

Re-visioning the Visual Arts – September 16-18, 2011

Summary Report

The Visual Arts Alliance (VAA), the umbrella organization of Canadian visual arts associations, organized *Re-visioning the Visual Arts* as a colloquium on the future of the visual arts in Canada.

Its purposes were to seek ways to make the visual arts more central in the lives of Canada and Canadians. It was also intended to create a bridge between the 2007 Visual Arts Summit (organized by the Canadian Museums Association) and a future sector-wide summit; encourage collaborative promotion, and identify priorities for the VAA.

The location of Kingston, Ontario, was chosen to commemorate the historic first gathering of Canadian artists and curators held there in 1941. That meeting was seminal in the creation of the Massey Levesque Commission, which led to many advances in the Canadian arts sector including the creation of the Canada Council for the Arts.



First gathering of the Conference of Canadian Artists, Kingston, 1941. Photo courtesy of Library and Archives Canada

The 2011 colloquium, held at the Donald Gordon Centre, invited sixty people who represent a balanced cross section of the visual arts sector including artists, dealers, and museum officials. The keynote address was given by Jeff Melanson, Co-CEO, National Ballet School, who made three key observations about where the arts stand at the moment:

- there is a direct correlation between exposure to the arts in school and involvement later in life; yet art programs in the K-12 system are decreasing;
- the arts tend to segregate themselves, which creates barriers for the public;
- since 1991, growth of private sector funding has far outpaced that of the public sector; today's successful organizations are those able to attract private support.

Three questions drove the weekend's panels and discussions: Who drives the visual arts? What are the challenges each of our constituencies face; and how do we (together) move forward?

From these lively debates, five themes emerged. (The details of these themes are outlined in the select conclusions section at the end of this document.)



Participants at the 2011 Visual Arts Alliance Re-Visioning the Visual Arts Colloquium. Photo courtesy of Guy Lavigueur.

On the basis of the debates and their conclusions, priorities were identified to shape the future of the visual arts in Canada. The VAA is ideally positioned to address issues of common concern and spearhead collaborative action to encourage an improved appreciation for the visual arts.

It was recommended that the VAA form three task forces to address **impacting public arts education, creating a national arts appreciation campaign** and **improving the arts economy**.

Having demonstrated initiative and leadership in holding the colloquium, the VAA will research the potential of these task forces and develop achievable project plans for the directives given. We encourage institutions and associations to join in our efforts, standing up for both the visual arts as a sector and for the well being of artists.

This “stock taking” of the current climate for visual art and artists was a timely opportunity to strengthen our community network at a time of economic and political uncertainty. Public funds are being reduced, and we heard that the arts were considered “an easy cut to make”. The 150th anniversary of Canada in 2017 will be an opportunity for the visual arts to be widely celebrated.

The colloquium was successful at bringing members of a diverse sector together to create a common agenda with which the Visual Arts Alliance can move forward. Together we must embrace the future with vision and determination, focusing on what unites us, and working together to spread the joys of active engagement in the visual arts as a way of life for all. We must also unleash our conviction of the importance of the visual arts to the Canadian public in new and dynamic ways.

We invite you to join us in our mission by providing input or contributing to the proposed task forces on the above subjects. We need your engagement. If you are interested in contributing, please contact the VAA through: info@visualartsvisuels.ca

Select Conclusions from the Colloquium Debates

1. The place of artists and creativity

There is a need to continue working to raise the standards of professionalism throughout the sector, but this alone will not address fundamental weaknesses in the art economy. Notwithstanding improvements made over the past thirty years, artists are just as poor as they were in 1941, or 1981 or today.. The "centrality" accorded artists in how we talk about the arts is meaningless if it does not affect artists ability to earn a living. A new approach is needed, for example, examining the working relationships between artists and galleries to see how they can be made more productive.

2. The centrality of the authentic visual arts experience

The general public appreciates seeing and connecting with works of art, yet too often their experience is poorly understood and fails to make a connection to the artist, art institutions, history and art as a discipline. While it is a self-evident good that more people have more access to digital tools and distribution systems, one consequence is that many professional artists feel neglected, as if they are "off the radar" or on the same level as hobbyists. We must accept that the visual arts is not like the cultural industries:" it is highly mediated by curators, critics, galleries and museums. If the sector as a whole is to move forward, gains by one of these cannot be at the expense of others. And the weakness of media support as a bridge to the public (art magazines and arts reporting in newspapers) is acutely felt. We need to find new ways to make the visual arts real and appealing to Canadians. The language that mediates visual art, more than the art itself, has much to do with this accessibility.

3. Visual arts and education

We must find ways to improve arts education in the schools. This is an issue that was raised in 1941. That so little progress has been made since then indicates that real innovation is needed. Jeff Melanson gave excellent examples: partnering with mainstream media and by creating new curricula and teaching tools. Elementary and secondary arts education is the foundation to society's understanding of the importance of visual art. Ways of negotiating with provincial jurisdictions must be found in order to improve this base of arts education for the general public. We must be mindful that the purpose here is not only to create consumers but to develop awareness and appreciation of the importance of the creative experience in human development and in achieving a full and rewarding life. This requires a holistic approach. More must be done to provide education that inspires appreciation, understanding and respect for our artists. The role of educators, including those within public galleries, is essential to achieving this goal.

4. Public perception of the visual arts

We must find ways to communicate and promote more effectively the excitement of Canadian art so that the public does not feel mystified by it . It is not just a matter of connecting art with other discourses like economics or fitness, as art makes its own valuable contribution to health and well-being. This value needs to be conveyed to Canadian society at large, which so seriously lacks this appreciation. 1% public art projects and events such as Nuit Blanche have done much to promote appreciation for the visual arts and warrant closer study and encouragement.

It is time to acknowledge that creative artistic production happens at many levels. That we can say that there are categories like "homemade" or "DIY" art, "funded" or "grant-supported" art, and "commercial" art, means something. We have to learn to respect every kind of creative effort.

Social networking is an important tool for connecting with audiences but, at the same time, strategies for engaging audiences must be as diverse as audiences themselves. The practice of charging admission fees needs to be assessed in relation to public policy objectives to obtain a better balance between accessibility and institutional sustainability.

5. Visual arts markets

Because the population of Canada is small, the art market is restricted even in the best of economic times, so in it is essential to look abroad, to look at export potential as a key to sustainability of the sector. It is imperative that we find ways to increase sales of visual art works at home and abroad. This is our biggest challenge and opportunity: to increase the livelihood of artists; to have their works loved and bought by Canadians and others. Strategies are needed to stimulate the art market, and then these successes in creating value need to be publicized.

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We especially thank the participants who gave their time and talents to make this colloquium a great success.