

## Jason St-Laurent

### 10 Easy Steps to Reaching New Audiences

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I originally proposed a conference idea a while ago—I was interested in talking about reaching new urban audiences—and I’ve since modified my presentation slightly into, I guess... well, let’s take a look at the title of my presentation. And it’s not that condescending.

So, basically, these ten easy steps are reflections that I’ve had with colleagues at SAW. They include my twin brother Stefan St-Laurent and Tam-Ca Vo-Van, who are co-artistic directors of SAW Gallery, and myself as programmer for SAW Video. And I oversee film, video, and music for the centre, so I curate screenings, media art installations, offsite projects, and an experimental concert series called *Electric Fields*. Just to give you a sense of the space that we’re working with at SAW, we’re in the basement of a facility called Arts Court and we sort of joke about the fact that... all the sort of sewage pipes you can see on the ceiling there, and we’ve got the Ottawa Art Gallery on the main floor, and our joke around SAW is that whenever a curator has a dump upstairs, it circulates through SAW.

So the exhibition that you see there... *[laughing]*

It’s a joke, Milena.

The exhibition that we see here is an exhibition that was called *Game Over*, which was a series of media-art installations... and one of the unique features of SAW is the access to a club space that we have, and this club space accommodates punk shows, burlesque cabarets... I mean, there’s more than 150 events a year, and the audience needs to circulate through our gallery space in order to access... so our gallery’s unusual in the sense that on the weekends it can stay open until 2 AM, so we have our installations running until the end of whatever’s happening in the club.

So my first step is to talk about accessible text and didactic material in our centre, which was a question that we had. When we got there, SAW was sort of in a... not

in a pathetic state, but you would have, you know, fifteen to twenty people showing up at openings, and they were the same people, and we weren't really seeing new faces, so our first discussion when we started working there was, how do we change the way we work in this particular artist-run centre? So we changed the format of our material and I'll show you what it looks like now.

There we go. So there are brochures that look like this... [*referring to slide*]

And inside, we normally have a very accessible text describing the artist's work and short biographies on the artist. That's what it looks like generally. And this is the sort of brochure that will circulate in various public spaces that aren't necessarily for art publics, so when we circulate this same brochure in other, more art-friendly or gallery spaces, we'll insert a more academic text on the exhibition, because there's... how would I put it? People in general have a hard time relating to contemporary art because of its general language, and we've decided to sort of trick them into coming to our centre by making ourselves look very accessible and very open and very unpretentious, and then we satisfy our regular art audience by having serious critical texts on artists' work.

Another strategy for us to reach new audiences is by doing off-site projects on a regular basis, and we do them locally and we do them internationally, and I'll show you a few examples of some of my curatorial projects. So this was an exhibition that we curated for a festival in South Africa, and this was in the central train station there—a series of media-art installations by Canadian artists and international artists like Mona Hatoum, and those were sort of interspersed throughout that station, so that was obviously a big challenge, because there were major security issues in that place. I mean, there's circulation of approximately forty-five thousand people a day in this particular section, and we also had our challenges with the train station administration, who actually censored and destroyed a tape by Tadasu Takamine from Japan, which is the tape *Inertia*. I don't know if you've seen it, but it's a woman strapped onto a high-speed train, which they found offensive.

And then, from South Africa, we brought back this project here, which is called

*Myself.write MyCode*, which is basically a virus that you can buy. It's actually a multiple, but we exhibited it. Inside a sleeve, you've got a CD and then a sort of text describing the artist's intention with this particular virus. So the virus actually destroys networks—and actually, I won't go into the details of that actual work—but we exhibited that during that exhibition *Game Over* which you saw earlier, but after the exhibition, the artist donated the work to SAW and we permanently installed it in the men's washroom, so at the urinal, at eye level, you've got this project that people can engage with while they, uh, empty their bladder.

The following project here is a project that we did in a neighbourhood in Ottawa called Vanier, which is probably the oldest Franco-Ontarian community in Ottawa—and the biggest but now this community has morphed into a kind of more cosmopolitan, I guess, neighbourhood. You know, it's where you get your crack, it's where you get your prostitutes, but on the flipside, it's also a very culturally dynamic community, and it's actually one of the largest Inuit communities outside Nunavut, so culturally quite dynamic, but not a place where you would normally find art projects or anything related to contemporary art. So this project was called *Home Movies*, and we projected or had monitors in various homes throughout the neighbourhood, which you would travel to with the help of a guide map. This particular work here, which you see in the centre—I hope you can see it in the centre—is a work by Julie-Christine Fortier, and the surrounding elements are this—probably Vanier's biggest tourist attraction is this house. I'll show you another one. This is a work by Miranda Pennell from London, and one of the strategies that we used is to coincide this exhibition with Hallowe'en so we could have a ready-made audience for this project. Maybe two to three thousand people in total saw this project, not all of it, but you know, they were informed of other houses to go to, so it was quite an interesting experiment to do this in a neighbourhood like this.

My third point is, we arrived there, and the centre was unilingual. Everything was just published in English only, and we decided to make it a bilingual institution, and to translate most of our public printed material, but then we started having this dialogue about possibly translating into other languages and seeing if we can

reach other communities through that action, so we decided to try it with... It's funny that you showed us the *Artstar* website, because we have a biennial called *Art Star*, which was created in memory of Colin Campbell, and for the catalogue, we actually translated it into three additional languages... so we translated into Arabic, to Chinese, and Inuktitut, and I actually have a copy of the catalogue here if anyone's interested in seeing it.

One of the great things that happened with this particular initiative is that we had the catalogue, which we distributed to mainly art-friendly places, but then we circulated these particular texts as press releases, as... kind of stand-alone documents. In all three cases, these texts were published word for word in various community papers, because they don't necessarily have art writers in these community papers in Ottawa, and we managed to reach audiences that came to our screenings from that very initiative. Actually, Richard Fung, which is the text that was translated in the middle, was—how do you say? He didn't think the initiative would be very successful, because his work, some of the work he was showing, was queer, and he just didn't believe that the community papers would respond, but they actually did, and we got an audience, and there were no walk-outs, so I think we need to be open to trying these types of things.

I got a copy of this here from the Art Gallery of Ontario, which is translated into French, which is great, but it's not Toronto's biggest community, so I often think that marketing departments in major institutions have the resources to translate into many languages, but they tend to stick to the status quo. I mean, they probably get money from Heritage Canada to translate into French.

Another way to outreach to our larger community is by thinking about issues of diversity, which people think have been beaten to death in artist-run centres, but through a project that... I'm also part of a collective called Code régional, and we do various curatorial projects, various art projects, and also we're initiating a project called the White Cube Award for Contemporary Art, which we'll be giving out in the fall of this year, and the award will go to the centre with an all-white staff, all-white board, and all-white programming. One of the major pushes by Canada Council for funding is issues of diversity, but through our connections in

Ottawa, we actually got a confidential study on this actual fact in artist-run centres. We don't know about other institutions, but in artist-run centres specifically... we found five artist-run centres in the country that have had all-white all the time for the past five years. So it's a difficult choice, because we've got five centres that actually fit our criteria for this award, so I'll keep all of you updated on this.

*Participant* You're just doing it for artist-run centres, right?

No, we're actually going to open it up to institutions.

*[laughter]*

I didn't know how to illustrate this particular point, but I like this one 'cause there's a punk on the left-hand side and SAW has actually had almost a twenty-year relationship with the punk scene in Ottawa, and it's one of our kind of bizarre points, and you know, there's always been Board discussion around this—you know, if we should be upkeeping this relationship with that community and so far I've managed to convince them that it's a good thing.

Another way—and Milena actually broached this topic yesterday, about having multidisciplinary openings as a way to open up your openings to communities that might not necessarily come to your centre. I'll show you some ways that we try to do this.

In relation to exhibitions, we'll try to find books that match either themes or various tie-ins to exhibitions, and we'll do book launches as a means to do that, and not only art books specifically, but we'll do local fiction-writer launches, that kind of thing, and for most openings we'll have performers, so these here are various examples of that. The last one that just came up is for the David Hoffos opening, which was in conjunction with *Alberta Scene*, which was a big Alberta cultural blowout in Ottawa that was successful in some areas and not in others, but for that exhibition opening we had the McGillicuddy Sisters, which are, you know, a crazy country band.

And then the acknowledgement of new practices. There's a general curiosity for new practices, and if you frame it the right way, you can actually get to the curi-

ous out there by acknowledging and curating new practices on a regular basis, and there are a few upcoming projects here.

This is a project called *Biokraphia* by Lina Saneh and Rabih Mroué from Lebanon, and then Mohamed al Riffai will be part of *Electric Fields* in the fall this year. So that's sort of a concern that we generally keep in the back of our minds... We have a mandate, at least on the gallery side, to show media art and performance regularly, but to sort of look at new practices generally as being a way to reach the curious.

Then on a monthly basis, in order to encourage local new practices, we have this event called *Configure*, which is a monthly VJ lab, and the community's invited to come, so it's not necessarily for VJs, but anyone interested in live video processing. So we take out a whole bunch of equipment and we put it in our club space, and people can exchange ideas, bring their own equipment and it creates this community of experimentalists, and it's been quite successful.

Then, for collaborations and partnerships, we've always had this tepid or... how would I say? Not *tepid*, but probably *cold* relationship with the major institutions in Ottawa, because we always felt that there are possibilities for you to dilute your programming by being part of large-scale events, and it's a difficult negotiation to try to convince larger festivals or larger institutions to buy into experimental practices or performance art, but we decided to give it a try with a few institutions. One of them was the National Arts Centre for *Alberta Scene*, which was fantastic. It was the most well-attended show of the year, and they actually had... you know, they didn't put their finger in our pie at all, so we could select the artists, and then they just kicked in a lot of money. David Hoffos's installation was something that SAW could not normally afford to mount—building walls and that kind of thing—so thanks to that collaboration we were able to do something that was a bit more ambitious than our normal gallery exhibition programme.

And then we try to collaborate with other communities, and this was *An Indian Act Shooting the Indian Act* by Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, so we collaborated with the Kitigan Zibi reservation in Quebec, which is about forty minutes away

from Ottawa, and you know, this was sort of an idea... Because this performance was originally staged in London and it had never been staged in Canada, and SAW reflected on its... what is its role in the shadow of all these major institutions like the National Gallery? What should be our role in Ottawa? And I'm going to get to another point where I get into responding to contemporary politics, but I think our role is to be in opposition to institutions, and I think not many centres think that way any more. I sort of see artist-run centres becoming like these little museums, and many of them are seen as sort of finishing schools for curators and artists, as opposed to places where real critical and experimental discourses happen.

Thematic programming. This has been a really funny reflection that we've had, because we've started thinking about our summer programming in terms of the blockbuster, but sort of as alternative blockbusters in Ottawa, and I'll show you a few examples. This one's coming up next summer, which is the Museum of Bad Art in Boston. We'll be exhibiting a selection of works from that collection, but that is more to open up a more general dialogue in the community about the aesthetics and value of kitsch in contemporary culture. This is the sort of thing that audiences can immediately be excited by, and then we sort of bring them into the space to reflect on aesthetics generally. We're hoping that some of the artists that come by our centre with their portfolios—I don't know if that happens to anybody else here, but we actually have people that bring in their paintings to our centre, physical paintings, and they want us to evaluate on the spot, and that's why we're interested in creating this dialogue around bad art, because there's so much of it in Ottawa.

And then here—this was in celebration of our thirtieth anniversary at SAW Gallery. This was a show called *Scatalogue: 30 years of Crap in Contemporary Art*, which was sort of an international sensation. On opening day, we had lineups of journalists and camera crews begging to come into the centre, and their number one question to us was, as curators—I co-curated with my twin brother—the number one question was, where did our fascination with shit stem from? And we would always put the question back to them, and it's like, “You've never put your fucking foot in our centre before so you've obviously got your own obsession, your own fascination with the material.” This show was by far the most well-attended show in

our history. We probably had between five and six thousand people come through our centre for this show, so that was quite successful. And it actually got—it was very controversial before it opened, but after it opened critics really raved about the exhibition, so it was great. We got I don't know how many friggin' covers—John Waters on the cover of one weekly in Ottawa, and etc., etc.—so we sort of try to engage with people, particularly for our summer exhibitions, in kind of a humorous and really accessible way, and then they come in to the centre and see quite challenging work.

Another way that we're reaching audiences in Ottawa is by trying to respond quickly to situations. So this is an ad that appeared in papers across the country. This was at the very beginning of the gay marriage debate, and this particular ad was so nauseatingly homophobic and stupid that we decided to respond to it, and luckily enough, we had an exhibition that was just about to open called *Opposition Party*, which was a group exhibition of local artists that have political practices or that have responded to political situations in their work. One of the works was—they weren't necessarily contemporary art—we had models of Douglas Cardinal's museum in Washington that was taken away from him. *That* kind of exhibition. So we decided to respond to this campaign. Immediately we went almost straight to press with this gay couple holding a baby, and that was actually our poster for the exhibition of *Opposition Party*. So we sort of try to respond to situations quickly, and I think that makes us quite relevant in the community. There was also, last year, an issue with the Independent Filmmakers Co-op in Ottawa that had funded this film that was on the subject of pedophilia, by Ken Takahashi, and he had gotten a production grant from the centre, and the city caused a stink. They threatened IFCO with the removal of their funding if they didn't withdraw that grant from the artist, and IFCO actually folded to that pressure, which disappointed us tremendously, so we decided to have a panel—I think we organized it in two days—to respond to that censorship case.

So it's always thinking about the current political situation in Ottawa and trying to respond to it in a really timely manner, and that's one of the benefits of working in an artist-run centre; that we don't have huge institutional hoops to go

through. It's one email to the board of directors, and you know, we have a pretty progressive board, so any idea like that gets approved almost instantly and we just go forward.

The last point is media and public relations. Before, the press releases for the Gallery and for Video were kind of carbon copies of our critical or curatorial texts for exhibitions and screenings or whatever it may be, and we've decided to start tailoring press releases to particular people, and then also tailoring our public announcements, our e-bulletins, to various communities. So we've started separating our email lists into groups, such as queer groups, for example. If we've got an exhibition of particular queer interest, for example, we'll totally tout that aspect up in our communications, so we're always changing our press releases and email announcements. We're tailoring them to specific communities or specific media outlets, because some outlets—like the weekly newspaper is obviously progressive, and we can use another type of language. The Ottawa Sun, on the other hand, is a different story.

So, Les Reines Prochaines, for example, we could have... This is a performance troupe from Switzerland. As a header to our press release, we could easily have said “conceptual Swiss feminist performance artists come to SAW”, which has its baggage for certain people, so we decided to switch that around and have “Swiss queens invade Ottawa”, and then the media just went crazy. So it's like... being coy about our communications generally, and our press increased by three hundred percent by tailoring our communications that way.

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