

New Challenges for Supporting Arts and Culture

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My presentation today will focus on five big changes impacting public arts funders in Canada:

- 1. A dramatic expansion in what is considered art;**
- 2. The ascendance of Aboriginal arts practice in a broad range of disciplines;**
- 3. A change in the “access” discussion from the need for more product to the public’s capacity to engage with that product;**
- 4. A movement toward more systems-based, ecological decision-making;
and**
- 5. A change in the value proposition from serving artists to benefiting society as a whole.**

In each instance, I will highlight contributing factors and discuss their impact on the Canada Council for the Arts, a Crown corporation of the Government of Canada that funds professional arts practice across Canada.

- 1. The definition of what is considered art is much broader today than it was in the mid-20th Century** when the Canada Council was formed. Then, the focus in Canada was to support art forms or disciplines like music, dance, theatre, the visual arts and literature within a clearly Eurocentric frame of reference. Music, for example, was largely symphonic or classical, theatre was text-based, and dance balletic.

Today such exclusivity is no longer defensible. In part this is due to major immigration to Canada from non-European countries. These new – and sometimes not so new – Canadians have cultural interests often very different from those imported from Europe, and press their rights as citizens for public support alongside more mainstream interests.

In part, it is tied to technological change and the emergence of computer-based art, new media, crowd-sourced literary and musical forms and other new practices unheard of when the Canada Council was founded almost 60 years ago.

And in part, it is due to the choices made by artists themselves – especially younger artists – to push the envelope of each art form or discipline, to work in several media or art forms simultaneously, and to create, collaborate and disseminate in ways that cannot easily be pigeon-holed by discipline.

In its early years the Canada Council established a distinct program each time a new arts practice emerged, but as the number of new practices grows, our approach has altered, and we are moving instead to a smaller number of programs that accommodate a broader range of applicants.

Within particular disciplines or art forms, we have introduced genre-free eligibility guidelines. Rather than funding only classical music, the Council will consider any musical practice that meets a set of underlying principles, such as being artist-driven and artist-controlled and qualitatively assessed by peers. Finding the right peers and having enough money to go around is certainly an issue, but so far our experience has been very positive, and today we award grants to a much broader range of musical practices than in the past, including hip hop, classical, folk, jazz, electronic, world, and that wonderful catch-all, experimental.

The Council also complements discipline-based programs with an overlay of cross-disciplinary initiatives and processes. The resulting matrix model facilitates horizontal integration and collaboration within the organization to better reflect what is happening outside the organization, and everything from budgeting to office design reinforces our commitment to use collaboration and consultation as means toward better informed decisions.

2. The **ascendance of Indigenous arts practice** mirrors in many ways a resurgent political, social and cultural voice for First Nations, Inuit and Métis people in Canada. In Canada as elsewhere in the world, cultural expression by Aboriginal peoples is freeing itself from the confines of anthropological and colonial pigeon-holing, and taking its place in art galleries and theatres and publishing houses next to its more traditionally acknowledged counterparts.

There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is the extraordinary talent of the practitioners themselves. In Canada, the rich story-telling tradition of Aboriginal peoples provides a robust foundation for a range of arts practices that honour traditional worldviews and philosophies and align well with contemporary interests. The acknowledgement of these practices is not a political or cultural concession; it is a reflection of the quality of the work and the vitality of Indigenous communities.

Simultaneously, there is a growing appetite and respect for cultural diversity itself. In the same way that humanity now realizes the crucial role that biodiversity plays in the future of the planet, so too we are waking up to the contribution that cultural diversity makes to our urgent quest for sustainable development.

Globally the focus is two-fold: to ensure that Indigenous wisdom and knowledge is kept alive through the maintenance of language and tradition, and to harness that knowledge through contemporary cultural practice. Canada is no exception. In the same way that Aboriginal knowledge saved many early explorers to Canada from starvation and hypothermia, so too there is a growing understanding of what Indigenous worldviews can bring to the struggle for balance and meaning in contemporary life.

The Canada Council supports both customary and contemporary Aboriginal arts practice. Consistent with the matrix model I mentioned earlier, the Council supports this work both within discipline-based programs and through cross-disciplinary collaboration. Aboriginal staff are recruited within each discipline to participate in the design and delivery of programs. Additionally, an Aboriginal arts office is in place to act as a centre for expertise and facilitate collaboration across the organization. This multi-stream approach ensures our commitment to Indigenous art remains culturally appropriate and specific, integrating (not assimilating) Aboriginal knowledge and creativity into the fabric of all we do.

The Council tracks its support to artists and organizations who self-identify as Aboriginal, as well as staff within the organization and peer assessors recruited each year (in total, the Council contracts between 600 and 700 artists and arts professionals to serve as peer assessors annually). The results of this tracking are analyzed on a regular basis to assess performance.

It is also worth noting that the current Minister of Canadian Heritage through whom the Canada Council reports to Parliament is herself Métis, a first for the arts in Canada.

3. Improving access has long been a priority for public arts funders, but the conversation in Canada is strongly shifting from the **availability of product to the public's capacity to engage with that product**. This was not always the case. When the Canada Council was created in 1957 the assumption was that Canadians already had an appetite for music and dance and theatre and literature, but that something needed to be done to ensure that what was on offer spoke to the Canadian experience – was made in Canada by Canadians. More Canadian product was seen as being in and of itself a good thing, and if you built it, they would come.

Today's reality is very different. Cultural product has grown exponentially, but not so consumption or participation rates – or at least not for those forms of cultural practice traditionally associated with the arts.

Many reasons are cited: the dominance of industrial players in the marketing of pop culture; the decline of arts education in schools; the impact of social media on young people's attention spans. Sitting quietly in a theatre or concert hall for several hours at a time appears to be less appealing today than it was in the past.

Artists too may be a contributing factor. Many forms of arts practice may seem specialized, self-referential or obscure. Without a guide, the average person can easily find him- or herself lost in the intricacies of the art world, and a single exposure is rarely sufficient in and of itself to generate repeat visits.

The Council has launched a series of initiatives to raise consciousness about how people experience the arts, and to make a stronger link between the quality of that experience and the sustainability of the arts practice itself. Foremost among these was the publication 15 months ago of a paper on public engagement in the arts and a subsequent series of blog posts and speeches. This year we will follow-up by commissioning foresighting research to help us better understand how future generations might experience the arts.

The Council also supports a range of audience and market development initiatives intended to support artists in better understanding and exploiting the marketplace in which they operate. Cultural animation and mediation of various kinds are promoted and celebrated, and organizations receiving ongoing support are increasingly encouraged to highlight not only their investment in art but their investment in audience-building as well.

4. This makes a good segue to the fourth big change. In its early years the Canada Council saw the founding of theatre companies and dance companies and publishers and orchestras as critical to building a national infrastructure on which arts practice could flourish. Keeping these organizations strong and healthy was paramount, and funding programs and policies reflected this priority. Each year more organizations were added, and today upwards of a thousand arts organizations receive ongoing support from the Canada Council.

The Council's budget, however, did not keep pace with this growth, and today the Council is very much a minority investor in the arts in Canada. Most organizations are as reliant on provincial and municipal funders and the private sector as they are on the Canada Council for their survival. In addition, new organizations are continually being added, and the competition for scarce resources increases.

This has led us to **see our work in an increasingly ecological rather than institutional context, a move that mirrors a broader societal shift toward more systems-based, ecological thinking.** We are asking not simply how a particular grant helps a particular organization, but how this investment benefits a broader set of players – the local community, other organizations, the art form itself. Similar to how contemporary society views the environment, we see the arts as an elaborate set of interacting parts, each dependent upon and influencing the others. Systems language has come to the fore, and with it, a change in the context for decision-making.

At the Canada Council this change is reflected in a number of ways. As a start, we have moved away from using growth as the primary measure of success. While “more” – bigger budgets, larger grants, more clients – may have made sense during periods of growth, it has little meaning in periods of constraint. Instead, we are focusing on the quality of relationships to measure our success – the ability of artists to speak to the public with better quality work, to collaborate and support each other, to make connections within and beyond the nation’s borders. Our current five-year strategic plan is entitled *Strengthening Connections* for this very reason, and our assessment and reporting methodologies follow suit.

So too we have gradually shifted our decision-making focus to be less transactional and more relational. By that I don’t mean that we still don’t do transactions – process applications, run competitions, communicate results – but that our decisions are informed by more than just what is in an application, and reflect as well our understanding of how art is practiced, how well certain players have performed over the years, what we sense are the big challenges going forward.

This has triggered a review of virtually all operating support programs at the Council – approximately two-thirds of what we spend on grants. Extensive consultation has or is taking place in each discipline or art form, following a timetable aligned with multi-year funding cycles. The review began in earnest well over two years ago and is expected to take until 2017 to be completed.

Reviews of other programs are also underway, and by the end of the current planning cycle all parts of the organization should be able to situate themselves within this broader systems or ecological framework.

5. Finally, we are experiencing a **shift in the value proposition for public funders from serving a particular sector to benefiting society as a whole**. The Government of Canada is not alone in having to defend to its citizens how it spends their money. A crisis of legitimacy haunts governments everywhere, and in an era of economic constraint, every funding decision is scrutinized, and every political priority challenged.

All public programs are called upon today to demonstrate the public value they generate, and arts funding is no exception. Any suggestion of special interest is frowned upon, even for professions that in the past were seen as having exceptional status, like doctors, or teachers, or farmers. Today, governments must demonstrate how funding doctors improves the public's health, how supporting teachers provides the work force needed for the future, how investing in farmers guarantees a stable food supply. No profession is seen as having in and of itself an entitlement for public support – except, perhaps, that of politician.

For many years the justification for public investment in the arts has been a grab-bag of arguments – creating jobs, generating ancillary spending, improving educational scores, building communities, strengthening identity, lowering ticket prices, giving artists a living wage.

The burden of the debate has now shifted. The value proposition for public investment in the arts must be as clear, and simple, and communicable as that for health, and education, and agriculture. It cannot be based on what it does for artists, but what it does for society. It cannot be seen as privileging the few, but benefiting everyone.

At the Canada Council we are moving toward embodying this change by imposing a public value lens on all of our corporate decision-making, including the language we use to describe our work. We are working from the inside out to situate ourselves within the same value system that included cultural rights within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that sees expressive life as a fundamental characteristic of humanity, that acknowledges culture as a critical component in sustainable development. We are trying to practice what we preach, even as the message that we preach remains dynamic.

As philosophical as this may sound, at heart it is quite pragmatic. Value propositions are short-hand for demonstrating worth. Arts councils will flourish only as long as the public sees arts investment as a public good, and it is our job to make the truth of that connection self-evident.