How dialogue with the arts community is informing the new funding model
Introduction

Continuous dialogue with the arts community is a cornerstone of the Canada Council’s work.

Whether it’s a conversation with a funded organization, an email exchange with a first-time applicant, or an interaction with one of the 600 to 700 peer assessors who serve each year on advisory or peer assessment committees or juries, our staff is constantly in touch with artists and arts administrators from across the country.

We’re also present at performances, screenings, exhibitions, workshops and conferences, listening and learning about what is happening in the field in Canada and abroad. We read the thought provoking research and reports on our sector. And we often seek feedback on a national scale, bringing people together via forums or consultations to explore developments and opportunities in-depth.

All of this makes for a rich, ongoing discussion that permeates everything we do. Most recently, it has influenced our commitment to innovate within our programs and program delivery in response to the rapidly expanding technological and societal changes of the times. As announced earlier this year, the Canada Council will significantly simplify and reduce the number of grant programs to fewer than 10 national, non-disciplinary programs that include all fields of artistic practice and its outreach in Canada and the world, and that take into account the specific issues of current arts disciplines and emerging art forms.

This ambitious project is already underway. For the next several months, the Council’s staff will do this work, leading up to implementation of the first phase in 2016–17. It’s a process that will be informed by what we’ve heard—and continue to hear—in our constant conversations with arts communities.

This document summarizes some of the trends and issues that have emerged from those conversations, and highlights the ideas that the Canada Council is reflecting on as we prepare to launch the new suite of programs.
Trends and Issues

Vital, diverse and dynamic, the arts are ever changing. And so is the larger environment in which the arts sector operates. Here’s what the community has told us about the trends and issues that are affecting artists and arts organizations in Canada.

1. Flexibility

Responding to opportunities and change is a key concern

In today’s rapidly changing environment, being able to respond to shifts and opportunities is of central importance for many artists and arts organizations.

“A number of organizations put forward the view that as a result of new technologies and the changing environment, their planning timelines are shortening and greater flexibility in deadlines and turn-around-times would be greatly appreciated. This would allow organizations to be more nimble and take advantage of time-sensitive opportunities.”¹

Many have advocated for accessible formats so all artists, with or without disability-related barriers can easily apply for funds.

Some have indicated that overly long wait times between grant application deadlines and the notification of awards can compromise applicants’ activities or programming. Others have suggested that it would be beneficial to have more application deadlines per year, or different durations for grants.

“Evaluations every three years do not help small organizations that are transforming quickly.”²
Given that the business work of running an arts organization or practice can leave little room for creative work, many also feel there is a need to lighten the grant application and reporting process. For example, allowing applicants to submit their applications in simpler formats. With rapidly changing technology, there is a movement to simpler, shorter forms and application requirements, not only in granting processes, but in all online transactions.

Although the Canada Council has built a direct and largely positive relationship with Aboriginal artists and arts organizations, some feel that the current funding structure expects Aboriginal creators to conform to an arts canon and criteria that do not reflect their historical or contemporary cultures.

“Aboriginal specific programming, from a culturally relevant perspective, recognizes that to Aboriginal people, all of our work, from politics to tradecraft, have an artistic underpinning and an inherent connection to the health of our communities on social, economic and policy levels.”

Some have accordingly articulated the need for a self-determined approach to Aboriginal arts funding.

2. Evolving Artistic Practices

**Interdisciplinarity is a growing trend that has transformed artistic practice**

For several decades, feedback from the arts sector has pointed to an increase in what is described as multi-, cross-, or inter-disciplinary activity, to the extent that it can no longer be considered unusual or exceptional. Many artists today draw on a variety of media to carry out their concepts, and don’t define themselves as belonging to a single artistic discipline. At the same time, practitioners have also noted that “traditional” arts disciplines are neither monolithic nor stagnant, and continue to evolve in tandem with their interdisciplinary counterparts. Diverse artistic practices have proliferated in Canada and more culturally diverse, official language minority and Deaf and disability arts practitioners are appearing on Canadian stages, in
galleries and in print. Funders, presenters and networks are expanding view to engage more profoundly with this sector. (from Equity sounding report)

“The notion of multidisciplinary represents a growing trend, especially for emerging artists. Digital technologies have bridged silos between practices and opened boundaries between disciplines. According to participants, this versatility/adaptability should be fostered, recognized and supported, as it is at the heart of the creation paradigm.”

“Discipline-based is not always appropriate. Aboriginal artists’ practice may not fit into Canada Council structures/grants.”

“Artists are incorporating more media and disciplines in their works, raising the question of where they ‘fit’—are they multi-media or trans-media?”

Certain applicants, however, feel a pressure to “bend” their artistic initiatives to adapt to the objectives of grants. Some would like to see a more open-ended grant process that doesn’t put an emphasis on fitting into a “box” and is more responsive to interdisciplinary or emerging practices.
3. New Models

Alternative organizational models are emerging in tandem with evolving times and artistic practices

An increasing number of arts organizations are working—or wish to work—outside the structure of formal, not-for-profit, incorporated arts organizations.

“For instance, an ad-hoc collective where artists get together to do a particular project (sometimes over several years) and then disband, or a producer model where individual movers and shakers develop and drive creative projects.”

Others have developed administrative or collaborative models that support the creation and development of high quality art, but that do not necessarily fit neatly within current funding paradigms.

Large-scale technological and societal shifts are also prompting many artists and arts organizations to adapt and pioneer new models of creation, production and dissemination. But developing sustainable infrastructure in the face of tremendous pressures and rapid change can be a complex and difficult undertaking.

“There is the recognition that new organizational models are needed today and in the future, but organizations don’t know how to develop them.”

Accordingly, there is a need to acknowledge alternative organizational models and support efforts to develop new ones.
4. Participation and Promotion

More people than ever are seeking to participate in creative endeavors and engage with critical ideas

Promoting the arts has become a more complex task in recent years, thanks to newly developed means for reaching and interacting with the public. Increasingly, artistic experiences are taking place in unconventional venues or virtual spaces. Technology continues to democratize culture, putting creative tools into more hands. How best to respond to this demand in the current economic environment, and navigate a more democratized cultural landscape is an ongoing issue.

“In this era of an unprecedented abundance of cultural offerings, the major challenge faced by presenters is to reach the public by creating promotional strategies adapted to new trends.”

Among many in the arts sector, there is an interest in better understanding how to engage the public, and ensure a future where Canadians value the arts and the work of artists in particular. Several have also expressed the view that the Canada Council could play a larger role in promoting and raising the public profile of the arts, and in encouraging arts participation.

5. Technology

Rapid technological change continues to present opportunities and challenges

There is little doubt that technology has opened up exciting avenues for artistic development and dissemination. It has had an impact on how art is created, leading to a blurring of boundaries between art practices, organizational models and sectors. And it has changed how creators connect with their audiences, enabling them to reach publics in new ways—and in places—that weren’t possible before.

Yet, keeping pace with technology on a day-to-day basis can be daunting. It requires new knowledge, skills and resources.
“While there has been an increase in the number of platforms and venues for engaging with the public, for many artists and organizations, the incorporation of new technologies and skills to reach audiences is not yet easily integrated into the making and programming of art.”

Once reliable business models may no longer be as effective or profitable in the borderless digital world. The need to adapt is ongoing. But while many in the arts sector are open to new ways of working, they would also like to see continued support for traditional artistic practices and live experiences.

6. Market Access

Access to international opportunities is increasingly important

In today’s interconnected world, a presence in the global marketplace is of paramount importance to artistic careers and success. Many Canadian artists and arts organizations are excelling abroad. Invitations to tour internationally, for example, have helped increase their profile and audience base. But the opportunities for Canadian artists internationally cannot be fully realized because of lack of financial or human resources.

While it is important to continue promoting the arts at home, many feel it is imperative to strengthen and support opportunities for Canadian artists internationally.

“The modest art market in Canada favours a small number of artists, leaving many practitioners with few outlets outside of granting to maintain a living wage or to pay for the space they require to do their work.”

Maintaining a commitment to support artistic excellence is equally essential to ensure that Canadian arts stand out on the international stage.
7. Demographics

Shifting demographics are reshaping art practices and audience expectations

The diversity of artists and art practices in Canada continues to grow at a rapid rate, affecting both the make-up of the artistic population and publics for the arts.

“…shifts in Canadian demographics have resulted in an ever-increasing demand for artistic work that reflects the diversity of Canadian audiences.”12

Aboriginal artists have a distinct and unique place in Canada, as creators, interpreters, translators and transmitters of an inherent Indigenous cultural continuity. And Aboriginal youth are the country’s fastest growing demographic.

Across generations, younger practitioners are defining themselves by their distinct approaches to artistic creation, shaped by different influences.

“Younger artists are pushing the boundaries, leading to new expressions, new directions, and aesthetic diversity.”13

Some young creators are producing or presenting work in alternate venues that lie outside the recognized arts infrastructure. And when it comes to artistic experiences, the next generation is seeking more active encounters and less passive consumption of art. As traditional audiences for the arts age, arts organizations continue to navigate such changes and are evolving to attract the attention of new audiences, communities and publics.
8. The Economy

The economic environment remains uncertain

Many in the art sector continue to face financial difficulties, exacerbated by an uncertain economic environment and ongoing societal changes. Declining sales and subscriptions, decreased investment income, and a reduction in funding from private sources and some levels of government are just a few of the challenges confronting arts organizations.

Economic conditions also remain precarious for artists in Canada. Many live below or at the poverty line and struggle to maintain their art practice and survive—difficulties that are often compounded for artists from equity-seeking groups. Such conditions are particularly disconcerting given that artists are at the heart of the creative process.

“The economic situation of creators remains difficult; revenue sources are a key concern.”

How does such financial uncertainty impact the arts? It can make it difficult for new initiatives to surface and for creative risk-taking to take place. It can also mean that artists and arts organizations must forego some activities, such as touring, or initiatives to engage with new audiences and communities.

Many advocate for increased public investment in the arts, as well as more diversified revenue sources and more sustainable organizational models.
Moving Forward

To remain relevant, the Canada Council must stay in step with the changing needs of a dynamic and evolving art sector. In the future, the Canada Council wants artists and organizations to dedicate their creativity and energy to their art practices and interactions with the public, and spend less time wading through the maze of programs and application forms.

However, in developing a new funding model, our fundamental values will be maintained:

- our commitment to artistic excellence;
- our profound conviction that peer assessment is the best system for attributing public funds to advance the arts; and
- our respect and promotion of Canada’s Official Languages, ethnic and regional diversity as well as the artistic practices of Aboriginal peoples.

Thus far, we’ve heard that many artists and arts organizations see the potential of the new measures. But even when change is necessary, it is never easy. As the new funding model begins to take shape and we plan for the future, we look forward to continuing our ongoing conversation, and will work to ensure that the Council’s programs support the needs of a vital art sector for the benefit of all Canadians.
This document was drafted based on a number of sources, including the following:


*The Canada Council’s new direction for support to Aboriginal Arts.* Prepared by Steven Loft (Coordinator, Aboriginal Arts Office) and Kelly Wilhelm (Head, Policy, Planning and Partnership Section) for the Canada Council Board Meeting. January 20, 2015.

Theatre Section. *Feedback from the Community* (Theatre Advisory Committee and written feedback from the community). December 2011–March 2012.

Cover image:

Thomas Corriveau, *Emile et Vincent*, 1985, oil on canvas, 195 x 300 cm, collection of the Canada Council Art Bank

Prepared for the Canada Council of the Arts by Robyn Jeffrey, May 2015
References

1 Summary Report of Consultations held by the Music Section, Prepared by MDR Burgess Consultants, June 20, 2014, p. 15.


14 Artists from “equity-seeking groups” include those from culturally diverse, Aboriginal, Deaf and disability, and official language minority communities.