

Shawna Dempsey's remarks – Visual Arts Summit 2007

When asked to be on this panel, we were each instructed to distill one, important point that was made at the Summit that needs to be remembered as we move forward together. So I've been listening carefully. And I've been struck by not just what has been said over the past three days, but what has not been said, as should be expected when we only meet every 40 years or so. The list of important topics not yet covered could fill weeks of Summits. However, even given the limitations of time, there has been on essential subject that was only briefly mentioned in the first two days of this conference, although thankfully given further consideration here today.

Building upon the comments of our Australia guest Tamara Winikoff early this morning, Kelly Hill's meticulous research, and Paul Wong's presentation on the last panel, I want to explicitly talk about the position and concerns of the individual artist. As Aaron Milrad stated in his comment yesterday, "We must not forget artists are human." And although this is a cringe-inducing phrase, calling forth images of artist-as-elephant-man, to be pitied, not scorned, Mr. Milrad raised an essential, irrefutable point: we cannot discuss visual arts in this country without grappling with the material, human needs of those who labour to make the stuff upon which this so-called industry is based.

And what I am saying has been said many times before by voice more articulate than mine, yet when confronted by the statistics on how much visual artists earn from all sources (which for me has included activities as diverse as house cleaning and speaking on this panel) – when confronted with the actual amount of artists' income – we continue to gasp in surprise. It is as if we live in a state of willful, collective denial. In fact this is true: by lunchtime the issue of artists' wages had all but evaporated from this room.

And perhaps part of the reason that individual artists have been largely absent from the discussions here, not as participants but as a subject, is that we don't fit neatly into systems or bureaucracies. It is often our intent to dismantle, disrupt, or deconstruct any semblance of order. To recycle a word that Steve Loft used earlier, artists are untidy. We interrupt or intercept the smooth, unquestioned flow of experiences, of acceptable meanings, of "beauty", and of capital, that are necessary for the systems of education, collecting, and marketing (all topics we have discussed here).

At an elemental level, an artist's most base, raw materials are images and ideas – things that are neither safe nor static. And working with these fearsome, unpredictable things – images and ideas – scares the shit out of me. Moreover, when I get it right it should scare you, too. So perhaps it is no wonder that there is only limited place for those of us who are unpredictable and even frightening at polite gathering such as this.

Further, if we acknowledge the conditions under which Canadian artists live and produce, we should be ashamed of ourselves that the core producers of what is named as a thirty-nine billion dollar cultural industry (that's 4% of the GDP) almost always live below the poverty line.

In fact it is nearly impossible to live as a full-time visual artist in this country unless one has the good fortune of international sales. One simply cannot survive on artist fees and grants alone. Small incomes, erratic incomes, lack of basic security such as employment insurance, maternity benefits, training funds, or pensions: we as a community continue to accept and condone – to perpetuate – that this is acceptable if one chooses to be an artist. As well as being inhumane, this is in direct conflict with all our lip service to diversity, for if we truly want diverse producers from diverse cultural backgrounds, economic backgrounds, and with diverse points of view, the profession of being an artist must be financially viable, as opposed financially suicidal.

And when I talk about how “we” tolerate a grossly underpaid creative class (not exactly what Richard Florida had in mind), I don’t mean we the citizens of Canada, but we the arts community: museums who cleave to CARFAC bare minimums even when we can agree on the rate, and all other levels and sectors of the arts including artists themselves.

All that we have discussed here over the past three days, all the systems, all the institutions, all the achievements, on whose back have they been built? Artists, who subsidize the creation of their product to a degree unimaginable in any other sector. My point being: I agree wholeheartedly with Aaron Milrad that we cannot forget who makes what it is that we are talking about. No matter how untidy, uncooperative or uncomfortable-making artists may be, and no matter how awkwardly or ungratefully we fit into the systems you create for us, truly the only thing essential to artmaking is artists. And as we strategize around what should happen as a result of the Summit, all of our carefully worded statements and all of the lovely meetings to come will amount to zero real change if the individual artist is not considered: our human needs, our material needs, and that which enables us to produce art.