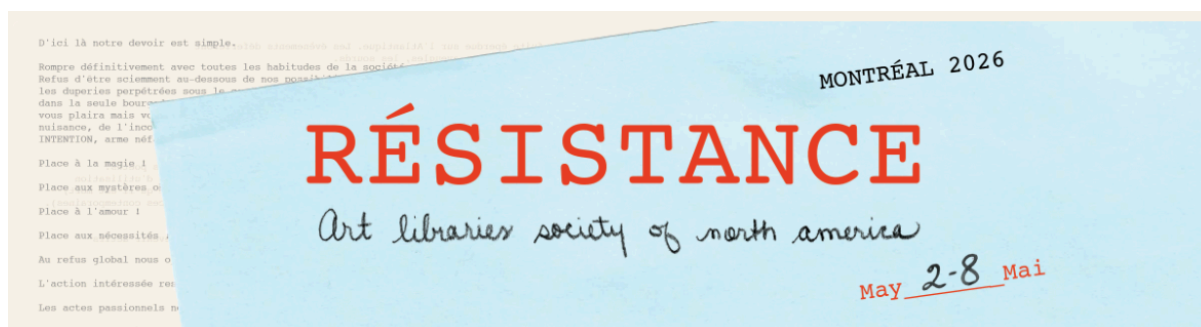




ARLIS North America's 54th annual conference, Montreal, Canada, 2nd-8th May 2026. Report for ARLIS UK & Ireland.

Supported by the ARLIS UK & Ireland Research Award and my institution, in my capacity as Chair of the Society I attended the annual conference of our sister organisation, ARLIS North America (ARLIS NA) in Montreal, Canada. The conference theme was resistance and its host city described as “a dynamic city where Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities thrive together. It is a place where French and English coexist, where cultures intersect, and where tradition and innovation harmonize in its architecture, arts, and technologies” (Valmestad, 2025).

Prior to the in-person event, a virtual pre-conference was broadcast live and can be watched on [Concordia University 4th Space YouTube channel](#). The talks focused on curating and exhibiting work in libraries, including working with students as collaborators and curators in exploring collections and selecting work to display.

The in-person conference ran for over a week, encompassing over thirty sessions addressing topics ranging from maintaining, preserving and promoting collections; addressing challenges of space; information literacy; and special collections (there was a strong focus on zinemaking), to name a few. The event included chapter meetings, tours of locations within Montreal and excursions to Ottawa and Quebec City, workshops, posters, international exhibitors, guided walking tours and social events.

I attended numerous presentations and workshops and met a wide variety of people from all over the world. What follows are the highlights and pertinent learning points I brought back, to apply to both my own work as a team leader at a UK university and in my role as Chair of ARLIS UK & Ireland.

In a prescient reflection of the conditions many information professionals are currently experiencing, my first session on a Sunday morning was a 90 minute workshop targeted to managers entitled *Burnout prevention: navigating stress and building resiliency in challenging times*. Led by Vesna Atwan, a professional coach, I heard from library

colleagues in institutions which were undergoing mergers or reduced financial income, and was invited to consider if my mind was a library, what would it look like? The conversation on my table included metaphors of toppling piles of books, shredded paper and a sense of organised chaos. We were informed that burnout is more likely to occur when employees expect too much of themselves and reminded that it is an occupational syndrome created by workplace stress. The session was practical, however, and we used a wellbeing quadrant to consider what made us feel good (in the realms of physical, creative, emotional, intellectual and spiritual) and a prevention plan of how we might recognise signs of burnout and address them.

Over the following days, I attended a variety of talks and workshops. On the first main conference day, a keynote talk from local artist and curator [Camille Larivee](#) showcased a variety of projects they had been involved with, followed by some fascinating discussions around how to document street art or other ephemeral or performance works. Larivee noted that a duality exists between needing to let the art go and be out in the world, in parallel with recording it using photography or documenting the works on platforms such as Wikipedia. More on Larivee's work can be found on [their website](#).

In a series of short talks entitled [Resisting classification](#), Nicole Smeltekop and Eli Landaverde (from Michigan State University Libraries) presented a talk entitled *The #GayAgenda: LGBTQIA2S+ materials in the Murray & Hong Special Collections*. The audience was introduced to the complexities and recognised gaps within a collection focused on activism ephemera and related materials, acknowledging there is no neutrality in their roles as they seek to collect and make the holdings visible. They encourage students to think about how material is both collected and catalogued, thereby exposing the decision making involved in this process.

Although the artists' files in my institution are long gone, I was interested in the discussion in a talk called *What's in an Artist File? The Future of Artist Files* which noted that these can be the only record for unpublished documentation of artists' work. They signposted the updated publication [Artists Files Revealed: documentation and access](#), created by the ARLIS/NA Artist Files Working Group and available on the ARLIS NA website to download. The work is informed by Sara Ellis and John Latour's *The State of Artists' Files in Canadian GLAMs and ARCs: Report into artists files*, available via Concordia University's repository.

The impact of national and international events in world politics, COVID-19, artificial intelligence and changes in higher education funding loomed large in many of the talks, which, while often somber, also showcased tenacity, optimism and creativity on the part of information professionals working within these constraints. Examples can be seen in the talks within the session entitled [Ch-ch-ch-changes: turning to face the strange \(changes in your library\)](#) such as Torie Quiñonez's presentation on resisting AI in their institution and Becky Alexander's talk *Final Chapters: How Academic Art Librarians Navigate Institutional Closure*, which described the sad process of closing a library.

Stafanie Hilles can be relied upon to provide practical and reusable session ideas and plans, and her talk [on her work with MFA students exploring subject headings](#) gave me many ideas I plan to implement in my own workplace. While this presentation is not yet available online, many of Stefanie's other works are available via the [Knowledge Commons Works](#) website.

My final pick was the session [Reports from the field: trends in academic art libraries](#), which included a presentation by D. Vanessa Kam called *Reinvigorating Library Policies with EDI, Sustainability, and Accessibility Frameworks*. She discussed reviewing library policies against specific frameworks and I plan to explore the ideas shared further with our Society.

Tours of local museums, galleries and libraries complemented the conference programme and I attended a visit to [Artexte](#), which describes itself as “a library, research centre and exhibition space for contemporary art. Our unique print and digital document collection holds over 30 000 documents covering the visual arts from 1965 to the present, with an emphasis on the art of Canada and Québec. Over 80% of the acquisitions stem from donations from the visual arts community.” There were threads of connection to several of the conference’s talks, including democratising and challenging who gets to decide what is collected (for instance, any artist can start their own file and add to it, and the files include ephemera, CVs, online articles); supporting a diversity of perspectives (they have a programme of exhibitions and run a residency for indigenous artists) and a focus more on access than on preservation. Their website includes virtual [guided tours](#), an online catalogue, guides and many other fascinating content, I recommend exploring it.

All presenters were invited to upload their slides and posters to the ARLIS NA conference proceedings collection on Knowledge Commons Works and many can be viewed there: [Search ARLIS/NA Conference Proceedings](#). I am very grateful for the support of ARLIS UK & Ireland and my own institution to be able to attend the conference.

References

Ellis, S. and Latour, J. (2022) The State of Artists' Files in Canadian GLAMs and ARCs: Report. Available from: <https://spectrum.library.concordia.ca/id/eprint/991187/> Accessed 21 August 2026.

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