

# MERCER UNION,

A Centre for  
Contemporary Art

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**STRATEGIC PLAN**  
2016-2021

**Mercer Union**  
A CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART



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# Foreward

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## Letter from the Directors

Mercer Union enjoys a unique position at the forefront of contemporary art in Toronto and Canada – a vantage point cultivated over many years, bolstered by the efforts and foresight of countless members, volunteers, staff and supporters. We are distinctive in our commitment to supporting the production of new and experimental work, assisting artists in realizing pivotal exhibitions. As we continue to evolve as an artist-run centre, artists and artistic practice remain at the core of who we are and what we do: the spotlight of every dream for our future. We see art's role in expanding minds and crossing boundaries. We cultivate artists and challenge audiences.

Mercer Union has the will and structure to take on ambitious projects with an elasticity not found in other institutional spaces. We foster an intimate and supportive space for artists to develop and take risks with their work shaping the cultural landscape of Toronto, Canada and internationally.

The next five years promise to be exciting, guided by objectives under five key pillars – each integral to our success – that are flexible and responsive to the needs of artists, audiences and our communities. We thank all those involved in the creation of this document for their dedication to the planning process, their invaluable perspectives and advice. As we work to achieve our goals, we look forward to your participation in this engaging new chapter for Mercer Union.

York Lethbridge  
Executive Director

Julia Paoli  
Director of Exhibitions & Programs

## Letter from the President of the Board

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I want to say, that we are very excited to be sharing our new strategic plan for Mercer Union, A Centre for Contemporary Art.

This plan has been in the works for the better part of the last year and has involved a great deal of staff, board, and volunteer time to get it to the place where it is today.

You will see, we have endeavoured to develop robust strategies across five defined pillars:

- Exhibitions and Public Programs
- Fundraising and Support
- Membership
- Advocacy and Communication
- Governance and Resources

Mercer Union has an incredibly storied history in the Toronto arts community and I believe it is our responsibility to honour that past and work towards guaranteeing the strength of the centre moving forward. Today, the role of artists in our society is just as important as ever, and the challenge of giving rise to those voices is just as real. This is why strong organisations, with artists at their very heart, are so important. And that is why we hope this strategic plan will launch us into creating a solid future for Mercer Union.

Of course, the real work is only just beginning. We now wish to use this document to guide us as we seek to build on an already inspired legacy. We hope we can count on your support, feedback, and trusted guidance to ensure we can continue to cultivate artists and develop audiences with challenging and exciting programming for many years to come.

Kind regards,  
Michael Charles Salem  
Co-Chair & President, Mercer Union Board of Directors

# Introduction

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The following plan provides a framework of key objectives that will guide the direction and management of Mercer Union, A Centre for Contemporary Art over the next five years (2016-2021). This plan was made possible with the invaluable input of current and recent Members of the Board: Joseph Banh, Joseph Borowiec, Meagan Campbell, Rochelle Chung, Miles Collyer, Rebecca Houston, John Hampton, Lili Huston-Herterich, Corrie Jackson, Sara Knelman, Charlene Lau, Gabrielle Moser, Vanessa Runions, Michael Salem, Tamira Sawatzky, Kristen Schaffer, Jennifer Rose Sciarrino, Nicola Spunt, Jessica Vallentin, and Negin Zebarjad; staff members Danielle Greer, Georgina Jackson, York Lethbridge, Katie Lyle and Liana Schmidt; consultants Janice Barlow and Su Ditta; and Mercer Union's Advisory committee.

In January 2015, the Executive Committee of the Board initiated a strategic review to clarify Mercer Union's role and direction in preparation for the renewal of its strategic plan. That year saw the organisation's annual Board and staff visioning retreat facilitated by an external consultant, an internally produced organisational analysis report presented to the Board of Directors and the formation of the Planning and Foresight Committee. The committee's first recommendation to the Board was that it would develop the new strategic plan internally, in consultation with the Board, and supported by a short-term engagement with an external consultant. In late 2015, Janis Barlow of Janis A. Barlow & Associates conducted interviews and held a planning workshop with all members of the Board and staff. The Planning and Foresight Committee then led Board and staff in a "Validation" session in place of the annual visioning retreat in early 2016, to share developments in the planning process, request feedback on key elements, and finalise the components of its structure. In the fall of 2016, the Board of Directors voted to approve the first draft of the plan. Structured around Mercer Union's five operational pillars, the strategic plan encompasses the date of the centre's 40th anniversary in 2019 and will mark a significant period of its history. It is with great pleasure and honour that we present this plan to you now.

Miles Collyer  
Board of Directors  
Chair, Planning and Foresight Committee

# Vision

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Mercer Union, A Centre for Contemporary Art, will be a leader in the advancement of contemporary art locally, nationally and internationally through the commissioning of new artworks and as a platform for emergent artistic practices.

# Mission

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Mercer Union is a non-profit, artist-driven space for contemporary art in Toronto. We have a unique track record of presenting innovative exhibitions by diverse Canadian and international artists in both formative and established stages of their careers. We are dedicated to supporting the production of new and experimental work, assisting artists in realizing pivotal projects.

Mercer Union has the will and flexibility to take on ambitious projects. We foster an intimate and supportive space that allows artists to develop and take risks with their work. In turn, their exhibitions play a role in shaping the cultural landscape of Toronto, Canada and beyond.

Art is crucial to expanding minds and pushing boundaries. Our exhibitions, educational programs, artists' talks, events and publications, both on and off site, encourage critical inquiry and conversation.

Mercer Union. Cultivating artists and challenging audiences since 1979.

# Values

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The principles that guide Mercer Union's strategic direction...

*Visionary, Risk, Criticality, Freedom, Diversity, Globalism, Professionalism and Excitement*

To be *visionary* in advancing the role of contemporary art in our culture

To foster experimentation and embrace *risk* in contemporary art practice

To encourage the development of *criticality* in art practice

To support and defend artistic *freedom*

To embody the unique *diversity* of Toronto culture and its contemporary art

To embrace the multicultural nature of Canada in *global* artistic dialogues

To advance the role of artistic *professionalism* in our culture

To share the *excitement* of creative insight and artistic innovation

# About Mercer Union, A Centre for Contemporary Art

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Mercer Union, A Centre for Contemporary Art, is an artist-run centre dedicated to the advancement of contemporary art. We support the production and presentation of Canadian and international critical artistic practices, often premiering artists' work to local and international audiences.

Mercer Union was founded by twelve visionary artists who each contributed \$1,500 to buy the lease on an 1800 square foot space on Mercer Street in downtown Toronto in 1979. As they declared, "Toronto does not have, has never had, and desperately needs, an artists' organisation dedicated to the exposition of new work in the most advanced forms of painting and sculpture."

Mercer Union has expanded from its original remit to present the spectrum of contemporary art, moving from its original location at 29 Mercer Street to the forefront of the local arts scene in downtown Toronto. In 2008, Mercer Union relocated to its current space at 1286 Bloor Street West – a renovated early 20th century cinema space now situated in the centre of a growing and dynamic arts district. Our 3300 square-foot facility includes two large white cube galleries, workshop, artist cabin, administrative offices and gated outdoor patio including a billboard space at the corner of Bloor West and St. Clarens Avenue.

Throughout our thirty-seven year history, we have realized ambitious programming, presenting important solo exhibitions by artists in formative and established stages of their career including Sol LeWitt (1981), Charles Ray (1985), Jessica Stockholder (1988), Lorna Simpson (1988), Knut Åsdam (2003), Isabelle Pauwels (2004), Kristan Horton (2005), Jeremy Deller (2006), Mona Vatamanu and Florin Tudor (2008), Deborah Stratman (2012), Paul Sietsema (2013), Geoffrey Farmer (2013), Tiziana La Melia (2014), Abbas Akhavan (2015) and Jason Dodge (2016), among many others. Artists participating in the program have won awards including the Sobey Art Award, the Gershon Iskowitz Prize and The Future Generation Art Prize and participated in major international exhibitions including dOCUMENTA, the Venice Biennale, and the Sydney, Istanbul and Gwangju Biennials.



*“It is a rare opportunity, to be given the time and financial support to produce works that need years to develop. In 2011 I was invited by Mercer Union to begin to think about making a project as part of their inaugural commissioning series. Two years later A Light in The Moon brought together two major works, Boneyard and Look In My Face; My Name is Might-Have-Been; I Am Also Called No-More. The support and space to experiment while working with Mercer was a wonderful and enriching experience that I will carry with me for time to come.”*

*— Geoffrey Farmer,  
artist and representing Canada at  
the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017*

# Exhibitions and Public Programs

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Mercer Union presents five to eight exhibitions per year, solo and group exhibitions, within the main galleries. In addition we present a series of commissioned public billboards, a series of critical conversations under the rubric of FORUM as well as artists' talks, workshops, seminars and off-site public projects.

Our principal objective is to offer artists the opportunity to create new works for exhibition – from conception to realization – that challenges their ambition and provides exposure for new practices. We are catalysts for the creation of art by providing comprehensive production and technical support, critical feedback and dedicated curatorial direction.

In the past five years we have commissioned ambitious new works by artists Geoffrey Farmer (2013), Abbas Akhavan (2015) and Liz Magic Laser (2015). We have presented the first solo exhibitions in Canada by artists Christopher Kulendran Thomas (London), Sarah Pierce (Dublin), Laurent Montaron (Paris), Tiziana La Melia (Vancouver), Krista Belle Stewart (New York), Liz Magic Laser (New York), Isabel Nolan (Dublin), Carlos Motta (Bogota/New York) and Jason Dodge (Berlin).

In 2016/2017 we will present key solo exhibitions by Duane Linklater (2016), Katinka Bock (Paris/Berlin) and Deanna Bowen (Toronto).

Our record of exhibitions and projects includes an impressive roster of artists who have gone on to achieve prominent positions in the wider global sphere of contemporary art practice.



“ My show at the Whitney originated as a commission by the non-profit art space Mercer Union in Toronto. They spent a year location-scouting and raising goodwill and we ended up staging a highly experimental and risky event at a race car track in tiny Stouffville, Ontario (2011). Less than 50 people showed up, half for the races and half were our volunteers. At the Whitney the expected visitor number for the show is 73,000. I would like everyone who will see it to know that spaces like Mercer Union are the backbone for artists like myself. ”

– Aleksandra Mir, artist

# Education and Networks

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Mercer Union actively seeks to foster engagement and develop new audiences for contemporary art. We foster critical discourses in and around art through exhibitions, artists' talks, workshops, the critical conversation series fORUM, screenings, a commissioned outdoor billboard series, education programs, events, publishing and off-site projects. We partner with educational institutions such as York University, University of Toronto, University of Guelph, Humber College, Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCAD U), and Etobicoke School of the Visual Arts, and run free gallery tours every Saturday afternoon.

We have distinguished ourselves by being engaged with the international exchange of ideas through invitational exhibitions and partnerships with other artists' spaces across the world – from site-specific drawings by Sol LeWitt in 1981, to our 2013 commission with Geoffrey Farmer who will represent Canada at the Venice Biennale in 2017. We have partnered with organisations and institutions including: SBC Galerie d'art contemporain (Montreal), Images Festival (Toronto), Walter Phillips Gallery (Banff), Contemporary Art Gallery (Vancouver), Cinema Politica (Montreal), Irish Museum of Modern Art (Dublin), Artspeak (Vancouver), the Toronto International Film Festival, The French Consulate General (Toronto) and The Mixed Theatre Company (Toronto). In 2016/2017 we will tour Abbas Akhavan's solo exhibition to renowned venues, the David Roberts Art Foundation (London, UK) and Tromso Kunstforening (Norway).

“*My most recent show at Mercer Union [in Toronto] really made me feel anchored in a local ecology and dialogue that I never felt a part of—in its entirety, not just in Canada.*”

— Abbas Akhavan, artist and winner of the 2015 Sobey Art Award



# Governance and Funding

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Mercer Union is a Canadian charitable not-for-profit organization that is governed by an active 14-member volunteer board (the majority are practicing artists) and led by two Co-Directors.

Mercer Union's programming is supported by the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA), the Ontario Arts Council (OAC), and the Toronto Arts Council (TAC); and through other government funding bodies, sponsors, foundations, private benefactors and earned income streams such as fundraising events, sales of limited edition and the biennial fundraising auction, Stellar Living.

Resource sharing is central to all our activities and we continuously seek to develop new networks and reach new audiences through collaborations with partner organisations. Mercer Union is a member of Artist Run Centres and Collectives of Ontario (ARCCO) and the Ontario Association of Art Galleries (OAAG).

# Exhibitions and Public Programs

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Exhibitions and public programs are at the core of Mercer Union's mission. This strategic pillar represents:

Mercer Union's *presentation* of solo and group exhibitions onsite, as well as off-site public art projects

Mercer Union's *educational* programs, including artists' talks, fORUM, school tours, lectures, seminars, etc.

Mercer Union's support of the *production* of new artworks, including commissioned projects

## Objectives

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The key objectives of this strategic pillar are to:

- 01 Support the development of **5-8 exhibitions** per year within the gallery space, including two major commissioned works, and **3 billboard projects**, while finding opportunities to present one off-site public art project per year.
- 02 Expand **existing educational programs**, including fORUM, to include an intensive Summer School incubator and opportunities for emerging arts professionals.
- 03 Establish a **residency program** by 2021 that supports the production of new work with a budget of \$20,000 per project.
- 04 Ensure that the planning and execution of programming satisfy **stakeholder interests** and allow for the development of presenting partnerships to support each of the three key programming elements.
- 05 Revisit and revise as necessary the **process of developing programming**.

# Fundraising and Support

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Fundraising activities help Mercer Union deliver exhibitions and public programming. This strategic pillar involves actively prospecting for funding partners and sponsors, as well as effective communication of the goals and objectives of the strategic plan to all current and potential supporters.

Mercer Union's key categories of development include:

- Core funding (i.e., ongoing support from the Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council and Toronto Arts Council)
- Sponsorships and Partnerships (i.e., financial and in-kind support from, and other forms of collaboration with, corporate partners)
- Foundations and Grants (i.e., non-core support, whether operational or project-based, from foundations or other public/non-profit sources)
- Donors (i.e., financial support from private, individual supporters)
- Event-based revenue (i.e., funds raised through special events hosted by Mercer Union, such as Stellar Living and the Mercer Multiplier)

## Objectives

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The key objectives of this strategic pillar are to:

**01** Better **communicate** Mercer Union's current need, positive impact and reporting to supporters and stakeholders in order to cultivate a culture of spending.

**02** Increase **core funding** that matches Mercer Union's reach and audience impact with adequate recognition.

**03** Increase outreach and engagement from **sponsors, private foundations and other public grant agencies** in order to diversify financial support.

**04** Develop an **annual calendar of fundraising activity** – including events, drives, dinners, sales, editions, and the Stellar Living auction – that makes efficient and effective use of Mercer Union's resources.

**05** Lower the **cost of fundraising**.

# Membership

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Mercer Union's members are at the heart of the community it serves. Membership is a demonstration of engagement, support and ongoing commitment to the organisation. Membership can also be leveraged toward the encouragement of support from other stakeholders, as our sponsors, donors and funders are interested to know how many dedicated members we engage and communicate with on a regular bases. Administration of the membership program involves the planning and coordination of member benefits, recognition, recruitment and renewal.

## Objectives

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The key objectives of this strategic pillar are to:

**01** Produce a compelling **case for membership** to prospective members.

**03** Maintain **existing members**, through ongoing stewardship and recognition.

**02** Attract **300 new members** at all levels, through promotional activities.

**04** **Manage delivery of membership programs** according to the scope and scale of supporting audiences.

# Advocacy and Community Outreach

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This strategic pillar represents Mercer Union's overall advocacy efforts, including the organization's role and objectives as a leading organization in the local, national and international arts ecosystem.

Mercer Union's advocacy and community outreach efforts address its unique relationship with each of its key stakeholder groups, including:

## 01 Audience

- Visitors
- Artists and cultural workers
- Members
- Students
- Neighbours

## 02 Partners

- Education partners
- Cultural organizations
- Media
- Embassies
- Real estate developers

## 03 Supporters

- Funders and granting bodies
- Foundations
- Sponsors
- Donors
- Volunteers

## Objectives

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The key objectives of this strategic pillar are to:

**01** Actively **grow audiences and groups to participate** in Mercer Union programming, and pursue their feedback for artistic, educational, outreach and fundraising development.

**02** **Be present in the community**, through pursuing opportunities to participate in community events where possible.

**03** **Invest in marketing and promotion** of specific activities and Mercer Union's vision and mission to targeted audiences.

**04** Ensure that Mercer Union programs and events continue to receive adequate **press coverage**, and actively push for expanded media reach.

**05** Maintain Mercer Union's position as a leader in the local, national and international arts community and **participate in collective advocacy efforts** with peer arts organizations, sector associations, artists, academics and others.

# Governance and Resource Management

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Oversight of Governance and Resource Management matters is the responsibility of the Executive Committee and includes roles, responsibilities and processes of both Staff and Board.

## Objectives

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The key objectives of this strategic pillar are to:

- 01** Manage board and staff capacity to **maximize effectiveness** (internal resource management).
- 02** Draw on external resources to **sustain operations, invest in programming and achieve strategic objectives** (external resource management).
- 03** **Ensure Mercer Union's financial stability** through the pursuit of increased operational funding, securing adequate project-based funding, and allocation of funds toward strategic investments (financial management).
- 04** Decide on a **direction for Mercer Union's facilities** (facilities management based on analysis of the options, such as renewal of current lease or relocation).
- 05** **Assess progress and achievement** of strategic objectives, measure performance against defined targets and track meeting of milestones.

**Mercer Union**  
A CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART