

1 Linda Swanson at Peel Basin Quay, 2011
2 Linda Swanson – *Slugs in Box*, 2011
Photography Shauna Janssen

The installation took place 17-25 September 2011, Peel Basin Quay, Montreal, Quebec, Canada
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A CURATOR AND CERAMIST'S DAY

Shauna Janssen on Linda Swanson

Linda Swanson's art practice is a mode of inquiry that privileges processes of reflection. Her art practice is guided by the phenomenon of metamorphosis and questions about the ecology and relations between the cultural and natural world. Synthetic clays, salts, and mineral compounds, elements of earth, water, and fire are but a few of the transformative materials that define the artist's ceramic artworks. Swanson's participation in residencies located within the diverse geographies of places such as Iceland and Kansas, for example, have afforded her opportunities to open both her practice and sensory awareness to the dramatic and transformative character of natural and metaphorical landscapes that have also come into formation so prominently in her artwork.

In the summer of 2010, I invited Swanson to create a site-specific installation for Urban Occupations Urbaines, a curatorial project I conceived to facilitate creative and critical responses to unresolved architectural conditions and urban landscapes. Against the backdrop of urban renewal and the largest gentrification project in the history of Montreal's development, Linda Swanson's *INFESTATION* was the appearance of 1000 slugs formed out of ceramic materials that were installed on the ruined quay of two nineteenth-century freight sheds located on the north bank of Montreal's Lachine Canal National Historic Peel Basin Sector. The Peel Basin quay, curiously, does not convey meanings typically associated with National Historic sites. The site is managed federally by Parks Canada and identified as such with a modest sign at the base of the quay. The site is bounded by movement in all directions: the Bonaventure Expressway to the east, the Canadian National Railway tracks to the west, a multipurpose path to the north, and the Lachine Canal to the south.

On 17 September 2011, Swanson invited the public to participate in the installation of the slugs, beginning at sunrise, and then to return to the site one week later, before sunset, and join in the redistribution of the slugs into the city. As Swanson explains: 'In the spirit of promoting the cultural fertility of Montreal's historic industrial district, the curious presence and materiality of these ceramic slugs is an effort to rouse a contemplative reflection on the processes of urban regeneration and renewal, and the potential connections between the natural, cultural, industrial, and historical aspects of the area.'



Swanson's invitation to the public to physically handle and place the slugs within the rough topography of the quay was intended to elicit a connection to the historical materiality of the site. Swanson's 1000 ceramic slugs, each approximately ten centimetres long, were hand-formed individually from porcelain and crystalline glaze. Grouped in recurring colour patterns, the slugs were distributed among the weedy fault lines of the decaying Peel Basin quay: they appeared as jewels basking and glittering in the first rays of the day's sunlight. For Swanson the activity of installing 1000 ceramic slugs onto the Peel Basin quay afforded a unique vantage point from which to materially engage with and interpret the ecology of a changing post-industrial landscape. As Swanson explains: 'The slugs themselves were not really the meaning of the piece...it was through those ceramic objects that one could connect to the place and even in their displacement from the site one could still engage with the ideas of the project. The slugs have travelled to other places in Montreal, as well as Korea, Norway, Mexico, France...so I hear! Are they souvenirs? Not really. They are more like a gateway or entryway into the ideas of the artwork.'

The ephemeral presence and insertion of these slugs into the ruinscape of a post-industrial site were imagined by Swanson as a device for creating an interruption into everyday movements through urban spaces, inciting reflection upon the ambiguous relationship between the processes of decay and renewal in the life of the city. As a public work of art, the subversive character of *INFESTATION* was brought into relief through the small scale of the artist's sculptural objects. In Swanson's view, '*INFESTATION* wasn't really artwork that was grand in scale. It was really subtle and it didn't work in the way that a lot of public artworks do. The subtlety of the infestation allowed a poetic experience. The project was about engaging with the site...it was about engaging with this fictional story about these slugs migrating out of the polluted Lachine Canal (slugs don't really come from canals)...I wanted to spark the public's imagination...and it is through this fiction that one could, in a way, re-engage with this site.'