

IMAGINE

**An External Review of the Canada Council for the Arts'
Artists and Community Collaboration Fund**

Executive Summary

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CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Background	4
Concepts, Language and Theoretical Frameworks	7
The State of the Art	11
Artist Statements	22
Funding Models and Assessment Criteria	26
Final Thoughts and Recommendations	32

Imagine:

You gently maneuver your way around the dance troupe as they cavort through a satire of exhausted commuters, and get off the bus with a smile on your face. Stopping to buy your regular take-out coffee, you linger on the sidewalk to watch a hiphop performance being videotaped by a group of intense looking teens. Across the street there is another mural being painted: so far it seems to be a celebration of the colour yellow, but it’s still too early to tell. The painters look exhausted but quite pleased with themselves. You decide to finish your coffee in the writer’s garden, where you add a couple of lines to the silly, sometimes disturbing poem that is three pages longer than yesterday. The high, sweet sounds of a choir are wafting from inside the women’s shelter next door; poignancy grips you and influences your next line. On your way back to the street, you pick up a pamphlet about the next legislative theatre session at city hall: this one is about housing issues, and you determine to go.

The shortcut along the mosaic path brings you into the middle of the Sun Festival committee’s annual transformation of the park, with the sculptures, banners, lanterns and puppets that everyone has been working on for the past month. Along with the regulars such as the community horn band and the youth stilt and clown troupe, special features this year include the opening ceremonies with the Native Friendship Centre’s Traditional Dancers, a new intergenerational Celtic orchestra and the much-anticipated play about the history of the area that the neighbourhood has been working on for years. You stop to help a group of seniors set up their shadow puppet screen and to admire their puppets.

The kids are busy as usual when you go to pick them up at your neighbourhood community art centre’s after-school program. They’re getting ready for a big multi-media opening of their “Home Show”, an exploration of the idea of home. Your son has been driving you crazy taking photographs of lint and dust – he says this is his homage to home – and your daughter is determinedly working on her hooked rug for her elaborate installation. This project has led to many great discussions about what home means; but right now, you just want to get them there. It’ll have to be a quick dinner, because you’ve all got tickets for a dance performance. Ever since your daughter was involved in the creation workshops for one of this company’s past shows, the entire family has been devoted fans.

Although this scenario may read like a fictional utopia, it actually illustrates just a few of the projects being funded by the Canada Council for the Arts’ Artist and Community Collaboration Fund (ACCF). The stated purpose of the fund is to support “the diverse artistic activities that bring together professional artists and the broader community”. This external review of the ACCF has two main goals: to provide an overview and understanding of the work that is currently being supported by the fund, and to evaluate how the fund is responding to the needs of artists who are doing the work, and of the communities who are engaged with the work. . A large part of the mandate of this review was to also answer the question: “what are the different interpretations and definitions of ‘process-based’ and collaborative work with community?”

The total amount of grants awarded from the ACCF was **\$1,365,800** in fiscal year 2002-2003 and **\$1,834,493** in fiscal year 2003-2004. In fiscal year 2004-2005, the amount was reduced to **\$860,000**, then increased in 2005-2006 to **\$1,068,000** for a total combined contribution of **\$5,128.293** for the period 1 April 2002 to 31 March 2006.

CONCLUSIONS

This review concludes that the ACCF is meeting its objective of supporting diverse artistic activities that bring together professional artists and the broader community. The dominant trend in this work is a multi-disciplinary, engaged practice that involves artists and communities in collaborative creation. ACCF support has provided space for these practices to develop and mature, raising both the quality and the significance of the work.

Communities are actively engaging with artists and with each other, creating public art and performance, infusing their neighbourhoods and their lives with meaning and beauty, experimenting with various ways of integrating art into everyday life. People of all ages and cultures are participating in meaningful experiences with art; art is appearing in unusual places, breaking up the routines of our daily lives; people are finding their voices, their talents, their communities through art; telling their stories and claiming their place through art; art is bringing together cultures, generations and interest groups; art is shifting perspectives and generating solutions; art is in the universities, the day care centres, the homeless shelters and the shopping malls.

These new ways of creating, interpreting and enjoying art have benefits for artists, for individual participants, for communities and for all of us. Most of these art projects directly or indirectly address issues of quality of life, as well as the quality and health of our social, environmental and political systems. These practices are offering communities various options for engaging with art and as a consequence art is becoming relevant to entire segments of society who were previously indifferent to its significance and value outside of the museum or marketplace. Artists are exploring more sophisticated theory with more accessible, organic, layered practices that are improving the quality and the depth of the work. New language and concepts are being developed that challenge old paradigms. 'Relational', 'dialogic' 'engaged' aesthetic theories are helping us to interpret the collaborative work; language of cultural democracy and community cultural development is shaping our understanding of the impulse and the potential. Collaborative approaches to art making are presenting challenges and opportunities to our modernist definition of what Irish curator Declan McGonagle, calls 'signature culture': "the idea of artist as individual genius producer and all the support mechanisms that exist to sustain and project this idea". McGonagle echoes other artists and theorists throughout this review when he calls for the addition of ideas such as "participation, transaction and negotiation". The Canada Council has taken up the challenge of these new approaches and because of the ACCF, there is a rich and multi-textured diversity of artist and community activities taking place throughout Canada.

Examples can be found in large urban centres as well as smaller towns and rural areas. Projects are taking place in the Northernmost First Nations communities, in inner city housing projects, in schools, in parks, in the bush and on the street. Council priorities of public engagement and audience development are natural by-products of the practice, and the relationships and partnerships that are established are the building blocks of foundational infrastructures that can support other art activity The ACCF is proving its potential at advancing the Council's strategic priorities of cultural diversity, aboriginal art, youth and interdisciplinary arts.

This review has found no evidence to drastically change the ACCF, or to discard the valuable work that has already been accomplished in its development. The following recommendations are therefore integrated with the original recommendations made by the internal ACCF working group, with some specific additional proposals for changes that would

better meet the needs of the artists and communities and would demonstrate a renewed commitment to evolve with these practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS (without rationales)

1. ACCF Status

It is recommended that:

- 1.1. The Canada Council formally adopt Artist and Community Collaboration as a permanent dimension of the professional activity served by the agency with the purpose of supporting diverse artistic activities that bring together professional artists and the broader community.**

2. Council Leadership

It is recommended that:

- 2.1. The Canada Council establish strong centralized leadership for the ACCF, supported with staff with dedicated full-time workload assignments to the program.**
- 2.2 The Canada Council supports its connection to and knowledge of the field through an ongoing standing committee involving staff with a dedicated workload assignment and led by a specialist in ACC practices to develop and implement policy, programs and strategies for development**
- 2.3 The Canada Council support its connection to and knowledge of the field through an ad-hoc advisory committee made up of community artists and others for consultation and advice re: policy and program development as needed**
- 2.4 The ACCF have a strong standing in the Inter-Arts Section.**

3. Peer Assessment Committees

It is recommended that:

- 3.1 Artist and community collaboration, as defined in the ACCF, be progressively integrated into regular funding programs in all existing disciplines, accompanied by a dedicated budgetary envelope and an evaluation process specific to the practice(s); and that each section be encouraged to develop or maintain a separate ACCF granting program, with it's own assessment process and peer assessment panels made up largely of community based artists**
- 3.2 All of ACCF programs be coordinated across disciplines by the central ACCF leadership**

4. Granting Programs

It is recommended that:

- 4.1 The ACCF develop a two-phase granting option. An example of such a model might include these features: the full amount for the project is confirmed, but released in two phases. Upon completion of a successful development phase, funds are released to complete the project.**
- 4.2 The ACCF support the role of 'cultural liaison' and includes this position as an eligible expense**

5. Definition and Assessment Criteria

It is recommended that:

- 5.1 The Canada Council maintain the current definition and assessment criteria for Artist and community collaborations, except for recommendation 5.2**
- 5.2 The Canada Council revise the first assessment criteria for the ACCF. One suggestion**

would be a change from: **Merit of the proposed collaborative process (where the artistic process tied to specific communities is as important as the final outcome)** to: *“Merit of the proposed collaboration process (where clear and appropriate strategies and processes are outlined to ensure a successful collaborative relationship)”*

- 5.3 *The Canada Council provide clear examples of successful projects, with a focus on how they meet Council criteria*
- 5.4 *The Canada Council continue to provide opportunities to educate program officers and staff from all sections about these practices*
- 5.5 *The Canada Council, in consultation with art educators and youth art programmers, develop simple but specific guidelines or criteria for projects that fall into art education and youth mentorship categories*

6. Application Procedures

It is recommended that:

- 6.1 *The Canada Council highlight the ACCF on its website for easier access and encourage dialogue about the practices.*

7. Evaluation and Reporting Requirements

It is recommended that:

- 7.1 *The Canada Council require that some evidence of community members' final project evaluations be included in the final report, in forms appropriate to the individual projects, such as testimonials and outside evaluations.*
- 7.2 *The Canada Council explore ways to capitalize on the wealth of experiences, models and stories in the ACCF reports to promote and disseminate the value of the practice*

8. Cross-cultural Issues

It is recommended that:

- 8.1 *The Canada Council develop an internal mechanism to ensure regular exchange between the internal ACCF leadership and the Aboriginal Arts Secretariat and regular consultations about other cultural approaches to artist community collaboration.*

9. Support and Development for the Practices

It is recommended that:

- 9.1 *The Canada Council take the lead in exploring and developing*
 - *strategies to better coordinate funding options and support between different granting agencies*
 - *strategies for the dissemination of the work*
 - *strategies for the development and dissemination of theoretical and critical analysis*
- 9.2 *The Canada Council develop policies and programs for professional development opportunities for artists involved in community collaboration work*

10. Financial Support for the Artists and Community Collaborations Fund

It is recommended that:

- 10.1.1 *The Canada Council increase the ACCF budget to a minimum of \$3 million and a maximum of \$5 million a year.*