Visual
Voice Galerie

Visual Voice Gallery
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Dear members of the selection committee,

I would like to wholeheartedly recommend Dr. Cristian Zaelzer for the Science Educator Award. 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 Dr. Zaelzer's Convergence project a perfect fit for the gallery's mandate. Over the last 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 art students which took part in this project.

Dr. Zaelzer's visionary Convergence initiative goes beyond the typical, formulaic, mainstream science outreach projects. The Convergence project connects art and science at the 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 from 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 on 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. Dr. Zaelzer inspired action in the students, colleagues, and sponsors through his infectious energy and determined vision. 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 exhibition went beyond my expectations. The art students' 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 the 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. Dr. Zaelzer provided an excellent exhibition catalogue, outlining both the neuroscience research projects which formed the foundation of each of the artworks, as well as an artist's statement from each art 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.

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 intricate neuron structures of the connectum, and how it all related to the artworks presented 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 gallery space was further activated by an opening reception, an afternoon activity for Quebec's 24 Hours of Science event, and a closing reception. At all three events both art and neuroscience students participated actively by giving talks about their artworks to the public, and by offering special activities.

Throughout our six-month-long collaboration, Dr. Zaelzer was indefatigable, dynamic, determined, and inspiring, and involved in every facet of the project, from high-level organizational decision-making to hands-on tasks such as catalogue layout.

The success of the inaugural Convergence project is evident in the students' accomplished artworks, the excellent audience feedback, and the fruitful relationships which have formed between the collaborating professionals. The Convergence initiative 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.

Dr. Zaelzer has made a significant contribution to the field of neuroscience through his unique, visionary Convergence initiative. I hope that you will honour him with the Science Educator Award and support his future endeavours in neuroscience education and outreach.

Yours sincerely,

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