

## **17<sup>th</sup> Canadian Arts Summit Hosts Unprecedented National Dialogue**

by Shannon Litzenberger

At the end of March 2014, the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Canadian Arts Summit brought together a host of institutional leaders from the arts and culture sector to discuss issues such as organizational evolution, community engagement and succession planning. Co-hosted by Business for the Arts and The Banff Centre, the annual event provides a forum where senior leaders of major arts organizations can identify and understand common challenges, exchange ideas, and collaborate on best practices and strategies for creating a stronger, more vibrant and thriving arts ecosystem in Canada.

This year, the event underwent a refreshing transformation, introducing a day of live streaming courtesy of The Banff Centre, as well as a fellowship program that sponsored a national group of seven diverse thought leaders from beyond the institutional pool of participants to join the conversation. More than 700 viewers from Fox Creek, Alberta to Fredericton, New Brunswick tuned in to the live stream and our Twitter feed #2014artssummit trended throughout the day. It was an unprecedented national dialogue that engaged many of Canada's thoughtful and thought-provoking arts leaders.

Designed by a Steering Committee of organizers spearheaded by McMichael Gallery Chair Upkar Arora, the program titled *'Transformation: Evolution or Revolution?'* aimed to tackle some tough questions. Challenged by 2013 Arts Summit keynote speaker and American arts evangelist Ben Cameron, we asked "In a changing consumer marketplace driven by digital access, personalized experiences and social influence, how does your community know they matter to you?" In light of a major generational leadership transition on the horizon, we also aimed to tackle the issues of leadership and succession planning asking *"As unprecedented numbers of institutional leaders approach retirement age, who will lead when they are gone? Have we prepared the next generation to take over Canada's major arts and culture institutions? Do they want to?"*

This year's keynote speaker, Lawrence P. Goldman of the New Jersey Performing Arts Centre (NJPAC), characterized this as the age of the "Great Tune-out", advocating that at this moment in history the live performing arts are vital for meaningful human engagement. He encouraged institutional leaders to focus on inclusive programming and open access. "Arts can create community and can restore a common humanity in a world that needs healing," he said.

A panel of Canadian artists inspired with their stories of identity, community connection and transformation. Ballet BC artistic director Emily Molnar spoke of growth as a contraction – a repositioning, while Manitoba-based visual artist KC Adams shared her struggle to define herself in the face of a disconnected Aboriginal heritage. Soundstreams' Executive Director Chris Lorway challenged us to think about institutional transformation and succession not only in terms of leadership,

but also in terms of venues and communities. Michele Maheux, Executive Director and COO of TIFF illustrated the ways in which the arts are themselves a vehicle for change – for “finding a voice, building confidence and changing worlds.”

North Carolina-based community engagement specialist Doug Borwick kicked off the much loved Pecha Kucha presentations – this year focusing on highlighting bright spots in community engagement. Borwick aimed to raise the stakes for all of us by stating, “Rather than mere ‘mattering,’ let’s consider the possibility of becoming indispensable. If you went out of business today, would your community care?” Seven dynamic speakers told their stories over 20 slides that auto-advanced every 20 seconds. We heard memorable stories such as Michael Green’s engagement in the historic Making Treaty 7 project, Patti Pon’s heartfelt reflections on Calgary’s flood relief efforts, Sylvain Emond’s community dance sensation *Le Grand Continental*, and Crystal Kolt’s unforgettable tale of a tiny city that could. “If Flin Flon can, we all can!” ...should we identify these people...not everyone knows who they are?

Perhaps the favourite session of the event was the thought-provoking and often comedic Succession Planning Debates, hosted by popular Canadian journalist Seamus O’Regan. Brave Arts Summit members debated this issue by supporting or opposing a series of provocative resolutions. Debaters gave timed statements and rebuttals, aiming to convince their colleagues to support their position. Will the next generation of arts CEO’s come from the business community? Will the next generation of Artistic Directors be hired from away? Have we nurtured a new generation of board volunteers and philanthropists?

Time for peer-to-peer discussion and exchange is a yearly feature of the Summit program and day two offered a chance to engage in informal conversation as well as organized topical discussions centered on the theme of transformation. Topics like public engagement, Canada on the world stage and organizational evolution inspired dialogue around internal transformation, while debate on topics like arts advocacy, arts education and succession planning were focused on sector-wide transformation and the role of the institution in the national arts ecosystem.

The event concluded with inspired reflections from Luminato’s Literary & Ideas Curator Noah Richler. His remarks were a highlight for many, eloquently capturing our collective aspirations and the obstacles that we must overcome in order to evolve as a sector.