recently there has been a fascination with this subject across the humanities, almost as if the benign figure of the cosmopolitan can stand as a countervailing force to globalization. The new, reinvented form of cosmopolitanism, or 'cosmopolitics' is opposed, as Bruce Robbins has written, to "the romantic localism of a certain portion of the left, which feels it must counter capitalist globalization with a strongly rooted and exclusive sort of belonging" (1998, 3). The 'new' cosmopolitanism proposed for the post-cold-war globalized era is not that of deracinated individuals who have forsaken all allegiances to places and collectivities, but rather is constituted through a series of 'multiple belongings.' David Harvey has recently stepped into the debate, in a way that speaks to the persistent efforts at global convergence in the art world including events such as the *Biennale de Montréal*. "A meaningful cosmopolitanism does not entail some passive contemplation of global citi-

zanship,” Harvey writes. “It is, as Kant himself insisted, a principle of intervention to try to make the world (and its geography) something other than what it is” (2000, 560).

Notes

1 Gosselin is the long-time director of the *Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal*, the parent organization responsible for both the “100 Days” exhibitions and the *Biennales*.

2 *5th International Istanbul Biennial: On life, beauty, translations and other difficulties* (Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, 1997), n.p.; “Declaration of Gwangju Biennale” (www.gwangju-biennale.org).

3 Ex-colonies and more recently accepted participating countries do not get their own pavilions, but are instead relegated to shared, temporary exhibition spaces.

4 A range of critical responses to *Magiciens de la Terre* was published in *Cahier du Musée National d'Art Moderne*, No. 28 (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 1989), the English version of which appeared in *Third Text*, No. 6, Spring 1989 (London: Kala Press). It is interesting that the first Montréal Biennale featured an exhibition entitled *Les Capteurs de Rêves* (dreamcatchers); this neo-primitivist motif was also apparently intended to ‘magically’ unite disparate artists, spaces, and histories.

5 Virilio laments this phenomenon, and puts a date to it: “It seems to me now that land art was the last great figure of an art of inscription, before the total delocalization of art in virtual reality.”

6 Gwangju Biennale website (www.gwangju-biennale.org).

7 Even local critics didn't necessarily find it necessary to connect the Biennale and MAC Borduas exhibitions; one who did only registered disappointment with both, without addressing the issue of internationalism in either case (see Baillargeon 1998).

8 This special section of the newspaper devoted to the fiftieth anniversary of the *Refus Global* included historical information, commentaries by 27 authors, as well as numerous corporate advertisements affirming the importance of the anniversary.

9 More recent debates about these issues are evident in a recent collection of essays, *Monde et réseaux de l'art: diffusion, migration et cosmopolitanisme en art contemporain* (Bellavance 2000).

10 *Tout le temps/Every Time* was curated by Peggy Gale, and included 30 artists. Other components of the 2000 Biennale included *Houses-Places*, an architectural exhibit curated by Georges Adamczyk, and *Out of this World*, a web-based exhibit curated by Sylvie Parent.

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