



Art Now

Economic incentives for investing in the arts in Canada

INTRODUCTION

The **Independent Media Arts Alliance** (IMAA) is a member-driven non-profit national organization working to advance and strengthen the media arts community in Canada. Representing over 80 independent **film, video, audio** and **new media** production, distribution, and exhibition organizations in all parts of Canada, the IMAA serves over 12,000 independent media artists and cultural workers.

THE CONTEXT

The arts are inextricably woven into our daily lives and at the core of our national identity. Canadian artists and art organizations are developing exciting works of arts, reaching a large public and enriching the lives of our diverse communities, from coast to coast. This is directly contributing to the strategic objectives of the Department of Canadian Heritage by offering Canadians a way to *“express and share their diverse cultural experiences with each other and the world”* and *“to live in an inclusive society built on intercultural understanding and citizen participation”*¹. **The impact of the creation of an environment in which cultural production is valued, supported and nurtured is profound and multifaceted.**

While the positive social effects of the arts are well documented, another perspective on the influence of cultural production is starting to be acknowledged by Canadian citizens and their representatives, as noted in a recent national study:

In today’s global reality, identity and sense of place matter. Distinctive places attract and retain talented people, encourage development and growth, and drive tourism and migration. Culture brings vitality and resilience to places, and is vital to turning a place into a community (...) Canadian communities need to sustain culture to achieve vibrant, secure and sustainable cities and communities. Instead of seeing culture in isolation, we need to understand its link — both actual and potential — to Canada’s competitiveness. A more effective harnessing of our cultural strengths to our economic vitality could yield enormous gains.²

Thus culture’s influence on our quality of life is also a **prime structuring element to enable the economic development of our communities.** Supporting the arts at the federal level helps to foster local bustling scenes that will in turn convince executives from here and abroad to invest new money in thriving Canadian cities like Calgary. Supporting

¹ http://www.pch.gc.ca/pc-ch/org/mission/index_e.cfm (Consulted on August 8, 2008)

² *From Restless Communities to Resilient Places: Building A Stronger Future For All Canadians*, Final Report of the External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities, June 2006, p. xvi

the arts ensures that the world will be seduced by a rich display of diverse Canadian works of art when all eyes will be turned towards Vancouver in 2010. Supporting the arts secures the role as creative incubators of established international art centres like Toronto and Montreal. Supporting the arts empowers smaller communities from Victoria, BC to Sackville, NB to Yellowknife, NWT to retain their young leaders, professionals and entrepreneurs by offering them a healthy and stimulating environment in which to raise their families. Supporting the arts enables the Indigenous communities all across Canada to truly move forward by activating their century-old cultural heritage and turning it into sustainable socio-economic development tools.

This new understanding of the full value and potential of cultural production in contemporary societies comes at a time when the rise of the **creative economy** is identified as a key strategic element by governments all around the globe. The creative economy encompasses both the contributions of **core culture workers** (those directly involved in producing creative works) and **culture-based industry workers**. Their role in the Canadian economy is of the utmost importance:

Occupations based on arts and culture skills have been recognized as among the fastest growing occupations in Canada since the occupations began to be studied by Statistics Canada in the 1970s. They have added tens of thousands of jobs to the Canadian labour force each of the last three decades, growing at twice the rate of the labour force as a whole during the 1990s. Culture-based occupations outnumber jobs in fishing or forestry or mining, or, for that matter, teaching. According to the 2001 Census these occupations are the career of half a million Canadians.³

The media arts cultural workers are especially sought after in our new digital global economy. This is true for straight forward content production but also in the context of several other peripheral sectors. (As an example, a Montreal-based architectural firm, responsible for the design of numerous award-winning high tech theaters from Las Vegas to Dubai is employing freshly graduated new media artists in order to conceptualize and deliver fully interactive environments in multi-billion dollar projects.) This highlights the shift that needs to occur in the perception of the government officials with relation to the federal support of the arts. The **federal investment in cultural production** has an **exponential effect** on the **quality of life of Canadians** from all **cultural backgrounds, regional locations** and **gender identities**. It is also a direct injection of funds into what is a nothing less than pure **research and development** for one of the **fastest growing segments of our economy**. It would be ill-advised from the part of our elected representatives to neglect such a **vital sector** that has, when compared to other areas of our economy, a **higher ratio of return on investments**.

THE PRIORITY

Over the year, the IMAA has been advocating relentlessly for the creation of a **federal cultural policy** guiding the government in its support of the arts in Canada. Despite this unfortunate oversight in our public policy, the artists and arts organizations have managed to survive thanks to constant sacrifices, incredible ingenuity and the support of specific government institutions and programs. The Department of Canadian Heritage has been a privileged partner in this process. One key issue for the arts is sustainability and there is an urgent need for a **new multi-year investment umbrella initiative** at the Department

³ *Building on Success: A Human Resources Development Strategy for the Cultural Sector – 2004*, prepared for the Cultural Human Resources Council by T.J. Cheney Research Inc., p. 1

of Canadian Heritage to support the numerous struggling arts organizations trying to break out of the cycle of financial instability crippling the development of their capacity. As our sector is just starting to see its efforts bear fruits, there is a growing concern over the future of several arts organizations across the land if adequate support is not put forward.

THE STRATEGY

What follows is a road map of some of the strategic areas where support for the arts should be directed, from the media arts perspective. The main priority is that the specific needs of the sector be addressed, no matter what the method is, and that the funds reach the communities themselves and not only the larger public institutions.

The objectives for media arts according to the Department of Canadian Heritage are the following:

- **Reaching audiences by ensuring a healthy supply chain continuum from creator to citizen, so that Canadian content is available and accessible to Canadians;**
- **Reflecting ourselves by reflecting Canada's rich linguistic, ethno-cultural, Aboriginal, and regional diversity as our shared citizenship and common values;**
- **Investing in excellence by focusing on cultural excellence and rewarding success;**
- **Harnessing the opportunities of new technologies by taking a proactive approach to technological change in order to take full advantage of its benefits;**
- **Reaching the world by developing international markets so that we can share Canadian talent and culture with the world.⁴**

The first step towards achieving all of this is **production** and in that regard, capacity building has always been a fundamental challenge for film, video, audio and new media organizations. More than in any other artistic areas, the media arts are operating in a rapidly evolving environment where skills, knowledge, equipment and facilities are in a constant need of reassessment and stabilization. The Department of Canadian Heritage needs to address this question by helping to strengthen organizational effectiveness and build capacity of media arts organizations. In parallel, the question of equipment and especially of space keeps coming back as a main challenge for organizations having to struggle with the shifting movements of urban gentrification and real estate speculation. Organizations have to be able to start envisioning dynamic and stable hubs where the artists can create and where the public can have access to a wide array of media artworks. This can be achieved by renewing or implementing programs that are supporting the improvement, renovation and construction of facilities, and the acquisition of specialized equipment as well as allowing organizations to conduct feasibility studies. In the case of both programs, such initiatives are long-term processes that warrant a sustained financial commitment in order to reach completion.

Once produced, the works need to reach the largest public possible. **Dissemination** is at the heart of numerous independent media arts organizations' mission statements. Whether they are concerned with the presentation of a rich diversity of quality artistic experiences or the expression of the distinct cultural characteristics of unique Canadian communities, such organizations warrants adequate support. As we also saw earlier, **reaching out of our frontiers** is now a **strategic exercise** that **serves a diversity of Canadian artists**, that **attracts new talents to our country** and that **positions our creative assets in a competitive new global economy**. Tools have to be readily

⁴ http://www.pch.gc.ca/pc-ch/sujets-subjects/arts-culture/film-video/index_e.cfm (Consulted on August 8, 2008)

available for media arts organizations to promote here and abroad the cultural vision and production of Canadians. Moreover, and in the spirit of investing in the creative innovations that are going to be the daily experiences of tomorrow, it is crucial to support the development of new media platforms via new media networking and R&D funds that are free of the constraints of the commercial-based industrial sector.

Increasingly, and particularly in the case of media arts, the issue of **preservation** is a major concern as film, video, audio and new media works are stored on supports that are fragile, volatile and by nature temporary. Recurring problems with the funding of media arts centres have seen entire collections slowly disappear, while even recent works are rapidly deteriorating due to inadequate storage conditions. This without even starting to address the complex archiving conundrums raised by the current and future playback problems linked to intricate format-based works. All these works, in their multiple forms, are the precious records of our nation's history, the key to our understanding of who we are today and our gift to the generations to come. In the case of Indigenous media artworks, the fine line between memory and oblivion is even thinner. As it is now, the resources available to institutions such as the Audio-Visual Preservation Trust and the National Gallery of Canada are wholly inadequate to address the challenges they are facing with regards to the preservation of our heritage. Reducing their funding level would be completely incoherent as a majority of the works that they are promoting have been financed by public money.

At the end of the day, excellence should be the main goal driving the arts in our country and the **Canada Council for the Arts** has been providing support and guidance to artists and organizations alike for more than half a century. A recent Special Examination Report by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada stated that "*[the Council's] assets are safeguarded and controlled, that its resources are managed economically and efficiently, and that its operations are carried out effectively*"⁵. The Department of Canadian Heritage has to confirm, secure and hopefully increase its own contribution to the Canada Council for the Arts.

CONCLUSION

The importance of the arts in Canada goes beyond its **fundamental role as an agent of personal and national identity building**. Cultural production, by **enhancing our quality of life**, acts as an **instrument of social cohesion** while also playing an essential **structuring function** in today's **creative economy**. In 2007, with a real value-added output of \$46 billion, an **overall economic footprint of \$84.6 billion** (7.4 per cent of Canada's total real GDP) and a global contribution of **1.1 million jobs** all across the nation, the culture sector was an important contributor to economic activity in Canada.⁶ Moreover, all this was accomplished with an estimated contribution from all levels of government (including federal, provincial, and local levels) of only \$7.9 billion, making the **arts and culture sector** one of the **most productive in the country**. As we are collectively facing difficult times for the months ahead, investing in the arts and culture is, more than ever, an important AND strategic choice for our governments.

⁵ *Canada Council for the Arts - Special Examination Report*, Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 26 June 2008, p. 21

⁶ All figures in this paragraph taken from: *Valuing Culture: Measuring and Understanding Canada's Creative Economy*, Conference Board of Canada, August 2008