

What Mayoral Candidates Want to Know About Art

In a twist on the traditional election debate, cultural leaders took questions from mayoral candidates about art's place in the city.

BY **PETER GOFFIN**



Art on the Ballot panel, left to right: Dalton Higgins, Shannon Litzenberger, Yasmin Parodi, Sarah Garton Stanley, and Joe Lobko.

The Toronto mayoral election is more than two months away, but voters have already had ample opportunity to hear their candidates debate. So Tuesday afternoon at the Theatre Centre on Queen Street West, debate organizers flipped the script: instead of the having candidates answer questions from experts and special interest groups, Art on the Ballot featured experts from Toronto's art and design industries taking questions from the people running for office.

Presented by **SummerWorks** and Toronto arts lobby group **Artsvote**, the event gave Toronto's creative class a chance to have their voices heard and offer guidance to candidates on the issues that matter to them.

The panel comprised five leaders in art and design: Joe Lobko, a partner at DTAH architecture firm; Sarah Garton Stanley, associate artistic director of English theatre at Canada's National Arts Centre; Shannon Litzenberger, a dance artist, writer, director, and arts advocate; Yasmin Parodi, a multi-disciplinary artist and youth representative; and Dalton Higgins, a performing arts and concert presenter, journalist, and author. Kathleen Sharpe, executive director of the Ontario Cultural Attractions Fund, moderated the discussion.

Participating mayoral candidates submitted their questions ahead of time. Although David Soknacki and Olivia Chow were the only two big names in attendance, **lesser-known candidates** Ari Goldkind, Matthew Crack, James French, and Dave "Sketchy the Clown" McKay came out. John Tory and Mayor Rob Ford each sent in questions.

Some candidate queries might have been better answered with specific policy recommendations or reams of data rather than a somewhat informal panel discussion. But the panelists did provide strong justifications for the arts as part of a vibrant, successful city, and outlined the needs Toronto's diverse arts community would like the their next mayor to meet.

Some highlights of the discussion:

On the importance of community partnerships

“The development of cultural life, like many other aspects of city life, is not dependant only on government,” said Lobko. “We can celebrate the ways in which we as communities already partner to bring the arts into our daily lives. We need to find more ways to do that. That’s going to be the key to the future, those community partnerships. ”

On the long-term value of the arts

It’s easy to see firsthand that the arts are a source of support for many young people who lack typical support systems, Parodi explained. “Instead of trying to convince [the next mayor] or hit them over the head with ‘Art is good for you, art is good for society,’ I would have them step into our shoes as artists or someone who is experiencing art as a transformative and life changing tool,” Parodi said. “I do a lot of work in the Jane and Finch community and they just closed down the Palisades Media Arts Academy.... It was extremely important for youth to be there. It was a music studio where they got recording experience. They were able to produce their own music, learn to play [instruments]. And I saw how this could transform people’s lives.”

In Higgins’s experience, art—and music in particular—is a vital part of Toronto’s minority cultures. “In racialized communities, what you’ll find is that ... art and life are inextricably linked,” he said. “Music is for many in [ethnic] communities cathartic; it keeps you stable, sane, provides a little equilibrium to your life. That’s the long-term value for me. You can’t separate art and culture from day to day life.”

In response to a question submitted by candidate Michael Nicula about the creative community’s role in improving underused and unattractive city spaces

“One thing I’d like to acknowledge is the arts community is typically at the forefront of the revitalization of derelict parts of our city,” Lobko said. “That’s historically been a pattern where, largely because of affordability, areas that were derelict suddenly become vibrant once more.”

Answering Rob Ford’s question, “What do you see the role of art being in Toronto’s creative economy? How can creative ideas produce profit and economic activity?”

Parodi referenced the facts and figures of a [City action plan report](#) to defend arts and culture’s financial viability. “The creative economy ... contributes \$9 billion annually to the [city’s GDP], so I think it speaks for itself. There’s digital artists, there’s musicians, there’s huge festivals going on, and the creative economy in Toronto has actually outpaced the medical and biotech industries.”

To Litzenberger, the arts are not necessarily a big moneymaker, but are integral to the financial success of the city. “Artistic ideas don’t always produce profit in and of themselves. But they do create conditions for the city to be prosperous,” she said. “Toronto’s identity is extremely diverse, and it’s one of the reasons that so many people are attracted to the city. No matter who you are, where you come from, what you look like, what you’re interested in, what you’re into, there’s a place for you here.”

Stanley stressed the importance of looking at success both from financial and non-financial perspectives. “My deep concern is that we will forget as creators that [the profitability] is not why we’re doing it,” she said.

“My concern is, in what parts of the city are we seeing this [economic] activity?” said Higgins. “With music, if you perform pop or so-called indie rock, are these good times for you? I would say yes. If you do reggaeton, salsa, reggae, hip hop, electronic—not so much.”

Responding to Ari Goldkind’s question about combatting “culture deserts”—areas where residents lack accessibility to the arts

Said Lobko, “I see a lot of great cultural life going on in areas other than the downtown, however with many, many more challenges in front of them. In the food desert nomenclature, the word *desert* is the important one and it implies the absence of something. What those communities are absent of, it seems to me, is not spirit or culture, but they are absent of

resources, affordability, good transportation connections, good food choices ... and affordable space in which to celebrate and share their culture.”

Lobko returned the idea of community leadership being vital to the success of local arts programs: “I think it’s most effective when there’s a grassroots, local initiative to create space and bring partnerships together that allow for the renewal of these communities,” he said. “Across North America we’re seeing examples [of this] that don’t lead to hyper-gentrification... Local stewardship is the best way to ensure long term sustainability.”

Photo by Peter Goffin/Torontoist.

CORRECTION: August 13, 2014, 4:55 PM This post originally stated that mayoral candidate Michael Nicula attended the event; in fact he submitted questions, but did not attend. We regret the error.