

March 30, 2015.

Open letter to Monsieur Simon Brault
Director and CEO
Canada Council for the Arts

Dear M. Brault,

The independent media arts community has followed with great interest the announcement made by yourself and other Canada Council officials at the CCA's Annual Public Meeting in January concerning the new proposed funding model, as well as your subsequent comments to the press on the same subject. Although the reform is still only partially outlined, the Independent Media Arts Alliance (IMAA) has already identified a number of questions arising from the information that the Council has presented to date. IMAA has also spent time studying the models recently adopted in other jurisdictions, since you have stated that these models provide inspiration for the Canada Council's own reforms. We write to you today in order to request clarifications on a number of points related to the proposed new funding model. We pose these questions to you in a spirit of constructive collaboration, believing that our organization's unique insight into the priorities and concerns of the media arts sector can only serve to enrich the current discussion.

In brief:

1. Recently adopted changes in other jurisdictions as an inspiration for the new model
2. The move from a "reflexive" to a "proactive" strategy at Council
3. Concerning the claim that all artistic disciplines now face similar issues
4. "Sweat and tears on the application form"
5. The Council's commitment to addressing equity
6. Accommodating emerging artists and practices
7. Balancing interdisciplinarity with the distinctiveness of core practices
8. Implementing national goals and priorities on a Council-wide basis
9. The "double jury" system

1. The proposed new funding model is inspired in part by recent changes in other jurisdictions, including Australia, New Zealand and England. IMAA has studied the newly reformed arts granting systems in these and other countries, including the Australian Council for the Arts' *2015 Grants Model*, Arts Council England (ACE)'s *2010-2020 Strategic plan*, and the models recently adopted in New Zealand and the Netherlands. We note that most of these models share some similar features, notably a clear demarcation between classes of organizations: larger, more established organisations qualify for long-term recurring funding ("National Portfolio Organizations" in England, organizations of "significant standing" in Australia) while smaller or emerging groups and artists can only access arts funding on a project-to-project basis. In the case of ACE, the Closed Funding programs—available exclusively to National Portfolio Organizations—represent the lion's share of public funding for the arts. Were a similar

demarcation to be formalized in Canada, it would exacerbate existing discrepancies between well-established organizations and other members of the artistic community¹.

1.1 Will each of the proposed streams be open to organizations of all sizes and profiles, as well as to collectives and individual artists? Or will eligibility to certain streams be reserved to distinct sets of applicants? If the latter, what criteria would govern this eligibility?

1.2 What does the Council envisage as a healthy distribution of funds between recurring operating assistance and project-based funding?

1.3 What decision-making process will determine the distribution of funding in the new model? For example, how would the distribution of new funds be determined if the Council's budget allocation were increased?

1.4 Under the new model, how will the Council prevent further entrenching of systemic discrepancies between well-established institutions on the one hand and micro-organizations, mid-sized groups and emerging structures on the other?

2. In presenting the Council's vision for the new funding model, M. Brault has critiqued the existing mode of functioning, which in his estimation consists of responding reflexively to any new concern, need or trend identified by the artistic community with the systematic creation of new programs. M. Brault acknowledges that programs thus developed were indeed responses to real concerns expressed by the milieu, but considers this approach to be short-sighted and no longer sustainable.

IMAA agrees wholeheartedly that it should not be up to artists to conform to the Council's programs, and that instead the onus should be on Council to adapt to changes in the arts community. We would argue that by creating programs at the request of the arts community, Council was already doing an excellent job of responding to the evolving realities of the arts sector. The goal of creating small, precisely-defined programs for specific types of practice (for example, *Dance on Screen Production Projects*, *Assistance to Artist-Run Centres*, or the *Arts and Community Collaboration Program*) is primarily to ensure an adjudication process that recognizes excellence in each of these well-delineated, specialized disciplines or forms. An analogy can be drawn here to the concept of biodiversity: a complex ecosystem with a large number of interacting components is a sign of health and resilience, not dysfunction. IMAA reasserts the concern voiced by the Artist-Run Centres and Collectives Conference (ARCA) that a radical simplification of this gradually evolved structure in favour of a "one-grant-fits-all" approach could prove detrimental to niche artistic practices, particularly those that emphasize innovation and experimentation.

2.1 How will a simplified and homogenized program structure ensure the discerning and well-informed evaluation and adjudication of the wide range of artistic forms currently supported by Council?

2.2 What mechanisms will operate to ensure that specialized practices are evaluated by peer assessors who possess the relevant expertise, qualifications, and overview of the discipline?

2.3 Different modes of artistic production imply different budgetary realities. Media arts practice, for example, is often characterized by its relative expense compared with other fine arts

¹ To cite a recent study pertaining to the Canadian visual arts sector, artist-run centres account for only 10% of public funding despite representing a far higher share of programming and activities. Artist-run centres are typically very small organizations, two-thirds of them with budgets under \$250K. They are much more dependent on Canada Council funding than public art galleries and art museums to accomplish their mandates. Source: Canada Council for the Arts Research and Evaluation Section, *The Visual Arts Landscape as seen through CADAC, 2011-2012*. March 2014.

disciplines. How will the new adjudication process ensure that these intrinsic differences are taken into account in order to fully support modes of expression that are inherently more investment-intensive?

3. It has been suggested that all artistic disciplines now face relatively similar issues. We certainly agree that some issues are indeed shared by the entire artistic community, and that each discipline has much to learn from the challenges and successes of others. However, IMAA contends that the particularities of specific disciplines and fields are also non-negligible, often stemming from long traditions of practice and cultures. For example, in the case of the media arts, the rapidly evolving technological needs in terms of equipment and expertise represent a core challenge which may not be felt to the same degree in other disciplines. We also believe that the challenges faced by a large and well-established organizations with stable and diversified revenue streams are by nature very distinct from those of smaller organisations, emerging groups or collectives. IMAA echoes the question of the Regroupement québécois de la danse (RQD) on this topic, suggesting that while we may all share concerns such as excellence, competitiveness, accessibility, outreach, intergenerational equity and public engagement, the approaches to these challenges may in fact be specific to each of our disciplines, as well as to our respective scales and nature of operations.

3.1 What are the general concerns which the Council deems common to all sectors?

3.2 On what basis and through what methods of consultation have these concerns been established in each sector or discipline?

4. The new funding model promises to reduce “sweat and tears on the application form.” We believe that so long as a very strong, talented, and rapidly growing arts community continues to vie for an amount of funding that has remained stagnant for nearly a decade, organisations and artists will continue to spend an inordinate amount of time and energy on grant proposals in order to remain competitive. Numerous reactions to the initial announcement of the new funding model have stressed the point that only an increase to Council’s budget can resolve the problem of access to funding for a larger proportion of high-quality applications. As Council is no doubt aware, the arts community has repeatedly called for substantial increases to the Canada Council’s allocation, including through formal recommendations advanced by the Canadian Arts Coalition, as a crucial element of our sector’s stability and growth. It has been suggested that applications should be made in the format that best reflects the applicant, referencing applications by video. While this proposal is interesting at first glance, we urge the Council to consider seriously the possibility that applicants with better access to production resources might be in a position to invest higher production values into video presentations, which could place some applications at an unfair disadvantage.

4.1 Does the Council acknowledge that the primary reason applicants devote so much time to completing funding applications is the highly competitive nature of the public funding environment, a consequence of the fact that each program, and the Council as a whole, are currently funded well below capacity?

4.2 Regarding the proposal to admit applications made in video as well as text form, could Council shed some light onto how this would be implemented?

5. The Council has signalled an encouraging commitment to beginning a new chapter in its relationship with Indigenous artists, based on the underlying principle of Indigenous peoples’ right to self-

determination. IMAA joins the National Indigenous Media Arts Coalition (NIMAC) in applauding the move towards greater autonomy for the Aboriginal Arts Office, the creation of a new program shaped by Indigenous governance and serving First Nations, Métis and Inuit artists on their own terms.

However, the media arts community wonders whether a larger commitment to equity will also be addressed by the new funding model, either with the creation of a dedicated stream or program to address equity concerns, or through a commitment to strengthening the Equity Office. The under-representation and inequitable access to funding faced by newcomer artists, artists of colour, deaf and disabled artists, members of official minority language communities and other marginalized groups should be identified as a priority by Council, and this priority should be reflected in the new funding model.

5.1 How will the Canada Council's new model ensure ongoing equity of access to its programs and services for all under-represented artists and organisations?

6. Since M. Brault's appointment, we sense a clear intention to accommodate emerging artists and practices by adapting the Council's structures to facilitate access for emerging artists and groups. IMAA welcomes this, as it is certainly our experience that young organizations, collectives and artists face significant barriers to the public arts funding system. Our concern, however, is that this heightened access for new and emerging structures may come at the expense of existing support to smaller organizations already in the funding stream.

6.1 How does the Council propose to strike a balance between channelling support to emerging artists and groups without jeopardizing the assets of well-established institutions, and all the while stabilizing the often very fragile structures situated between the two?

6.2 With the rapid evolution and growth of the arts in Canada and internationally, how will the Council engage new practices, new models, and newcomers to Canada within the framework of reduced specificity?

6.3 M. Brault has noted that emerging artists and collectives should not be required to form "shells" (i.e., incorporate organizations) in order to qualify for eligibility to the Council's programs. How will Council ensure equitable treatment between organizations with recognized governance models and less formalized groups?

7. The new programs have been described as "non-disciplinary" and covering all fields of artistic practice, with the understanding that the peer adjudication process will generally remain discipline-specific. IMAA recognizes the great value of trans-disciplinary approaches and creating synergies between sectors and practices. We note for example the wide adoption of media arts-related techniques by other disciplines in recent years. Notwithstanding this, IMAA believes that the media arts remain a distinct field of activity unto itself, possessing a set of aesthetic practices well-understood by its community of practitioners.

7.1 Does the Council recognize the importance of balancing the drive towards cross-disciplinarity with the need to preserve the core integrity of certain artistic practices and traditions? How does it propose to maintain this balance in the context of a suite of non-disciplinary streams?

8. We understand that the proposed simplification of programs is designed in part to facilitate the implementation of national goals and priorities on a Council-wide basis.

8.1 What are the national goals and priorities envisaged by Council?

8.2 How and by whom are these national priorities being set? As a result of what kinds of consultation with the arts community and its various sectors and disciplines?

9. M. Brault has alluded to a “double jury” system, one discipline-oriented and a second, program-oriented. The relationship between these two juries merits further clarification. In one instance ([interview with *The Province*, 27 February 2015²](#)), M. Brault suggests that the first jury would be composed of peers from the applicant’s own discipline while the second would comprise expertise relative to the applicant’s proposed activity. Elsewhere ([interview with Radio-Canada, 22 January 2015³](#)), he speaks of a first evaluation with respect to the ecosystem of a given discipline and a second reflecting Council’s overall objectives.

9.1 Can the Council articulate more fully its vision for the double jury system and the interaction between the two juries?

9.2 Would the additional jury be comprised of professional artists, or of internal Council staff as is the case under Arts Council England’s recently reformed model?

9.3 Can the Council shed more light on its proposal that applicants be able to choose by which jury they would be evaluated? Would this be similar to the recently announced funding model at Australia Council?

We pose these questions to you, M. Brault, and to the Canada Council as a whole, in order to begin a process of constructive contribution to the Council’s vision for the new funding model. We look forward to receiving your answers, and eagerly await the unveiling of the new program structure in the summer of 2015. Between now and the implementation of the new programs next year, we will continue to consult our own constituency on these matters, and to relay to you our sector’s vision for a thriving media arts sector, whose vitality lies in no small part with its individual artists, collectives, and small to mid-sized organisations. These constituents, despite their sometimes precarious status, contribute significantly to the overall strength of the arts ecosystem. Their light and flexible structures are ideally suited to fostering experimentation and innovation, and draw on their own communities of practice to identify and support the emergence of new forms and practices. We trust that the Council’s new model will continue to offer significant and sustained support to all organisations, regardless of scale and status, whose mandates nurture and encourage the production and dissemination of innovative art forms.

Yours sincerely,



Emmanuel Madan
National Director

² <http://blogs.theprovince.com/2015/02/17/the-future-of-the-canada-council-will-be-flexibility/>

³ http://ici.radio-canada.ca/emissions/pas_de_midi_sans_info/2014-2015/archives.asp?date=2015-01-22

Independent Media Arts Alliance

Cc.

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The Independent Media Arts Alliance (IMAA) is the National Arts Service Organization for the Media Arts. With a coast-to-coast-to-coast membership of nearly 100 artist-run centres, festivals, and distributors, we represent over 16,000 independent media artists and creators engaged in independent film, video, audio and new media arts.

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