

# ACTING UP

A LIVELY SYMPOSIUM HOSTED BY THE ROYAL CANADIAN ACADEMY OF ARTS RESTORES ACTIVIST ENERGY, STIRRING UP NEW IDEAS, PASSIONS AND FRUSTRATIONS.

A few states of mind emerged at the Royal Canadian Academy of Art's symposium on advocacy in the arts, held in mid-May as part of the organization's 126th annual general assembly in Halifax. It's important to remember the sequence of these states: exhaustion to energy to elevation.

The afternoon at NSCAD's Bell Auditorium was divided into three parts: a panel presentation, smaller group discussions and a reconvening of all to consider the findings of the smaller groups.

If you've observed such sessions, a sense of exhaustion can underscore and undermine gatherings like this. When activists and advocates get together to consider the fight that fills their year, it's easy and understandable to see how such a mood could take over. Still, some consideration of the difficulties and burnout rate resulting from constantly having to struggle to give visual arts a solid place and value in Canadian society is expected.

"It just goes on and on and on," concluded Ken Ward, artist, writer and chair of Visual Arts Nova Scotia, of the struggle and

the pervasive sense of crisis. He didn't hide his exasperation and, arguably, nor should he have.

"Visual artists don't seem to want to get involved in the dirty work" of advocating for the arts in public and political spheres, Ward said bluntly.

"Part of the problem is burnout," he continued. "I'm stepping down [as VANS chair] after two years because I'm already burnt out."

Ward summed up a common feeling voiced by other panel members and participants at one time or another throughout the day. For example, Robin Metcalfe, director of Saint Mary's University Art Gallery, added: "There is a fair amount of conflict and adversity in the community." Metcalfe also pointed to a "lack of a culture of culture." Indeed, others nodded thinking about the cracks in the network linking the arts across Canada.

"There's a disconnect somewhere," voiced Andrew Terris, Halifax-based arts consultant and activist, adding, "We have to get political."



Geoff Butler, *Big game* ( from "Angel looks" series ), 1992. Alkyd, 79.4 x 122.3 cm. Collection AGNS.



Rose Adams, *Vanitas #1*.  
Oil on canvas, linoleum collage, 24"(h) x 36" (w), 2005.

While this meeting took place a full month before the provincial election and the re-election of the Progressive Conservative party in Nova Scotia, there were nods all around. “We need some new thinking,” offered Milly Ristvedt, RCA member, artist, and chair of the RCA Advocacy Committee in Ontario.

Energy crept in, erasing the exhaustion. Picking up on Ward’s point about the need for artists to increasingly take on advocacy positions, Ristvedt suggested a beginning point. “We have to have campaigns within our own organizations,” she urged. These would be positive messages about what the arts contribute to communities. They would not, Ristvedt said, emphasize the stress and struggle.

Ward reminded the room that VANS alone has some 600 members. “In this province, that’s a big voice,” he said, more people to call on for what he called the “constant education of politicians.”

Talk of addressing politicians across Canada also energized the group. “We’re getting ready to fight again for the Nova Scotia Art Council,” Metcalfe promised. Of course, the province’s art council was dismantled in 2002, after a brief life of several years.

Jodi McLaughlin, director of the Khyber Centre for the Arts in Halifax, supported the idea of a greater political role or force. Arts organizations needed to encourage votes along with private donations to survive, she said.

Energy was high—certainly higher than during the

introductory panel presentations—when Megan Williams, RCA Governing Council member, arts consultant and activist invited the assembly to break into smaller groups to consider weighty but vital—for action—questions that reflected the discussion’s direction. These were: what is the cultural value of visual arts in Canada? How do visual artists and arts organizations reach beyond their own network into the broader one? How do we help individual artists and institutions survive?

Though tackling separate queries, education, in one sense or another, came up. On the first question, the group determined the national arts community has to define how they value their own work. This included “standardization”—a term used by artist and Maritime-based CARFAC board member Gerard Beaulieu in his panel submission earlier in the afternoon—of everything from visual formats for submissions of work to galleries for exhibition consideration, to sharing and enshrining “working realities” to public lending rights.

Handling the second question, regarding the cultural value of visual arts in Canada, the group decisively put forward the need to educate. From primary to post-secondary, schools are great channels to communicate the motives, materials and minds of artists.

This group also shared a belief that artists must learn to learn how to talk about their work in a way that reaches more people, namely those not formally educated in art. With clear language, artists and visual arts groups could better form partnerships

with institutions such as hospitals, to show work and to work engage sympathetic politicians.

On the final concern, the group felt individual artists and organizations will benefit most from increased media coverage, which itself required new and simplified—not simplistic—language. At one point, Ken Ward asked rhetorically, “Why aren’t visual artists on *Oprah*?” That got a few laughs, but the point was a good one: being a visual medium, TV could bring greater exposure, understanding and appreciation of visual art practices and practitioners; “fostering respect” was how the group put it at one point.

A solid foundation of ideas was laid. Ideas aren’t innocuous, the group seemed to think, as a whole. It was up to individual Royal Academicians, as they refer to themselves, to go back to their communities and make the ideas a reality.

Flush with ideas, passions stirred and frustration still felt (that likely never goes away), a sense of elevating the game—to quote sports parlance—resulted.

John McAvity, director of Ottawa-based Canadian Museums Association, revealed plans, shared by multiple organizations, including the RCAA, for a “visual arts summit.” (Earlier in the schedule, Metcalfe mentioned the summit, likening it to the Kingston Conference of 1941, where artists, gallerists, educators and administrators came together for a massive brainstorm and formed, at least the groundwork, for crucial funding bodies such as the Canada Council of the Arts.

“It’s meant to include everyone in the food chain,” McAvity said, adding, “it’s not a conference we want to start, but a movement.”

Ron Shuebrook, artist, former president of Ontario College of Art and Design and incoming RCAA president, echoed the lofty but attainable goal of a nationwide movement with real and measurable results: “We’re not starting again. We’re continuing the work.” ■

*Sean Flinn is a freelance journalist in Halifax.*



Suzanne Gauthier, *Lagoon*, 2005.  
Wax on wood, milar, fabric, acrylic paint, linoleum, 50.5" x 80.5" x 4.5"



Charlotte Wilson-Hammond, *In/Finite #5*.

### RCA ACADEMICIANS AND AWARD WINNERS

During its Annual General Assembly in Halifax, the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts celebrated the election of new members. Thirty Canadian artists and designers were elected by their peers in recognition for significant contributions, through their work, to the visual arts in Canada. Nova Scotian Academicians included: **Rose Adams**, mixed media; **Geoff Butler**, painting; **Suzanne Gauthier**, painting; **Charlotte Wilson-Hammond**, painting; **Wilma Needham**, photography, installation; **Ed Porter**, printmaking.

Dalhousie Gallery curator and director **Susan Gibson Garvey** was presented with the RCA medal for her outstanding contribution to the development of the visual arts, along with fine crafts advocate **Jean Johnson**, director and curator **John Porter** and arts patron **Donald Sobey**.