

In response to The Canada Council Visual Arts Section, Phase Two Community Consultations, Presentation of Proposed Program of Grants to Professional Artists for Feedback, October/November 2004.

The Canada Council for the Arts has, since its inception, maintained an ethic and set of values that are, in general terms, supported by the artistic community. The Canada Council has managed to remain cognizant that the artistic character of our country begins with artists, and the practices they maintain. Council's programs have recognized the importance of self-determination by the artistic community, and its programs have recognized that artistic activity is not primarily the production of objects, or the provision of services, but rather a practice of inquiry whose value lies in part in its uneasy, unpredictable, and mobile relationship to society. These values have been difficult to maintain within the increasing corporate focus of the federal government and its ministries. Current changes proposed to the program of grants to individual visual artists threaten to shake the confidence that the artistic community holds for Council. These changes are internally driven. They are not in response to any demonstrated need or demand from artists or other communities. In fact, when this scheme was mentioned in the first round of consultations in Vancouver, it was soundly rejected. This casts a serious shadow over the legitimacy of the entire consultation process.

It is apparent that Council is experiencing pressure to provide 'deliverables', 'measurable outcomes' and favourable 'ratios of success', as they are known in the corporate world. These pressures are familiar to anyone involved with post-secondary institutions and other organizations which value critical thought over the past twenty years. These pressures are difficult to resist, since compliance is often tied to potential infusion of much needed resources. However, it is important to determine the long term effects of adapting corporate models, values and languages to administer funds to those engaged in a practice that will not fit neatly into the equation of supply and demand.

The proposed changes to the program of grants to professional artists, as outlined in council documents and presentations, reveal a fundamental shift in the values of The Canada Council regarding the support of individual visual artists. The exhibition project and first solo categories are clearly programs to fund exhibitions rather than artistic practices. Instead of a subsidy to an artist's (often inadequate) income from other sources, this program will in effect subsidize audiences' access to contemporary art, as is the case for grant programs supporting visual art organizations.

Tying eligibility to a product, the exhibition, as distinct from practice, marks an important philosophical shift in council's support and will lead to some questionable results. It will formalize a bias toward market-based practices, as they are currently defined, and discourage the free inquiry, critical positioning, and

experimentation with new forms that are key to the future development of the discipline.

By tying artist grants to exhibitions in recognized galleries and institutions, Council further complicates the process by having to determine which galleries and institutions are 'valid', and which are 'invalid' as forms of professional recognition. Furthermore, by forcing artists into this relationship, it would be incumbent on Council to ensure that these approved 'valid' institutions conduct themselves in an ethical manner. This may include, but not be limited to, the payment of artist fees and/or a fair portion of the proceeds from art sales in a timely manner, and ensuring that galleries and institutions don't charge artists 'rent' or other for other costs associated with the exhibition and promotion of their artwork.

Because assistance to visual arts organizations is limited, it is unlikely that additional 'recognized professional venues' will develop in the near future, let alone alternative approaches to the presentation of art such as collectives, temporary sites, and unconventional creative solutions to the marked lack of presentation opportunities. This will result in barring access to assistance programs to artists who work outside the gallery system.

The requirement of a confirmed exhibition creates a 'pre-jury' vetting arrangement by disqualifying applicants that are not able to secure a commitment from a 'recognized professional venue'. This may solve some administrative problems at The Canada Council, but will create some serious problems within the artistic community. Rather than encourage a 'stronger partnership between arts professionals in the community', this criteria will place the administrative burden of 'pre-selection' on artist run centres and galleries that are even more poorly placed to respond to the demand than Council staff. Making the staff of such venues the gate keepers to the process of application will seriously undermine the principle of peer assessment (artists evaluating the work of artists). By imposing a stringent hierarchy upon the relationship between curators and artists, this plan will actively weaken a milieu that depends upon cooperation and collaboration, and an understanding that the practice of curation and the production of exhibitions and other public presentations should *follow and not lead the practice*.

By imposing a gate keeping structure upon access to grant programs, the Visual Art Section is abdicating its responsibility for equity programs. Although there are many progressive organizations that are well-versed in equity issues, 'recognized professional venues' are not necessarily accountable for equity on a policy level, as is The Canada Council. It further threatens to degrade the primary criteria of excellence by subcontracting its activities to institutions and businesses that present work for a variety of reasons and to which excellence may not be the highest priority.

Peer assessment stands to suffer an additional blow once the pre-jury vetting has taken place. Applications will undergo “online pre-selection by 10 peers followed by a joint assessment committee (peers and other visual arts professionals) of five members held in Ottawa”. Who will these ‘others’ be? Dealers, to comment upon the marketability of the proposed product in national and foreign markets? Marketing consultants, to evaluate the artists’ promotional materials and potential for celebrity? Museum educators, to peruse the potential for school tours and the relationship of the content to provincial grade school curriculum? The layers of activity that rely upon artistic practice as resource material should not be placed in a position of pre-empting or determining the direction of a discipline.

These concerns regarding assessment and evaluation are especially troubling in the context of three strikes and you’re out for five years. The proposed restrictions to re-applying are clearly not driven by any programmatic concerns in supporting artistic practice, but instead are gratuitous measures designed to simply decrease the number of applications.

Reducing the amount of money awarded to artists would seem at first glance to be designed to more broadly distribute limited funds. However, since all visual arts organizations are programmed at capacity and beyond, the prospect of more ‘measurable outcomes’ in the form of exhibitions becomes unlikely. Council risks undermining the principles that make it a valuable and distinct agency in an effort to ‘instrumentalize’ its programs, an effort that is likely to fail.

The introduction of pre-selection vetting by venues, and tampering with the spirit of peer assessment can be seen as the beginning point of an extremely troubling trajectory: the entrenchment of top-down management of individual artistic practices by visual arts institutions and/or commercial dealers.

As The Canada Council heads toward its fiftieth anniversary there is much to celebrate. The growth of visual art organizations such as galleries, museums and artist run centres and the development of a larger and livelier commercial scene are welcome signs of an increasing public interest in contemporary visual art. It is important to remember, however, that the well-recognized strength, diversity and innovation that characterizes Canadian visual arts practice was not fostered in top-down management models, the commercial marketplace, or the politically influenced funding agencies found in other countries. Excellence in Canadian visual arts, now recognized by visual arts organizations and by dealers, was fostered through Council’s support of autonomous artistic practices, of self-determination and peer assessment. It is our profound hope that Council will not squander the support of the artistic community over the last half century by eliminating free access to programs that fund practices and not products; not betray the trust that we have placed in its ethics and values by eroding our faith in the

process of assessment, nor succumb to the pressures of corporate culture by reducing the practice of visual arts to 'deliverables' and 'numbers served'. Please continue to recognize that the marketplace, the museum, the gallery, the school tour, the review, and the touring exhibition are all activities that are dependant upon and should follow, not lead, the artist.

Sincerely,

Glenn Alteen

Lorna Brown

Keith Higgins

Jonathan Middleton