

## The Visual Arts in Canada: A Synthesis and Critical Analysis of Recent Research

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"The Visual Arts in Canada: A Synthesis and Critical Analysis of Recent Research" is the first comprehensive assessment of the state of research knowledge of the visual arts in Canada, cataloguing over 550 Canadian studies and a further 315 studies done abroad.

Conducted by Professor Guy Bellavance of the Institut national de la recherche scientifique (INRS), Centre - Urbanisation Culture Société, the study considers what existing research tells us about the socio-professional realities of the visual arts sector, identifying gaps in the research and proposing strategies to fill those gaps.

The study's primary findings include:

- ✚ **The visual arts sector as a whole requires systematic and recurrent study.** This should be approached in a holistic way, as an ecology of interdependent parts and will require a "conceptual" definition of the sector and methodology, for which this study offers a model.
- ✚ **The art economy or "market" should be the priority for future research.** It is essential to understand how private galleries, auction houses, individual and corporate collections, public galleries, donations, prizes, awards and grants, and artists contribute to the visual arts economy.
- ✚ **The education system is increasingly shaping the visual arts.** The economic impact of visual arts education needs to be included in the economic footprint of the visual arts. The education sector itself needs to expand its scope to study the operational framework of the visual arts.
- ✚ **The provinces need to do more and better research** so regional differences and detail can be added to the quality research done federally, following Quebec's lead as an example.
- ✚ **Public galleries and art museums need to be studied** to better understand the fundamental role they play in the validation, collection, presentation and promotion of Canadian art.
- ✚ **The socio-economic situation of arts professionals and others working in the visual arts needs to be studied** with the same thoroughness we see in the study of the socio-economic situation of artists.
- ✚ **New digital technologies are profoundly changing how art is produced, presented, promoted and how the public engages with it.** We need to understand these developments better, using research proactively to innovate and advance the field.
- ✚ **Visual arts organizations play a vital role in the visual arts.** We need to understand their true scope better, how they create identity within, and mediate relationships between, stakeholders.

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The Visual Arts in Canada approaches the visual arts in terms of five categories or sub-sectors, which despite local or regional variations are commonly used in research in Canada and abroad:

- 1) the school as a mechanism of professional training and education;
- 2) public arts-funding bodies (grants to individual artists and arts organizations);
- 3) museums as mechanisms for collecting and presenting Canadian works of art;
- 4) the art market as a mechanism for selling artworks; and
- 5) professional groups as sectoral associations.

These sub-sectors are parts of a social and professional “ecosystem” that may be viewed from above, as a whole system, or from below, as micro-systems contributing to and anchoring a larger ecology.

Each chapter of the report focuses on one sub-sector, indexing the major studies and additional references, indicating accessibility, format and how they may be accessed. The conclusion draws together the main observations from each chapter and makes recommendations.

#### **Gaps in the knowledge base**

**Visual Arts Education** Visual arts education accounts for a large yet relatively misunderstood segment of the visual arts. Yet its importance should not be underestimated: not only are artists and other arts professionals trained; but education generally facilitates labour force renewal and the development of audiences for art while providing many bread-and-butter jobs for artists and other art professionals. Data on professional training and visual arts education are particularly hard to gather due in part to the fact that education falls under provincial jurisdictions. And because most data are gathered by educational organizations rather than by cultural organizations, categories like “studies in the fine arts” or “in art,” used in the school system only partially match the “visual arts” as a distinct category of artistic activity. As a result, very little precise information exists on regular programs having to do with the visual arts: funding (particularly with regard to tuition fees), annual graduation rates, the professional paths of students, teacher profiles, program structures and content, and the nature of research/creation grants in the university setting. (pages 7-15)

#### **Public Funding**

The Canada Council for the Arts and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec generally produce high-quality recurrent data that reflect the evolution of direct-assistance programs targeting artists and non-profit arts organizations. The contributions of the other levels of government, whether provincial or municipal, is less clear. The habit of data collection and analysis needs to be extended to all the provinces to make data more consistently available. The production of information on individual grant recipients seems to be less frequently studied. There is also a glaring lack of information on the number and type of public-art projects funded at the municipal level. (pages 17-34)

#### **Art Museums and Public Galleries**

There is not enough information at either the federal or provincial level to define the fundamental impact museums have had in the collection and exhibition of Canadian visual art. At the federal level, most of the basic data that would be required to evaluate the effect of art museums is currently insufficient: the number of art museums; organizations’ funding structures and size; the value and nature of acquisitions (purchases/donations, historic/contemporary, Canadian/foreign); the evolution of budgets set aside for exhibitions of work by contemporary Canadian artists (particularly with regard to artists’ fees, catalogues, etc.) (pages 37-52)

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#### **The Art Market**

Our knowledge of the structure and the dynamics of Canadian art galleries, although it has progressed over the years, remains incomplete; and our understanding of auction houses, which in Canada are often subsidiaries of international firms, and of the identity of major private individual and corporate collectors, whose purchases furthermore are not limited to Canadian art, is more wanting still. Research also rarely takes into account the indirect effect of the public sector and of non-commercial operators, one example of which might be tax exemptions for donations of artworks that could be indexed for secondary markets. The so-called economics of the visual arts is not limited to strictly commercial operations. (pages 55-74)

#### **Professional Associations**

Artists' associations have initiated many studies focusing on the socioeconomic conditions of artists, showing the diversity of income-generating activity and chronically low incomes from art production alone. There is a lack of studies of the working conditions of arts professionals in the other sub-sectors, and also of the organizational approaches of artists vis-à-vis their working relationships and interactions with the other sub-sectors. While there are far more artists' associations than there are organizations of other stakeholders in the visual arts, too little is known about even the artists' associations. An investigation into artists' associations would have to take into account not only the numerous artists' groups, but also the types of associations—union-model groups that represent only artists, cooperative model such as artist-run centres whose membership is not limited only to artists, schools, academies or invisible colleges (based on aesthetic affinities) or sales- or market-based groups. There is also a need to better understand associations representing the other various categories of professionals (critics, curators, dealers, etc.) and the different levels on which these associations operate (national, provincial, regional and municipal). (pages 77-109)

#### **Overall conclusions**

Although there is a relatively extensive body of research covering the five sub-sectors, it is for the most part episodic, fragmentary and without an overall trajectory. The very definition of the visual arts sector varies in accordance with the specific missions and the sporadic strategic needs of the different sponsors of research, which is not conducive to integrating data. A “conceptual,” functional and stable definition of the visual arts sector is needed. The five major categories of activity identified as making up the visual arts in Canada provide a preliminary structural framework for in-depth analysis.

First among the obvious gaps in the research is the omission of several strategic stakeholders. Artist-run centres, art publications and collectors all play important roles in the visual arts, whether as liaisons or mediators among the sector's various mechanisms. They are essential connective tissue in the visual arts world.

There is a noticeable lack of interest within Canadian art history and in university research for systematic examination of the artistic ecosystem, its various sub-systems and how they validate individuals and works. Challenges of defining the sector, the market or the professional criteria of artists are closely linked to this lack of interest in the processes of recognition within the visual arts ecosystem.

The trend of approaching the visual arts as a legitimate economic sector, as a market in which monetary values are traded, and as a remunerated (or at least remunerable) labour pool is a historical phenomenon. While quantifiable information is useful and necessary, is it just as

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important to get the measure of the conceptual construction of these data. It bears remembering that the visual arts world, compared to other sectors, markets and professions, is defined by the preponderance of independent producers (artists and freelancers) or volunteers, of micro-businesses (galleries, magazines), of not-for-profit organizations (museums and other exhibition sites, teaching institutions, private foundations), none of which can be overlooked in an analysis of the dynamics of the exchanges in this universe.

#### **Moving forward**

There are several possible strategies by which the Visual Arts Alliance might remedy the fragmented and episodic understanding of the visual arts in Canada: short term, and longer term.

A first, short- and intermediate-term approach would mobilize primarily, but not exclusively, the internal resources of the Visual Arts Alliance and of its main government partners. University partners would be sought out to act as secondary resources, providing for methodological support, and carrying out ad hoc studies.

A second type of strategy would be more long-term, and entail the development of one or more national partnerships that would bring together Alliance members, targeted institutional and government partners, and university researchers from across Canada. This team could also potentially collaborate with similar collectives abroad.

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To obtain copies of the full research study or for additional information please contact:

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