

Letter on Behalf of the Universities Art Association of Canada

Anne Whitelaw

Volume 43, Number 1, 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050824ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050824ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Whitelaw, A. (2018). Letter on Behalf of the Universities Art Association of Canada. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 43(1), 89–90.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1050824ar>

security is important, it can just as easily become a stopgap measure or keep us working overtime for the carrot of the tenure-track job that often doesn't materialize. There will be no golden moment when the fight stops and we all have the tenure job of our dreams. If you are lucky enough to have one, then I respectfully suggest you turn your attention to understanding and improving the experience of BIPOC, queer, and transgender students at your institution.

The process of rebalancing sessional, contract, and permanent faculty ratios is a stressful one, and change is riskiest for precarious workers. As discussed in *Be Nice or Leave*, those who play nice and make things pleasant for administrators are rewarded, while people who already shoulder the burden of doing equity work are either tokenized as representatives of the diversity goals of the institution or treated as completely expendable. I recently observed how just one tenure-track hire (combined with the real pressure of lowered enrolment across the fine arts) meant dramatic reduction or elimination of sessional faculty. These positions were held by a woman of colour, a person with a disability, a genderqueer person, and a Francophone, and all were also working artists/cultural producers.

Since we wrote the above letter, Nicole Bursich was hired as a contract-staff curator at the National Gallery of Canada, and I left my colleagues and Toronto family for a tenure-track faculty position in California. Just like everyone else, we still get an alarming number of requests to write for free, front money for projects, pay our own travel, or sign pathetic contracts way below living wage, and sometimes the answer is just, "No thank you." Sometimes it's a sad goodbye. Now the UAAC conference is an exciting reunion with colleagues I miss deeply—often such conferences are a rare opportunity for large gatherings of kill-joys and like-minded cultural producers to come together, and I am encouraged by the UAAC Board's receptivity to welcome such discussions and to make structural changes—and it feels good, so I still pay to attend. ¶

December 5, 2014

Dear Anthea and Nicole,

Thank you for your recent letter regarding the potential role that UAAC can play in addressing the current conditions of employment precarity for so many academic workers in Canada. Your letter clearly and passionately outlines not only the challenges experienced by many of our highly qualified colleagues as they face dwindling opportunities, but also the responsibility that academic institutions—including UAAC—must bear for ensuring more ethical and equitable working conditions for sessional faculty.

The UAAC Board discussed your letter at its recent board conference call meeting. We all concur that the current situation for sessional faculty—within the studies and the practice sectors—is unsustainable and exploitative. As an academic association with a growing commitment to advocacy work, we will encourage our institutional members and universities' leaders to consider carefully the long-term pedagogical and research impact of relying on underpaid and unsupported academic labour to do the work of the university. It is abundantly clear to us all that while more permanent positions must be created, the immediate need is to adequately compensate sessional faculty for both their teaching and research activities by raising salaries and establishing long-term contracts that reflect the actual work of highly qualified professionals.

With respect to the specific issues raised in your letter, there are some areas where UAAC can take action and others where it can advocate. Concerning art institutions' and art historians' reliance on the unpaid labour of artists, we absolutely concur: artists inside and outside the academy should be paid for the work they do, and that includes payment for use of images and speaking fees to artists who are invited to present on their work. The latter issue can only partially be addressed by UAAC. As a scholarly, rather

than professional organization working within an academic framework, we feel that the choice to participate in our association, including the conference, infers a decision to belong to a membership that engages in specific kinds of academic exercises. We do not pay speaker fees to anyone who presents at the conference unless they have been invited by the association executive to speak. For example, this year, we paid a speaker’s fee to Jennifer Polk, who delivered a feature lecture on alt-academic work. We also partnered with a research network, ArtCan.ca, to pay participants on the corresponding alt-academic panel a nominal honorarium. When we invite artists to speak—as we likely will in the coming years—we will pay them CARFAC fees. As the Universities Art Association of Canada, we are working within an academic framework, and operate with a model of registration fees applied to all participants to ensure that our national conference on visual-arts scholarship continues to run for many years to come.

This said, we are interested in hearing our diverse members speak about their research and practice, and we are working to develop a range of presentation formats that are inclusive of the styles of presentation delivered by members who are historians, theorists, and practitioners in art and design. We therefore would like to try and tackle this particular problem in another, albeit imperfect way.

A major point raised by your letter and already under discussion by the UAAC Board concerns how we can facilitate the participation of sessional and independent members in the Association. To that end, we are lowering membership fees for unaffiliated members from \$90 a year to \$75 a year—an amount that is more in line with other scholarly associations in Canada. We have also raised the membership fees of regular members by an equivalent amount, the extra money being dedicated to increased support for unaffiliated (sessional and independent) members. We are also exploring other means of establishing a fund to which regular members could contribute that we hope

will assist low-salaried, un-salaried, and graduate-student members with travel costs associated with the annual conference. Much as we would like to waive membership and conference fees for unaffiliated members, these are the only resources UAAC can access to continue the work of the Association and to run the annual conference. We hope that by reducing these fees even slightly, low-salaried and unsalaried colleagues will find it easier to continue their membership in the association and attend the conference.

We look forward to continuing this conversation, and we hope that this small step will be a starting point for a longer discussion on these important issues. We encourage you to continue to voice your concerns to the membership and to the executive and to help us find ways to address them at UAAC, but also more broadly within academia. Although we have not yet called upon unaffiliated members to nominate themselves for board positions, recognizing that the Association can only pay a portion of its board members’ travel and accommodation expenses, we would welcome the presence of sessional and independent members on the board in any of the categories, and we encourage you to consider a nomination at the next election.

On behalf of the Board of the Universities Art Association of Canada, I thank you both for your continued interest in and unflagging support of the association—you have been faithful participants for many years and I always look forward to seeing you, however briefly. Thank you for opening up this conversation, and I hope that we can continue to work together to seek ways to improve working conditions across the country.

Sincerely,

Anne Whitelaw
President, Universities Art Association of Canada

Anne Whitelaw is Vice Provost Planning and Positioning and Professor of Art History at Concordia University.
—Anne.Whitelaw@concordia.ca