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President's Address

Power of the Arts National Forum: Advancing Social Change

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Good afternoon. It has been both an informative and invigorating weekend, thanks to the participation of each and every one of you.

I would like to applaud the leadership of those who have conceived of and hosted this forum, especially : The Rt. Hon. Michaëlle Jean and Jean-Daniel Lafond as well as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Carleton University, Dr. John Osborne.

I am always grateful to return to my alma mater and appreciate the striking changes to the campus but all its beauty and energy as well.

In this forum, by bringing together a diverse, eclectic and thought-provoking group of voices, we demonstrated numerous times this weekend the power of the arts to make a real and lasting difference in our lives – and in the lives of our communities. This is especially evident to me as president of a federation that represents more than 85,000 scholars, students and practitioners in the humanities and social sciences. And the power of the arts is equally real and essential to me as the mother of an autistic child. My son Louis and his classmate Catherine are non-verbal. The arts are key in enabling them to express themselves and experience the world and all its beauty.

What has struck me most about this weekend is the value of juxtaposition: Philosophers alongside musicians, doctors alongside community workers, amazing young artists alongside those in their prime – each with his or her own perspective shaped by study and experience, each exposed here to the views of those from outside his or her own discipline or field of interest.

Madame Jean reminded us yesterday to embrace these encounters in all their complexity. And, in the marvelous words of Edouard Locke, “complexity leads to sanity and simplicity leads to madness”. As the former director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, an interdisciplinary centre devoted to shedding light on Canada and its place in the world, it is evident to me that our country works best when it embraces its complexity and diversity.

Our task now is to carry that message, that beautiful truth, out into the world – and to help others understand how the arts advance our shared citizenship and bring us closer to the society we aspire to be. This purpose that we have embraced is profoundly democratic and should be based on, as was suggested brilliantly yesterday by René Villemure, the values of respect, solidarity and civic responsibility.



I have no illusion about the difficulties inherent in this task. The artistic mindset and the humanities face a barrage of prejudices. This is not new. The critics of today are echo chambers of a long tradition. I know full well the look of skepticism that crosses the faces of some parents as their child speaks of pursuing a liberal arts degree. In fact, I saw it on the face of my own father.

And these challenges are not only external. They come also from within. The implications of this weekend's discussions are deep and wide-ranging for my community of scholars and researchers. The key call for action that I heard will require persistent engagement with society on a basis of trust and equality. This should be real in all dimensions of our scholarly work:

- In our teaching
- In our research
- In our service to the community.

To better unleash this potential, it is important that we continue to break down the silos between the disciplines, create open spaces, and foster holistic approaches. In an academic culture that still overwhelmingly values very narrow specialization, this will require a transformation, even a revolution in our individual and institutional practices.

The good news is that change is happening that advances not just the arts but the artistic mindset – encouraging expression, creativity and the exchange of ideas within and outside the walls of academia. That's the foundation on which progress is built. The federation which I lead is taking active steps in encouraging its members to explore that space: notably by opening its annual Congress—the largest academic jamboree in Canada—to the community, by encouraging artistic endeavors of all kinds and by strengthening its multi-disciplinary programming. I invite you to come to Congress 2014 and make your voices heard.

Another example of breaking down silos is the way in which cross-collaboration and integration among funding agencies, universities, colleges and communities is increasing. Yesterday, we heard from Judith Marcuse and her Arts and Social Change Synthesis project supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). The National Action Plan formulated over the course of this weekend is a contribution to this evolution.



But we need also to be honest in recognizing the different impulses in our partnerships. One participant summarized it well yesterday:

- A researcher must follow the empirical evidence, strive for objectivity and maintain some critical distance.
- A community activist must be accountable to the needs and voices of her community.
- An artist must remain authentic and true to her vision.

Irreconcilable differences? No! Let's see instead exciting potential in negotiating that space, in building trust, in collaborating around shared goals, in strengthening the ecology for the arts – all to enhance the public good. This is exactly what dealing with complexity and diversity is all about.

Let me close with a few brief examples.

In 2011, in the Montreal neighbourhood of St. Henri, a vacant storefront was transformed into La Ruche d'Art – the Art Hive. It is the brainchild of Janis Timm-Bottos, a Concordia University researcher and art therapist.

What had been an empty space now bustles with collaboration and energy. People drop in and work alone or together, with paint, with fabrics, even with recycled goods. There are no instructors – people help one another, they learn from one another.

It is like this, every day, that art is made. Connections are made. And a community is strengthened. Through projects like the Art Hive, the Graffiti gallery on Winnipeg, the

Encounters project, which we heard about yesterday along with so many others, we see a society that hungers more than ever for the organizations—small and large—, the ideas and the shared pursuits that bring us together. And we see the benefits both for individuals and for society of what some describe as “arts-based social inclusion.”

Even Ottawa, the city that many claim fun forgot, is alive with arts-based events. A recent one was the youth-driven House of Paint festival, an upbeat multi-generational block party held just a few steps from here on the river's edge beside the city's first legal graffiti wall!



And last weekend, the annual Nuit Blanche was held – an all-night celebration of art. It was cold and rainy that evening. And yet there was a current of energy on the streets.

In the Byward Market, an Ottawa artist named Christopher Griffin was handing out a cube of clay to any and all, and encouraging them to make something of it – and then place their creation onto the body of a rusted-out Chevy Nova.

The car was surrounded by couples, families, children. In the air, were sounds of Latin music, conversation, laughter. On the car's hood, its trunk, its roof, these instant artists placed clay snakes, eggs, faces, hearts, letters and more. This car, this clay was a temporary creation. It would last only until morning. But the effect was one of immediacy and elation. For a night, for a moment, a community of people came together through art.

This forum has reminded us of the transformative power of the arts. Through co-operation and common purpose, partnerships—across all disciplines and walks of life—grounded in our collective realities and communities—can advance the public good. Together, we can build a better world – one that is more inclusive, more vibrant and more engaged.

What a great challenge! Together, we must find our voice and raise it against the narrowing of perspective. Borrowing John Osborne's fine metaphor from Friday, every day we must bring the light into every corner of the country, again and again and again.

Thank you.