

An Inspired Future for the Arts - 18th Canadian Arts Summit Gathers Cultural Leaders in Toronto

by Shannon Litzenberger

From April 9-11, the 18th Annual Canadian Arts Summit gathered a host of institutional leaders from the national arts and culture sector to contemplate our collective future. Discussions ranged from the macro to the micro, and delegates considered both big picture trends that are affecting our future, as well as the specific ways in which the industry is adapting to change. 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.

Held this year at the Aga Khan Museum and the Canadian Film Centre in Toronto, the sold out event welcomed an illustrious group of over 120 arts leaders from across the country, primarily from Canada's 60 largest arts and culture institutions. The first day of the program also welcomed an enthusiastic virtual audience, with more than 400 viewers tuning in to the live stream and commenting on the Twitter feed, *#2015artssummit*, which trended throughout the day. It was a unique opportunity for national dialogue that engaged many of Canada's thoughtful and thought-provoking arts leaders.

Designed by a Steering Committee of organizers spearheaded by National Ballet of Canada Chair David Binet, the program aimed to look to the horizon and imagine how arts institutions can both lead and adapt to change. Futurist and resident scholar at Massey College, Sanjay Khanna, set the stage with a compelling analysis of economic, social, psychological and environmental trends that he projects will significantly influence the important role that arts organizations play in their communities. He advocates that arts and culture will become a form of inner sustenance that will help society to face shocking change. Instagram's Director of Brand Development, Dan Habashi offered a lens on the tech space, giving insights into the future of content-led online communities driven by social media. How can we remain visible in a "feed economy"? We also heard from an impressive panel of Artistic Directors, moderated by TIFF's Piers Handling, who shared their views on whether their artistic visions were becoming more conservative and how they imagined their institutions evolving over the coming decade.

Lessons and success stories were shared through the always popular and fast paced Pecha Kucha presentations. This year's topic focused on new, creative models of collaboration and partnership. We heard about the challenges of a government-mandated program on Sir John A. Macdonald, how to create a socially engaged museum, and the transformative power of community participation through the Tiny Lights Festival in Ymir, BC.

Other highlights included IEG's Chief Insights Officer, Lesa Ukman who encouraged delegates to leverage more of their organizational assets to attract sponsors. YMCA's David Hughes shared his experience in creating a model for measuring social return on investment while working with Pathways to Education. Perhaps a favourite presentation of the weekend was that of Arthur Cohen who presented the findings of the U.S.-based Culture Track study, while sharing insights into how we might create a homegrown version in Canada.

Time for peer-to-peer discussion and exchange is a yearly feature of the Summit program and day two offered a chance for delegates to engage in informal conversation as well as participate in topical discussions centered on the theme of change. Sree Sreenivasan, Chief Digital Officer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York gave a dynamic address, speaking about how to animate cultural venues with digital and social media tools. He challenged institutions to "break the rules" and allow free capture and dissemination of their cultural content and artifacts for interested arts audiences. Adaptive change guru Richard Evans of EmcArts led a panel and workshop on innovation, highlighting the Denver Theatre Company, the LA Music Centre and Canada's own Royal Winnipeg Ballet as examples of organizations that are transforming from the inside out.

Of particular interest was an informal address by Deputy Minister of Heritage Graham Flack who highlighted the '5 M's' of the cultural sector: Money, Messaging, Medium, Mechanics and Mission. He advised the group, as leaders in the sector, to focus on reshaping our story as a leading industry within the creative economy. More and better data is needed to reinforce the important role of the arts in Canada's economic and social future.

The event concluded with a strong sense of connection among the delegates, with many rich conversations developing as a result of the thoughtful and provocative program. There was a clear willingness among the group to invest in collective initiatives and work together toward an inspired future.