Serious Politics

by Kim Waldron

When I decided to run for public office I had no experience as a politician. For more than fifteen years I have been working with self-portraiture, and my previous art projects often involved documenting performance linked to the process of acquiring knowledge. For example, before starting my last project, *Beautiful Creatures (2010–2013)*, I had never slaughtered or butchered animals, but the resulting artwork explored what it takes to produce the meat we eat. Similarly, by becoming a politician I could put the mechanisms of constructing a public persona on display. Politics is all too often about self-representation, and the project *Public Office (2014–2015)* would allow me to propose my personal politics in a public forum.

I launched my campaign as an independent candidate for the 2015 federal election while eight months pregnant. A year before the scheduled election I opened a campaign office on St-Hubert street and began to collect signatures. I had to begin early, as I had an artist residency in China that year. The campaign office was a pop-up exhibition organized by Galerie Thomas Henry Ross art contemporain and funded by the City of Montreal through the Pierre-Ayot Award. In engaging with electors, it was very interesting to learn how to listen, talk, and walk like a politician, and I became a better potential representative as time passed; the more I got to know citizens, the more I found myself able to speak on their behalf. From the initial role-playing I was engaged in, I slowly started to become a politician. The project also concerns the difference between a personal and political persona. My art projects often provide an interior reflection about how we construct our identities through social interaction. In effect, my personal persona informs the positions I take politically. To facilitate a connection between these two personas, I published a memoir, funded by the Claudine and Stephen Bronfman Fellowship in Contemporary Art, so that constituents of the Papineau riding could know me better.

As a candidate, I wanted to advocate for electoral reform and for bringing more diverse voices into government. People often vote against parties rather than for the best candidate, and by run-

INDÉPENDANTE

Kim
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Campaign poster.
Photo by Kim Waldron.

Participants at the Papineau All-Candidates Debate 2015, hosted by Optica centre for contemporary art as part of the VIVA! Art Action performance festival.
Photo by Kim Waldron
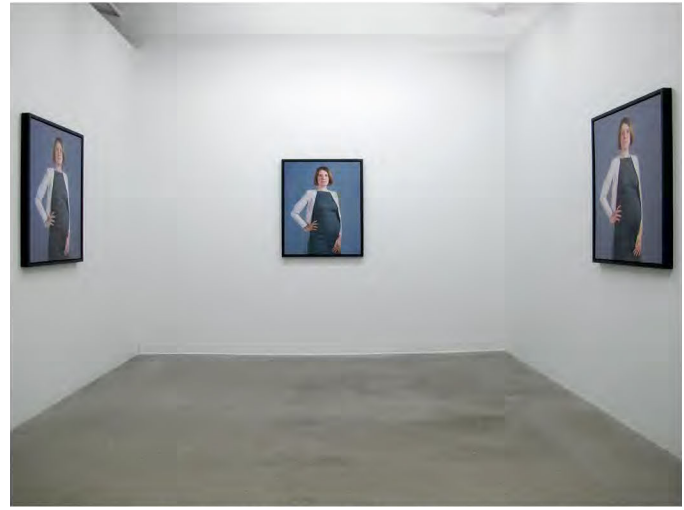
La très honourable Kim Waldron at Galerie Thomas Henry Ross art contemporain, 17 September–23 October 2015.
Photo by Kim Waldron

ning as an independent I was proposing that they vote on conviction rather than strategic manoeuvring. My campaign poster showing me pregnant stood in stark contrast to the posters of party candidates, which reeked of corporate branding. When you have no money it is difficult to compete against a political party and its fundraising machine. As an artist I fought with my image. My electoral signs throughout the Papineau riding set the stage for my actions. Politicians are normally seen as talking heads, and their campaign posters typically use a headshot. I decided to focus on the body and featured my belly prominently on my poster. Women candidates definitely don't run using such an image, as people tend to focus on trivial things in regard to women like the outfit she is wearing. The fact that I started out pregnant and ended up with a one-year-old baby also became a commentary on the ridiculous length of the campaign.

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I used the French word *indépendante* as the slogan of my campaign poster, and this term, in combination with my image, sent a powerful feminist message. On the day I went to drop off the 100 signatures required to become a candidate at the Elections Canada office, I was surprised to discover I would be registered as *candidat indépendant*.

The electoral law does not recognize the feminine accord, and I attracted media attention when I filed a complaint during the election asking that I be recognized as female. This action ended up becoming a significant part of the project and its reflection on

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the self-staging of women candidates (see, e.g., Lévesque). We will have to wait and see if the law changes.

While artists have run as candidates mostly as a form of satire, in running as a year-long performance, I was proposing that a professional artist could be an effective representative. The artist-run centre Optica hosted the Papineau All-Candidates Debate 2015 as part of the VIVA! Art Action performance festival.

Seven of the ten candidates in the riding took part at a community centre in Parc-extension, including the New Democratic Party (NDP) and the Bloc Québecois. Clearing away the noise and advertising of the election campaigns, it became possible to compare our messages. To have my voice heard as equal to the voices of the other candidates was interesting. We were all presenting left-leaning perspectives, but there is a sharp contrast in how one self-censors when one is part of a party and when one is running as an independent. The party candidates would constantly refer back to the position of their party and often redirect questions to discuss the talking points of their party's campaign. As an independent I was free to propose an unrestricted perspective based on my personal convictions.

Your visibility depends on the media, and it felt wild with so many journalists and photographers roaming around looking for a story. I would get a call from a journalist, and I would have to drop everything, switching from a private to a public persona. To respond to this challenge, one month before election day I opened

Image used on 19 October 2015 on *Facebook* to invite people to go vote.
Photo by Kim Waldron

Campaign poster installed in the electoral district of Papineau.
Photo by Kim Waldron

a show at Galerie Thomas Henry Ross art contemporain titled *La très honourable Kim Waldron.*

The exhibition consisted of three paintings of myself painted by Wang Wei while in residency in China, and I staged a couple of interviews in the gallery, using my status as a professional artist to frame myself as a credible candidate. As a candidate and an artist I was in the business of image construction. But in both cases I needed to be true to myself by having my public image reflect my core personal beliefs.

I happened to be at the YMCA the day that Tom Mulcair decided to vote. It was a designated advance polling station, and the horde of camera people that had gathered outside followed him into the building, clicking and flashing away. The bottom had already dropped out of the NDP campaign, and it was strange seeing him with his hollow smile in person. There were a couple of citizens placed at the door for him to greet on his way out, and after I had experienced first-hand the construction of my own image by the media, it was amusing to witness the staging of an opponent.

Running as a candidate in this past election pushed me to the limits of what one person is capable of doing. I applied my experience being an artist, mother, and worker to the task at hand and discovered that you need an army to run a campaign. Working with limited budgets, I often execute most aspects of a project by myself. Being a politician necessitates working with others, and this experience opened up my art practice to more collaboration.

It is discouraging to put so much money, time, and energy into an election campaign only to discover that most people voted to remove Stephen Harper from power rather than to elect a majority Liberal government. The Liberals have a majority based on 39.5 per cent of the vote, and Harper's 2011 majority was won with 39.6 per cent of the vote. Practically the same number of people who did not want Harper in power do not want Trudeau in power. Without election reform our democratic system remains broken. On election night, I had 0.31 per cent of the vote; my opponent, Justin Trudeau, won the riding with 51.98 per cent of the vote.

Work Cited

Lévesque, Catherine. "Kim Waldron Wants Elections Canada to Recognize Her as Female Candidate." *Le Huffington Post Quebec* 23 Sept. 2015. Web. 25 Nov. 2015.

About the Author

Kim Waldron is a Montreal-based visual artist. Active in the local, national, and international scene, she has an MFA from Concordia University, where she is currently a visiting professor, and a BFA from NSCAD University. She was the recipient of the Claudine and Stephen Bronfman Fellowship in Contemporary Art and the Pierre-Ayot Award in 2013.