

# ASOs: POSITIONING A FUTURE FORWARD

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Prepared By:

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## Arts Intermediaries (ASOs) in Movement and Stability

Mass Culture's journey to explore the rapidly changing landscape for arts service organizations (ASOs) began in 2019. It has been enriched through an academic partnership with Dr. Miranda Campbell and her 2020 publication, "What Does the Arts-Service Organization Sector Look Like Today?" Since then, Mass Culture has worked with those who represent ASOs as well as a wide range of others who share an interest in the future of the arts sector to map the issues facing ASOs and generate possible solutions. This work, thanks to the Canada Council for the Arts accelerated in 2022 with the ASOs: Positioning a Future Forward initiative. This process has provided an extraordinary vantage point on the arts sector and what might guide us to a different future. This document is a summary of the main insights from this process and presents a Sector-Wide Agenda.

*ASOs: Positioning a Future Forward* has been a year-long collaborative enterprise that culminated in a hybrid in-person/virtual conference in January 2023. The follow-up session to the conference was *Infographic to Action: A Sector-Wide Agenda* (March 2023). This event was to move the ideas of the conference and activity leading up to the conference (five deep explorations of critical issues) toward action. Jane Marsland was invited to provide a reflection piece during the *Infographic to Action* event. She said, “The answer to a problem is community.” Being present in how we affect one another and the sector we all care for is a gift. This yearlong process (see Appendix A) of unwrapping the nature and intent of how we can work better together has enabled us to arrive at three themes to move forward on:

**Taking Partnerships to the Next Level:** Increase internal capacity for meaningful relationship building and ongoing consistent collaboration and partnership development amongst ASOs and beyond.

**R & D and Evaluation:** Generate greater investment in supporting the capacity for developing creative and collaborative research & development. As well as the application of evaluation strategies, initiatives and infrastructure.

**Institutional Change:** ASOs seek ways to change and adapt to actuate equitable, diverse, and inclusive organizations. Without institutional change, ASOs remain as a barrier to themselves and their desire for growth.

These three themes along with the ideas, actions and processes contained within each were established through a Mass Culture-led reflexive thematic analysis of the 43 conversations it hosted as part of the *ASOs: Positioning a Future Forward* initiative. The Sector-Wide Agenda in its entirety can be reviewed in Appendix F.



**Reflexive thematic analysis is an approach to thematic analysis that values the researcher's subjective experience as the primary way to discern knowledge from data.**

These three themes are not new. As a sector, we have been persistently noticing them and seeking solutions for a long time. What the *ASOs: Positioning a Future Forward* initiative has done is deepened our analysis and shared understanding, inspired a community of people who are resolute in continuing to grapple with them, and set the stage for a productive, adaptive space that is in the sweet spot between argument and amicability.

*"The level of conversation, the passion, and the conviction that people shared really made me feel like you've achieved something that I hadn't seen before in this kind of broad-ranging and widely dispersed group."*

**Jane Marsland**

(Discussant, March 2023)

This work has strengthened our understanding at a systems level and revealed some of the key polarities that will need to be navigated for us to see progress. For example, from a public funding perspective, ASOs are in direct competition with one another, and yet, we know we need one another to not just survive, but thrive. *ASOs: Positioning a Future Forward* has given us a way to navigate that tension by inviting arts workers to cluster around community-informed forward actions.



**ASO Convergence Image Gallery**

## Forward Actions

During the Infographic to Action: A Sector-Wide Agenda, forty-five arts workers came together to take “Infographic to action”, arriving at a set of strategies and activities to move forward with.

Physically, there is an inverse relationship between mobility and stability. We intuitively feel pressure to incite noticeable change as a sign of progression. In this period of continued unrest and uncertainty, the compulsion to constantly move towards something ‘new’ and ‘different’ is a massive weight, especially if you believe in the critical role that the arts play in humanity. What we have learned through this initiative’s journey, however, is that to be resilient is to find strength and stability in what we **know**. This initiative has fully expressed that collective ‘knowing’ and it’s now time to mobilize through the various forward actions that have been identified to establish that value with all of society.



We have discovered some ways forward through this initiative. Some will take time to produce results and some will die on the vine. Some, such as the various ASO networks that convene and conspire regularly, have already come to fruition. A desire to design and support a network of these networks through a shared platform is a prime example of a forward action brought about through the conversation on **Institutional Change**. Others include joint advocacy efforts to better resource **Arts R&D and Evaluation** to build the evidence base needed to understand ourselves as a sector and demonstrate our value. A commitment to devising shared learning spaces that are thematic (tech stewardship) or through the general exchange (ASO Monday Group) manifested through the discussion held on **Taking Partnership to the Next Level**. For a full list of forward actions see Appendix G.

The level of progress on these forward actions is heartening. They are both permeable, allowing people to apply their energies and strengths where they can, and decentralized, so that no one individual or organization is responsible to move all of these things forward.

Mass Culture as an ASO is committed to being an active participant in this work. We will continue to act as a convenor/ connector for this community when needed. We will continue to creatively engage the sector in the development and transfer of knowledge.

There is an abundance of insights contained within this work. However, as both a source of perception and inspiration in writing this summation, I have read (at least a dozen times) **Heather George's** curatorial statement/ poem that she created as part of the Solution Pathway, *How might we assist in the permanence and present nature of the arts?* For that reason, I'd like to reshare it here...

## **There is no Permanence** **by Heather George**

*Cyclical ellipsis of thought,  
shared across and between the generations.*

*Carried in the intangible,  
expressed in the tangible,  
It is fleeting only held in solid form for just a moment.*

*Repetition of form, of pattern, of song, of dance, of  
word,  
Repetition, upon repetition, upon repetition.*

*Communities of knowledge,  
Communities of care,  
Communities grounded in place and space.*

*Indigenous expressions  
Used not as a symbol of a colonial nation  
Rather as expressions of self-determination.*

*Common ethics and values become our focus,  
no longer needing a singular national identity.*

*A new commission, a new story, a new cycle?*

## **Appendices**

### Appendix A

ASOs: Positioning A Future Forward Process Design

### Appendix B

Developmental Evaluation Framework

### Appendix C

List of Crowdsourced Challenges Submitted by the Sector

### Appendix D

Solution Pathway Descriptions and Participation

### Appendix E

Conference Sessions

### Appendix F

Sector-Wide Agenda in Detail

### Appendix G

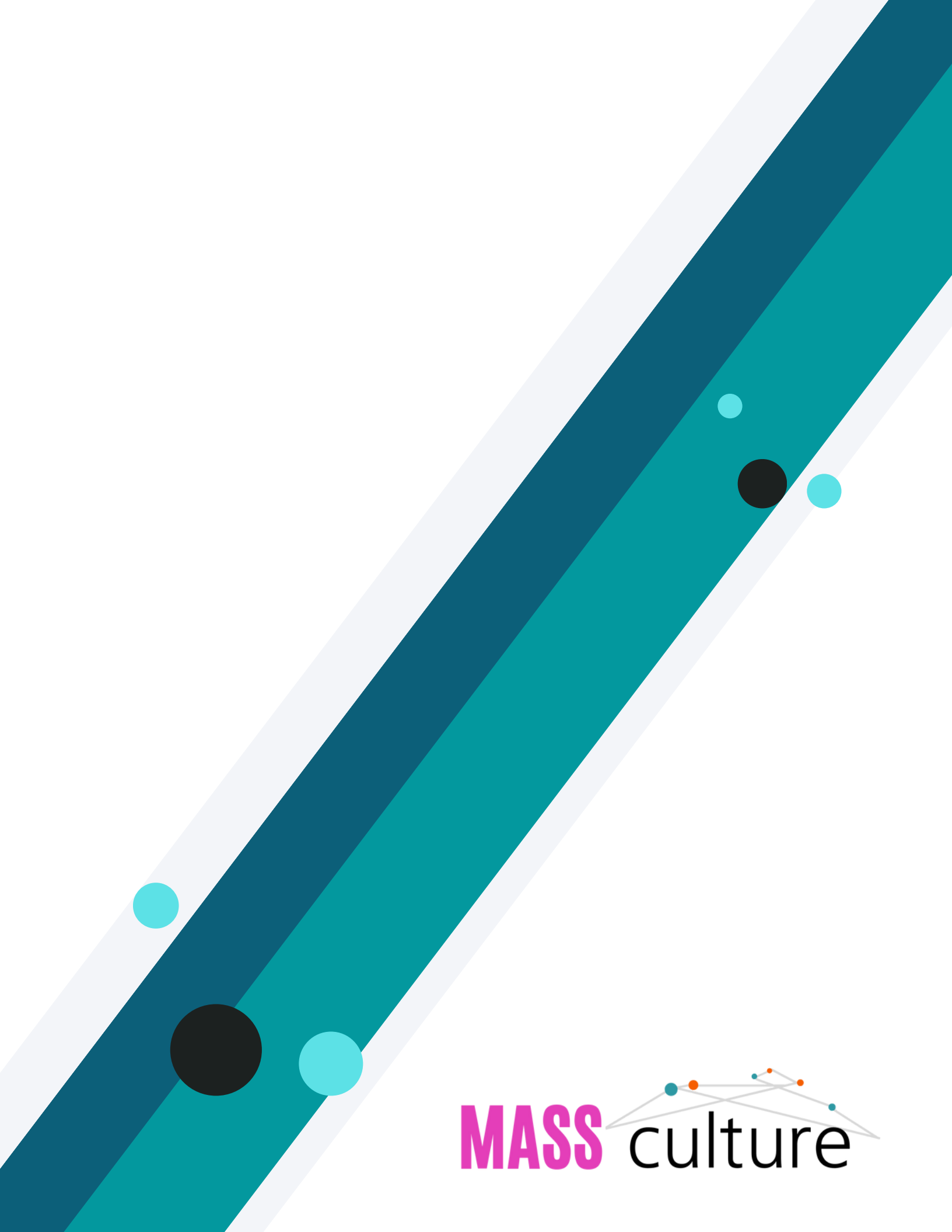
Forward Actions

A Word version and all of the appendices can be viewed in this Google Folder:

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