

DAVID HOWES, overview

Engaging the Senses, the 48th Annual Conference of the International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA) was held at Concordia University, Montreal from 5-8 October 2016

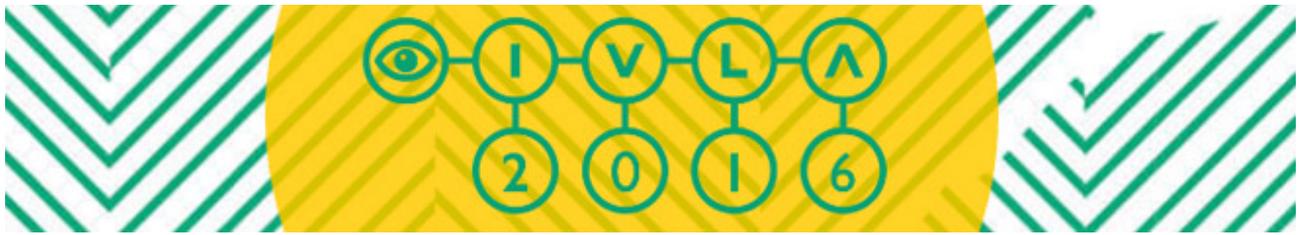
IVLA 2016 was a Co-Production of the Centre for Sensory Studies and Hexagram in association with the International Visual Literacy Association. The conference was sponsored by the Concordia University Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture with additional support from the Department of Art Education, the Department of Design and Computation Arts, the Dean of Fine Arts, and the Aid to Research Related Events Program. The organizers also wish to acknowledge the collaboration of the Canadian Centre for Architecture and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The conference theme was expressed as follows in the Call for Papers

In 1969, John Debes (Co-founder of the IVLA), defined Visual Literacy as “a group of vision competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences.” In 2014, Brian Kennedy (Director of the Toledo Museum of Art) proposed that “Visual Literacy is the key to sensory literacy.” This suggests that the past and future of Visual Literacy lies with engaging the senses.

Visual Literacy is already a field of multidisciplinary investigation. How might it also become a field of multisensory and/or intersensory investigation? For example, how can insights from the study of Visual Literacy be extended to other modalities of sense, such as Sound Studies or Taste Cultures? What did the great dancer Isadora Duncan mean when she said: “If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it!”

Come explore the far borderlands of Visual Literacy with us.

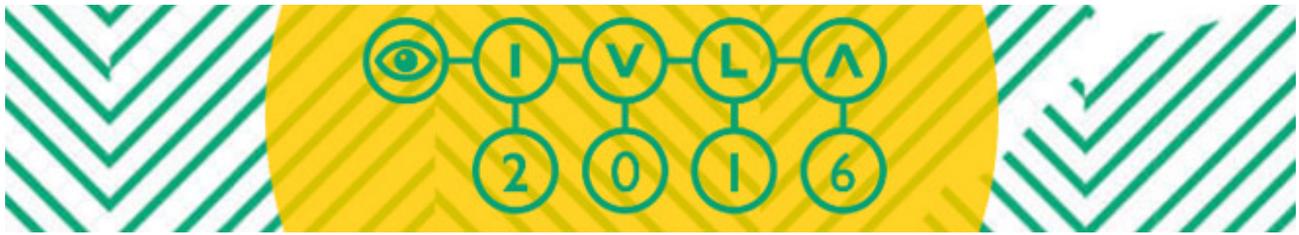


And come people did. There were over 175 registered participants, and the days were full to overflowing with ideas and inspiration.

This website is dedicated to presenting some of the highlights of the IVLA 2016 conference. You will find Dean Rebecca Duclos's welcome address. There are video recordings of the plenary lectures by Jason Edward Lewis and Richard Sherwin. "Glorious Matter," a panel presentation by artist-researchers belonging to the Textiles & Materiality Cluster of the Milieux Institute, was also captured on video and is available here. There is a Picture Gallery where you can get a visual sense of the conference, including the work of blind artist David Johnston. There is also a section dedicated to written impressions of IVLA 2016 by a number of people involved in the organization of the conference. Finally, there is the short film entitled Nature Morte. It is by independent film maker Tereza Stehlikova. Inspired by her experience at the conference, the morning after it ended, Tereza went to Jean Talon Market in Montreal North and made a film of all the rich offerings to the senses that can be enjoyed there. It is a feast for the senses.

The conference did explore the far borderlands of Visual Literacy. For example, there was the panel organized by Piet Devos (Postdoctoral Fellow, Centre for Sensory Studies) entitled "The Distorting Mirror of Blindness: Visual Literacy and Non-Sighted Aesthetics"

This panel will explore the ways in which blind people rely on other senses and not strictly visual forms of literacy to create their 'pictures' of the world. By discussing the works of blind artists and literary authors, we will discover that the non-visual senses may work together in the most unexpected manners, not only to perform daily tasks such as 'reading' the urban environment, but also to make and experience art. Meanwhile, our panel will point out that blindness is not at all the negative opposite of visuality. On the one hand, blind artists and writers have always been very much aware of living within a predominantly visual culture, whose (linguistic) codes they need to appropriate so as to reinvent them. On



the other hand, when being represented by non-disabled artists, blindness also often proves to be a productive site where visual ‘normalcy’ exposes and questions its own (metaphorical) power relations.

Co-presenters included: Georgina Kleege (University of California Berkeley), Hannah Thompson (Royal Holloway London), Florian Grond (McGill University), and Vanessa Warne (University of Manitoba)

Another panel, organized by Jessie Motts (Miami University), focussed on “Sensing the Political: Hearing Images and Reading Bodies”

This panel explores how our practices of “reading” are embedded in a socio-political context. Our panel will rethink visual literacy in terms of multi-sensorial engagement by giving focus to the body, the inter-play of the senses, and the political. Our intended goal is to touch on our everyday interactions in a way that speaks the silent and reads the invisible. We want to call attention towards aspects that are often passed over because of how hegemonic structures inform these practices of “reading” and sensing. The four panel positions consider how our “reading” plays out in film, news media, and queered, raced, and gendered perspectives. Our intended audience is Higher Education and Social Activists.

There were many classic presentations, like Jasmine Burns (Indiana University Bloomington), “Verbalizing Visual Vocabularies: Using Visual Thinking Strategies in Library Instruction for Art & Design” and a wide array of groundbreaking papers, like Ben Jacks (Miami University), “Landscape Choreography: Architectural Atmosphere and Multisensory Perception.” You are invited to take a moment to explore the Conference Program (including Abstracts) to see some more of all that there was to see at Engaging the Senses.