

At 11th hour, politicians pushed to pledge arts funding

Artscetera in The Westender

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By Mary Frances Hill

Author Dan Brown got rich with *The Da Vinci Code*. One of Country Music Television's most popular videos is for a song called "Tequila Makes Her Clothes Fall Off." Ben Mulroney's on TV.

Where the hell did arts and culture go?

Until last Friday (Jan. 13), the fine arts had been absent from the agendas of the political parties currently vying to bed down at 24 Sussex. On Jan. 10, the morning after the English leaders' debates, Diane Farris, who runs her eponymous gallery at 6th & Fir, sent out a mass e-mail that echoed the concerns of arts leaders (including retired ballet star Karen Kain), who noticed that not once — not even off-the-cuff — was the word "arts" mentioned by any of the four debaters.

Was that the sound of artists of all stripes beginning to hyperventilate?

The oversight was not lost on Heather Redfern. The well-spoken executive director of Vancouver's Alliance for the Arts and Culture promotes local artists, performers and arts organizations, and acts as an advocate for the role of the arts in a strong economy. But she's feeling election-time anxiety, and it's tiresome.

"No one said 'art,' no one said 'culture,'" she says. "Arts and culture is at the core of our sovereignty as a country, not softwood lumber."

On Nov. 23 of last year, the Liberal government promised a tasty infusion of about \$306 million (or an increase of five bucks per Canadian) to the Canada Council every year for the next three years. Redfern's Alliance sent out mass e-mails referring readers to VoteArts2006.ca, a website run by the Canadian Arts Coalition (an umbrella group for arts advocates). The site included a letter for constituents to send to their local candidates, pressing the politicians to either keep the Liberal promise or answer it with commitments of their own.

Hurrah for the people. Last Friday (lucky Jan. 13) the coalition announced that the other federal parties promised to fund the arts, via the Canada Council, by an extra five dollars per Canadian.

Name an art form and it more than likely has been boosted by some Canada Council funding. The organization that founded the Governor-General's Awards helps publishers, writers, musicians, dancers, galleries, actors, production companies and many other individuals and organizations survive on grants and prizes to pay for overhead, research and operating costs. In the years 2003 and 2004, arts funding counted for a mere 0.1 per cent of all government spending.

Just over 2,000 artists across Canada received grants from the Canada Council, ranging from \$1,000 to \$1 million (a caveat: in Vancouver, only the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra received a cool million). Locally, artisans as disparate as event producers Public Dreams Society to jazz singer Kate Hammett-Vaughan to the Vancouver Film

Festival to Geist magazine survives thanks to the aid of a Canada Council grant. (The list goes on. Go to CanadaCouncil.ca)

Good news, this, but arts groups need not fall over themselves to plead their thanks just yet. A political promise is still merely a promise. Forgive the cynicism, but considering how much cultural events contribute to the economy, it's discouraging that it took this long, with this much footwork, to get it onto campaign agendas.

Redfern sums it up. "The arts are a revenue generator for the tax system, and funding through the arts councils is an investment, not a handout." [OBJ]