



# Art in America

NEWS NOV. 07, 2014

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## Revamped Montreal Biennial Looks to the Future, in More Ways than One

by Murtaza Vali

Thomas Hirschhorn: *Touching Reality*, 2012, still image of video, 4:45 minutes; courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.



As part of Canada's centennial celebrations in 1967, the people of St. Paul, Alberta, built the world's first UFO landing pad, a charmingly eccentric gesture welcoming visitors to their small town from both this and other worlds. Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen's multimedia installation *Space Fiction and the Archives* (2012) intertwines this absurd endeavor with the



contemporaneous expansion of Canada's immigration policy and the adoption of multiculturalism as a foundation of national identity. The piece gently questions the sincerity of the country's proclaimed hospitality.

Montreal-born, Stockholm-based Nguyen's work is one of 150 featured in "L'avenir (looking forward)," the latest edition of La Biennale de Montréal (through Jan. 4, 2015). The show draws inspiration from the spirit of discovery, hope and possibility that defined Montréal in the 1960s, a city then in the throes of social and political reform, urban expansion and postcolonial activism, and the site of the Expo 67 World's Fair, with its iconic Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome, which showcased the cutting edge of industry, technology and research.

While futurism and its limits have proven an increasingly popular exhibition theme since documenta 13—the upcoming Sharjah Biennial 12, for example, is titled "The past, the present, the possible"—it is a particularly apt subject for a biennial that is looking to the future as it reimagines and repositions itself on the global contemporary art circuit. Executive and artistic director Sylvie Fortin, formerly editor and executive director of Art Papers, has worked since her appointment last September to transform the long-running but largely regional initiative into a biennial that is global in scope. The show is co-curated by Gregory Burke, recently appointed executive director of the Remai Art Gallery of Saskatchewan along with Toronto-based independent curator Peggy Gale, Lesley Johnstone and Mark Lanctôt. The latter two are curators at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (MAC), the biennial's main collaborating institution. The current edition features 50 artists and collectives representing 22 countries but balances global and local concerns through the inclusion of 25 Canadian artists, 16 hailing from the province of Québec, and features 23 newly commissioned works. Anchored by a sprawling exhibition in the galleries of MAC, the biennial spans 13 other venues—nonprofit arts institutions and public spaces—citywide.

"L'avenir," the French half of the bilingual title, is a concept borrowed from French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Literally translated as "future," Derrida uses the term to foreground the speculative and uncertain character of what is

to come. It asserts the potential for artists and others to imagine our future. While artists like Nguyen revisit past attempts to envision and construct a utopic future, others choose to analyze the present conditions—environmental, economic, geopolitical and technological—that shape and hinder our ability to do the same.

Given the proximity of Canada's Arctic north, many of these works focus on this region, which is increasingly mined for natural resources and where the effects of climate change are immediately and profoundly observable. Through a conspiratorial, whispered voiceover, Zurich-based Ursula Biemann's video installation *Deep Weather* (2013) reveals the deleterious effects of oil extraction on the Alberta sands ecosystem but also links it to rising water levels and regular flooding in faraway Bangladesh. London-based, Montreal native Susan Turcot's *Hide and Seek* (2013), a suite of moody, surreal charcoal drawings, conveys the alienation, physical and psychological, experienced by oil industry laborers. And Arctic Perspective Initiative, a transnational, multidisciplinary research group—founded by Montreal-based Matthew Biederman and University of California, Santa Barbara professor Marko Peljhan—that collaborates with indigenous populations, complements their technology-heavy installation at MAC by simply flying the flags of the 20 nations and peoples of the Circumpolar region on a street alongside the museum and in the hall of the railway station.

Other works deflate the dominant effect of capitalism in our lives through humor. Montreal-based Richard Ibhgy and MariLou Lemmens' *The Prophets* (2013) consists of hundreds of whimsical little sculptures that employ ordinary household materials to create economic graphs and charts drawn from academic and scholarly journals. Presented at the SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, Stockholm-based duo Goldin+Senneby's *M+A* (2013/2014) is a scripted but repeatedly rehearsed one-man performance that deploys tropes of theatricality, magic, farce and failure to reveal the speculative fiction that is global finance. The frequency and duration of this performance is determined by the success (or failure) of an algorithm used to invest the production budget in the financial markets.

Another subtheme is the impact of technology on identity, privacy and our consumption of images. Made using the wildly popular virtual world Second Life, Montreal-based artist Skawennati's episodic *TimeTraveller™* (2008-13) follows a Montréal Mohawk from the future as he virtually revisits key moments from Native American history. Digitally grafting her face onto the heads of women in nude selfies downloaded from the Internet, Miami-based Jillian Mayer's timely *400 Nudes* (2014)—displayed as takeaway postcards in the MAC's atrium—bravely offers her self as a shield against accusations of shame and unauthorized invasions of privacy. Paris-based Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn's gut-wrenching *Touching Reality* (2012) is a simple, silent projection showing a female hand swiping through and occasionally zooming in on a selection of photographs of mangled bodies on a tablet. The subtle introduction of a gesture of tactility into our encounter with such images collapses the safe distance that sight allows, reactivating their horror.

Through references to Montreal's history, challenging new commissions and a strong focus on young Canadian artists, the biennial presents a unique, locally relevant take on a trendy biennial theme.