



**The ASC! Research Project**  
**final report**

**/ ICASC**  
**ASC!**

# quick links to key resources created by the ASC! project

**THE AGEWELL CHATAQUA PROJECT**, visual documentation of artwork about aging  
<https://icasc.ca/asc/arts-based-facilitation>

**THE ART OF CHANGING THE WORLD (ACW 2017)**, the report on the ASC! Project's capstone event, <https://icasc.ca/resources/ACW-2017-report>

**THE ART OF COLLECTIVITY: Social Circus and the Cultural Politics of a Post-Neoliberal Vision**, book with contributions from several ASC! team members, largest study of social circus to date, <https://icasc.ca/resources/art-collectivity-social-circus>

**ARTISTS SPEAK**, a series of video interviews with senior and young ASC artists  
<https://icasc.ca/artists-speak>

**ASC! JOURNAL ARTICLES**, a list of peer-reviewed and popular articles created by ASC! team members, <https://icasc.ca/resources/art-social-change-resources-summary>

**ASC PARTNERSHIPS BLOGS**, presenting key takeaways from our research  
<https://icasc.ca/post/asc-partnerships-blog-series-post-1>

**THE ASC WEB**, a curated video collection of ASC! Project conversations and workshops  
<https://icasc.ca/ASC-Web>

**THE BC #ASCmap** of ASC organizations and funding patterns in British Columbia  
<https://icasc.ca/BC-ASCmap>

**CREATIVE PUBLICS**, a report on a pre-federal election public participatory arts project  
<https://icasc.ca/resources/creative-publics-final-report>

**EVALUATION TOOL**, a comprehensive, interactive online tool designed for both novices and those with evaluation experience, <https://icasc.ca/asc-evaluation-tool>

**MIXED ABILITY THEATRE/DANCE** videos: *The Making of Change: Making Unlimited; Limitless: Inclusive Dance Creation as Pedagogy and Advocacy*  
<https://icasc.ca/resources/limitless-inclusive-dance>

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS BRIEF** for all levels of government, as well as non-governmental and private funding agencies  
<https://icasc.ca/resources/icasc-art-social-change-policy-recommendations>

**SOCIAL CIRCUS IN QUEBEC**, a video documentary (French and English versions)  
<https://icasc.ca/resources/social-circus-quebec-english-version>

**CHECK OUT** the comprehensive ASC! Project archive in ICASC.ca:  
<https://icasc.ca/resources/asc-project-knowledge-sharing>

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# ASC! Project / Final Report

In 2013, a national team of academic researchers and community partner organizations, hosted by SFU's *International Centre of Art for Social Change (ICASC.ca)* received a \$2.5 million grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) to run a six-year national collaborative study — the **ASC! Project** — on the current state and future needs of arts for social change (ASC) in Canada.

The project included team members and collaborators from across Canada, employed some 39 Research Associates and Research Assistants, and received more than \$1 million in matching contributions. In addition to performances, exhibitions and diverse community events, outcomes from this project include numerous text and video resources, as well as practical tools for the ASC sector, many of which are available on the comprehensive [icasc.ca](http://icasc.ca) website.

This report presents a very brief overview of this large-scale national project.

## WHAT IS ASC?

The ASC! team defines *art for social change (ASC)* as *collective art-making by groups of people* (who may not self-identify as artists) about what matters to them. This creative process is facilitated by a specially-trained artist or group of artists. Designed *to engage heads, hearts, and hands*, ASC is *rooted in social, environmental, and political justice and is a form of cultural democracy* designed to *nurture insight, exchange and action*. ASC involves all art forms: theatre, dance, music, visual and literary arts, urban arts (such as hip hop, murals and graffiti) and digital arts. Almost always working in partnership with community-based organizations, ASC, with its unique goals, methods, pedagogy, and scholarship, has over 50 years of history in Canada and is practiced in diverse contexts around the world.

# Key High-Level Findings

The ASC! Project revealed a Canadian ASC sector that is rich, vibrant, and growing, with more than 500 ASC organizations — and many more individual ASC practitioners — working throughout the country. The project also brought to light areas where more support and work is necessary. The ASC! Project identified future needs for the ASC sector in three key areas.

**1. Education: Individual connections and knowledge sharing.** Research on the opportunities available for formal ASC training and interviews with experts in the field revealed a concerning lack of mechanisms for inter-generational ASC knowledge transfer. New ASC practitioners have told us that they find it difficult to find accessible

formal training opportunities or to connect with experienced practitioners as mentors. Experienced practitioners nearing the ends of their careers have told us that they would like to pass on their decades of knowledge to emerging practitioners but that there are no clear venues for doing so. ASC practitioners at all levels have repeatedly told us how difficult it can be to find relevant resources and professional development opportunities to help them expand their practice, to work effectively with partners, and to meet requirements, such as those for evaluation and impact assessment. Increasing the ability of ASC practitioners to connect with mentors and colleagues is a priority for the ASC sector at this time.

**2. Connection: Organizational partnerships and capacity-building.** Partnerships are central to the majority of ASC work. Whether those partnerships are between an individual artist practitioner and a funder, between community



## findings cont.

organizations and the communities they serve, or amongst diverse groups of people and organizations that come together to use participatory art-making to better their community, those working in partnerships can often accomplish more than those working alone. The ASC! Project showed that there are two key barriers limiting the effectiveness of partnerships in ASC. The first is similar to the individual connections gap: People and organizations often find themselves investing significant effort in just trying to find relevant partners. The second issue is that working with others poses its own challenges. There is a need to increase knowledge sharing around creating successful ASC partnerships.

**3. Information: Awareness, policy, and research.** The various components of the ASC! Project provided ample evidence that those connected to ASC work understand the work and its value. However, too often, those outside the field have not heard of ASC or are not aware of what ASC can offer. This lack of awareness creates extra work for ASC practitioners who must not only show why a particular project idea is valuable but must also start with basic introductions of what ASC is and the positive impact ASC practices and projects can bring. This lack of awareness also means that communities that might benefit greatly from ASC approaches in order to address their challenges foreclose on this option before even becoming aware of its existence. Awareness ties directly into policy in that if policy-makers and decision-makers are unaware of ASC as a field, they may unintentionally exclude ASC projects from access to funding, from approved approaches to addressing social change, and so on, thus perpetuating a circle of missed opportunities for creating a more just society. In order to increase awareness, ASC practitioners and organizations need to be able to demonstrate the benefits of the work in ways that make sense to diverse audiences.

**4. Adaptive qualities of ASC:** The principles and processes that underlie ASC practices can be adapted for use in a wide range of contexts and agendas. They offer alternative and effective approaches to change work by nurturing inquiry through collective, imaginative processes. An ASC-based “head, heart and hands” lens allows individuals and groups to perceive and respond to the world — to what matters to them — in ways that can create solidarity and empathy across difference, generate a sense of possibility, and devise practical solutions to often complex and divisive issues.



## A DIVERSITY OF METHODS. A SHARED PURPOSE

The work of the ASC! Project included a diverse array of approaches to understanding the state of the ASC sector in Canada today and to documenting and understanding the impact of ASC work. The following list (ordered alphabetically by title) provides a brief snapshot of the many projects that made up the national 6-year body of work, as well as links to more detailed information on each project. >>> [See the archive of resources and outputs from the ASC! Project.](#)

## The Agewell Project

In collaboration with *Arts Health BC*, **Judith Marcuse** led a series of arts workshops in Metro Vancouver focused on aging, culminating in an exhibition of over 100 paintings, drawings, photos, installations, videos and performances. These creative processes deeply explored issues surrounding aging. During the exhibition, held in Vancouver's *Performing Arts Lodge* (a subsidized residence for older artists and technicians), members of the public were invited to participate in additional dialogues and workshops.

>>> *An ebooklet with photographs of the displays and artist statements is available for viewing at [ICASC.ca](http://ICASC.ca).*





## The Art of Changing the World (ACW 2017)

The capstone public event for the ASC! Project was *the Art of Changing the World*, held in Ottawa in the Fall of 2017. More than 180 artists, scholars, activists, policymakers, and changemakers from across Canada and abroad shared their perspectives, knowledge, and strategies for using community-engaged art for social change approaches to create positive change in diverse settings. The structure of the conference emphasized both knowledge sharing and experiential learning opportunities. Three major priorities emerged for the sector: increasing capacity for artists, organizations, and policy makers; the need to address urban/rural divides; and the need to advocate for recognition and support of the sector across Canada. >>> [Learn more about ACW 2017](#).

## Artists Speak

*Artists Speak* is a collection of 27 video interviews with artists in British Columbia who define themselves, or were defined by others, as having socially-engaged arts practices. **Patti Fraser** (SFU), **Lynn Fels** (SFU), and **Flick Harrison** explored and documented the diverse perspectives, insights and approaches to community-engaged ASC by asking: What needs to be preserved or held as a responsibility as socially engaged arts are re-imagined in the future? How do we learn and meaningfully pass on the wealth of knowledge and experience developed by practitioners in the field? This resource includes: two teaching videos, "What Matters" and the "Art of Listening," that highlight key insights shared by individual artists; three digital research essays, "Artfor?" which speaks to the importance of how community arts projects are framed, "A Walk, A Question and Missives from the West Coast," which highlights the importance of place-based arts inquiry and "The Future," which shares the challenges and insights of a newer generation of artists. A digital "Guide to the Scrapbook History of a Community Engaged Artist" collages the lived experience and multiple interconnections, practices, issues and relationships that have unfolded over a 30-year career. >>> [Enter Artists Speak](#).



## The ASC Web

Created by **Judith Marcuse**, **Flick Harrison** and **Patti Fraser** from over 600 hours of video documentation taken over six years of ASC! Project activities, the [ASC Web](#) is an extensive, curated and categorized synthesis of exchanges, interviews, insights, workshops and other elements of the ASC project. Thirteen hours of accessible and wide-ranging material is presented in an innovative platform that encourages exploration of multiple aspects of community-engaged art for social change. Designed for professional development and educational use, this collection reflects knowledge and perspectives from a wide range of ASC artists, scholars, administrators, funders, policy makers, change leaders and others who participated in the ASC! Project. >>> [Enter the ASC Web](#).

## Chataquas

As an exploration of both traditional dialogue and arts-based facilitation techniques, **Judith Marcuse** led a series of [Chataquas \(arts-infused dialogues\)](#) across Canada, often in partnership with diverse organizations, including *Ashoka Canada*, *Creative Manitoba* and the federal *Department of Canadian Heritage*. Each session investigated a specific topic, including methods, perspectives and issues in the field of ASC; the integration of ASC processes into Canadian and international NGO policies and programs; the re-imagining of a university's mandate; and federal government policy to address issues of racism in Canada.

Performance, literary and visual arts, as well as group processes encouraged participants to think outside more usual frameworks to explore and share what mattered to them. New collective art-making enabled them to surface, share, and process their experiences and insights. The Chataquas strongly demonstrated the potency and adaptability of arts-infused dialogue to create new



directions for identifying and implementing solutions to often complex issues in a wide variety of contexts. >>> [Learn more about Chataquas.](#)

>>> [The interactive ASC Web](#) (previously described) also includes many videos that document hands-on, arts-based facilitation and dialogue techniques.

## Creative Publics

Can art-making foster political engagement? This question was the catalyst for [Creative Publics](#), a roving, pop-up, voter engagement project led by PhD student **Tara Mahoney** (SFU) that brought together artists, students, and community members to make art inspired by political issues leading up to the October 2015 Canadian federal election. As an action research project, Creative Publics opened a rare avenue for data collection, while also encouraging an embodied experience of political expression through an art-making process allowing participants to explore and demonstrate the ways in which issues are connected and intersect. Creative Publics illustrated the importance of bringing political dialogue to the street, where anyone has the opportunity to participate. The project increased participants' motivation to vote in the election, created opportunities for experiential political learning and facilitated dialogue.

>>> [Read the final report.](#)

## Dancing Parkinson's YYC / I Always Look Forward to Tuesdays

Dancing Parkinson's YYC, created in conjunction with *Decidedly Jazz Danceworks*, was the first dance program in Calgary specifically designed for people with Parkinson's disease and their care partners, spouses or companions. In addition to establishing an ongoing, weekly dance program, the group created a 40-minute presentation, *I Always Look Forward to Tuesdays* performed by 20 participants in January 2015 as part of One Yellow Rabbit's High Performance Rodeo. In addition, researchers **Anne Flynn** (U of C) and neurologist **Afra Foroud** (U of C) conducted a mixed-method study in 2013-14 involving forty participants. Findings from Dancing Parkinson's YYC demonstrated that dance programs are cost effective, and that dance's focus on movement capacity, literacy, and community-building resulted in complex and positive outcomes for participants.

>>> [More information on Community University Dance](#)

## Master's Program in Art for Social Change

Between 2016 and 2018, **Judith Marcuse** (SFU) and **Lynn Fels** (SFU) led the piloting of *a master's program in Art for Social Change at Simon Fraser University*, the first program of its kind in Canada. The program provided a theoretically and experientially rigorous foundation for the understanding and practice of ASC, along with theoretical insights, knowledge and practice of specialized facilitated arts processes, evaluation methods, and ethical frameworks. The program also included opportunities for students to engage in supervised fieldwork.

>>> [See the SFU program details](#) and [the comprehensive final program report](#).

## Monitoring and Evaluation in Art for Social Change

Community-engaged artists and their organizations, funders, and policy-makers are increasingly asking for evidence of the value and impact of ASC programs. Often ASC practitioners have minimal formal training in evaluation, or use different approaches from those sought by funders. Recognising these factors, **Annalee Yassi** (UBC) led the development of an *evaluation resource* that seeks to clarify some of the diverse theories, methods, and techniques useful for evaluating ASC projects, as well as other forms of community-engaged change work. In addition to its interactive elements, the tool provides a road map for both those who are less experienced and those with developed evaluation skills, while also providing comprehensive links to related resources. Available online at no charge, this tool is designed for those interested in finding effective approaches to evaluation.

>>> [Learn more and use this valuable tool for your own work](#).

## Partnerships

Through surveys, and Chataqua dialogues, and 48 hour-long interviews, **Judith Marcuse** explored the role of partnerships in ASC work. The results supported generally-recognized best practices in the development and care of partner relationships, including the importance of early and sustained dialogue to establish common language and build a shared vision; the centrality of equity, reciprocity, respect, and equal voice; and the need to address issues of robustness and sustainability by, for example, ensuring connections are not dependent on one key person who may leave an organization or be reassigned. >>> [Read the ASC Partnerships Blog Series](#).



## Rencontres/Encounters

Recognizing that people from different and conflicting backgrounds encounter one another every day, **Rachael Van Fossen** (Concordia) and **Lisa Ndejuru** (Concordia) developed Rencontres/Encounters (R/E), an engaged, intercultural research-creation project that extended therapeutic drama approaches



designed to build empathy. The central question was: To what extent can we build relationships and transform understandings across vastly different life experiences, value systems, racialization, immigration statuses, faiths, sexual and gender identities, etc. through stepping into performance in the stories of "the other"? For example, what might happen when the conservative Pentecostal Christian steps into the persona of the drag artist to recreate a lived experience of gay-bashing? Across the life of the project, the team saw significant changes in perspective and profound questioning

of previously held values. >>> [Read their journal article, \*Terms of Engagement: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Artistic Experimentation in the Rencontres/Encounters Project\*.](#)

## Social Circus

Urban youth are increasingly finding themselves socially and culturally alienated, and in socially and financially precarious situations. Over the past several decades, social circus programs have emerged around the world to help address the situation. However, very little research has been done to date on how this social intervention is functioning and what impact such programs have. **Jennifer Beth Spiegel** (Concordia/SFU) conducted research at four sites in Quebec in partnership with *Cirque du Monde* and *Cirque Hors Piste* to address these issues. Survey results showed a steep improvement in personal growth indicators, as well as statistically significant increases in social inclusion and social engagement. Interviews revealed that the program's success seemed to be due



to a combination of free, accessible, and accepting high-level instruction and a strong sense of “family.” *Social Circus* provided a place for those whose way of life has been marginalized to support one another in developing their own creative expression, sense of identity, and pursuit of singular and collective goals.

>>> [Watch the documentary video in English and in French.](#)

## Sharing Our Understanding and Learning (SOUL)

**Katherine Boydell** (Hospital for Sick Children) and **Lynn Fels** led the *SOUL Pod*, an internal research group that focused on ASC! Project knowledge representation and mobilization, emphasizing arts-based and online resource creation, pedagogy, and accessibility. Given the variety of user groups, from policy makers to educators to artists engaged in arts for social change, the SOUL Pod encouraged a variety of forms and mediums, including performance, teaching videos and online resources, along with conventional articles. As our research team was based in multiple cities across Canada, the SOUL Pod paid particular attention to effective information sharing and nurturing relationships. The pod encouraged leadership, collegiality and coordination through monthly online meetings among the research assistants, a monthly internal newsletter, and annual research gatherings. >>> [Learn more about SOUL.](#)





## Teaching and Learning / Art for Social Change

Led by **Lisa Doolittle** (U of L), this team documented, analyzed, and reimagined teaching practices to support and inspire next generations of artists/practitioners and scholars in Canada. A mapping process identified existing opportunities for learning in Canada; fieldwork and theorizing considered ways in which current pedagogical approaches may both serve and limit the field; and practitioners, teachers, and learners were connected with research into ASC teaching and learning alternatives. During a five-year field study, the research team also focused on how ASC could be fostered in a small city (in this case, Lethbridge) where few resources existed to support this work. Interviews with 18 people with extensive ASC teaching experience in institutions and community settings revealed approaches that were dialogic, embodied, and often involved mentorship. Common goals included individual consciousness-raising on social justice issues, creative development, and arts and community engagement skills training, enabling learners to participate effectively and, ultimately, to create and implement complex ASC projects. Analysis revealed that the impact of teaching and learning in ASC has far-reaching effects: sparking change at the individual level; at the community level where it connects students and teachers with those experiencing the social justice issues being addressed; and at the policy level, influencing publicly funded institutions and organizations that host educational programs and projects. >>> [ICASC.ca's directory contains a listing of training and educational opportunities across Canada.](#)

## Unlimited / ASC Pedagogy in Mixed Ability Environments

Using ASC methods in mixed ability environments, the Unlimited Project explored the teaching of dance and theatre in/as disability advocacy in community-based workshops and through a sustained community-university partnership. Community partners included *Southern Alberta Individualized Planning Association*, *Inclusion Lethbridge* and *South Region Self Advocates Network*. The project provided unique insights into how this teaching can be transformative for both those with and without disabilities. Over four years, this field study, led by **Lisa Doolittle** (U of L), progressed from a community-based art for social change partnership, to a post-secondary drama course, to a large-scale, university-produced theatrical production, returning once more to community with ongoing weekly integrated dance classes at a local arts centre in Lethbridge, Alberta. This initiative underscored the capacities of people with disabilities, the power of the arts to help build deep relationships across difference, and the value of broader training in ASC pedagogical/facilitation methods. >>> [View the videos](#) and the journal article. [May I have this dance? Teaching, performing, and transforming in a university-community mixed-ability dance theatre project.](#)







## WHAT'S NEXT?

The ASC! Project has drawn to a close, but its host organization, the [International Centre of Art for Social Change \(ICASC\)](#), enriched with the extensive learnings and new connections gained from this work, is now ramping up for the next phase of supporting ASC practitioners — and the ASC sector — in creating more inclusive and equitable communities at the local through national levels.

ICASC has published the [ASC Policy Recommendations brief](#) for use by government agencies and continues to meet with representatives from government at multiple levels. In addition, [ICASC's 2019-2021 Strategic Plan](#) outlines key actions that we will be taking to help build capacity, connections, and learning within the sector and across sectors, including the creation of mentorship programs and regional hubs to support established and emerging ASC practitioners and organizations, and ultimately to support the communities we all serve.

Art for Social Change is an important element for the creation of just and sustainable societies. In a time of increasing social polarization and complexity, creative processes that nurture often-unheard voices, develop critical thinking, encourage collective mobilization, and support citizen engagement are more important than ever before. We hope that the outcomes of the ASC! Project continue to enrich our practices and the communities we serve.

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## THE ASC! PROJECT TEAM

### Principal Investigator

Judith Marcuse

### Co-Investigators

Katherine Boydell

Lisa Doolittle

Lynn Fels

Anne Flynn

Rachael Van Fossen

Annalee Yassi

### Research Assistants

Nicole Armos

Noel Begin

Cary Campbell

Lisa Campkin

Callista Chasse

Kate Cunningham

Sierra Dakin-Kuiper

Srijani Datta

Lowell Gasoi

Patricia Gray

Sophia Han

Liza Hartling

### Staff

Steve Barker

Kim Gilker

Flick Harrison

Tracey Leacock

### Advisory Committee

Bruce Clayman

Arlene Goldbard

Ted Little

Evan Haynes

Lauren Jerke

Tyler Justinen-Teite

Mars Loveseth

Tara Mahoney

Corey Makoloski

Annick Maugile-Flavien

Krista McEwan

Heather McLeod

Cami Mori

Lisa Ndejuru

Stephanie Parent

### Post-Doctorals/Research Associates

Afra Foroud

Patti Fraser

Jennifer Beth Spiegel

Stephanie Perrin

Rufino Rodriguez

Mike Sawchuk

Emily Schon

Leyla Sutherland

Shelby Tay

Shira Taylor

Caitlin Van Fossen

Marshall Vielle

Haley Wadell

Prodpran Wangcherdchuwong

Ned Zimmerman





*graphic drawings by Corrina Keeling, lovelettersforeverybody.ca*

#### **Official Partners**

Arts Network for Children and Youth  
Ashoka Canada  
Banff Centre  
Calgary Arts Development  
Cirque du Soleil  
Concordia University  
Decidedly Jazz Danceworks  
Judith Marcuse Projects  
McConnell Foundation  
Simon Fraser University  
The Alex  
The Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids)  
University of British Columbia  
University of Calgary  
University of Lethbridge

#### **Collaborators**

Dr. Patrice Aubertin, National Circus School  
Dr. Deborah Barndt, York University  
Dr. Shauna Butterwick, University of British Columbia  
Seanna Connell, ArtBridges  
Dr. Rachael Crowder, University of Lethbridge  
David Diamond, Theatre for the Living  
Dr. Jean Harrowing, University of Lethbridge  
Ruth Howard, Jumblies Theatre  
Mo Korchinski, community activist, Women in 2 Healing  
Dr. Patrick Leroux, Concordia University  
Candace Lewko, Lethbridge College  
Navida Nuraney, ArtStarts BC  
Dr. Rena Sharon, University of British Columbia

**Photos by Kim Gilker, Christine Germano,  
& Corey Makoloski**





**/ICASC**  
**ASC!**

## Contact

email: [info@icasc.ca](mailto:info@icasc.ca)

web: [icasc.ca](http://icasc.ca)

facebook: [InternationalCentreOfArtForSocialChange](https://www.facebook.com/InternationalCentreOfArtForSocialChange)

twitter: [@ARTsocialCHANGE](https://twitter.com/ARTsocialCHANGE)