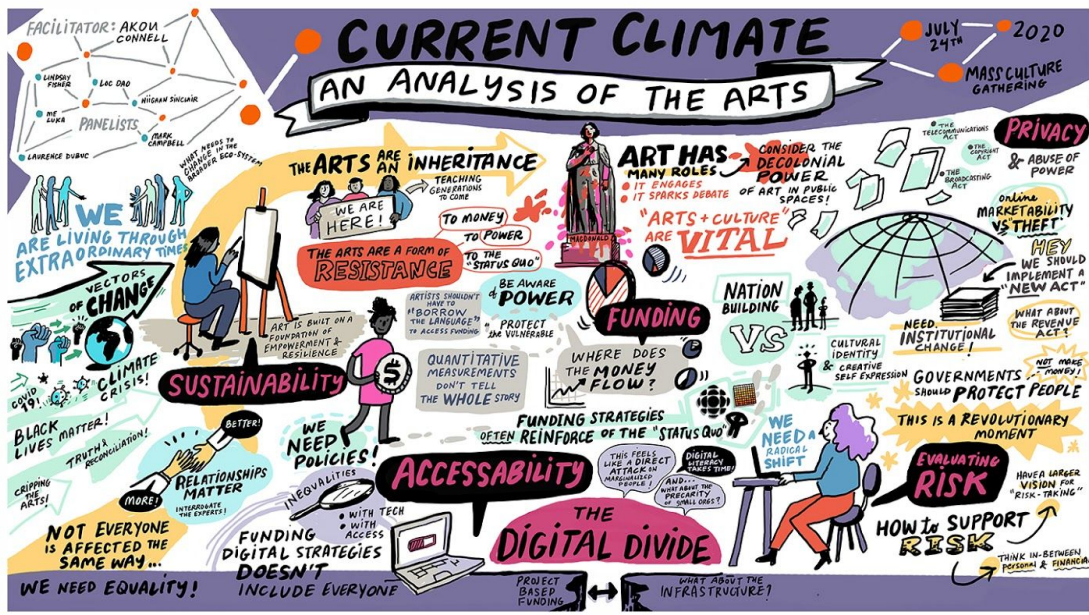# Towards an Intersectional Approach: Rethinking Arts Ecosystems

An analytical paper in conjunction with Mass Culture Digital Gathering: In Context: Federal Cultural Investment 2020-2021
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Originally intended to serve as an examination of the government of Canada's 2020 federal budget and its impact on the arts and culture sector, this paper has altered in focus. The COVID-19 pandemic response has interrupted regular budgeting protocols at the federal level. The pandemic is only one of several converging, interrelated global change pressures affecting democracies and related systems. As a result, the paper explores a more intersectional approach to interrogating funding models, overarching legislation, regulatory frameworks, related systems, and change pressures. It begins the necessary sense-making, deep questioning, and probing of the paradigm shifts required in response to a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous ([VUCA](#)) world.

This paper also serves as a companion piece to contextualize an essential [facilitated discussion](#) with [Niigaanwewidam Sinclair,](#) [Mark V. Campbell](#), [Lindsay Fisher](#), [Loc Dao](#), [Laurence D. Dubuc,](#) and [Mary Elizabeth ("M.E.") Luka](#), recorded on July 26, 2020; a conversation that intentionally takes into consideration plural perspectives in examining the state of the arts and culture sector in Canada. A rich conversation that will serve as a wellspring for many conversations to come.

> "...art is always bubbling up, and human beings are being human through it, regardless of any colonial law. And we're in a moment where we're living the residues, the afterlife, of these colonial laws; less than a hundred years ago. And the people in the streets today that are pulling down statues, that are spray-painting graffiti, that are doing all kinds of dances in the streets – this could've been 1850 Trinidad when they outlawed the drum for the third time, for all we know…there's that kind of human spirit." (Mark Campbell: July 2020)

Convergence: Vectors of Change

Climate change. Resource scarcity, international conflict, and population displacement. Decolonization. Globalization. Digital transformation. Social movements like #BlackLivesMatter, #IdleNoMore and #MeToo. Democracy and capitalism in systems crisis. These are a few of the main ingredients in the global systems change pressure cooker – and they are presenting themselves concurrently.

The arts and culture sector of any one country, or indeed, globally, does not exist in a vacuum. The systems that frame daily life for humans are interrelated and co-dependant: government, economic, social. The concurrent pressures placed on these systems by several vectors of change are no accident. The pressures themselves are outcomes of the problematic assumptions and philosophy of approach embedded within them. We cannot elude the interrelatedness of all elements – particularly now.

The pandemic is a moment for sober second thought while we prepare for the next critical event. Climate change is the result of an extractive mindset that supports a capitalistic continuous growth economic model that is no longer sustainable. We are confronted, through climate change and the pandemic which is an extension of it, with the fault lines in the systems we've relied on since the Industrial Revolution. It is crucial to question the underlying assumptions of these long-running systems, along with their intended and unintended consequences. Pursuing these systems blindly, further and faster, will only amplify the crisis trajectories we're already on.

We know from history, as well as from our current global reality, that as resources necessary to survival (human, plant, animal and mineral) become scarce, war and population displacement follow. Imbalance of global resources increases pressure upon a crumbling economic model, amplifying the conditions undermining environmental and social stability. In geological time, we know that mass extinction is a result of global climate change: this is playing out right now, thanks to the twin engines of environmental degradation and industrial carbon emissions.

The current governing structures in most nations, designed in a time of relative resource abundance before the rise of global capitalism, are also subject to new pressures: environmental disaster response, pandemics, population displacement, and a crisis of care for vulnerable populations. National jurisdictions struggle to legislate solutions to hold multinational organizations accountable, slow climate change, or contend with the impact of population displacement. Power is shifting beyond the purview of

national governments towards a handful of multinational corporations where profit is the end, rather than collective good.

Western democracies still operate in a paradigm of command and control that depend on transactional systems, hierarchical bureaucracies, capitalism, value chains that are top-down, inside-out, and an assumption that the power and privilege of white male establishment will continue. Yet all vectors of change point to one common theme: that we must move from transactional systems of operating to a more relational, intersectional, and sustainable mindset, or there won't be anything left to sustain.[1]

Relational approaches are everywhere we look, across disciplines of thought and ways of knowing. The sciences understand the interrelatedness of ecosystems, and see these in crisis as the list of extinctions balloons, placing all at risk. The humanities and today's social justice movements draw upon Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, illustrating how power and privilege is relative and dependent on several socioeconomic elements (race, gender, class, education, etc.). The IT sector talks about the digital revolution, which entails a shift from Analog (top-down, transactional approach) to Digital (networked, relational) ways of functioning. Indigenous peoples propose that for a sustainable future, the old ways are the new way forward. "All my relations," a relational way of living, brings humans into better balance with the earth.

> "...the most important thing to think about in terms of [the sustainability of the arts is] not thinking it's tied to money, but it is in fact the resistant form to money. It's the expression of our presence on the Earth and on this place and in this time as an indication for those who are coming after us that they, too, can inherit something." (Niigaanwewidaam Sinclair: July 2020)

During the pandemic, perhaps for the first time, government rhetoric is placing human health above the economy. We are at a pivotal juncture, faced with stark reminders that economy cannot exist without intersectional relationships and a healthy environment. A sustainable future demands a networked approach. It's a seismic shift in its own right, and it touches us all.

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[1] Find out more on the topic of the future of work: Future of Work Research with LeSage Arts Management

Why Art?

Where does art fit into the broader context of our human reality? It has everything to do with the kind of society (locally, nationally, globally) we want to live in. The full diversity of humanity sits within that larger network of frameworks, and with humanity, always, there is art.

With every major ideological shift in human history, art has been at the heart of sensemaking; it sustains, critiques, offers hope and solace. We know, looking back at the long arc of history, that art continues despite massive ideological paradigm transitions and the accompanying hardships. Creative self-expression is a form of resistance, critical reflection, resilience: a statement of survival and being.

> "Art isn't reliant on governments, and art will continue regardless of government funding. Art will reside no matter what. It resides in resistance; in 'we are here, we are not going away; we are present, experiencing the moment.'" (Niigaanwewidaam Sinclair: July 2020)

Art is at the heart of what it is to be human: questioning, creative, expressive, and always in search of the elusive truths tied to existence and persistence. Funding art, then, must be decoupled from agendas and systems not inherent to the art itself, including (but not limited to) nationalism. And yet often, nation-building has depended on art as a tool of establishment[2]. Why fund art, then? This question inevitably gets raised every time there is a major crisis, and our planet is currently juggling several at once.

> "The removal of art is the artistic expression [...] The notion of public art as not being colonial and full of dominating powers is just a false illusion, and the removal of those statues I think is like a public editing of space that is based in the artistic practice of that society." (Niigaanwewidaam Sinclair: July 2020)

Nations have been responding individually and, in some cases, collectively or in partnership with the private sector, to stabilize arts and culture ecosystems according to how art is valued at a societal level. "...[We] need to decide as a country what percentage we want to dedicate to the arts from our tax revenue. Then: do we [need]

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[2] Find out more on the role of art in nation-building: Massey Commission History Lesson, Can Artists Really Save the World? Digital Gathering

the same organizations we have now? Do they run the same? It's eye-opening to see the influence of corporations and lobbies on the actual reality of making change." (Loc Dao: July 2020) The means for funding cultural production depend on the wealth and values of the country. In the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia's Parliament has called for a [parliamentary inquiry into the value of the arts during the pandemic](). In [Germany, crisis supports for the arts sector have been impressive](). Conversely, in the [U.S., public emergency funding response has been paltry]().

In Canada, the COVID-19 pandemic has demanded an emergency response to support the sectors hit hardest. Normally, the Arts and Culture sector is a strong contributor to GDP. The most recent figures show that the GDP for the Arts, entertainment and recreation sector was [59.0% lower in June 2020 than in February 2020](); the most severe drop of all sectors (see more on this from [CAPACOA]() and [ArtsPond]()). To mitigate the precarious position of gig economy workers (atypical workers) in the arts, hospitality, IT, and other sectors, the federal government initiated the Canada Emergency Response Benefit ([CERB]()). In addition, substantial funding has been channelled into the culture sector through institutions and granting programs. Unfortunately, not all creative workers are "professional artists" according to current definitions, nor do all of them work directly for the arts organizations receiving emergency funding. The [Emergency Support Fund for Cultural, Heritage, and Sport Organizations]()' funding efforts were aimed at organizations already receiving funds from a government source, which begs the question of how those within the sector who aren't currently recipients can be supported.

> "I think there's a power struggle between the folks that are grass roots and living a certain kind of art, and a government that funds these art forms, or attempts to fund art forms as a means of governmentality." (Mark Campbell: July 2020)

Over the last 20 years the Canadian arts ecosystem has been under increased pressure to evaluate its value in relationship to the economy, rather than to people. The arts and culture sector, to justify continued public funding, has had to argue not only its intrinsic value, but its contribution to GDP, demonstrating return on investment (ROI) for public funds invested. While the arts and culture sectors of many countries, including Canada, have enough administrative resources within their funding bureaucracies to validate their existence in economic terms, at its foundation, art has always had its roots in what it means to be human: creative self-expression.

"The question of art sustainability is how do we get back to a notion of ourselves that doesn't necessarily borrow the language of corporations, but is rather embedded in the language of folks who are in that community? People should be able to define their own terms. Sustainability for some groups may be about children. For others, land and space. It could be a theoretical and ontological sense of self that might be outside the status quo." (Mark Campbell)

UNESCO has linked culture to human well-being, defining culture as "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, that encompasses, not only art and literature, but lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs" (UNESCO, 2001). In 2009, to ensure a framework beyond economic terms to include social impacts[3] for helping define cultural policy, UNESCO developed the 2009 Framework for Cultural Statistics (FCS).

Cultural policy is defined by legislation and administered by regulatory bodies and funding institutions. Before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, three pieces of federal legislation were on the table in Canada: the Copyright Act, the Telecommunications Act, and the Broadcasting Act. None of them, Loc Dao pointed out in our discussion, include the word "internet," and all three are intricately tied to several other related bits of cultural legislation. Loc suggests that "rather than tweak existing legislation, we should build one comprehensive piece of legislation." A more flexible, holistic approach that can adapt and ensure sustainability and agility in a world of rapid change, global streaming platforms, trans-border Intellectual Property (IP) challenges, and more. Collaboration with other jurisdictions, and potentially with the support of international bodies like UNESCO or IFACCA may increase the bargaining power of governments in protecting the rights of artists and producers.

Likely, with the pandemic, review of these pieces of legislation will be delayed, and here we have yet another opportunity: to collectively reimagine and co-create a more inclusive and responsive alternate legislative, regulatory, and institutional framework in the interim.

Legislative and regulatory structures aside, cultural expression is, as Niigaanwewidam pointed out, a statement of resistance, existence and human experience. Creativity is not the sole domain of the arts and culture sector. To silo arts and culture is dangerous.

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[3] Find out more on the topic of arts civic impact frameworks: Civic Impact Frameworks Study Date with Christina Loewen, Opera.ca

In every discipline of thought, creativity is central to observation, sensemaking, experimentation, human well-being. Creative self-expression and human rights are inextricably intertwined. It is a bulwark against oppression, a beacon of hope in dark times, a conduit for mutual understanding between diverse peoples. It is particle and wave. It is the mirror we hold to ourselves to see sublime beauty and fatal flaw. Why and how, as a country, will we continue to fund it? Are we ready to make a firmer commitment to a broader base?

From Transactional to Relational

What, at the foundational level, are we interrogating when we contemplate the need for systems change in the arts and culture sector? The arm's length funding agency paradigm we're familiar with in Canada began in Great Britain as a response to a global vector of change: World War 2. Nazi Germany was extremely sophisticated in effectively bending academia, journalism, art and design to its propaganda purposes, building popular support. In post-war Great Britain, a conscious effort was made to insulate the generation of ideas and creative self-expression from political interference. This motivation was at the heart of creating arm's length funding bodies for research in the social sciences, sciences, media, and the arts: all of this to ensure the ongoing health of democracy, which is dependent on healthy debate and exchange.

The British colonies followed suit. The Canadian Broadcasting System (CBC / Radio Canada) was established to ensure balanced reporting; the National Film Board (NFB) and Telefilm to produce Canadian films. Regulatory bodies like the CRTC were founded. The Massey-Levesque Commission(1949-51) led to the establishment of the Canada Council for the Arts.[4] Similar arm's length arts councils were established at the provincial and municipal levels. Peer juries became the democratic device by which those with professional expertise and knowledge in the field make decisions on what is funded. "Professional artist" was defined as part of this framework, and with it, a concept of excellence and expertise – all rooted in Eurocentric notions, and therefore deliberately excluding a great diversity of cultural production outside these institutional enshrinements.

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[4] Find out more on the topic of the Massey-Levesque Commission from the Mass Culture archives: MC Minds Video with Senator Patricia Bovey (2019), MC Digital Gathering on the Massey Commission: 70 Years Later (2019), MC Minds Podcast with Zainub Verjee & Narendra Pachkédé (2018)

Decades later, we must ask ourselves: Do we need the same legislation, funding frameworks, institutions, and regulatory bodies? When we map the money, what needs to change in how the funding flows? Disability arts activist Lindsay Fischer queries the concept of the "expert":

> "What do we want to interrogate? For me, it's the concept of the expert. Money and power comes with expertise. How do we ensure that vulnerable sectors are not at the mercy of this monied industry?" (Lindsay Fisher: July 2020)

Today, many of the large institutions established under this funding framework are bastions of white supremacy at the board, staff, and artistic production levels. These institutions have gained a blend of public and private support based on an exclusionary model of what is excellent; a model that often ignores the fact that diverse Indigenous cultures existed here prior to colonization, and that wave after wave of immigration has changed the demographic portrait of large urban centres dramatically. This pluralistic reality has, more often than not, been inadequately reflected in gallery and performance spaces.

Representation of the plural Canadian reality is needed at every level of our systems, for it is through knowledge exchange and co-creation that we gain mutual understanding and respect, and thereby change how we do our work. The paradigm must change, and become more relational, for "Sustainability is about relationships and collaborations built on trust and respect; common ground." (Lindsay Fisher: July 2020)

The idea of distancing intellectual and creative production from political power has merit. But wherever there is power, it is reasonable to assume that abuse of power will follow. The impulse to put decision-making in a more democratic, peer-driven decision-making framework was motivated by a similar instinct to insulate humans from our worst traits. Accountability and transparency for the use of public funds through governance and reporting frameworks also holds merit. But the devil is in the details: where do collective resources flow, and where is there lack – and how does this inadvertently and inevitably reinforce the existing power structures? The underlying values and assumptions embedded in the foundations of systems (what); who is included and excluded; the transactional complexity of the systems in place often serve and reinforce those who already hold power and control (how); and where decisions get made (at tables in institutions where those who adhere and reflect the notions held on what is "excellent" choose who sits on the juries).

Beyond funding structures, at the grass roots level, artists - whether deemed "professional" or not - still struggle to earn a living wage from their creative production. Attempts have been made, through Status of the Artist legislation federally and provincially, to ensure a proper social safety net for atypical workers. But these pieces of legislation lack teeth. These laws are unenforceable without substantial changes to tax code and labour code.

The social safety net constructed after World War 2 assumed a single breadwinner working for a single employer with a full pension. The Labour Force Survey and Census have failed to properly count artists or quantify the contribution of the culture sector because most artists declare a job that earns a wage as their primary income, as opposed to their professional arts practice, which may not be enough to subsist on alone. The culture sector is predominantly composed of workers with an atypical work profile – the same profile emerging in the gig economy with the IT sector, and indeed, across all sectors. Our sector has expertise in identifying and articulating the modifications needed to the social safety net to support gig economy workers, and therefore deserves to be at the table for official discussions on the Future of Work. The digital transformation is accelerating the transition of large proportions of the traditional workforce into freelance work, self-employment, and atypical work profiles where one person holds several jobs.

Building social protections around the Future of Work is now an emergency. During COVID, Universal Basic Income, once considered a fringe experiment, has solid footing as a potential solution that could support all gig economy and atypical workers, including creatives and artists:

> "If government steps in and makes a broader social intervention, like basic income, then artists are lifted as much as everybody else. This ensures we're in a sustainable environment whether we're professional artists or not. There's evidence here that really could be turned to interesting purpose." (Mary Elizabeth Luka: July 2020)

Pre-COVID, several funding streams in the Canadian culture sector focused on digital strategy and cultural export. The intention was to build new markets and equip the culture sector to engage audiences and markets in the digital space. Looking back at

these strategies, while it is better that we take some action than none at all, Mark Campbell points out that Canada was late to the party:

> "These things were urgent in 2010. The urgency has passed. Once there was multiplatform media giants controlling everything on the internet (2008-09) – already it was too late for Canada to think about exporting any of its culture or even getting themselves in the game. Likewise digital strategy and technology are tied to the level of precarity in which the arts are held by government agencies." (Mark V. Campbell: July 2020)

And while there were some advances, such as the "writ[ing of] the NFB digital strategy in 2009, and [its execution] in 2010" (Loc Dao: July 2020), had these interventions come earlier, or been more widespread, perhaps the arts sector would have been slightly more prepared and a little more resilient. But the biggest factor has been a lack of cohesive national and international collaborative approach in the arts sector to ensure discoverability, IP protections, traceability, and a framework to enable and guarantee remuneration for cultural products on streaming platforms. This is something that demands international cooperation between national cultural bodies; it's not something individual organizations or artists can take on alone or on a small scale.

And then there's digital infrastructure itself. Compounding already existing regional imbalances in arts funding is the lack of nationwide digital infrastructure. The result: unequal access not only to cultural production and a means for cultural distribution but, during COVID, decent broadband has been the only access point to education, health, essential government services, and commerce. The digital divide is a gaping chasm, and it affects rural, northern, and Indigenous populations more than the rest of Canada. Digital infrastructure is now an essential service, and many don't have the access they need. The same infrastructure is necessary for reducing the need for carbon-heavy air travel…and here we are, back in intersection with the environment.

Conclusion

> "Sustainability is a concept rooted in very political notions such as empowerment and resilience. The arts and culture sector has been challenging the assumption that change affects everyone the same way. Investment targeting arts workers is positive, but not enough. We need more policies

ensuring equality which would rely on a decolonial approach, and we need to foster empowerment and autonomy in artist communities. We need to move away from short-term project funding and really give vulnerable communities resources to build sustainable communities and practices. It's important to acknowledge that systemic discrimination exists in Canada, and what we need are policies ensuring equality, and this comes through laws, funding guidelines, organizational policies, government policies, etc." (Laurence Dubuc)

The right to make art is one thing. The right to be able to earn a living as an artist is another. Sustainability for the arts means different things for different people – and the full diversity of creative potential deserves to be supported.

In 2016, the World Economic Forum identified critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, collaboration, and resilience as skills in high demand with business leaders in its report on The Future of Jobs. Once again, the arts and culture sector is the place to turn; these are areas of expertise at the foundation of most fine arts and design programs. Including this sector at the table wherever the future of work is discussed is emerging as an essential element to ensuring inclusive design, well-being, and long-term socio-economic resilience in a rapidly changing context. The arts sector is home to all of these skill sets.

Even democracy could be reinvigorated through inclusive, intersectional, imaginative co-design and continuous improvement. Canada has announced plans for digital government. The digital transformation of government (Government as a Platform) has already been achieved in Denmark and Estonia. With a common data layer at its foundation that enables triangulation of data gathered across government departments and jurisdictions, informed decision-making holds transformative potential. Add a window for direct civic engagement to provide feedback to rapid prototype solutions for wicked problems and unfair service and policy outcomes. The arts sector holds many of the skills the World Economic Forum has identified as essential for an intersectional approach to prototyping our future.

The challenges facing atypical workers of the Arts and Culture sector will soon be the challenges that face all sectors. Continued solutions prototyping for this sector may well help solve parallel challenges on a national and international scale in other sectors. One thing is for certain: if the arts and culture sector embraces intersectional approaches to redesigning its legislative, regulatory, and institutional bodies, we will light the way for similar transformation elsewhere.