

TOWARD A CANADIAN Biennale

WAYNE BAERWALDT AND THE POLITICS
OF FAITH

a text by Ed Janzen

Listening to Biennale de Montréal curator Wayne Baerwaldt speak about his curatorial vision is a harrowing pleasure. Harrowing, because his vision is indistinct and sometimes contradictory.

A pleasure, because he seems comfortable with his vision being incomplete — maybe even wrong. An inversion of the image of the curator-as-control-freak, Baerwaldt appears utterly comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Montreal artist and art commentator Don Goodes interviewed Baerwaldt and posted the edited videos of their conversation on YouTube and vernissage.tv (search for “Baerwaldt”). The remarkable results comprise the quotations that appear here.

“I was interested in coming here to think about the context of a Canadian Biennale — in Montreal, in Quebec,” Baerwaldt explains, “as part of Canada,

but in a very unique cultural milieu that’s been established here over the last 400 years.

“We don’t have our own [Canadian] biennale, at this point. The Biennale de Montréal has played that role to ... a very limited extent. It’s been about Montreal ... about its connections to Europe. It’s been about a certain political dynamic. It wasn’t really operating in a way I thought a Canadian biennale might.”

“One of the themes, in a very loose way,” he continues, “was dealing with borders ... from physical to geographical borders to political borders and those that are absolutely imaginary ... most

of the artists could conceivably fit in ... whether they want to or not."

Whether they want to or not? Wait a sec...

There's more: "[An exhibition concept] can be on a very publicly accessible level [or] you can really throw caution to the wind ... work very intuitively, and hopefully surprise yourself.... I'm interested in that fine line between failure and success."

Exploring this success/failure tension, Baerwaldt discusses how some artists' works were positioned so that the sound from a particular video could bleed into another space, creating a new environment and producing an unpredictable recontextualization of another artist's work. (Maybe this is what he means by "whether they want to or not.") "It's suddenly working on a different level — or I think it is, anyway. Enhancing or impacting upon another artist's work in some sort of way that works, stimulates the imagination.... Maybe that's the producer in me thinking ... "This is the way it should be." So, it could be absolutely delusional."

The success/failure tension was perhaps amplified by the fact that the Biennale only received \$500,000 in funding — unlike similar events in other countries, which operate "with budgets from \$3 million to \$300 million."

"Everything from the didactic panels, which are incomplete or sometimes non-existent, to the lighting of one piece or another ... to some degree it's about practical limitations, not having staff ... or time to finish."

It sounds like he's complaining — but get this: "On another level it's probably

seeing fifty per cent of the artists change the titles of works that are created right up to the last minute. And I think that's legitimate, of course, that's their every right to do so...."

At this point, many curators would lose their minds. After all, isn't it the curator's role to envision and advance a well-defined, theorized concept? Is it really so difficult to print off proper labels, even last-minute? Shouldn't the audience expect as much? As chief artistic officer, the curator, even in the most iconoclastic exhibition, remains responsible to the artists and the audience.

Baerwaldt seems to agree: "Producers usually like to know what they're getting in the end." But he quickly upends the traditional relationships: "I'd like to think that some percentage of the presentations here would even confound the producer, and ask for a leap of faith. And I think I, as a rule, put myself in that position wherever possible."

It's a big leap of faith. It wouldn't be difficult to conclude that Baerwaldt's biennale simply suffered from overreach, that he and his associates failed to bring off a professional-level event owing at least in part (with some justification) to the lack of money. Moreover, Baerwaldt positions himself on the line between success and failure — but, since he appears rather comfortable with failure, even failure becomes success. What does a leap of faith mean when you can't lose?

What will confound many — and has — is that Baerwaldt may be right. Anyone who's followed his career will recognize that he has always worked this way. And, while controversy has dogged him — programming his friends, frivolous expenditures — so has success,



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and not just his own. While curator at Winnipeg's Plug In artist-run centre, Baerwaldt "discovered" young artist Marcel Dzama and took him to the L.A. International show, launching his career. Baerwaldt may promote "art stars," yet few disagree that the artists, like Dzama, deserve their success. Moreover, many have done less with far greater resources to promote recognition of a relatively small art scene like Winnipeg's.

Similarly, many remember when Baerwaldt brought the "World Tea Party" event to Plug In back in 1999. Does anyone remember what the week-long event was actually about? Maybe not — but not because it was unmemorable; everyone who went remembers it as a magic moment. This is what could be called the "Baerwaldt touch." It's not producing gold from base metals; the gold is already there. But he makes people *believe* in the gold. There's the leap of faith.

So, was the "Canadian biennale" a golden success — or a racket?

It's a Canadian predicament. In older industrialized countries, with longer histories as nations/empires, with internationally recognized roles in the master narrative of art history, big-ticket art events can exude a cultural bravado, a sleek, programmed vision of a nation's artistic ethos. This would be difficult to achieve in Canada, more or less a massive, colonial resource-extraction project

built upon dispossession of the country's First Nations. Further, the English colonial project's primacy was contingent upon the conquest of the French colonial project. That is, it is a *result* of colonization, not a "first cause" — a follower, not a source, of art trends.

If Baerwaldt's "Canadian biennale" is a bit of a racket, well, so is Canada, an aggregate of nations interwoven with colonial relationships and animosities. Perhaps it's appropriate that Baerwaldt's vision of a biennale "about borders" is so vague.

Despite Canada's troubled "national" landscape and its government's disinterest in art, Baerwaldt feels the experiment, the leap of faith, is necessary — and that the government and private sector must step up with funding. "There should be some sort of celebration, I think, [that] comes close to ... a cultural flashpoint for the making of a contemporary art history, here."

Perhaps Baerwaldt's vision of a Canadian biennale might work for the country as a whole. If we could be a little more comfortable with being uncomfortable — a little more failure-friendly — who can say what productive, experimental spaces that might open up?

And then again, "it could be absolutely delusional."

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