

Sneak Peek: Janine Marchessault Presents Massive New Exhibition

by Mark Mann
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(Photo: Image courtesy of "Land|Slide: Possible Futures")

Janine Marchessault, the curatorial powerhouse and York University Fine Arts Professor behind “**The Leona Drive Project**” in 2009 and the “**Museum for the End of the World**” at the 2012 **Nuit Blanche** in Toronto, has been working for the last year and a half on a massive collaborative exhibition slated to run at the **Markham Museum** this fall (September 21–October 14, 2013). She and her team presented a sneak peak of “**Land|Slide: Possible Futures**” at Toronto’s **Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art** on Thursday, June 26. The exhibition will engage 35 Canadian and international artists — as well as a host of local agencies, not-for-profit groups, educators, activists, and

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developers — to transform the historic site in one of Canada’s fastest growing cities into an interactive landscape of art installations and participatory performances.

Typical of Marchessault’s projects, there are many themes and interests at play, including issues of urban sprawl, multiculturalism, and ecology, but the foundation of the exhibition is the city of Markham itself, a municipality northeast of Toronto known as a center for the high-tech industry. “Markham was the perfect place to stage this exhibition, because it is the 21st century city,” she explained to **ARTINFO Canada** in conversation this week. “It’s the most diverse municipality in Canada. It’s also a place that does have a progressive green trend. It’s connected to the green belt and agriculture, but it’s also a place that is developing incredibly fast.” In many places, that development counteracts the green trend, but for Marchessault, who serves as the Canada Research Chair in Art, Digital Media, and Globalization, it also provided the image that would become the launching point of the exhibition.

“As I drove out to Markham I encountered these subdivisions where streetlamps and stop signs had been installed, but there were no houses,” she described on the phone. “You could really see the line where agricultural land stopped and where the subdivision started.”

The idea of the line became “the critical formal element of the exhibition,” as she explains on her website. Her collaborators are developing that idea in different ways; for example, the artist **Iain Baxter** will be producing a maze constructed out of lines and embedded with language about ecology chosen by children.

“There is an idea that the line is a horizon that is infinite and that development can happen infinitely,” she elaborated. “That’s the way sprawl works: it continues out into this infinity. But what if there is a line? What if there is an end point where things stop?”

If that sounds foreboding, it isn’t meant to be. Visitors to the “Museum for the End of the World” will remember the dark, melancholic tone of that exhibition, but this one is different. Though Marchessault doesn’t shy away from hard realities, her purpose with this project is more optimistic and instrumental than gloomy and admonishing.

“I really do believe that we are in a crisis period,” she stated simply. “But crisis doesn’t actually work to change the way that people think. With this exhibition, I wanted to think about a world in transition and about possibilities for changing the way that we understand progress: not in terms of growth, but in terms of staying still, in terms of sustainability.”

Marchessault doesn't use those words lightly: her approach is rigorous, inclusive, and thoroughly researched. To that end, she has reached out to an incredibly diverse array of community partners. She is working closely with **Chloe Brushwood Rose** from the Faculty of Education at **York University**, who will be acting as Research Lead for the educational component of the exhibition, and urban planner **Jenny Foster**, "who has helped us understand some of the urban planning innovations in Markham." She is also relying on her usual partners at the **Public Access Collective**, of which she is a founding member, as well as the full participation of the Markham Museum and its progressive director, **Cathy Molloy**.

Though the list of collaborators numbers in the dozens, including the Greenbelt Farmers' Market Network, which will be supporting Land|Slide to purchase fresh produce from farmers at Greenbelt farmers' markets for the exhibition (some of which will be prepared and served by celebrity guest chefs). Other notables include Toronto's **Gendai Gallery**, who are facilitating an extensive collaboration between Chinese artist **Xu Tan** and Markham's local Chinese community; **Seeds for Change**, a grassroots community organization that fosters community gardens; and the local **Unionville High School**, whose students are collaborating with artists on a number of works.

As is often the case for Marchessault's exhibitions, "Land|Slide" is situated at a distance from the downtown art world. Markham isn't a typical destination for urban art-seekers. "I know curators in suburban galleries in Mississauga, Oakville, and Scarborough work really hard to get people to come out," she acknowledged, but she is nonetheless optimistic about working with GO Transit, the regional public transit service for the Greater Toronto Area. "Even though it is still incredibly insufficient, there have been some innovations around public transit and it's not impossible to get out there."

"I think that it's going to be a challenge," she admitted. "The main thing is to make the exhibition so outstanding and unique that people feel they have to come."