

La machine qui enseignait des airs aux oiseaux, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal

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La machine qui enseignait des airs aux oiseaux

The exhibition program that became *La machine qui enseignait des airs aux oiseaux* initially emerged from an intensive round of studio visits with Montréal-based artists and was planned to take place over numerous instalments during the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal's closure for renovations. After those renovations were delayed, however, this extended program was condensed into a single exhibition that, intentionally or not, resembled a biennial format. With over thirty participating artists, it composed the largest survey of local art since the last Québec Triennial in 2011, and was one of the most substantial group exhibitions in the city since the final iteration of the ill-fated Biennale de Montréal in 2016.

"Who are museums really for?" is a question that has been on many lips of late, and the MAC Montréal is one among many museums to stage a recent survey exhibition of artists from their local area, marking a heightened attention to immediate communities rather than a global or touristic public. However, due to both design and circumstance, *La machine...* was hardly a definitive or authoritative portrait of art practice in Montréal.

Firstly, this was because curators Mark Lanctôt and François LeTourneux avoided a strong thematic or interpretive lens in favour of a broad and inclusive approach and an extensive selection of supplementary projects—in addition to the exhibited artists, the show also included an online film program curated by Ronald Rose-Antoinette in collaboration with the International Festival of Films on Art (FIFA), a podcast series produced by guest curator Daisy Desrosiers, and a hefty publication with inserts of writing by a varied slate of local authors including Nicole Brossard, Rawi Hage, Madeleine Thien, Maude Veilleux, and Jacob Wren, plus scholars such as Joana Joachim, Krista Lynes, and Michael Nardone. This catalogue also came with a reader of texts on

anthropology and colonialism edited by Raymond Boisjoly. Such a wealth of ancillary material bolstered the sense of the exhibition as a biennial-type event, but also came in handy when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the show's viewing, keeping audiences at home, only able to access the MAC Montréal via print media and web-based offerings. (*La machine...* was installed a full two months before visitors were actually allowed to see it.)

Once it finally opened, the exhibition offered an abundance of rewarding works, but without imposing artificial cohesion on a selection of artists with often dramatically varied concerns and sensibilities. In a personal conversation, Mark Lanctôt told me they wanted a rubric that would allow connections between a diverse roster of artists without making shared identities the focus. The device they settled on to orient their inquiry, curiously enough, was an artifact from the eighteenth century: the serinette, a type of small, crank-operated barrel organ that was first popularized among the European aristocracy as a way to teach songs to their caged birds. A historical print in the museum's collection depicts this instrument in the hands of an impoverished street performer, a sign of its transit from high to low society. What interested the curators about the serinette was its association with the popularity, in its time, of automatons, and its relationship to debates on the nature of humans, animals, and machines at a moment when industrial capitalist modernity (fuelled by violent globalization through colonization) was just beginning to take shape.

From this antique novelty, the curators extrapolated a theme that brings together a constellation of ideas around bodies, technology, materiality, and language; about transmission and translation, craft and mechanization—how language, embodied in objects, can define borders and enforce power (or undermine it); and how technology mediates and

La machine qui enseignait des airs aux oiseaux, exhibition view, 2021.

Photo : Guy L'Heureux

Jérôme Nadeau

The Crawler, 2019 (left) and *Less Lost*, 2019 (right).

Photo : Guy L'Heureux, courtesy of the artist

Vikky Alexander

Green Leaf Ceiling, 2020.

Photo : Guy L'Heureux, courtesy of the artist & TrépanierBaer Gallery, Calgary



dematerializes bodies. Though tantalizing in its potential, this abstract, even abstruse thematic was articulated somewhat differently every time it was encountered. Broad and slippery, it imparted a diffuse shape to the exhibition, but its ambiguity often resulted in awkward juxtapositions between works whose languages remained untranslatable to each other.

The closest thing to a perceptible “Montréal scene” in the exhibition was the handful of artists whose work has circulated in the network of DIY project spaces in Montréal, across Canada, and abroad. For example, artists Simon Belleau, Kristan Horton, Marlon Kroll, Nicholas Lachance, Jérôme Nadeau, and Thea Yabut all participated in the Episode Laurier event, a 2018 micro-fair involving small galleries, project spaces, and independent curators. Those artists all work, to a greater or lesser extent, in a vernacular of materialist formalism that chimes with the framework of this exhibition and is echoed in the work of other included artists like Trevor Baird and Anne Low.

The first large exhibition space, where all of the works were connected by the medium of textiles, illustrates some of the challenges of the exhibition. Guillaume Adjutor Provost’s video installation queering historical zoot suit culture in Montréal, Rosika Desnoyers conceptual research into needlepoint, Carla Hemlock’s defiantly “crafty” integration of Indigenous tattoo motifs into her monumental protest quilt, Anne Low’s mattress-like bundles, and Nicholas Lachance’s sombre series of prints of medieval plague imagery were all compelling in their own way, but they seemed to be speaking past each other rather than entering into a dialogue. The same difficulty applied in the following gallery, where Isuma’s feature-length film (about translation and power in an encounter between a government official and an Inuit elder), Jérôme Nadeau’s hybrid photo-painting abstractions,

Karen Kraven’s elegantly tough fabric sculptures (referencing her family history in the garment industry), and Vikky Alexander’s conceptual photo-environments all seemed to lose rather than gain impact by their association.

The curators’ impulse to avoid a definitive regional survey is no doubt a productive one; aside from being inevitably exclusionary, such an attempt could only ring false. That said, if their task was still to make current practices more visible, legible, and comprehensible, it is hard to view *La machine...* as an unqualified success. Part of this response may stem from a simple lack of appetite, in the present climate, for biennial-style exhibitions of any kind, coupled with a pervasive uncertainty—after the political and epidemiological upheavals of the last several years—about what matters in art now, and indeed how much art matters at all. If this exhibition’s picture of the present was indistinct, it may be because the curators chose an oblique approach when the pressing questions of the day demand to be tackled head-on.

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Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal

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