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Canadian Arts Summit Report

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Arts Leaders Explore the Transforming Landscape of Cultural Engagement at the 21st Annual Canadian Arts Summit: EngageNOW

**By Shannon Litzenberger,
Program Director,
Canadian Arts Summit, Business / Arts**

The Canadian Arts Summit was an event in demand, attracting a diverse, at-capacity complement of 150 delegates, speakers, leadership fellows and senior arts leaders, including artistic directors, executive directors and volunteer board chairs of Canada's largest arts institutions. This year's theme, *Engage Now*, invited delegates to consider critical questions like:

How do the aesthetic values of cultural institutions shape the values of a nation?

What is a diverse audience?

How do we engage them?

How are our institutions experimenting in order to be more relevant to more people, more often?

How do we, as advocates of arts and culture, take charge of the narrative about the relevance and impact of our work?



Diane Ragsdale, Keynote Speaker (photo by Rita Taylor)

Sessions and panels were built around the themes of Culture Track Canada, the landmark survey of more than 6,400 Canadian culture-goers on motivations and barriers to participation in the arts, the results of which will be launched on June 20 at the Globe and Mail Centre in Toronto. Speakers within and outside Canada's borders charged the discussions with forward thinking perspectives around key themes including digital engagement, designing the ideal cultural experience and the changing philanthropic landscape, among others.

In her powerful keynote address, New York-based arts leader and scholar Diane Ragsdale discussed the relationship between aesthetics, ethics and economics. Ms. Ragsdale encouraged arts leaders to talk openly about the aesthetic values inherent in their own organizations and how these values inform perceptions and decisions from hiring to programming. "Art is the way we share with one another what it means to be human. Which art,

where, by whom, serving whom—all matter greatly in these times," said Ms. Ragsdale. She challenged institutional leaders to understand the ways in which they determine who has cultural rights, which forms of art and audiences are given status and respect, who belongs, and who needs to be invited in. Uncovering blind spots and inviting new, more diverse perspectives into artistic and organizational decision-making are critical to authentic connection with diverse publics. "As executive, artistic, and board leaders of leading cultural institutions, you have both the agency and accountability to respond to the changed cultural context. In 2018, that's the work."

A sneak preview of the inaugural Culture Track: Canada study was another Summit highlight. Arthur Cohen of LaPlaca Cohen shared early insights revealing:

- Canadians are cultural omnivores, and their relationship with culture is purpose-driven. Specifically, they value experiences that ultimately nurture empathy, connection and perspective.
- While fun, novelty and escape are desired attributes of a cultural experience, relevance is a precondition for success. Audiences won't consider participating if they don't feel connected to the content or experience.
- Audiences have limited experience with technology in cultural settings, and are divided on whether it should even have a role. The opportunity ahead is to reframe digital as a tool to foster deeper connection rather than a solution unto itself.
- A fundamental shift has occurred in what individuals seek in committing to organizations. They now value empathy and reciprocity rather than discounts and rewards. This new relationship-based approach is replacing transactional models.
- Canadians are philanthropically active, but culture is rarely their top priority. To generate increased support, a greater emphasis must be placed on culture's distinctive social impact, as well as the need for non-governmental funding.

As the themes of Culture Track: Canada were unpacked in subsequent sessions, other insights emerged.

In the session *Engaging Diverse Audiences*, moderated by Sarah Garton Stanley, associate artistic director of English theatre at Canada's National Arts Centre, the discussion was aptly framed around diversity in institutional contexts by stressing that we must consider our commitments as tools used on the road toward institutional change, instead of confirmation that change has occurred.

Many of the invited panelists challenged current definitions and perspectives that frame conversations around diversity. JS Ryu, executive director of Indefinite Arts challenged us to reconsider how we understand the identity and status of artists with disabilities and how we assess the quality of their work.

Multidisciplinary artist, co-founder and artistic director of Alberta Aboriginal Performing Arts Christine Sokaymoh Frederick highlighted the challenging and often misunderstood use of language and terminology that define First

Nations, Métis and Inuit artists. This signalled the work needed to create shared understanding across cultural paradigms in order to come into authentic collaboration with Indigenous people and communities.

Regina Symphony Orchestra's music director Gordon Gerrard offered a bright spot anecdote about the positive impact a new socially-focused programming approach had on their audience engagement and demographics. The creation of the Forward Currents Festival inspired essential conversation about Truth and Reconciliation in their community.

In *Numérique Next*, a session focused on digital engagement moderated by OCAD's Sara Diamond, the discussion was wide-ranging about digital inclusion, the creative use of tools and applications, talent needed for digital transformation and Indigenous engagement.

Jolyanne Mathieu from le Société arts technologiques in Montreal shared the tremendous impacts of collaborative platforms that link remote communities to centres with abundant resources for performance, learning,



Culture Track: Canada First Look featuring Arthur Cohen and Phil Cox from LaPlaca Cohen (top-left), Numérique Next panel featuring Julie Nagam, Jolyanne Mathieu, and Alex Mayhew (top-right), Engaging Diverse Audiences panel featuring Christine Sokaymoh Frederick and Junk-Suk Ryu (bottom-left), and Social Impact Giving panel featuring Naki Osutei and Valerie Chort (bottom-right - photo by Rita Taylor)

and workshops. These technology tools allow centres with fewer cultural resources or less access to presentation opportunities for local talent, the ability to share in the in the resources available in larger, cultural hubs.

Alex Mayhew of Impossible Things demonstrated an exciting application of augmented reality created with the AGO entitled *ReBlink* that provides new experiences for museum goers, especially youth. Summiteers were given a hands on demonstration, viewing prints of classical artwork with contemporary visual commentary integrated into the pieces using AI.

Julie Nagam of University of Winnipeg and the Winnipeg Art Gallery (joint appointment) demonstrated the ways Indigenous networks

and creative content could build new cultural expressions and engage Indigenous youth in learning their cultures. She showed how digital archival tools were meant to act as memory keepers. She also focused on the extraordinary transformation that she is helping to lead at the WAG to include Indigenous and Inuit art, culture and practices and the ways the museum is adapting and decolonizing.



The Invested Philanthropist panel featuring Anne Maggisano, Judy Matthews, Karlee Vukets, and Alexandra Baillie with moderator Nichole Anderson (photo by Rita Taylor)

The *Invested Philanthropist* panel brought together patrons of the arts for a discussion around what drives their philanthropic giving. The discussion included Alexandra Baillie, Anne Maggisano, Judy Matthews and Karlee Vukets. The conversation began with each panelist talking about their coup de coeur philanthropic projects, which quickly revealed their investment as patrons went well beyond financial. As they discussed their involvement on many levels, they described large investments of time, talent and treasure. They spoke to a common passion for the arts, a clear drive to have impact, and to make a difference. There was also a robust discussion around how social impact and excellence in the arts are inextricably linked.

The *Social Impact Giving* panel, made up of corporate and foundation executives including RBC's Valerie Chort, TD's Naki Osutei, Metcalf Foundation's Sandy Houston and Duane Green of Franklin Templeton Investments, explored the

topic of corporate giving, social impact, and the arts. There was a good discussion on the growing need in the corporate and foundation community to not only quantify results, but to animate the value of investments in the arts within a broader framework that includes both intrinsic and instrumental (qualitative and quantitative) impact.

A candid interview with Canada Council CEO Simon Brault and director general of arts granting programs Carolyn Warren offered an opportunity for exchange on the early results of their new funding model. New ideas with transformative public and sectoral impact are driving new investment allocations, along with significant priorities to support Indigenous arts, equity and diversity.



Courageous Acts: Institutional Experiments: Gideon Arthurs (top-left), Catherine Crowston (top-right), and Kevin Loring (bottom-left), Cornell Wright, steering committee chair (bottom-right)

On the topic of *Designing the Ideal Cultural Experience*, Banff playwright lab director Brian Quirt stressed that audience engagement in cultural experience should be central, not ancillary while Paris-based artistic director of Théâtre du Chatelet, Ruth MacKenzie advocated: “When our ticket buyers are as loved and cherished as our big donors, that’s when the revolution starts.” Grazyna Krupa demonstrated how CBC’s arts programming is experimenting with a new focus on core values targeting underserved audiences in need of better representation, while Kristine Germann of Toronto’s Nuit Blanche highlighted how the blurring of lines between ownership and authorship resulted when free, accessible, interactive contemporary art experiences were placed in the public realm.

Courageous Acts: Institutional Experiments in audience engagement highlighted the work of several Canadian institutions leading change. Newly named artistic director of Indigenous Theatre at the National Arts Centre Kevin Loring underscored the importance of proudly incorporating Indigenous principles into the Canadian identity as a way of challenging and reframing the narratives promoted by the nation-building institutions created over the past 60+ years. National Theatre School CEO Gideon Arthurs spoke frankly about the real challenges and opportunities of a major strategic reorientation resulting in an expansion from 160 to 8000 participants. Tafelmusik’s William Norris spoke of their innovative initiative Hausmusik, where they experimented with baroque music in new venues, with new listening conventions for new audiences not already engaged in



Creating a New Narrative panel featuring Chris Creighton-Kelly, France Trépanier, Geoffrey Crossick, and Jill Robinson

their regular concert season. Art Gallery of Alberta's Catherine Crowston chronicled a major organizational shift, transforming artists into a community of civically engaged meaning-makers and gallery-goers into participants engaged directly in processes of artistic creation. Outgoing Banff Centre literary director Devyani Saltzman (now director of programming at AGO) highlighted the need for institutions to take risks and be vulnerable in order to break down walls.

A focus on research, data and its application in both understanding value and informing decision making was explored in presentations by Jill Robinson of TRG Arts and UK-based cultural value researcher Geoffrey Crossick. Robinson demonstrated how organizations can listen more effectively to their audiences through data and respond through values-based propositions that align with diverse audience segments. Crossick stresses that in order to take control of our narrative we must strive to understand cultural value differently. We must question the hierarchy of quantitative data, the experimental method and randomized control trials and instead recognize the equal validity and rigour of arts, humanities and social science-based research methods.

Chris Creighton-Kelly and France Trépanier of Primary Colours/Couleurs primaires were provocative and candid as they offered delegates a look at the early results of their multi-year work

around how to place Indigenous artistic practice at the centre of the Canadian arts system. Their advice to institutions included hiring racialized people and engaging them in decision-making, considering new ways of developing work that draw from other bodies of knowledge, changing programming so new audiences will come, and engaging communities through 'inreach' - going to reserves, mosques and community centres to develop ongoing relationships.

The closing session, *Creating a New Narrative* moderated by musician and scholar David Maggs, brought these views in conversation, producing a dynamic and diverse set of perspectives around how we move forward in a complex and changing reality.

As the leaders of Canada's largest publicly funded purveyors of aesthetic and social values, delegates left with an imperative to examine how audience engagement is deeply connected to the values being expressed in their work, in their spaces, in their policies, and in the composition of their board members and staff. Inspired by new perspectives and practical ideas for change, Summit participants are being called to make meaningful connections with new audiences and communities in new ways, framed by a more expansive, inclusive set of values and expressed through new creative possibilities.



CAS21 Steering Committee (left to right): Cornell Wright, Nichole Anderson, Amiral Alibhai, Sara Diamond, Howard Jang, Anthony Sargent, Janice Price, Robert Foster, Lisa Rubin, Camilla Holland, Michèle Maheux, Jim Fleck, Gideon Arthurs, and Shannon Litzenberger

The 2019 Canadian Arts Summit will be hosted April 11-14 in Montreal.

Visit www.canadianartssummit.com for details to come in early 2019.

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