



**Independent
Media Arts Alliance**
**Alliance des arts
médiatiques indépendants**

Written Submission to the Canada Council for the Arts

**as part of CCA's Strategic Planning consultation process for
2021-2026**

Submitted November 16, 2020

Background - who we are and who we represent

The Independent Media Arts Alliance (IMAA) represents and supports the Canadian independent media arts community, a vibrant network of artist-driven media arts production centres, artist collectives, independent distributors and media arts festivals and presenters. The broad field of media arts includes independent film and video, audio and sound art, electronic art and digital art forms ranging from independent game development to VR/XR.

The organizations and collectives in our network work tirelessly to inscribe the media arts within communities across the country. They support independent artists by pooling resources and knowledge, offering affordable access to tools and technologies, and encouraging experimentation, collaborations and partnerships. Their approaches to curation, distribution, dissemination and programming are not dictated by market forces but rather emphasize the inclusion and centering of marginalized, under-represented voices and visions, reflecting the true diversity of Canadian culture and artistic expression.

These artist-led organizations and collectives support proudly independent media practices, deliberately working outside the mainstream commercial industry to champion alternative and innovative visions, be they aesthetic, theoretical, political or socioeconomic. The impact of the independent media arts on society is immeasurable: the works created and presented challenge our notions of beauty, technology, politics, and social value and contribute to a deeper, richer, fuller understanding of ourselves and our world.

We have drafted a brief for consideration by the Canada Council for the Arts as it completes its important consultations towards a five-year strategic plan. Our submission embodies the central values of addressing systemic inequities, promoting broader support for the arts, and encouraging deeper sustainability for this sector at a particularly precarious time.

Current Strategic Plan, 2016-21

We recognize the major strategic moves made by the Council over the last five years. This was a particularly eventful period in the Canada Council's history, marked not only by the doubling of its budget but also the introduction of the new structure of funding programs, many new procedures and a digital application portal. We offer a few insights from our constituencies as to some the challenges experienced as a result of these changes.

1 - Procedural changes

The **move from discipline-specific to cross-disciplinary juries** (for example, visual arts and media arts projects adjudicated together by the same assessment committee) is proving detrimental to the assessment process. The downside of the wider scopes of expertise on any given PAC is that committee members less familiar with a given discipline or practice will defer

to others on the committee who have greater specialization in those fields. This effectively reduces the pool of informed opinions on any given application, and dilutes the spirit of peer assessment.

The overall effect of introducing **standing committees** to some aspects of the peer assessment progress has not been positive. We understand that the intended advantage of this new mechanism was to ensure greater continuity in the assessment process from one competition to the next; however this is outweighed by several disadvantages. A longstanding shortcoming of PAC composition at Council has been that program officers tend to recruit from within their contact circles, which despite their best efforts are inherently limited in terms of geography, identity, fields of practice and other factors. Inviting this limited group of assessors to sit for extended periods amplifies the power of these individuals further. The pool of peer assessors should be aggressively expanded and diversified, not limited further in this way.

In 2017, Council formalized **new procedures for determining grant amounts** whereby the peer assessors' involvement ends at the assessment and ranking stage. Program staff, including Program Officers and Program Directors, then complete the decision-making process by determining and approving the amounts awarded. While it has always been the case that ultimate authority for determining grant amounts lay with Council staff and not with the assessment committees, previously these decisions were de facto left to assessment committees and were rarely if ever revised by program staff. Our past correspondence with the Canada Council (see for example IMAA's letter of January 31, 2018) has already stressed that peer assessors' involvement in the assessment process, including budget recommendations, is essential to uphold the principle of peer assessment. That these new procedures were implemented without consultation with the arts sector has regrettably undermined the arts community's trust in the Council's decision making process.

Since the introduction of the portal's Applicant Profiles as a key prerequisite to program eligibility, there is concern that the **profile validation process** is not administered equitably or rigorously enough in some cases. We have received reports that the profiles of certain presenting organizations are validated despite their not conforming to established standards regarding the payment of artist fees. Additionally, there is no clear mechanism for monitoring changes to applicants' artist remuneration practices after their initial validation, meaning they could remain eligible even if they cease to adhere to these standards.

2 - Council's approach to equity, inclusion, anti-racism and anti-harassment

The last few years have seen increased requirements on Core-funded organizations to make commitments to equity, pluralism, and safer workplaces. These are welcome developments, but Council's overall stance still lacks teeth. We call for a clear commitment by Council to **aggressively and decisively defund organizations** who do not adopt policies for inclusive and safe work environments with diversified leadership, or who treat adoption of such policies

as a fig leaf without any meaningful implementation or accountability to the communities they serve.

Central to Council's messaging around equity at the time of the New Funding Model's launch was that "Equity is now part of our DNA." This was used as justification for removing direct granting powers from the Equity office, on the pretext that the equity lens had sufficiently suffused all of Council's new programs. We believe this decision was extremely premature and has undermined the effectiveness of the Equity office in spearheading Council's efforts to attain these priorities.

3 - Support for Indigenous-led organizations

Although the Council can proudly celebrate meeting its objective of tripled support for Indigenous arts over the past cycle, in absolute dollar amounts the level of support is still extremely low (\$14M to CKS in 2019-20).

This demonstrates that the CCA still has a long way to go to address the longstanding dearth of support for First Nations, Métis and Inuit arts. It's unacceptable that so many Indigenous-led collectives and organizations continue to face barriers to Core funding. Among artist-run centres, Indigenous-led groups have been particularly vulnerable to economic precarity. Not too long ago there were at least six Indigenous-led artist-run centres across the country; today only one remains. Council should redouble its efforts to proactively reach out to existing, emerging, or dormant Indigenous-led groups that are not currently receiving Core funding, work actively to build capacity among these groups, and take flexible, creative and cooperative actions to facilitate their path to self-determination and long-term sustainability. A purely performance-based lens for approving funding cannot be sufficient here; instead, the focus needs to be on the future potential impact these groups stand to make. Concretely, this means that if low-capacity Indigenous-led organizations struggle to meet their funding obligations or rank poorly in assessments, program staff should be trained and empowered to respond not by penalizing these clients but by recognizing these challenges as needs for further support, mentoring or accompaniment.

A similar approach is recommended for working with other equity-seeking organizations operating at low capacities, particularly groups serving Deaf, disabled or racialized communities.

4 - Prescribing collaboration

The rollout of new Strategic Funds, in particular the DSF, points to the increasing premium placed by the Council on collaborative initiatives between multiple organizations. These expectations are laudable in principle, but in practice have disfavoured small or regional organizations for whom this type of collaboration is prohibitively difficult. Securing necessary partnerships is onerous work and often not within the reach of small, regional organizations for whom fulfilling their core mandates with limited budgets is already a struggle.

Recommendations for next Strategic Plan, 2021-2026

IMAA offers the following priorities to consider in framing the Canada Council for the Arts' next five-year strategic plan:

1 - Recognize the key role of small organizations in the evolving arts landscape:

The COVID crisis has reminded us that size alone is not an indicator of organizational resilience. In the spring of 2020, small arts organizations were less likely than larger ones to lay off their staff. The Council's upcoming strategic plan should recognize that small, community-focused organizations are a crucial part of the "backbone" that CCA is seeking to protect as the pandemic continues. They embody a responsiveness, a flexibility, and a collective community knowledge that can foster original responses to the challenges we face.

The artist-run network is a key ingredient in this resilient and adaptable ecosystem. The Canadian artist-run centre model is the envy of the international arts world. Many European countries lack an equivalent structure for ensuring democratized access to art production facilities.

A top priority must be to ensure that space is continually open for new organizations and ideas to flourish. How can the sector and the CCA work to cultivate new groups even, and especially, when these emerging players challenge more established groups that may not be meeting the needs of the broader community?

2 - Resolve operational challenges

Although a strategic plan is distinct from an operational plan, we nevertheless believe that for the CCA to achieve its larger vision it must necessarily address some key operational challenges encountered over the past cycle.

For example, many artists and organizations report that they often don't receive responses to simple email queries in a timely manner. CCA should set clear and reasonable **service standards**, and be accountable to its clientele whenever those standards are not met.

"Temporary" blackouts on **application feedback** – still in effect as recently as fall 2020 – are unacceptable, as it is a core function of program staff to provide constructive feedback to applicants. Application feedback is particularly valuable to first-time applicants. The Council should ensure that it always has sufficient operational capacity to deliver this essential service.

Council should **improve internal communications** within its staff, as frequently clients receive differing or contradictory messages from program staff.

In tandem with internal communications, **greater transparency in Council's communications with clients** could be achieved via regular email updates, and by announcing to the community when new program officers are hired or take on new roles.

We're aware that many of the operations issues cited here stem from unforeseen difficulties during the portal roll-out. When first announced, the portal set unrealistic expectations for streamlined processes throughout Council's operations, from application to reporting; many of these promises are still unfulfilled over 3 years on. The arts community deserves a full and honest picture of how the portal will eventually improve Council's overall operations, and what obstacles remain to achieving these objectives.

We also recognize that hiring freezes imposed by Parliament may be an obstacle to improving CCA's responsiveness and efficiency. If Council were to clearly identify organizational capacity building as a central strategic goal, we believe the arts community as a whole would be very supportive in endorsing a call for expanded staffing.

3 - A renewed relationship with Arts Service organizations

We hope that the constructive and nuanced input that IMAA is providing in this brief demonstrates the high value of a healthy and engaged dialogue between CCA and National/Provincial Arts Service Organizations. We believe this dialogue is essential to furthering our common goal of promoting the health of the sector. Over the past few years, it would appear that CCA has lost confidence in the value of this relationship. This is evidenced by the fact that the Council didn't host any conversations with the NASO community as part of the current strategic planning process. The discontinuation of the annual NASO meetings since 2018 is also symptomatic of our much-diminished relationship at this time. Yet the feedback we receive from media arts organizations across the country – both members and non-members – is that IMAA is a uniquely qualified voice for the community, as most groups lack the time, capacity or global perspective to play this role individually. We trust that in the years ahead, the Canada Council will once again recognize the tremendous on-the-ground experience and insight embodied in groups like ours.

Like many of our counterpart ASOs, IMAA acknowledges the danger of devolving into a mere lobby advocating on behalf of our official members. We, along with most NASOs, resist this tendency and strive instead to serve our communities of practice in all their diversity, not to privilege the interests of a narrow "in" group of entrenched interests. Council's policy towards National Arts Service Organizations should actively encourage these inclusive, broad-minded approaches. Council should also consider reviewing its requirement that ASOs diversify their funding. Our unique role as spokes-organizations on behalf of our sectors and fields of practice is detracted by obligations to seek project-specific funding for activities tangential to this key mandate.

In Conclusion

Ce mémoire a été rédigé par l'AAMI en consultation avec les membres de la communauté des arts médiatiques indépendants de tout le pays, y compris les membres du conseil d'administration, l'ensemble des membres et les non-membres de l'organisation. Nous remercions le Conseil des arts du Canada de nous avoir donné l'occasion de contribuer à ce processus de réflexion et nous restons à votre disposition pour discuter plus en détail de ces questions avec le personnel du CAC.

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. IMAA represents a diverse constituency of media arts groups, ranging from emerging artist collectives to established organizations, spread across all ten provinces and all but one territory. The combined memberships & clienteles of these groups amount to a community of over 15,000 individuals.

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4067 Boul. St-Laurent, suite 200A, Montréal, QC H2W 1Y7
(514) 522-8240 | info@imaa.ca | www.imaa.ca