

From Polycrisis to Collective Solutions: How Arts Funders Can Help Build a Better World

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We are now living in a period of multiple, concurrent crises, including threats to global human health, the natural environment and political stability. Simon Brault contends that the arts and culture—and, indeed, much of society—still operate under outmoded colonial systems and mindsets. In an appeal to arts funders to effect change and develop collective solutions, he argues the redistribution of resources and the broadening of representation will build new collaborations and further equity, access and sustainability for the future.

Introduction

As I write this text, I am weeks away from the end of my nine-year tenure as Director and CEO of the Canada Council for the Arts (the Council).¹ It has been a privilege to lead the Council through one of its most important periods of growth and transformation in over 60 years.

In the last few months, I have been meeting with arts funders from across Canada and around the world to talk about the major issues facing our work—issues that are redefining our relationship to society. In all my conversations, one thing has become clear: arts funders need to accelerate their transformation to meet the realities of the 21st century and to better our divided world.

Turbulence—Polycrisis

We are living in what philosopher Edgar Morin called a “polycrisis”—a term he coined more than 25 years ago to describe a multitude of simultaneous crises whose combined interaction is far more dangerous than the sum of its parts. The current polycrisis involves ongoing pressures from the global pandemic, climate change, inflation, supply chain disruptions, the resurgence of extreme right-wing ideologies, the polarisation of societies, a mounting sense of isolation and mental health crises among citizens, and armed conflicts around the world which pose a threat to global peace.

In the midst of all these crises, the future of public and tax-based private funding of the arts in Canada—and around the world—is uncertain. Does society still need arts funders? Arts funders were, after all, designed for a very different context than the one in which we are now living. For example, the Council was a creation of the mid-twentieth century for a country that had little-to-no professional arts sector, was significantly less diverse, and dedicated to the colonial vision of its founding nations, France and Great Britain. We are almost a quarter into the 21st century, and the context has changed significantly.

What has not changed is that arts and culture continue to face the challenges of limited resources and limits placed on freedom of expression. In Canada, despite 70 years of cultural policies, laws, regulations and targeted investments to strengthen the creative economy, the cultural sector continues to operate largely at the expense of those without whom it would not exist—artists. Worse still, this state of affairs is often presented as inevitable and normal.

Arts funding should not become the way to make up for a lack of fair remuneration and working conditions. Our investments lose meaning, value and impact if countless artists and cultural workers are kept in a state of precarity that leaves them without adequate social support, vulnerable to exploitation and psychological distress, or forced to leave the sector. There is a growing acknowledgement that at the root of all these precarities—within the arts and in society more broadly—are colonial, capitalist, and extractive ways of thinking, doing, and being.

If arts funders continue to act in response to the context for which they were created rather than the realities of the present and future, they risk their irrelevance if not their demise.

Changing Course— A Holistic Approach to Access and Redistribution

This might be one of the most challenging moments in recent history to be a leader in arts and culture, and yet, transformational leadership is what will guide a much-needed course correction. Transformations that must now be amplified by the global arts funding ecosystem must be enduring and visionary, with a view to creating the most resilient and sustainable arts sectors possible in societies where everybody fully experiences their fundamental cultural rights. So where do we need to change ourselves, and how can we support each other in that change?

One of the most significant projects for us as arts funders is to ensure access to the power and benefits

of artistic creation for everyone around the world—regardless of cultural background, ethnicity, age, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, language or place of residence. We must increase access and open up the echo chamber that has been the traditional, institutional arts sector created in the West and disseminated around the world. We need to better reach new generations of artists and audiences, as well as communities that have historically been left out of subsidised cultural systems and that lack representation on our stages, in our publications, and in our museums.

To do this essential work, arts funders need to redistribute their resources, as well as their attention and power. Not only is this a matter of social justice, but also the necessary recognition of the universal right to culture. In the context of dim economic forecasts and no additional resources on the horizon, a holistic redistribution—combining vertical and horizontal approaches—will ensure that available resources are put to best use. Vertical redistribution reallocates resources from the most economically, socially, and culturally advantaged to the least advantaged, while horizontal redistribution reallocates resources according to priority objectives.

In addition to redistribution, the concept and practice of decolonisation is beginning to shift the arts and culture in Canada towards greater cultural sovereignty and self-determination for Indigenous peoples, as well as towards a more equitable and accessible future. Decolonisation is an open-ended and evolving concept, but it is also a complex process. Once we begin to decolonise our ways of thinking and being, we must steadfastly stay the course to ensure that we do not revert to the way things were.

The concept and process of decolonisation means something particular for a country like Canada with several Indigenous groups and a history as a former colony of both England and France. Ultimately, decolonisation is relevant to many other countries beyond Canada, as at the heart of this work is a deep-seated desire to redress the harms caused by the logic, systems and institutions of colonialism, including arts funders.

The decolonisation of arts and culture work is a collective endeavour that will need to begin with a redefinition of the hierarchical classification of the arts that gives preference to so-called “classical” culture while it devalues Indigenous and non-Western cultures. We need to revisit notions of professionalism and artistic disciplines, which are deeply rooted in Eurocentric and colonial values. We need to relativise the notion of artistic excellence, a concept that often refers to the hierarchy of good taste, beauty, and values that confirm and perpetuate the dominant culture. And we need to move beyond limited notions of artistic expertise that are often the product of education systems built to reproduce power relations and safeguard the privilege of the dominant colonial discourse on art and culture.

Redistribution and decolonisation will not only increase the social relevance of the arts, but will also enable arts and culture to play a leading role in shedding light on the major issues in our world.

Tailwinds—Opportunities to Influence and to Collectively Explore Solutions

Arts funders have an opportunity to exert a positive, sustainable influence on the viability of the arts and the future of democracy. More than an opportunity, arts funders have a duty to influence and to evolve beyond their traditional roles as funders, to advance arts and culture in a broader sense. There is no better time to act, to explore collective solutions and to participate in decision-making—within and beyond arts sectors and across geographical boundaries—in an effort to address common, global challenges.

As an example of developing collective solutions within the arts, the Council recently convened a gathering of public and private arts funders from across Canada. It was the first gathering of its kind, and provided an opportunity for a wide range of informed and insightful conversations about pressing socio-economic, environmental, regional, generational, and ethical issues surrounding long-term funding of the arts sector in Canada. This gathering built connections, sparked ideas and sowed the seeds for sectoral transformation.

Traditionally, arts and culture have not been included in the conversations taking place at major decision-making tables related to the future of our societies. Yet, the arts have a clear role to play in discussions of all kinds, including around mental health, education,

and poverty, to name just a few areas for potential exploration. The arts are also levers of affirmation, healing, emancipation, and solidarity in the face of the climate emergency, armed conflicts and threats to human rights. Since arts funders, as public agencies, often have a direct line of communication with decision makers that others in arts and culture lack, it is incumbent on us to advocate for a seat at the table. Arts funders can influence policy development by putting forward knowledge and expertise, and by amplifying the most promising demands and proposals that are being brought forward by the cultural milieu.

This type of collaboration can be all the more impactful when we, through international bodies like the International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies (IFACCA), encourage the arts and culture sectors in our respective countries to think of themselves as part of a larger, global community. IFACCA is a microcosm of the world, enabling arts funders to learn from one another and to understand what is happening globally. These gatherings help us reflect on our own contexts, shift our own mindsets, and ultimately break down barriers and traditional hierarchies. Now, more than ever, we need international fora like IFACCA because the challenges facing our world—like increasing polarisation, the climate crises, conflicts and wars—require global conversations and collaboration, above and beyond the borders that divide us.

On the international stage, cultural diplomacy is a crucial path forward in a polarised world torn by major, persistent conflicts. The Council has a long history of supporting international cultural exchanges and partnerships, which has included funding artists to travel the world to create and

share their artistic works. For example, inspired by 60 years of diplomatic relations, the Council recently partnered with Arts Council Korea to support projects that will deepen and diversify creative, collaborative relationships between Korean artists and artists from Canada.

International conversations, partnerships and collaborations are a tremendous opportunity for us to learn from and influence one another, and to identify and develop collective solutions to the many challenges in our world.

Conclusion

Arts funders, and leaders of public institutions, now need to reflect on some difficult questions. We need to ask ourselves: who is missing from our conversations and how can we bring those people and communities along with us on the transformation journey? Who do we need to partner with to make transformation happen—not just in the arts but from other sectors too? And how can arts funders work together more strongly, across geographic and cultural divides, for a community of impact?

This project is within our grasp, and its magnitude and ethics justify the full recognition we are demanding for the arts sector and all those who dedicate their lives to it. □

About The Author



Simon Brault has been active in the cultural sector in Canada for over 30 years. He was Director and CEO of the Canada Council for the Arts from 2014 to 2023, leading the Council through one of its most important periods of growth and transformation in over 60 years. During his tenure, the Council more than doubled its annual contribution to the arts sector with a historic investment from the government, and created a dedicated funding program for Indigenous arts and culture administered by Indigenous staff—one of the first of its kind in Canada. Brault additionally led the Council through the global pandemic, tirelessly advocating for artists and self-employed workers, and ensuring the Council swiftly distributed emergency funds to the arts sector. In 2019, Brault became the first Canadian to be elected Chair of the International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies (IFACCA), a role he occupied until 2023.

Notes

1. The Canada Council for the Arts was founded in 1957, as Canada's national public arts funder, with a mandate to "foster and promote the study and enjoyment of, and the production of works in, the arts". The Council provides funding to artists, arts groups and arts organisations across Canada.

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