Visual Voice Gallery
Belgo Building
372 Ste-Catherine Street West
space 421
Montréal QC H2B 1A2
www.visualvoicegallery.com

Montreal, August 29, 2017

Dear members of the selection committee,

I would like to wholeheartedly recommend the project *Convergence, Perceptions of Neuroscience,* lead by Dr. Cristian Zaelzer, for the NSERC Science Promotion Prize. I had the pleasure of collaborating with Dr. Zaelzer on the *Convergence* initiative, a project which fuses visual art and neuroscience by inviting art students and neuroscience students to create collaborative artworks. Visual Voice Gallery, which I own and run, specializes in presenting contemporary art exhibitions which create a dialogue between art and science, making the *Convergence* project a perfect fit for the gallery's mandate. During a period of six months I was involved with the curation and exhibition of the *Convergence* initiative's artworks at my gallery, as well as serving on the jury which advised the students which took part in this project.

The visionary *Convergence, Perceptions of Neuroscience* initiative goes beyond the typical, formulaic, mainstream science outreach projects. The *Convergence* project connects art and science on a fundamental level of knowledge construction, information sharing, and idea translation. Right from the start I was impressed with the comprehensive series of lectures and field trips offered to both art and neuroscience students. This in-depth approach allowed the students in both fields to understand each other's knowledge bases, research methods, and vocabularies; a necessary prerequisite for a meaningful creative collaboration. The care and effort expended in these knowledge-sharing events resulted in the exceptional artworks presented later at Visual Voice Gallery.

The *Convergence* team assembled an impressive network of collaborators, all of whom contributed their expertise with great enthusiasm. The project brought together seasoned professionals from the fields of neuroscience and fine art to help steer the collaborations between the two groups of students, but also to exchange ideas about the fusion of art and science in curriculum building and knowledge production.

The implementation of the *Convergence* exhibitions went beyond my expectations. The art student's comprehensive understanding of the neuroscience research projects was apparent in their artworks. The young artists' enthusiasm for their new-found knowledge was evident in each art piece, many of which had a didactic element such as accompanying information leaflets or interactive software components. The quality and finish of these artworks was superb, so much so that gallery visitors were unaware that this was an exhibition of student works.

The gallery visitors were intrigued and compelled by the art exhibits, and spent an unusual amount of time in the gallery space interacting with each exhibit. The excellent *Convergence* exhibition catalogue outlined the neuroscience research projects which informed the foundation of each of the artworks alongside an artist's statement from each student. Visitors typically went from artwork to artwork with the catalogue in hand, consulting the background information for each piece. This way the general public was introduced to cutting-edge neuroscience research in an accessible, compelling way, which lead to deeper understanding of complex ideas and many discussions about contemporary science in the gallery space.

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While I mediated the exhibitions during the week, Dr. Zaelzer was present every Saturday, the busiest day of the week for the gallery, and gave guided tours of the exhibition to gallery visitors. Art lovers, families, tourists, and art critics were spellbound by Dr. Zaelzer's explanations, which ranged from the sleep patterns of fruit flies to the interactive neuron structures of the connectum, and how it all related to the artworks in the gallery. The attendance of the *Convergence* exhibitions was excellent, and I noticed many repeat visitors, who often brought friends and family to see the exhibition.

The success of the inaugural *Convergence, Perceptions of Neuroscience* initiative is evident in the students' accomplished artworks, the excellent audience feedback, and the fruitful relationships which have formed between the collaborating professionals. The *Convergence* project demonstrates the benefits of combining art with science. When artists create science-informed artworks they construct metaphors, translating intangible scientific findings into sensual experiences. Art contextualizes science and fosters a deeper understanding of the natural world, making contemporary science accessible to the general public.

The *Convergence, Perceptions of Neuroscience* initiative has made a significant contribution to the field of neuroscience education and outreach. I hope that you will support this outstanding project with an NSERC Science Promotion Prize.

Yours sincerely

Bettina Forget
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Art-science researcher, SETI Institute
President, English Language Arts Network