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CANADIAN ASSOCIATION FOR NEUROSCIENCE
ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE DES NEUROSCIENCES

Toronto, May 17, 2019

From: Dr. Melanie Woodin, PhD, Chair of the Advocacy
Committee,
Canadian Association for Neuroscience

Dear members of the Selection committee,

As Chair of the Advocacy Committee of the Canadian Association for Neuroscience (CAN), I am writing this letter of recommendation with great enthusiasm for Cristian Zaelzer, founder of the Convergence initiative (<http://www.convergenceinitiative.org/>), as candidate for the Dana Foundation Science Educator Award.

The Convergence initiative aims to promote and educate the public about neuroscience and art, at the crossover between the two. As a scientist and graphic designer, Dr. Zaelzer has worked to build a bridge between the neurosciences and arts, by fostering the development of a space where neuroscientists and artists can meet and work together on collaborative projects that shed light on both fields. Its primary goal is to make neuroscience research accessible to the public by linking it to the arts. Dr. Zaelzer has been very successful in this endeavour since he founded Convergence in 2016.

Since its origins, the main activity of Convergence is an interdisciplinary course hosted at the Faculty of Fine Arts (FoFA) at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. Concordia FoFA students work with graduate students registered in McGill neuroscience programs to develop artworks that capture the essence of the neuroscience discoveries and are displayed to the public, in interactive art exhibitions in which artist and neuroscientists have conversations with exhibit attendees.

The course is the result of the collaborative work between Dr. Zaelzer, an expert in neuroscience and science communication, and MA. Ed. Bettina Forget, an expert in the artistic process and art education, and owner of the Visual Voice Gallery in Montreal. The course combines lectures, debates, laboratory visits, workshops, studio work, and independent study to encourage all participants to understand and discover territories outside their scientific and artistic comfort zones.

Registration to the course is open to both art students at Concordia and neuroscience students at McGill, and takes place over a full academic year, for 6 credits. It is an opportunity for true dialogue between artists and scientists, for the benefit of the public, who can view and experience the results of these collaborations.

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Over the first two iterations of this course, over 60 art and neuroscience students have collaborated to produce 28 artworks, and thousands of members of the public have attended the six public exhibitions in Montreal, triggering discussion about neuroscience research and the artistic process. This artwork is available to the world through the online publication of exhibit catalogues, social media coverage of the activities, and public conferences accessible online.

Convergence has thrived thanks to a network of supporter that Dr. Zaelzer has developed; this independent initiative is supported by the Brain Repair and Integrative Neuroscience (BRaIN) Program of the McGill University Research Centre (MUHC), the Integrated Program in Neuroscience (IPN) of McGill University, the Concordia University Faculty of Fine Arts (FOFA), the Canadian Association for Neuroscience (CAN-ACN), the Montreal General Hospital Foundation, and the Visual Voice Gallery in Montreal. Dr. Zaelzer's enthusiasm and hard work has made these collaborations possible, and all partners benefit from this association.

Dr. Zaelzer also launched a series of conferences titled "Convergence Sci-Art Art-Sci Series" which feature lectures at the crossover between science, arts and communication. From October 2017 to April 2019, seven lectures have covered subjects like the influence of media on modern science, the public perception of the scientific method, neuroscience popular misconceptions, and science immersed artistic practice. Dr. Zaelzer himself has been invited as a panelist or a guest speaker eighteen times since October 2016 at different universities, community events, and art galleries. He has presented and discussed on topics like the neuroscience behind science denialism, the importance of the arts and emotions to facilitate science communication, and the development of transdisciplinary collaborations. Dr. Zaelzer has also presented his work at the Canadian Association for Neuroscience and the Society for Neuroscience meetings.

As a final note, Cristian is not just a neuroscientist but also a graphic designer. He has dedicated a lot of personal to create the beautiful imagery of Convergence, and has developed the website, the two exhibitions catalogues printed and online, the photography, a big part of the videography, and the more than fifteen posters promoting Convergence events to the general public.

Convergence seeks to overcome stereotypes by bringing together people with different points of view: neuroscientists, artists and the public. Dr. Cristian Zaelzer's work has had an impact on neuroscience education and promotion in Montreal and internationally through the convergence website. The Canadian Association for Neuroscience very strongly endorses his nomination for the Dana Foundation Science Educator Award.

With regards,

Melanie Woodin, Ph.D.

Chair of the Advocacy Committee - Canadian Association for Neuroscience

Professor, Department of Cell and Systems Biology

Vice-Dean, Faculty of Arts & Science

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