



ARTS OTTAWA

Arts Correspondent:
Meral Tan

Audited the December 15th
Action Lab: Social Impact in the Arts

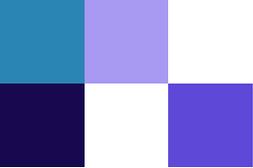
Meral Tan is a graduate of Carleton University's Film Studies MA program. She's currently working as an arts administrator at the Digital Arts Resource Centre, programming events and educational opportunities in media arts.

digitalartsresourcecentre.ca/team/

Meral Tan for Arts Ottawa

Since stepping into my current career as an arts administrator, I've been interested in understanding the broader impact our programming has on the communities and creators we work with. This is not because I lack feedback. I receive attendance numbers, post-program survey results, some genuine smiles and "thank yous" but I don't always know the longer-term implications of the programs I help develop and run, or how to clearly communicate the positive experiences I observe. This curiosity is not only about feeling fulfilled or reassured in my work. The possibility of a significant cut to arts funding by the Liberal Government in the fall of 2025 was just another reminder of how unpredictable our sector can be, and of the need for arts administrators to continuously advocate for the value of our work to secure funding. But how is our work assessed by funders, and how can we better communicate its value? Arts Ottawa's first Social Impact in the Arts Action Lab focused primarily on these questions.

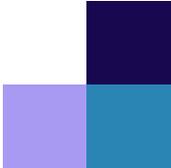
Arts Ottawa's invitation to join the launch of the Lab as a community observer came at a time when I was already thinking more critically about impact assessment and seeking additional resources. Based on my previous experiences participating in Arts Ottawa's Learning Labs and serving on their Community Advisory Circle, I knew I would benefit from the discussions on impact measurement and, hopefully, bring back tools that I could incorporate into my current work.



The Action Lab launch took place on December 15, 2025 at the Carleton Dominion-Chalmers Centre and focused on how we can measure art's civic impact from the perspective of creators and arts administrators. The program began with Arts Ottawa's opening remarks, which outlined the background work that led to the creation of the Lab. Following the introduction, Shanice Benicky, one of the Action Lab advisors, took the stage with her presentation titled "Arts' Civic Impact: Qualitative Measurement and Collective Action." Shanice touched upon the practice-based research methodology and its opportunities and challenges as they have surfaced in her own research as a Cultural Studies scholar. She emphasized that institutions exist to support artists and arts organizations, and that institutional work should be approached critically rather than taken for granted. Towards the end of the presentation, Shanice introduced existing impact measurement frameworks, including the **Opera Civic Impact Framework (2020)** and the **Canada Council for the Arts Qualitative Impact Framework (2019)**.

Shanice's presentation sparked a wide range of questions, including how change can be implemented on the policy-making level, how marginalized groups can advocate for themselves when their own needs are not met, and how institutional culture can change. My key takeaway from the presentation and the discussion that followed was Shanice's emphasis on the need to cultivate collaboration among local arts organizations to discuss change. How can we connect artists, arts leaders, institutions, and policymakers so that decision-making processes regarding the city's cultural scene are informed by creators' perspectives? As I listened, I agreed that we rarely come together, at least to my knowledge, to discuss broader sectoral changes, particularly those related to how art's impact is evaluated. The changes creators and arts leaders want to see were the focus of the following roundtable discussion. The roundtable was composed of arts managers and creators from three different organizations and was facilitated by Valerie Stam. The panelists highlighted that funders often require quantitative data to measure impact, but that data extraction reflects a colonial mindset. As a result, a key challenge is to figure out how arts organizations can justify their work using tools that are not based on, and do not reproduce, a relationship of extraction. One panelist also noted that, despite external pressure to extract data from the communities arts organizations work with, funders may not even pay close attention to the specifics of that data.

Unlike funders, creators and arts leaders prioritize qualitative approaches to impact assessment. One panelist noted that a small program with only a few participants does not necessarily indicate low impact, emphasizing the importance of sharing the one-off and unique implications of our work, including participants' positive feelings. One Action Lab participant stressed the importance of presenting qualitative and quantitative data together for a stronger impact reporting. It was also suggested that Arts Ottawa could take the lead in advocating for qualitative impact reporting with funders.



When asked about more sustainable or healthier ways of sharing impact, one panelist discussed the importance of working with external auditors to conduct evaluation and reporting, and of sharing results with the community in a transparent way. This expansion of organizational capacity is an additional budget line, and funding timelines for projects like this do not always align with the operational timelines of the organizations. Another panelist highlighted storytelling as a successful fundraising strategy.

During the final section of the Lab, participants were asked to reflect on the following prompts: “What is an easy way to start? What questions do you ask in your work? Tools and strategies you use now. Nourishing, not draining - what might this look like?” Participants were asked to write down their thoughts on sticky notes and place them on the whiteboards.

Overall, the Action Lab launch highlighted a gap between what funders prioritize and what arts organizations prioritize when sharing impact. Perhaps for practical reasons, I had expected to workshop a measurement tool that I could apply directly to my current work, but I still found the conversations and resources meaningful and helpful. The session also served as a reminder that local arts organizations face similar challenges, and that we need a shared platform to discuss change. I look forward to seeing how this Arts Ottawa initiative progresses over time and what tangible outcomes emerge from it.

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2026

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