



Arts Correspondent: Ava Marguerite

Audited the November 27th Collaborative Strategy Session

Ava Marguerite graduated from the Ontario College of Art and Design University with a bachelor's degree in fine arts majoring in conceptual photography, and a diploma from School of Photographic Arts: Ottawa. She has received a Research and Creation Grant from the Canada Council for the Arts (2025), a grant from the Ontario Arts Council (2022) and the City of Ottawa (2021). Marguerite has also received several recognitions including The Marc Guertin Craftsmanship Award, for outstanding photographic craft from the School of Photographic Arts: Ottawa, was shortlisted for the Athens Photo Festival, and a finalist for the Project X Photography Award from the Ottawa Art Gallery, the Ottawa Arts Council and the School of Photographic Arts: Ottawa. Her work is in the City of Ottawa's permanent art collection, in private collections and has been exhibited nationally and internationally.

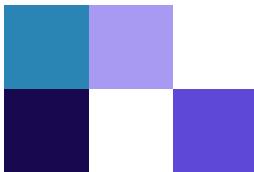
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Ava Marguerite for Arts Ottawa

On November 27, 2025, I attended the Arts Ottawa Learning Lab, where participants discussed what is needed from Arts Ottawa and what would be most beneficial for artists and arts organizations in the city. I was invited by Arts Ottawa to audit and respond to the session. I am originally from North Bay, Ontario, studied at OCAD University, and have lived in Ottawa for nearly ten years. After my undergrad I studied at SPAO, worked in the private arts sector, and am now a full-time artist and running a commercial photography business.

I entered the session carrying concerns shaped by both my lived experience and my work in the arts. In Ottawa, there is a lack of retention of critical artists, particularly when it comes to creating opportunities for artists whose practices are not commercially driven and prioritizing local artists more intentionally. Toronto, for example, does a strong job of championing artists residing within its defined city limits, whereas in Ottawa I have noticed a pattern of reserving fewer opportunities for those who choose to stay while making exceptions for artists who reside outside the region. This makes it more difficult for artists to build competitive CVs and reinforces the idea that "you have to leave Ottawa to be a successful artist." Having worked at a commercial gallery in the city, I have also observed that collectors often look outside Ottawa when purchasing art. While many factors are at play, I believe one key issue is the lack of infrastructure supporting long-term career development for Ottawa-based artists. More awards, critical recognition, and dedicated platforms for local artists could make a meaningful difference, provided these opportunities are substantial and not merely participation.

Over the past year, Arts Ottawa has focused on building power from the bottom up, with an emphasis on creating a flow from community to organization and back out. The purpose of this meeting was to test the concept of a core leadership circle, bringing the sector together to advise the organization's direction and support ongoing collaboration. Following earlier meetings with Francophone organizations, this session served as the second focus group, helping Arts Ottawa better understand itself through a collective lens.



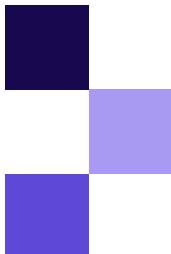
The meeting began with a land acknowledgement, which prompted a discussion about representation in the room. One participant noted the absence of Anishinaabe representation and raised questions about how this intersected with the acknowledgement. Cassandra responded by outlining how Arts Ottawa understands its role in relation to Indigenous communities. Using a metaphor of the ship and the canoe, the ship representing a colonial structure and the canoe an Indigenous one, she explained that Arts Ottawa sees its responsibility as working alongside Indigenous-led sectors rather than occupying that space directly.

We sectioned off into small groups and responded to prompts about physical, economic and social barriers. We were asked to write down what was happening, missing and who should be responsible for making it happen. My group started with economic barriers. I listened as the people in my group talked about the frustrating barriers that their organization experiences receiving funding. Facing dismissive comments such as 'nothing happens in Ottawa' a remark one local arts organization reported receiving from a funder or receiving funding but having barely covered expenses. Ottawa is not often viewed as a cultural hub by funders, which makes it difficult for local non-profit organizations to secure adequate resources to sustainably support the arts sector.

Local grant systems are often restrictive, limiting what artists can create and how they can share it. Grant funding often comes with strict rules: you can create work, but you cannot monetize it. For example, an artist may receive funding for a single piece or body of work, but if they want to produce books for distribution, they face limits. Other concerns that were raised were the growing competition between artists and arts organizations, talent retention and ongoing elitism in the arts. We see elitism in the arts in the form of financial barriers that leave out people who have potential to achieve high levels of craft. Some organizations felt like there wasn't reciprocal support between organizations, where they spent time, energy and effort to write letters of support for another organization, but then discover it isn't reciprocated. The overall sentiment was clear: artists are often simply expected to be grateful for the opportunity to create.

Next we moved to physical infrastructure spaces/places. One individual expressed their frustration with being unable to afford a 40% rent increase. Among arts organizations there's a shared sentiment in understanding the value brought to spaces, this has been a long standing trend in the arts all over the world. It feeds into this gratitude mentality that is instilled in the arts, as if we should be thankful for a space. There's this tension in knowing our value and advocating for it. Do organizations negotiate upfront in order to maintain their space down the road? In a highly commercialized period of time creating accessible spaces for artists is important, it seems like there are rigid rules for the arts that don't apply to the world surrounding them. Arts organizations can't operate for profit, yet they risk eviction when real estate market values rise. These restrictions keep the arts in a constant state of struggle. Venues are able to kick out lower paying renters in favour of higher paying ones. The arts are not existing on an even playing field but there's an expectation to express virtue and gratitude for the peanuts they're given. If arts organizations advocated about how their presence raises the market value of space they would have more power in negotiation. The trend seems to be that arts organizations are overworked and underpaid in non-government sectors.

Accessibility extends beyond finances: transportation and infrastructure also shape participation. For example, attending the opening of The Camera and City at the National Gallery of Canada, required a 30 minutes commute by the LRT in -10 degrees weather, with significant walking. Attendance was solid, but smaller than major events like First Thursdays at the AGO. In contrast, Montreal art events often feature alternative attractions like outdoor beer tents with heating, drawing the community into the evening. While we cannot control weather or infrastructure, we can learn from other cities and adapt their approaches to make Ottawa's arts culture more accessible, vibrant, and attractive.



The final section of this exercise was social impact. An ongoing theme across every section was the tension between commercialization and the arts. How do we articulate and quantify our value when the arts are up against a growth-driven mentality? There are so many artists that create impact and influence our culture that don't necessarily translate to economic value. There are local artists that are influencing movements in the scene that only bring out 100 people, but they have meaningful and impactful work. The issue that arts organizations are facing is being able to quantify variables that aren't data driven. There's a desire outside of the arts to quantify our importance but the arts aren't a commodity. The arts weave together important aspects of our society and quietly influence the culture.

We moved to a whole-group activity where participants place stickers to indicate Arts Ottawa's possible roles across each stream, including: Host/Convene, Co-Steward/Co-Lead, Amplify/ Learn+Share, Prototype/Test, Connect to City/Provincial/National Systems. It was identified that this group is looking for Arts Ottawa to be an Advocate for the arts as well as a database to connect the arts and we felt like Arts Ottawa was the best group to do this. This led us into our final section which was what we would like to see Arts Ottawa prioritize in the next 12 months and who needs to be involved in shaping this work. Suggestions included creating a conference, data gathering and analysis, quantifying cultural over commercial impact and an arts hub space for professional arts companies.

This session amplified that there's a need for proper advocates and a shared data-base for the arts community in Ottawa. Being in this room confirmed that my concerns about the arts community were valid, but it also showed me that there are people actively working to make Ottawa a better place for artists.

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