

Art and Politics: The History of the National Arts Centre By Sarah Jennings

Jonathan F. Vance

Volume 102, numéro 2, fall 2010

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065591ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065591ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Vance, J. F. (2010). Compte rendu de [*Art and Politics: The History of the National Arts Centre By Sarah Jennings*]. *Ontario History*, 102(2), 250–251. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065591ar>

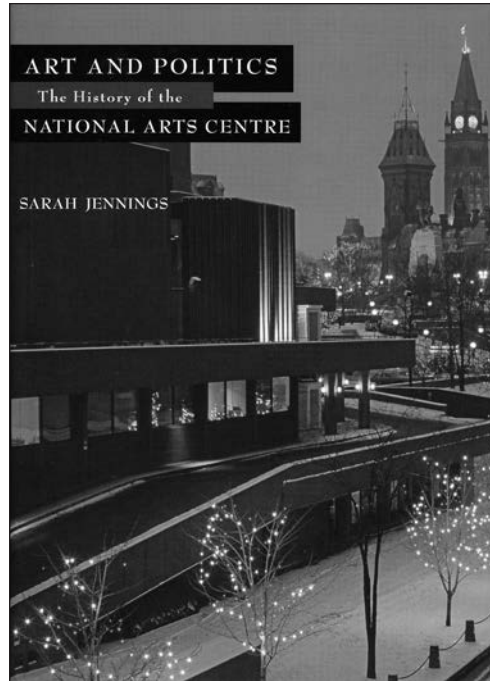
Art and Politics: The History of the National Arts Centre

By Sarah Jennings

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2009. 426 pages. \$50.00 softcover. ISBN 978-1-55002-886-7 <www.dundurn.com>

There is an old story, possibly apocryphal, that staffers at Ottawa's National Arts Centre used to refer to the facility as Stalingrad on the Rideau. Even if this is a myth, there is ample suggestion of a siege mentality in Sarah Jennings' comprehensive study of the NAC. And because the NAC never seems to have done anything by half measures, *Art and Politics* provides unusually vivid examples of some of the age-old debates—who should pay, elitism vs popularism, centralism vs regionalism—that have long characterized Canadian culture.

Envisioned as a national monument to mark Canada's Centennial in 1967, the NAC was bullied into existence primarily by one man: Hamilton Southam. He was an arts patron of the old breed: wealthy, suave, and well connected in government and international cultural circles. He could apparently summon influence and money simply by picking up the telephone, and the ease with which he smoothed over financial difficulties (such as the fact that the projected cost of the facility nearly doubled before construction even began) would come back to haunt the NAC. If the building itself had a soul (and some who worked there might swear that it did, for good or ill), that soul grew accustomed to Southam meeting its constant demands for money. And when he was no longer at the helm to steer through the shoals, the runaway deficits that had once been excused as artistic over-exuberance became enormously problematic.



Clearly, the difficulty was in making culture pay. How much should the NAC be expected to find its own sources of revenue? Should Broadway musicals subsidize “serious” theatre? How much money should go to opera, which probably attracted fewer patrons than lawn-bowling? In this regard, Jennings quotes an apt comment from entertainment impresario David Mirvish: “There was no way to make it financially viable. There are many good reasons for the NAC, but they are all non-financial.” (p. 258) Jennings knows that there are no easy answers to the questions of financing, except to suggest that Southam was too good in the seemingly effortless way he dealt with the money problems.

But there was more than just money at stake. The financial question overlay a deeper, philosophical one: should the NAC seek to be a centre of excellence that could compete with elite culture internationally, or should it be an agent of democ-

ratization, bringing culture to smaller communities across Canada? Jennings presents this as an ongoing theme of the book, manifest first in the conflict between Hamilton Southam and his counterpart in government, Gérard Pelletier. Making the NAC into a centre of excellence implied that its greatest impact would be felt in the Ottawa region, which seemed to violate both the regional imperative in Canadian governance and the democratizing impulse. In a fascinating dissection of the rarefied world of Ottawa's elites, Jennings sheds light on the degree to which the NAC became a kind of private playground for the region's high rollers. She observes that a "culture of 'freebeeism'" (p. 160) pervaded the capital. Many powerful people objected to the NAC's relentless calls for public money, but they also took for granted their constitutional right to fine meals and cheap tickets to the best performances if there were clients, foreign dignitaries, or out-of-town relatives to entertain. The NAC's catering arm almost always ran a deficit, so in a very real sense taxpayers across Canada were being asked to pay so that Ottawa's glitterati could enjoy the high life on the public tab.

Art and Politics, then, tells an important story, both in and of itself and as representative of the larger themes in the his-

tory of Canadian culture. It does, however, bear the hallmarks of an "official" history of the facility. It is full of names, far too many for the reader to digest; it is almost as if Jennings could not bring herself to leave anyone out, even if their connection to the NAC was a single appearance. Perhaps the same impulse was behind the rather gratuitous inclusion of a colour wedding portrait of *maestro* Pinchas Zukerman and cellist Amanda Forsyth. In general, Jennings tends to be too even-handed and reluctant to offer criticism. At certain times in its history, the NAC has been appallingly badly run (viz. six CEOs in three years) and many of its problems can be traced back to the shortcomings of various senior managers. But even those who nearly succeeded in running the facility into the ground get no more than a gentle slap on the wrist. *Art and Politics* is heavily based on interviews with NAC insiders, past and present, and one senses that Jennings has tried a little too hard to avoid bruising fragile artistic egos. A more critical writer might have been tempted to ask whether the NAC has survived as a vibrant cultural hub not because of the efforts of successive management teams, but in spite of them.

Jonathan F. Vance
The University of Western Ontario

Creating Memory: A Guide to Outdoor Public Sculpture in Toronto

By John Warkentin

Toronto: Becker Associates, in association with The City Institute at York University, 2010.
xii + 347 pages. \$32.50 softcover. ISBN 978-0-919387-60-7 <www.yorku.ca/city>

For walkers, strollers, cyclists, city-lovers and history buffs, John Warkentin's *Creating Memory* is an extraordinary gift. It is a treasure trove of information revealed through the profiling

of over 600 public sculptures that grace Toronto's streets, parks and special places. It is also an excellent interpretive account of how these totems of memory and message "fit into the fabric" of the city and contrib-